

**COAL  
GETS IN YOUR  
VEINS**

**CAT RECTOR**

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# TRIGGER WARNINGS

This book includes individual scenes that are fictionalisations of real traumatic events that happened to or around me. Some are mine to tell, some were included by request.

This book is a standing monument to things that people have suffered, and as such, please proceed with caution.

A list of these side scenes and their specific triggers can be found on my website, as well as in the appendix at the back of this book when it's published.

Death

Violence

Misogyny

Sexual content

Domestic abuse and sexual assault from a spouse

Implied sexual assault involving a minor (off page)

Homophobic slurs

Emotional abuse

Grief and depression around loss of loved ones

Firearm use

Recreational alcohol, smoking, and drug use

Death of a wild animal

The evils of being a vampire

Blood and gore

Descriptive scenes of biting and blood drinking, including in sexual scenarios

Poverty

Fire, burns, and burning buildings

Mention of past murders

Bigotry

Don't forget to hydrate.

Just...make sure the water doesn't have any coal in it, okay?

# PREFACE

This book is the culmination of many things, but primarily it's an attempt to write what I know. What I know above all else is what it was like to grow up in the generational trauma of an impoverished ex-coal mining town, and to wish to be swept away from my troubles by a handsome brooding vampire.

And because of that, I get to introduce you to Laurel and Spencer.

I thought that would be the end of it. Book written, job complete. Laurel and Spencer's stories were on the page, and so was a collection of mostly true vignettes inspired by the goings-on of the town I grew up in. To help set the scene, you know? When I handed the first draft to some local readers, I asked them to be honest. Had I been too sharp with the way I had framed this fictional version of the place I loved? Did I need to dial it back?

They read the book, then told me I hadn't cut far enough.

They asked me to add their personal stories, and the book also became a memorial.

This book is fictional. It's a fake town with fake names and there are paranormal concepts that clearly don't exist in real life. It is, however, based on real dynamics. The point of view of Penny Harbour is what most closely resembles fact. Each scene is different and from the perspective of a fictional person who lived in the Harbour. While the details have been left fuzzy or changed altogether, each scene represents a real event that happened to myself, to someone who asked me to share their story, or to someone that I love.

There are horrors in this books, and most of them are true.

For some, the hardest part of reading this book will be believing that these things happened. For others, it will be believing that the area in question is built on a duality of loving community and deep pain.

The place where I grew up was complicated. It cared. It lifted people up. It gave everything it had to people who needed it most. It did the best it could. I met my platonic soulmate there, but I also met the people who would carve my heart out of my chest and serve it back to me in shreds. It gave and stole so much from me, and it started years before I was born, and will keep doing it long after I'm dead. It shaped me and everyone I loved, for better or worse.

When I was a teenager, I thought it was paradise. At the age of 35, I know something I didn't know back then; you can't build a town on 300 years of traumatic events without it haunting the generations to come. We now understand generational trauma to be something passed down from family member to family member, through their actions but also genetically. Trauma changes people to their core, mind and body. I look at my own family tree and I see it, clear as crystal.

The town of Penny Harbour is true and it's false and only someone who lived there will properly know the difference.

I come from a place where the sea rises up to meet you. Where doors keep shuttering, never to open again. Where the tap water can smell like rotten eggs and the people who share your blood can be your truest enemy. Where the people are deeply entwined over generations, and they're divided and hold grudges and will still build your house back up when it burns to the ground. Where neighbours walk in without knocking and put the kettle on, because they know they're always welcome. Where the town is built on top of the souls of miners who didn't make it out, and there isn't a single person down any family line that it didn't touch. Where love is hard and complicated. Where getting by is often the best you can hope for.

In a place like this, the coal got in our veins for 300 years, and the trauma of it ate so many of us alive.

Yet we carry on with hope and love.

Because what else can a person do?

# PROLOGUE

*Nova Scotia*  
*1721 to 1992*

The crack of dawn came early for the miners of Umberlee #2, just the same as it did every other morning. The chill of maritime air was visible on the breath of the men and boys as they walked down the main road in the frigid winter cold. Each had a tin can in one hand: lunch made by a sister or wife or mother. Snow crunched underfoot as they made their way up the dirt road, dressed in stained slacks and heavy coats.

Dougie Bougois—Dougie Boy, most men called him—was creeping up on his fifth year of employment in the Umberlee. He was eighteen, and more man than boy by that time, especially with five years in the pit. Five years of getting in that blackened coal car and sliding slowly into the depths of the earth with dozens of others just like him. His comrades. His family. And maybe, if he was unlucky, the people he'd share his grave with.

As smooth and routine as automation, Dougie found his way to the lockers, where he stashed what few things he wouldn't take down into the dark with him: his matchbook, his good coat, and the nice new mittens his sweetheart had made him. It would be chilly for a bit, before he went down into the ground, but the pit would be hot and sweaty soon enough. With all that stowed away, he followed the others to the lamp cabin, saying his hellos and good mornings along the way.

Old Benjamin saw him coming, gave him a growl as a hello, and handed him a lantern. One that would stay unlit until Dougie knew it was safe. The mines were full of gases, and he had lost too many friends to methane, cave-ins, and explosions.

A boy learned a lot about death in a place like the Umberlee.

Dougie made his way to the tracks that would lead him underground. The night shift were saying their goodbyes amongst themselves, and the morning shift were climbing into the coal cars as they emptied out. The smell of coal and gas and sweat was thick in the air, and a layer of dust covered everything—especially the men. Some of them he'd recognize anywhere; others were coal black from head to toe, the dust coating their clothes, lost in their hair, and driven up under their fingernails.

One man coughed violently, and Dougie would've sworn he'd coughed up a cloud of black.

## Cat Rector

Dougie climbed into the coal car, the first layer of dust finding its way onto his body. A yawn rose in his chest, and he fished around in his breast pocket and pulled out a can of chewing tobacco. He'd already had a cup of tea, but maybe some chew would wake him up proper. He stuffed the brown paste between his gums and his lip. The bittersweet flavour coated his tongue, and as he waited for the cars to start moving, the nicotine did its work. It would keep his mouth wet while he was down in the deep dark, and keep him working on through the twelve hours ahead.

After he put the can of chew back, he checked his lunch tin. His sister had put together a good lunch that day: a potato, some bread rinds, a thin slice of ham, and a cup of tea in a thermos. She'd even packed him a clean handkerchief. He didn't like getting the coal in his mouth when he could avoid it, but they had nowhere to clean up down there, same as there was no toilet neither. A man did what he had to do, and that meant eating coal with his lunch.

