

Snow Angels by Kristine Kathryn Rusch

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Too much could go wrong with chainsaws.

So him and Sarah got sent to the car again. This time, Bobberts was mad.

Sarah didn't care. She just skipped ahead, happy to be in the trees and the snow. She liked outside, she liked playing, she liked it all.

She didn't know there was cool stuff they couldn't do.

Dad said Bobberts would get to do it "some day."

Bobberts was beginning to think "some day" meant "never."

The snow on the path was muddy. You could see the rocks underneath it. Bobberts kicked one, and Gramps laughed.

"It's not that much fun, kiddo," Gramps said. "They get a chainsaw and just slice through the tree. It's over in five seconds."

Bobberts nodded. Dad said the same thing, but that didn't mean it was true. Bobberts had never seen somebody use a chainsaw—Dad said he was too little. He was nine now, and tall for his age. Everybody said so.

He wasn't little anymore.

Sarah skipped through the trees. "There's the car," she said, pointing.

Their car and two others. Those weirdo people who were walking with Daddy and the tree guy into the woods. Bobberts didn't want to call it a farm, because he didn't see pigs and cows and horses. It was just a woods with lots of Christmas trees.

Gramps reached the car first and unlocked it. Then he rubbed his hands together. "You kids get inside," he said. "I gotta see a man about a dog."

As he walked back up the path, Sarah looked at Bobberts. "There's dogs?" she asked.

Bobberts shook his head. "Gramps says that when he's gotta go number one."

Sarah giggled and put her hands over her mouth. She was still little. Four. Mom said everybody had to watch out for her. Small and pretty and all girl, that's what Mom said. But Mom never saw the goofy side of Sarah, except that one time. That time she was really, really little and trying to learn Bobberts's name. She couldn't say Bobby, so Daddy tried to teach her Robert.

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Sometimes Bobberts liked it.

Sometimes he wished she wasn't so cute so everybody remembered everything she said.

She took his hand and tugged. "Lookee the snow."

She pointed at the field above the cars. The trees didn't start right away. There was one big pile of white. He knew what she was thinking. Sarah'd been like this ever since the snow started. One big pile of white and she wanted to dive into it.

Finally Daddy taught her snow angels just so she wouldn't go running into the big pile of white and dive into a rock or something.

"Don't wanna," Bobberts said. He'd get colder than he already was. Besides,

big kids didn't make snow angels.

"C'mon." Sarah tugged him toward the empty whiteness. Bobberts looked around for Gramps, but didn't see him. The trees were pretty thin right near the road.

Gramps taught Bobberts how to pee in the woods last year.

First rule, Gramps said, go deep enough that nobody can see you. A car went by on the road, kicking up slush. Bobberts winced. He was gonna get wet and cold no matter where he was.

"You do it," he said.

Sarah stuck her tongue out at him, and ran up the hill. She stopped smack in the middle, turned to face the road, spread her arms, and fell backwards.

Snow puffed up around her.

Bobberts kicked the snow off a nearby rock and perched on it. He could see Sarah and he could see the path. Far away, he heard the moan of a chainsaw, and closer, the slam of a car door. Sarah made a perfect angel. Then she sat up and wiped the snow off her face. "C'mon," she said. Bobberts shook his head.

She put her thumb to her nose and wagged her fingers at him. Then she got up, moved a few steps down, and flopped again.

How many snow angels was she gonna make?

Mom would be so mad at him. Sarah wasn't wearing her mittens, and her coat



was gonna get soaked. Bobberts looked up the trail for Gramps, but still didn't see him. Then something caught his eye. A guy was standing in the thin trees, staring down at Sarah. The guy was wearing gray, just like the trees, and he blended into the hillside.

Bobberts felt a little shiver. How long had that guy been there?

Adults were so creepy.

Sarah sat up again, took off her hat, and shook snow from it. Then she stuck it on her blond curls. This time she didn't look at Bobberts at all.

