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I watch white puffs rise from my mouth like the smoke of a locomotive. I had to park 10 minutes away from my apartment because of full capacity— not a bad option for yesterday afternoon, but horrible to deal with now. *Trudge, trudge, trudge*. My boots squish the slushie-like ice beneath me, mixing the dirt and snow to create an ugly, grey mush.

I open the door to my beat-down 2010 Corolla, sit down, and turn the engine on. I rub my hands as the car heats up and shiver. My car heats up enough and cautiously, I begin to drive, hyper-aware of an overdue tire change.

I'm amazed at the stillness of the world around me – no other soul dared to venture out in the snow. I was alone on the road. Southerners can't deal with snow, everybody stays home. At least in the North, they expect the cold. At least they're prepared – they make us figure it out on our own out here. It's a damned surprise every time! I note the lack of salt on the roads. Charming. I drive so slowly, I stretch a 10-minute drive into 20.

"You were scheduled 'bout eleven minutes ago. You been late all week, miss Laura. Is your clock right on your phone?"

Reprimanding disguised as jokes.

"It is, I just had to drive real slow cause of the ice."

I give a tight-lipped smile and slip away to start my monotonous work. She gives an exaggerated toothy smile with squinted eyes, but her stare is icy cold.

"Start on the coolers while it's so slow."

Of course. It's not enough that I'm here in faulty weather; I'm still expected to *work*. I pass my coworker in the back, where I notice the enduring cold.

"The store's freezing, what's up with the heat?"

"Andrea's saving the power, we're on the generator right now." He looks up from mopping liquid that won't evaporate. He spreads it further and further.

I stock the coolers and have to squeeze back and forth because of how many cases of drinks have been crammed back here. They could topple onto me at any moment, I think. But at least they'd have to give me a payout.

While I'm immersed in the fascinating number of brands of soda, juice, tea, and water – Andrea calls me over the store intercom. I come out of the cooler, causing my glasses to fog.

"It's starting to snow more. We're gonna stay open, but I'm calling Mikayla for our next steps. Let Carlos know."

A part of me pities her. Her livelihood and soul belong to this place.

"How will we get home if it keeps snowing?"

She doesn't answer.

"Hey, Mikayla, what's the protocol for..."

I hear a car starting in the lot and pulling off. I don't gotta look, I know who it is. *So much for telling Carlos.* I should leave too, but I can't. I'm frozen in place, behind the register like an obedient dog doing tricks for treats.

About a dozen people stumble in after each other into the store. I see the flurry of snowfall behind them.

"Hello, welcome to Cutie!"

"Oh, thank god! You guys are the only ones open!"

More people sprinkle in as the storm worsens. I feel a headache coming on.

"Hello, welcome to Cutie!"

"Where's the restroom?"

"In the back, on your left."

The line reaches the back. More people come in, and more, and more, and then some more. My stomach churns. I haven't had the chance to eat. It's a mixed crowd – businessmen and women, homeless folks, families, couples, and locals. Some people don't have money, and

Andrea pulls me to the side. My dizziness worsens, and I develop double vision. Andrea finally turns the heat on.

“Make sure they don’t take nothin they didn’t pay for. ”

I nod and open my mouth to respond, but only a white puff comes out. I grab the counter for support as my vision blackens. I crumble to the floor, thinking about my dog and cat. I hope they’re okay, warm at least. Slowly, my vision stabilizes.

I note that my shift should’ve been up by now. But I’m stranded. Several people are tuned into the news.

“Wherever you are, plan to stay there for the next day or two!” A news anchor states.

“Get comfortable everyone, looks like we’re having a sleepover,” My manager chuckles.

“Get ready, Miss Laura. We’ve got a lot to do today.”

I sway. Left, right, left, right.

“Oh, lord, don’t do that!”

Plunk.

“She’s passing out –”