The car shifted, drawing Dougie out of his thoughts. The whole line of cars was filled with the men of his town, some younger than him and some much, much older. Each of them crept closer and closer to the yawning maw of the mine, and so did he. It was black inside, darker than dark. No black was deeper than what was at the bottom of the pit, and they drew closer a little at a time as the cart began to slope.

The Umberlee was fifteen kilometres deep at its lowest point, and the mine manager hoped to go at least another fifteen. There were rumours, though, that the manager was runnin' the tunnels too close together. That they were in for another bump. Everyone felt it coming, but it wasn't as if anybody had much of a choice. A man didn't work, he didn't put food on the table. Wasn't as if there were better jobs around anyhow.

As Dougie's cart approached the mine opening, he turned and gave a little wave to Harvey, who was manning the switch. The boy was ten years old, and Dougie tried to be a little extra kind to him. Mining was a scary thing sometimes. For little boys, that was. Not for people like Dougie, who was half a child himself, but thought himself a man. He remembered being scared too, in the years before.

Sometimes he was still scared shitless, but he never told nobody about it, not even when the nightmares stole his sleep.

None of the other men talked about it, so Dougie figured he shouldn't neither.

The car passed into the dark, and the world faded away. The dim lights from above faded out quickly, and soon Dougie couldn't tell if his eyelids were open or closed. There wasn't any difference at all. What little light they had down there would come from lanterns, but not until later, if no gas was found in the mines, but that first few kilometres of slow track downhill sometimes got under his skin.

## Coal Gets In Your Veins

Sitting in the dark, he wondered what he couldn't see. Rats, absolutely. Always rats. But maybe something else. Maybe something worse. How was he to know? He couldn't see a fucking thing.

He'd go for a drink later, that was for sure. A Friday shift deserved a drink. So long as he made it out alive again to get one.



# LAUREL

*Nova Scotia*

2024

The shrill blare of a single set of bagpipes was loud enough to be heard all around town. It was the same old song on the same old instrument, one that sprang up a few times a year in most any Nova Scotian town. Even though my thoughts had been drifting for a while, it was hard to focus on any of them over the screeching. Not a bad screeching, though. Bagpipes stirred something in my soul when I heard them. They were part of the blood in these parts, and they were welcome—at least when they happened for a few minutes at a time and not more than once a month.

I shivered. My thick camouflage-printed coat should have been enough to keep the winter chill out, but my body heat had faded a half hour ago. We were all sitting in the open air, and the breeze kept snapping at my exposed skin. I pulled the fur-trimmed hood tighter around my face. We'd all been sitting in hard plastic chairs for long enough that my ass had gone numb, and it was starting to grate on my nerves.

The miners' memorial was important to Mom, and I figured that meant it should be important to me too. As the music continued, the town mayor stood solemnly in front of a tall statue of a man in a miner's helmet, lantern in hand. The base of the statue held the carved-out names of over a hundred men and boys. Some of them were from long before my time, and some of them had been alive—and dead—in Mom and Nan's days.

I'd always had a hard time keeping the history straight. It wasn't something I was proud of. There'd been so many mines, and so many accidents, in Penny Harbour and the towns around us. The memorial that day was for the anniversary of the UMBERLEE #2 Bump—or I was pretty sure it was, at least. Bumps weren't things I lingered my thoughts on for long. I'd seen diagrams of a mine bump before, and my imagination had made it far too vivid for my liking. I could practically see the ground shifting around the mineshaft, the floor rising up to meet the ceiling like a mouse trap snapping shut. People crushed in seconds, or trapped behind the blockage. Choking on poison air. It sounded like something from a horror movie, except it wasn't. At least four bumps had happened in local mines since my nan was born, each in a different shaft.

All those relatives stuck down there...

Just thinking about it made my skin crawl.

## Coal Gets In Your Veins

The song died out, and the mayor cleared his throat. “Thank you, everyone, for coming today. I know it’s not the best weather for this kind of thing, but we try to commemorate our family and friends on the day of their death. Which is a Tuesday this year, as you can see by all the empty seats.” The ten other people present on the snow-covered lawn gave a chuckle, and he carried on. “All right, folks, go on home. Thanks for coming, and we’ll see you in July for the Dorothy Explosion memorial.”

I could deal with a few memorials a year. God knew we’d had more accidents than the town could stand to remember. Thousands of people over three centuries.

We only gathered for the big ones.

A sniff came from beside me, and when I looked, Mom was wiping a tear from the corner of her eye. That was the most emotion I’d ever gotten from Mom over any of these events. That woman wouldn’t even talk about what happened. I barely knew who she was crying over, let alone the details. But it was that way with everyone in town. A thousand tragedies, big and small, and each one of them held tight to people’s chests like talking about them made them real.

Now, if one of the Joneses up the road was caught cooking meth, you’d know about that before lunchtime. That was different. That was *good gossip*. No one talked about pain, though, not in a small place like Penny Harbour, where everyone knew everyone’s lives and had done so for the last three hundred years.

I gave Mom a little nudge with my elbow. “You all right to go?”

“Hmm?” Mom looked up, blinking away her tears. “Oh, yes, let’s get out of here already.” She stood, pulling her purse tightly against her black vinyl coat. Her cheeks were pink with the cold, her pale skin flecked with age spots. A white hand-knit hat covered her blonde bob, the ends sticking out around the edges. “Thanks for coming with me, honey.”

“No worries. Bob Peters cancelled his window replacement on me for today anyways, so I had plenty of time.” I trudged through the snow beside Mom as we made our way off the lawn and toward the parking lot across the street. “You coming over for supper this weekend?”

“No, no.” Mom shook her head, digging her car keys out of her pocket. “Nancy asked me to go to one of them painting nights where you drink and pretend you can do art. I’m gonna go and be foolish with her for a few hours. Might even sleep in on Sunday.”

“Good, getting out of the house suits you.” I gave her a smile. She’d been getting more and more distant the last few years. It was good for her, really, finally having friends and fun. Mom had been struggling to have a social life for years, ever since Dad fucked off when I was a teenager. It seemed like men were a curse in our family; Pop

## Cat Rector

had gone and died on Nan years too soon, Dad had disappeared and never came back, not even a phone call, and I...I had Greg.

Parked next to Mom's SUV, my old black truck looked monstrous. We stood in front of the cars, doing the dance of who was leaving first. A chill wracked up my body and I quickly decided it would be me this time. I leaned in to hug my mother and cut things short. "All right, you have fun now. Send me a picture of whatever it is you paint."