This time, she went farther down the hill.

He saw the pattern she was making. Snow angels, like those cutouts you

make with folded papers and scissors. She was really good at stuff like that. Mom said Sarah was gonna be an artist one day. Bobberts sighed. This was taking forever. Daddy said only five minutes and it had to be lots more than that. The chainsaw still rumbled back there.

The tree wasn't even that great. There was a bigger, fuller one right next to it, but Daddy said it wouldn't fit in the front door. Gramps'd winked at Bobberts and said Daddy just didn't want to carry it all the way back to the car.

Bobberts rubbed his nose with the back of his hand. He was getting snow snot. Nose drips that happened out in the cold, that's what snow snot was. Gramps

said so. Sarah said it was just icky, and Bobberts agreed.

Sarah.

He looked up. She was in the middle of her fourth angel. She'd done 'em so perfect that they looked like they were hanging along the slope. She'd fallen on her own footprints, so you couldn't see them at all. Then that guy came out of the trees. He snuck out, like he didn't want nobody to see him. He walked right into the middle of the fourth angel, screwing it all up, and bent down. Sarah screamed.

Bobberts stood up. No Gramps. Nobody, just that chainsaw still whirring far away. The man grabbed Sarah by her arms and pulled her up. She was

screaming and kicking and biting just like Mom taught them to do.

The man didn't care. He just grabbed her like Daddy did sometimes and tucked her under his arm. She was yelling, "Bobberts! Bobberts!"

And Bobberts didn't know what to do.

The man was going back toward the trees.

Bobberts looked at the path, but it was empty. He bit his lower lip, and headed up the hillside. When someone gets you, Mom always said, you do what you gotta do to get away. She never said what you gotta do when someone got Sarah.

Bobberts was breathing hard. He had to hurry. That guy had Sarah and she was screaming and he was scared. What if

that guy was one of those guys who hurt little kids? What if they never see Sarah again?

Bobberts could hear himself breathe. It sounded louder than the screaming, louder than that weird saw noise. Louder than the guy yelling at Sarah to shut up.

But the guy had his back to Bobberts, and he was moving fast. Through the trees, Bobberts could see the car. It was the same one that had passed earlier, the one that sent slush everywhere.

The guy'd seen Sarah and come back for her.

That made Bobberts even madder.

They were almost at the trees. Bobberts had to do something. He ran the last few steps, slipping on the snow.

And that's when he thought of it: He was wearing really good boots (Mom made him), but that guy was wearing Nikes.

Nikes weren't made for snow.

Bobberts reached the guy and grabbed the guy's back leg. The guy's front foot slipped. The guy turned and yanked at the same time, sliding on the snow. Bobberts let go. The guy fell on his belly, and went down the hill like he was on a sled, dropping Sarah. She was crying really hard now. The fall had hurt her too.

Bobberts half ran, half slid down near them.

"Sarah!" Bobberts yelled. "Run away!"

Sarah was stretched out in the snow.

She was still crying. Sometimes she could cry so hard she'd forget what she was doing.

Bobberts pointed to the path. "Get Gramps!"

She stumbled. The guy crawled toward her, getting close to Bobberts. And that's when Bobberts kicked him.

The guy rolled onto his back. He was really big and really mean looking. Bobberts was never so scared in his whole life, not even when the sixth grade boys ganged up on him.

"Boy or girl," the man said in an icky voice. "Don't matter to me." He pulled Bobberts to him, but he didn't knock Bobberts down. The guy grinned at him, and a shiver went through Bobberts. A

shiver, and an ick, and a fear like he'd never had.

So he kicked again. Kicked and kicked in the place Gramps said no boy ever really liked, and the man was squealing and rolling away and holding himself. Sarah was gone—where'd she go?—and there wasn't sound, except Bobberts's breathing and the guy squealing and the bam of Bobberts's boot hitting the guy.