Mom hugged me back, squeezing just a little longer than usual. "I will. Say hi to Greg for me."

Her casual use of his name made me pause and catch my breath. It almost always meant she was about to start asking questions I wouldn't want to answer. "Yup, sure, will do." I hurried, and before Mom could notice anything—because she always noticed *everything*—I let her go and made for the driver's side door of the truck.

The old beast rattled and coughed to a start with all the grace of a geriatric two-pack-a-day smoker. I threw it in gear, and while I wouldn't say I tore out of the parking lot as fast as I could go, I had no interest in taking my time.

It was impossible to explain to my mother or to anyone else that I simply didn't want to talk about my home life. People would always get curious, and that curiosity would inevitably end up with me being asked about my husband, which wasn't a place I ever wanted to end up. I had nothing good to say anymore, and I'd spent all my lies on the first five years of our marriage. I didn't have many left.

The drive home was a short one. In a town with a total of twenty streets, it wasn't far to drive anywhere in Penny Harbour. I passed the grocery store, the post office, the corner store, and the gas station. Another street had two little mom-and-pop restaurants right next to the school, and a mechanic or two further down the road. That was about all there was to Penny Harbour, aside from the houses that kept the 632 residents of the town sheltered. Well, more or less sheltered. I'd done enough home repairs around the area to know that some shelter was less reliable than others.

My phone buzzed in my pocket. I'd hit a rare patch of intermittent cell service on the stretch of road I was on, and when the buzzing went off rapid-fire, playing a specific little chime over and over, I didn't have to guess who it was.

Greg had been messaging me since shortly after he'd gotten to work that morning, irate at his boss again. But since cell service was spotty at best around the Harbour, I hadn't gotten anything since I'd left the house. These new messages were probably more whining. I glanced at the ancient and slightly vibrating digital numbers on the truck dash. Twenty past three. He'd be home in an hour and a half.

Then there'd be hell to pay.

My gut swirled, all the tension settling in my shoulders. In the minute since the

## Coal Gets In Your Veins

buzzing had started, I'd basically stopped breathing. Realizing it, I inhaled long and deep, going until my lungs burned with expansion. Exhale. Repeat. Each deep breath helped bring the blood back to my head. Kept the fear from setting in. A little trick my friend Emma had forced on me, and one that I didn't readily admit to her that I'd been using.

As I pulled up to the house that Greg and I had bought twelve years prior, relief flooded over me. The driveway was empty. Sure, he wasn't supposed to be home yet, but every once in a while he was home early, not giving me a chance to get my head right before I saw him. The lack of absolute certainty always fucked with me.

After pulling the truck up into the long driveway, I habitually put it in reverse and whipped it back into its normal spot on the lawn. Nine times out of ten, I could land the tires right in the grooves in the grass.

I hopped out of the truck and slammed the door behind me. The cold nipped at my nose again, my breath clouding in the air. I jogged up the deck stairs that led to the front door of our little bungalow and pushed the door open. It was never locked. No one in Penny Harbour locked their doors unless we were asleep or going far, and we probably wouldn't until bears started using doorknobs.

The oil furnace had kept the house above freezing while I was out, but it was still chilly inside. I kicked my boots onto the mat and didn't bother taking my coat off as I rushed from the kitchen, into the hall, and down the basement stairs. I flicked on the light to reveal the half-finished room, all concrete and storage and old furniture. A couch from the 1970s was arranged next to a coffee table and a mismatched armchair, all turned toward a generously sized television. It was the place where Greg brought his buddies to drink and smoke and give no fucks.

I only ever went to the basement to stoke the fire or get something from the deep freeze. I never put myself in his line of sight when I didn't have to.

Once I'd piled kindling and old cardboard into the wood stove, I opted for the shortcut and grabbed the small propane blow torch. When the kindling lit, I tossed a couple of split logs on top, sealed the stove back up, and booted it upstairs toward the shower.

Chasing warmth, I cranked the tap as hot as I could stand it and then stripped off my coat and clothing. The familiar scent rose in the bathroom, a thin cloud of sulphur and coal. Out in butt-fuck nowhere, we had no town water system, just wells that dredged up whatever could be found beneath the house, most of it laced with things that city folk would call unacceptable.

We just called it water.

I stepped into the steaming downpour and gasped at the shock of heat. It was slightly too hot, so I dialled the knob back a bit, taking a moment to luxuriate in the

## Cat Rector

warmth. It seeped into my skin, into my muscles, pushing back the bone-deep cold the Atlantic Canadian winters often brought.

The shower brought my body back to equilibrium. I washed up quickly, less dirty than I was chilled, and stepped out of the shower before I could get too comfortable. A long, hot shower would be nice, but hell was headed my way and I needed to make sure I would survive it.

I towelled off, watching myself in the foggy mirror as I did. Sometimes I wondered who exactly was looking back at me. When the skin around my eyes had started to darken. When my hair had gotten that long. I dried it, continuing to look. To ground myself in that body that was mine but that I often forgot the age of. Thirty-five, if my licence could be believed. Cream-coloured curves lined with scars from working hard and fucking up. Lean muscle bought with countless hours of installing windows and lifting concrete. I liked my body for the most part; it did right by me. It just kept getting older.

More tired.

Who would I be in another decade? Another two?

Not bothering to get dressed right away, I wrapped the towel around my head and went out into the hallway naked. The heat had kicked in since I'd gotten in the shower, and the mildly warm air felt good on my skin.

The paranoia was creeping back in, and I checked the time immediately. Quarter to four. I still had plenty of time to get supper ready, even if I felt the seconds ticking by with each beat of my heart. I started the preheat on the oven and pulled out the potato-and-vegetable mix I'd prepared and left in the fridge the night before. Two steaks were marinating in a bowl, and I set that on the counter to come to room temperature. It was a meal that Greg normally went ape-shit for, which might help me out in the coming hours.

I opened the fridge again, this time for me. Tucked in among the food and condiments was a nearly empty four-litre water jug. I hauled it out, the last bit sloshing around inside. Setting that on the counter, I stole the pint of rum from the back of the freezer. A large cup of water, a large shot of rum. Covering all the bases.

I chugged back the water and chased it with the shot. Maybe it would make this easier. God knew something had to.

Still naked, I took the empty jug and walked it down the hall to the storage closet. Inside, among a bunch of other junk, were a dozen identical four-litre jugs. Half of them were full, the other half empty. I shelved the empty and grabbed a full one. Next time I drove up to town, I'd take the empties and fill them at the freshwater pump. The lucky town people had clean water. Our well was fine for showers and dishes, but a

## Coal Gets In Your Veins

person shouldn't even make their dog drink it, let alone themselves.

On the way back to the kitchen, I took a minute to pull on a pair of soft pyjamas and dump my towel in the hamper. A naked woman in the kitchen might please or infuriate Greg, and had gone both ways in the past. I wasn't going to risk it.

Ten after four.

I realized that for all the stress those texts had caused me, I hadn't looked at them. Instead, I'd put myself and the house to rights because I knew the consequences of not doing that. I put the water in the fridge and went back to the bathroom to clear the clothes I'd abandoned on the floor. My phone was a thick brick in my pocket, and I grabbed it before shoving all that in the hamper as well. My chest was constricting just knowing the messages were in there, waiting.

They weren't going to be good.

He might've texted me since, but I wouldn't know until I put the phone in the one spot in the house that actually got reception.

As I walked to the cell phone window, I tapped the screen.

Twelve missed texts.

Greg:

Fucking cunt is at it again!!

Thinks she can send me to these Shit Jobs

I told Lonnie to tell her to stuff it but I know he won't say nuthin

cause he's a fucking pussy

usless af

On and on it went.

The last text read:

Greg:

are you even fucking listening, what the fuck

I put the phone on the windowsill, sitting it on its little stand that lived there.

*Ba-ding ding ding ding ding*

Five new texts, the last of which read:

Greg:

Think you can just ignore me all day

Where are u???

## Cat Rector

I'd been out. I'd told him where I was going, and since we'd both grown up there, he knew full well the reception was shit. He had no reason to behave like that.

And yet.

Twenty after four.

I stared out the window, past the phone. The sun was setting, and my truck was sitting there in the coming dark, clunky but strong. Waiting. I could get in it and drive away. I'd had the thought a thousand times before. I'd never acted on it, but this time could be different.

I could be gone before he got back.

Emma or Mary-Jo would take me in. My mother would. They'd make sure I was safe from him.

But then I'd have to admit it.

Admit they were right. Admit why I was afraid of him. What he'd done over the years. Explain that no, he'd never laid a hand on me, but that it was horrific just the same. He'd whittled me down, little by little over the years, until I barely knew myself. That it wasn't just about my feelings. It wasn't just that he made me sad or angry. He left me hollow, but I didn't know how to make anyone believe that.

And the ones who did believe, I'd have to explain why I'd stayed so fucking long.

I had no desire to try to explain.

I had survived every encounter before, and I'd survive now.

Maybe I'd have more courage tomorrow.

The stove beeped, letting me know the oven was warm enough.

Besides, who was going to make supper if I didn't?

Time ticked by under my fingers as I prepped the rest of the meal. Plates on the table, cups next to plates, forks next to steak knives. Another shot of rum. Check the veggies. Flip the veggies. Back in the oven. Ten to five. Steak in the pan. Sear. Reduce heat.

Gravel on the driveway.

I didn't look up. I kept my eyes on the steak in the pan, blood seeping up through the meat. Greg's boots clunked heavily up the steps and the door flew open, slamming against the wall.

"The fuck have you been?" Greg snarled, tossing his work bag with a heavy thud.

I still refused to look up. "I went to the memorial with Mom today. I forgot to put my phone in the window until I started supper, but you were driving by then and I—"

"Yeah, sure, you forgot." Greg left his boots on as he marched through the house, down to the end of the hall. He yelled to be heard over the distance. "And now I can't find my good fucking wrench. What'd you do, hide it on me?"

With him out of the room, I dared to look elsewhere. Greg had tracked snow and

## Coal Gets In Your Veins

muck all through the house.

"I haven't seen your good wrench," I called back, as demurely as I could manage.

The clatter of tools came from the other side of the house, and then it was the thumping of his boots again as he came back to the kitchen. "Shit fucking day surrounded by shit fucking people." Greg kicked his boots at the wall, one after the other, and then threw the *missing* wrench into his boot for morning.

"I'm sorry you had a bad day." The steaks were done, so I plated them both and turned off the burner, as well as the oven. That was the first time I looked at him.

If it weren't for the seething rage that always seemed to come off him in waves, Greg would've been mostly handsome. Beat up around the edges, yes, but that came with hard work. He was a welder and worked long hours in town, and he bore the burns and scars of that work. But his face was made of sharp lines, and he had a closely shaved beard that kept him looking fine even when he was covered in dirt. He'd been handsome when he was young, and age only looked good on him. But the only thing that held any weight for me anymore was how he looked at me with utter contempt.

"Bad doesn't even sum it up." Greg walked past me, close enough that it set off alarm bells in my head. He'd found the pint of rum I'd been drinking, and he put the bottle to his lips to finish it off. "I need a new fucking job, one where the boss doesn't ride me for every fucking thing."

From talking with some of his coworkers at holiday parties, I knew that *every fucking thing* included not showing up to work, smoking pot on the job, and stealing people's lunches from the fridge. He'd been kicked out of half a dozen jobs since we were kids, but sure, Greg, it was always everyone else.

"You're right. I'm sure somewhere else would be lucky to have you," I said, attempting to placate him

"The one I've got should be lucky to have me. Do you have any fucking idea how hard it is to get a new job? No, you wouldn't, cause you keep working for free like a fucking moron. Maybe I could go work somewhere else if I didn't have to take care of your share of the money too."

That burned. Greg knew what to say to get a rise out of me. I tried to swallow it; I really did. "I'm sorry you don't like my job."

"Job? You have to get paid for it to be a job."

"I do get paid. Not as much as you—"

"Barely fucking anything. I take care of the bills here." Greg stepped closer, getting into my space.

Two ways. This always had the chance to go one of two ways.

"And I'm grateful you do that." I looked up at him, trying to be brave.



## Cat Rector

If today was the first day he hit me, please let me at least have the grace to be unafraid.

“Not grateful enough.” He took my face in his hand and squeezed my cheeks, making sure I was looking at him. “Tell me how fucking grateful you are to sit here and live off my hard work.”

I swallowed, trying to control my breathing. Running the lines in my head. “I’m so thankful that you take care of me and the house, and that you put food on the table. I wish I knew how to thank you better.”

“I know how.” Greg pressed me against the counter, the edge jamming into my back. One of his hands pawed at my side, groping until he found his way under my shirt.

I let out a sigh of relief, one he immediately took as enthusiasm.

This game was one I knew how to play.

I hated him, inside and out, but I also knew the cycles. He would rage until something could reset him. If it wasn’t a bar brawl or a joint, it was a fuck. If I could be a somewhat willing plaything, the rage would subside.