Then the guy's hand grabbed Bobberts's foot, and Bobberts went down, just like Sarah did when she was making snow angels. Only he was surprised and the air went right out of his body.

"Don't make no difference." The man's



voice sounded airy now, and kinda weird. He sat up. His skin was sickly looking, like he was gonna puke.

The guy was bigger than the sixth grade boys. Bobberts couldn't stop them from beating him up. This guy would win. This guy would hurt him.

But Momma said when someone gets you, you do what you gotta do to get away. Bobberts slipped his hand in his pocket. Daddy was already mad at him about the knife. He told Bobberts that Bobberts was too young to use it.

Do what you can, Momma whispered in his ear.

Bobberts dug the knife out, and snicked it open and jabbed it in the guy's arm. The guy screamed and reached for

the knife, but Bobberts remembered to pull it out so that Daddy wouldn't get mad that it got stolen, and the guy was calling Bobberts bad names, and pulling even harder on Bobberts's boot. Bobberts stabbed the guy's arm again, and again, and then Bobberts missed, and the knife slipped and hit the guy in the leg.

The guy really screamed, and far away, Bobberts heard Gramps yelling his name, then yelling for Daddy, and then just yelling.

But the guy was screaming and rolling away from Bobberts and blood was squirting like the guy's leg was one giant water pistol, and the snow was getting all red.

The guy had let go of Bobberts's ankle, but it took him a minute to realize it because his ankle still hurt. His whole body hurt from falling and running out of air. The guy was still screaming, and Daddy was yelling now, and Bobberts got up and tripped his way over Sarah's snow angels to the path. Gramps took his arm, and Daddy was running down from the woods, and Sarah was crying, and the tree guy was yelling into his phone about police and help, and the weirdo couple behind him wanted to use the chainsaw to scare the guy. Then Gramps said it wouldn't be necessary because he'd be dead soon anyway.

At first Bobberts thought Gramps meant the guy would be dead because

Gramps would see to it, but Gramps didn't mean that at all. The guy had stopped screaming and the blood wasn't squirting any more, and the snow was so red it didn't look like snow, and the blood was dripping down the footprints into Sarah's snow angels, decorating them like Momma decorated her Christmas cookies, with a touch of red over the white.

Then Daddy reached them and grabbed Sarah and looked at Bobberts, and Gramps said, "The kid saved them both," and Daddy looked like he was gonna cry, and Bobberts knew exactly why. He held out the knife. It was bent funny and covered with gunk. He said, "I'm sorry, Daddy. I think I broke it."

And Daddy took the knife from him, dropped it onto the path, and pulled Bobberts to his other side. Bobberts clung onto Daddy's jeans, feeling Daddy's leg shake, or maybe Bobberts was shaking, and Sarah was crying, and Gramps was telling everybody to stay on the path, and Daddy said, "It's okay,"

but they all knew it really wasn't.

The tree guy couldn't wait and he had to go see if the mean guy was all right, and Gramps kept shaking his head. Bobberts wanted to get out of there, but he knew they couldn't go yet.

"Daddy," Bobberts said. "You forgot the tree."

And Daddy laughed, only it didn't sound like a Daddy-laugh. It sounded

kinda shaky and weird, and he looked at Gramps and said, "I think we're gonna get a tree from the store." Bobberts didn't know what that meant, but he nodded anyway.

Sarah wiped her face off and lifted her head and said, "I was just making angels, Daddy."

"I know," Daddy said. "I know. And they protected you, honey."

"Uh-uh," Sarah said. "That was Bobberts."

And Bobberts smiled, even though he was shaking. He smiled and reached for his sister, and hugged her, even though it was a baby thing to do.

And nobody said nothing, nobody except Gramps, who said, "We got hot

cocoa in the car,” like it was a reward.

And maybe it was.

Like smiling against his dad's leg, and hugging his sister, and being really, really glad that nobody said nothing about the knife, lying bloody and broken in the snow