It was fine.

A compromise I could live with.

Sex was the only thing we ever did together anymore anyway. The only time I felt anything for him other than numbness or contempt. It was the only good thing he brought to my life, because as horrible as he was, an angry lay a few times a month was better than never being touched again.

It was what had been important when we met. We were young and bored and there was nothing to fucking do in that village. Dad had just taken off and I was so *raw*. Angry. Greg and I had partied and fucked for the last few years of high school, and one day I looked up and it was ten years later. We were married and he was so angry all the time. I could hardly remember making those choices at all. I’d just gone with the flow of things, and suddenly I was stuck. Stuck in a small house and a small life with a man who made me feel smaller than I had ever thought possible.

A man who had to fuck the anger out of him in order to feel anything.

Greg took me against the counter and then on top of it, and it felt better than nothing. Better than whatever else could have come next, at least. He’d never been good at it, but I didn’t know that until it was years too late and I’d listened to enough of Mary-Jo’s stories to understand I’d been missing out on something. Her conquests sometimes cared that she got off.

Greg never had.

*You could just end it.*

*Reach over.*

## Coal Gets In Your Veins

*Take the butcher's knife and be done with it.*

*Wouldn't that be so sweet, Little Laurel?*

My hand twitched. Ached to move. To do exactly as that little voice in the back of my mind was asking me to. It would be *so easy*.

I moved my hand from Greg's shoulder, and just as I started to inch it toward the block of knives on the counter, he grabbed my hand and squeezed, pressing it into the countertop. And then the impulse was gone, thank fuck.

What kind of monster was I?

The sex was over almost as fast as it started. I fixed my clothing and plated up the veggies that had been in the oven. We both sat down at the table and ate in silence, scrolling on our phones for the latest social media gossip. I didn't read anything. I just flicked my finger on the screen and waited until I could reasonably go to the bathroom without sparking his ire. Double-checked the alarm that would remind me to take my birth control later.

After he was done eating, Greg wordlessly grabbed a beer from the fridge and went to park himself in bed with the TV. He was a predictable creature. He'd be half-drunk by the time I finished the dishes, and he'd spend most of the night in there, glued to whatever mindless thing he'd found to watch.

And I'd be left to think over how gross the encounter had made me feel. It was a terrible brew of shame, made worse by the small knot of pleasure coiled in my gut. I hated it more than I could explain.

Like clockwork, Greg was passed out by the time I'd cleaned up. I stared at him from the open doorway, the TV going on about last night's hockey game, and I couldn't imagine getting into bed next to him. It was far too early, yes. But my skin had started crawling just looking at him.

A little voice in the back of my mind asked the same questions it always did.

*Do you think you deserve this, Laurel?*

*Does he?*

*What would freedom cost you, sweet thing?*

*What would you do to escape his reach?*

I shook myself and went to the bathroom. A storm of thoughts churning in my head, I cleaned myself up before pulling on the clothing I'd abandoned to the hamper not long ago. My coat was in there too, overlooked in my rush to fend off Greg. I pulled it on and followed my panic into the kitchen, grabbed my phone, and went right out the door.

I had no idea what I was doing or where I was going, only that I needed to go. If I stayed in that house with him, I might have killed him.

## Cat Rector

Figuratively speaking

Mostly.

Night had fallen. The cold had set in harder with the darkness, but I wouldn't care once I started walking. I bolted past the pair of trucks on the lawn and down the lane, going as fast as my legs would take me.

The world around me was abandoned, the way it always was in the middle of nowhere. Homes on large parcels of land, with enough distance between each that a whole other house could fit between. Street lights dotted the distance along the single road stretching north and south, the only other light coming from the three homes I could see from the side of the road. Nothing around in the dark. Empty space and the quiet of wind in the trees, covered in white, iced-over snow.

With a quick look at the empty road, I crossed the street and headed for my neighbour's driveway. The length of it went down past the house, a straight shot into the trees. The driveway portion was shovelled, the snow piled on either side, but the lane into the woods was still covered in ankle-high powder. Snowmobile tracks and footprints tamped down a lot of it, and I walked in the long lines as much as I could, pushing forward. Running from my problems at a brisk walk.

The lane ended, the path veering to the left and right. That far back from the road, there were no street lights, so I popped on the flashlight on my phone. Better to be seen by any late-night offroad vehicles. The track, as most called it, was the remnants of an old railroad that had run through the town while the mines were still in operation. The metal tracks themselves hadn't been there for more than sixty years—what good was a railway for a dying town?—but the imprint had remained. It served as a path for ATVs, snowmobiles, and the occasional pedestrian.

Taking the path to the right, I pressed on, trying to push the nervous energy out of my body. Fucking Greg. Fucking life. How long was I going to put myself through this same thing? He wasn't supposed to have this power over me. I wasn't supposed to be stuck in a life I hated.

*When was the last time you felt safe, Laurel?*

*Will you spend your whole life trying to anticipate his every need?*

*You can never prepare enough for him.*

*Aren't you angry?*

I was. I was furious. But I'd gotten good at hiding it. I didn't hate my *life*. My work was fulfilling; my friends were amazing; I loved my mother. I just hated Greg. I was terrified of what it meant to leave. What he might do, but not *just* of him. The change. What was waiting for me on the other side? I'd lose the house and the savings, and I'd lose the town. Most everyone liked Greg. He never acted to other people the way he acted to

## Coal Gets In Your Veins

me. If he stole something or was crabby with people, that was just a quirk.

No one knew how aggressive he was with someone he supposedly loved.

A howl rose up from somewhere, breaking me from my thoughts. A coyote. I'd never been out in the woods alone in the dark before, because mostly I was smarter than that. Or I hoped I was. Coyotes didn't attack people that often, and bears should be hibernating. A moose wasn't going to eat me, but stumbling on one of those in the dark was a good way to not see the sunrise.

Maybe I shouldn't have followed my feet after all.

I'd find a driveway not far away that led back to the road. Five minutes at most. I'd push on that far, then leave the woods and keep walking on the side of the road. That would be a more intelligent option.

A light was shining up ahead.

It wasn't the steady floodlight of a snowmobile. Instead it was a small, flickering thing. Fire. Someone else was out there.

The track ran along the back of dozens of properties, and it was within reason that someone needed a little alone time in the evenings. It wasn't like Penny Harbour got the attention of criminals or anything. Probably it was Arnold Porter out having a drink by his lonesome.

I kept up this negotiation with my fear as I drew closer, telling myself who it might or might not be. As I drew closer, things became clearer. The light was a small fire contained in a metal bucket, and it lit up the shape of a person sitting in a ragged old chair. With their coat on and hood up, it was hard to say which of my neighbours it was.

Whether it was the light of my phone or the snow under my boots, something drew the attention of the shape in the dark.

"Hello?" they called out.

Well, there was no getting around being noticed.

"Hello," I called back, putting on my best small-town hospitality voice. "Cold night to be sitting in the dark."

"Just as cold to be out for a walk, don't you think?" The voice was masculine with an accent that was familiar and strange all at the same time. Our local accent was thick with remnants of Scottish, Irish, and British, but his sounded...pure. Faded, watered down, but untarnished Irish. Like it had come from the source but had gotten used to being somewhere else.

I stopped at the spot where the trees had been cut into a clearing. A large pile of stone chips sat in the background, a man-made hill that towered over us both. Over the years, people had dumped all kinds of things in that clearing: a beat-up washer, two

## Cat Rector

bikes, and a bunch of odds and ends.

And this guy, sitting in the dark among the old trash.

“Just trying to get my steps in before bed.” It was all I could think to say. Decades of casual conversation with anyone who passed by had burned this politeness into me. An easy script to follow with everyone I met, every day. Tell them just enough but never too much, and never, ever be rude. It might get back to someone else that you were.

“I see.” The stranger pulled his hood down and my heart skipped a beat. He was a good-looking guy; that much was for sure. His face, illuminated by the firelight, had a porcelain quality to it. His layered blonde hair seemed windswept, a little too long to be short, a little too short to be long. And thick, too. The kind of hair a person wouldn’t mind losing their fingers in. His grey eyes were wary, and the way he looked up at me was...almost hungry.

“Didn’t mean to intrude on your alone time,” he said, sitting back in the chair. He waved a hand toward the fire. “I’d invite you to join me, but that seems like a strange proposition for a weirdo lurking in the woods.”

The honesty shocked a laugh from me. “Well, at least you’re up-front about it. You from here, stranger? I don’t think I know your face.”

The man shook his head, patting down the front of his too-thin-for-this-weather black jacket. “I live here, but I know that’s not what you mean. I came from Away, as the locals say.”

“Gotcha. Used to be that no one new moved here, until all the people from Ontario started running from the cities a few years back.” I cringed, realizing my mistake. “You’re not from Ontario, are you? Not with that accent, surely.”

It was his turn to laugh. “No, I’m not. I’m from all over, honestly. Ireland, originally. Once upon a time. But that sound is long gone, I think.”

“Hmm, I’m not sure about that. It’s still there, at least a bit.”

He smirked. “Good to know.”

I kicked the toe of my boot into the snow. This was the time to either leave or commit. He’d invited me to stay, but probably in the way people do, assuming you’ll say no. And I could leave. I could go back home to Greg and lie in bed next to him, not sleeping. Wishing for something else. Or I could sit with a weirdo hanging out in the woods by himself.

The fact that I knew which was more appealing...

“You know, if you’ve got another seat, I wouldn’t mind some company. I’m currently running from something and could use the distraction.”

Clearly not expecting that answer, the man got up and gestured to the chair he’d just been sitting in. He looked around a moment and then came back to the fire with

## Coal Gets In Your Veins

an upside-down steel bucket. He put it down a respectable distance away from my new chair. “I really didn’t think you’d say yes to that.”

“Me either.” I settled in as best I could onto the cold, abandoned lawn chair. Sure, he could be a murderer, but in a place as small as Penny Harbour, murder was too loud a crime. Things like that didn’t happen around here. Instead, our crimes were kept within our four walls, unless it was jail time for hunting moose out of season. “I suppose it says a lot about me that I’d rather sit in the cold with some random person than go back home.”

The stranger pursed his lips in contemplation. “Well, far be it for me to judge someone for running and hiding. I moved here, after all. What else could I reasonably be doing?” A joke was on his voice, and for just a moment, the lilt on his voice was slightly more feminine.

“If you moved here willingly, you’re either insane or on the lam. How are you enjoying the bad well water and shitty cell phone reception?” I asked. The cold of the chair was already seeping into my muscles, so I leaned forward toward the small fire.

“It’s not that bad.” He shrugged, and then stopped to roll his eyes. “I mean, *it is*, but it’s also what I was hoping for. I needed to...slow down.” He pulled a flask from his coat pocket, sniffed the contents, and put it back. His other pocket had a different flask, which he offered to me.

I waved the flask away. “Sorry, I draw the line at being roofied in the woods.”

He laughed, took the top off, and had a drink. “Smart.”

“How long have you been in Penny Harbour?”

It was a question that needed mulling over, apparently. “Going on two years, I think.”

“Two years? Really feels like I should have run into you at the store or something by now.”

“I do a lot of my shopping in town. I mostly keep to myself.”

I had the urge to ask about that. Digging up skeletons was a bit of a local pastime, but I also knew small-town nosiness wasn’t a quality that people from Away valued all that much. Besides, I was just as much a stranger to him as he was to me. “Well, there’s no better place to sit alone than the local appliance dump. Do you know what that is?” I pointed to the pile of stones we were sitting next to.

The stranger looked up at it, the peak three times higher than he was while sitting. “I don’t, actually.”

“It’s from the coal mine that used to be on this spot. They’d break up the stone and off-load it into piles like these. Lots of them around here, and this one’s on the small side.” I put the light of my phone under my chin, speaking in a ghostly voice. “Generations ago, dozens of people died on this *very spot*.”

## Cat Rector

He looked at me, an eyebrow raised and a smirk on his lips. “Really?”

“I mean, maybe.” I shrugged and pointed the light away from my face again. “There were a lot of accidents. I don’t know what mine this would’ve been, but yeah, probably. Either way, now it’s just a place to put your old washer when you don’t want to pay the dump to take it. We’re a very sophisticated bunch.”

That drew a wide smile from him, and suddenly I was smiling too. It was weird how sometimes strangers were the easiest to talk to, and in the Harbour, they were few and far between.

“I didn’t want to draw attention to it, but I was already moved by how luxurious this village is.” His voice was *very* flippant and sarcastic.

I pointed a finger at him. “You watch it. I’m allowed to say nasty things because I’ve always been here. You’re still fresh meat.”

A look of delight settled on his face, and I felt as if I wasn’t quite in on the joke. “I understand. Rest assured, I quite like it here.”

“Good. I hope you do.” And I meant it. He seemed like good people, at least from first glance. The Harbour was made up of mostly good people trying hard to stay good. Wouldn’t hurt to have some new blood around.

I looked at the time on my phone. The rage had melted out of my body for the moment and was being replaced by the aftershock of exhaustion. “Listen, I’m going to call it a night, but it was nice meeting you...”

“Spencer.” He stood when I did, reaching a gloved hand out to me.

I shook it, giving him a smile. “Laurel. I’ll see you around. Or maybe not, since you’ve evaded me this long.”

“You’ve found the place I come to hide, so my days of evasion are over, I think. I’m not here all the time, but it’s soothing, sometimes, to sit and just...listen.” He shoved his hands into his pockets, staring down at the little fire.

“Yeah, it is nice out here,” I said, looking around at the dark, peaceful woods around us. I let the rustle of branches and the crackle of the fire come between us for a moment, before setting out on my way. “Maybe I’ll see you again, then.”

“Good night, Laurel.”

I turned out of the clearing and started back down the track. Inexplicably, I felt good. Better, at least. Like a tiny bit of hope had been injected into my life, despite that I was walking right back into the belly of the beast.

# SPENCER

Laurel left and I waited. I had no intention of sticking around either, but I gave the woman space. I knew from a lifetime of walking in the dark that nothing spooked a person faster than being followed down a narrow path. She'd likely pushed her bravery to the limit already, sitting with a complete stranger in the woods. If she caught me following behind her, she'd absolutely assume I was stalking her home.

In another place, in another time, she would've been right.

She would've never made it back home.

My stomach growled, a burning pit of hunger. Pulling out the flask I *hadn't* offered to her, I twisted off the cap and tipped it up to my lips. Cold, metallic life ran across my tongue. It wasn't enough to sate the hunger—the packaged stuff never was, not really—but it was better than anything on two legs that this place had to offer.

Everyone in Penny Harbour tasted like ashes, their blood gritty as sand. Like something had seeped into their bodies and set up shop over generations. I'd never seen anything like it. And, of course, that was why I'd stayed.

A person couldn't get themselves in that much trouble if they couldn't eat the people.

Laurel had gotten lucky.

The thing that didn't make sense to me was why I'd given her my name. My *real* name.

I'd given out hundreds of false names over the centuries. Lied to countless people in order to cover my tracks. So I could hunt safely. And for whatever reason, my actual name had stumbled out of my mouth. Though no one had used it in so many years that I wondered if it was even mine anymore.

Had I gotten so desperate?

Staring into the dying fire, it was hard to lie to myself. I'd gone from place to place for so long, looking for something that would lessen the grief in my chest. Keeping to myself. Years of it, until this. Then I'd settled into an old house overlooking a harbour where everyone tasted like shit, because it finally felt right. Somewhere I knew no one and nothing was coming for me, and I could be alone with the hole inside me. Two years, alone. It shouldn't have felt so long, not held against the more than two centuries I'd seen. It should've been *nothing*. A small reprieve from the world as I mourned everything I had lost. Instead, it was a tar pit, dragging me under, one agonizing inch at a time. One I couldn't stand to leave, either.



## Cat Rector

Laurel's company had been a nice change, for once, as short-lived as it was. Who knew? Maybe I *would* see her again.

I stood and began to fill the fire bucket with snow. Surely Laurel had gotten far enough ahead of me by that point, and I could start making my way back to the house. If I was truly lucky, something to eat would pop out of the bushes on the way back. I'd been sitting there with the intention to hunt, eventually. Catch something that somehow tasted less awful than the people. But the moment was gone. We'd made too much noise for whatever might be running around in the dark. Besides, I couldn't have her stumbling onto me with my teeth in some rabbit's neck.

I started back home, stepping as softly as I could.

# PENNY HARBOUR

The Penny Harbour Rural Community Store was the only grocery store within a thirty-minute drive. Open from eight in the morning until eight at night, it did its best to serve the needs of the locals, no matter how many or few. And it struggled to keep the doors open; surely it did. Hours might go by without a soul inside its walls—aside from the lone cashier and a stock boy. But if the locally owned and operated shop didn't keep its doors open, no other company was going to open shop behind it. No, Penny Harbour didn't make nearly enough revenue to be considered a good investment.

It could be argued that all people needed to eat, but what did a billion-dollar corporation care about the welfare of a couple hundred people in the middle of nowhere?

Julie was thankful for the store as she walked its aisles; she hated going to town if she only needed a few things. The building had seen better days and the lights weren't as strong as they used to be, but neither were her legs or her heart. And frankly, she was the same age as the building—give or take.

She had her list, and she leaned a little harder on the cart than she would've liked to, but wasn't that the way with age? Julie was working with a modest budget, which meant her cart was full of little cans and boxes with green labels. No one could tell her food was made with the off-brand stuff anyways, and if it meant her money could spend further, she didn't mind that at all.

The store only had five aisles, but she found nearly everything she'd been hoping for. After that long, Julie knew what the store did and didn't carry. A person had to go to town—that was what everyone said when they meant drive to Hammonds, the closest actual town they had around—to get anything fancy. In fact, Julie chose recipes out of her cookbooks based on what she could and couldn't get in Penny Harbour.

She'd found one last night that called for endives, whatever in the hell an endive was. That certainly wasn't tucked between the corn and the fiddleheads, now was it?

Julie checked her list against the things in her cart, standing under the flickering fluorescent lights above her. She hadn't passed anyone in the store yet, so she was hardly worried about taking up too much space. Check, check, check. The only thing she hadn't found was fresh garlic, and so the powdered stuff would just have to do.

Ambling toward the checkout, Julie put on her friendliest smile. Colleen was sweeping the floor around the cash register, and Julie was glad to see her. She didn't

## Cat Rector

much care for Donna, the one other full-time cashier, but she did her best not to let Donna know that. They were cousins, after all, and it was best to try to get along with cousins.

“How’s it goin’ tonight, Colleen? You keeping busy?” Julie parked her cart at the back of the register and started unloading cans onto the worn black belt.

“Oh, you know, living the dream.” Which was the same as saying *fucking horrible, Julie, I work in a grocery store in the middle of nowhere and I’m bored out of my gourd, but the truck needs a new motor, so here I am.*

Colleen looked like she hadn’t slept in a week. She didn’t hurry back to the register, since Julie was still unloading and she was mid-sweep. Her broom collected a fine dusting of black that had found its way onto the off-white tile floor. No matter how often she swept, that black coal dust kept finding its way back inside. Colleen bent down with the dustpan, skillfully collected it up, and dumped it into the garbage behind the register. A smudge of black stayed on her pants when she wiped her hands on them.

“How’s your mother doing?” Julie asked, her cart empty and the conveyor belt half-full.

Colleen had started to ring the cans through, packing them up into bags as she went. “She’s been asking after you, actually. She’s been doing good, but you know her. She never gets out as much as she should. Maybe sometime you could come down and play a few rounds of cards with her. All she does is work, knit, and watch *Wheel of Fortune.*”

“We miss her up at bingo.” Julie took a full bag of groceries from Colleen and put it back in the cart. “I mean, we miss her, but we don’t miss losing to her.”

Colleen laughed, which brought some of the light back into her eyes. “I know she misses the money she got from winning all the time. I’ll try to convince her to go up for a game or two, but I think you’d have an easier go of it than I would. Dinner’s at five. You can come by any day after six.” Colleen tapped a few keys on the cash register and a total appeared.

The total was more than Julie would’ve liked it to be. The total was real close to her having to put something back. She hated doing that, especially in front of people who knew her—and in Penny Harbour, everyone knew everyone.

“All right, you’ve twisted my leg. You tell your mother I’ll be down tomorrow night.” Julie tapped her card as casually as could be, as if it didn’t hurt to lose all that money, and she picked up her bags. “Don’t work too hard, sweetheart.”

“Never do, Julie. Never do.” Colleen went back to sweeping up the coal dust, and Julie hobbled outside with her bags, careful not to slip on the iced-over snow outside.

# LAUREL

Greg was already gone by the time I hauled myself out of bed the next morning. I sat up, rubbing my face with my hands, trying to decide if I had dreamt my late-night walk. It definitely *felt* like a dream. I hadn't done something that ill-advised in a long time. Not since I'd been causing trouble in my youth, and that felt like a thousand lifetimes ago.

I slung my legs down over the side of the bed and groggily made my way into the kitchen. Sure enough, my boots were sitting on the mat, still dirty.

Well. It hadn't been a dream, then.

I turned and put the kettle on the stove, the pieces of everything running together in my tired mind. I'd gone, yes. I'd met Spencer, the random dude in the woods that I'd never seen before. And was...was the rest a dream? I could remember something, but it was vague and threatening. A nightmare perhaps?

I wasn't sure.

Making myself an instant coffee, I grabbed my phone off the windowsill and took it into the living room. Reception was shit in Penny Harbour, but I could do anything that ran off Wi-Fi. Getting calls or text messages, that was a whole other kettle of fish.

My soft brown armchair was my morning spot. The place where I woke up. Once I was curled up in it, I sipped the coffee and checked my notifications. A few texts from Greg had already come through while I was sleeping. Carrying on like he hadn't come home in a rage, fucked me, and fallen asleep. It was hardly the first time, but it still pissed me off. Which was useless, it turned out. I'd tried for years to talk things out, or to reason with him, but none of it had worked. None of it was worthwhile.

*And what good are useless things, Laurel?*

I took a sip of coffee and swallowed that voice, along with my feelings.

I opened Tabs. It was the only social media platform anyone in the area actually used. It was the calendar, the events board, the thrift store. It even acted as the only website for most of the local businesses. If anyone was talking about this Spencer guy anywhere, it would be on Tabs.

I checked some of the easier places first. I searched for his name, and then checked the community groups. I even checked the Tabs page for the realty companies to see if it was attached to a sold house. Nothing. The name Spencer didn't show up anywhere, or at least, not with that pretty face.

Not that I was a master detective or anything, but I'd assumed it would be easier than that.

Cat Rector

I tapped into the Tabs messenger app and hit the chat named *Sloth Survival Squad*.

Laurel:

Morning, ladies. Anyone know a Spencer that lives here in the Harbour?

When no one started typing immediately, I drank the last bit of my coffee, left the mug on the side table, and went to get dressed.

As I went back into the bedroom, my phone pinged.

Emma:

Just Spencer Harrow. I assume you don't mean him?

Laurel:

Nope. I met a random dude in the woods last night and he said his name was Spencer. Been living here a while, I guess??? Never saw him before

Emma:

In the woods? Sus.

A new icon appeared, meaning all three of us were awake and present.

Mary-Jo:

Why were you in the woods at night? Trying to get eaten :P

I typed out an explanation and erased it three times before settling on one.

Laurel:

Greg pissed me off, so I had to get out of the house. Went down to the track for a walk, met a dude, had a chat

Mary-Jo:

Fuck Greg

You're pissed at him cause \*he's a bad person\*

Emma's response was softer, as usual.

## Coal Gets In Your Veins

Emma:

Please be careful, Laurel. It's not bear season yet but you know there's lynx and shit out there.

Laurel:

I'm fine. No Spencers tho, eh?

Emma:

Nope

Mary-Jo

No. But really. Fuck Greg

I rolled my eyes and put my phone down. I wasn't having that conversation with Mary-Jo again. She had had a decades-long string of relationships that had never turned into anything long-term. How could she possibly understand how much sacrifice it took to be married?

The phone kept pinging, and I clicked the slider over to silent. It was nearly eight and I'd told Larry Turner I'd be there by nine. He'd asked me a month ago to come over to fix the kitchen backsplash, and I just hadn't had time then.

Everyone around Penny Harbour had something that needed fixing.

It wasn't a big job, but it was going to take time. I knew for a fact mould had grown around the edges of that drywall, and I was of a mind to rip the whole chunk out, check behind it for more damage, put a new piece up, plaster the holes, and tile over it so they wouldn't have that issue again. Old houses moulded so easily, and people in ex-coal mining towns mostly didn't have the cash to be proactive about their homes.

That was where I came in.

After I'd pulled on some old navy green overalls and a ratty old blue turtleneck, I put on my work coat and steel-toe boots. A fresh powdering of snow sat outside, but the tire tracks in it told me it had fallen before Greg left for work. I pulled open the driver's door long enough to start the truck and get it warming up. After clearing the snow off the cab and the cover of the truck bed, I grabbed my giant tool kit from the shed around back. I threw it in the passenger seat and went back for a large scrap of drywall. The whole shed was a mess of leftovers, but it was an organized mess. Besides, if I didn't throw things away, I could save money on the materials I needed and charge these people less.

The drywall slid nicely into the truck bed and then it was time to leave. I hopped

## Cat Rector

in the cab, which was mostly warm enough, and turned the poor old girl down the driveway.

If Penny Harbour was the middle of butt-fuck nowhere, I didn't know what to call the corner of land that Larry lived on. It was a fifteen-minute drive down a beat-up road, but the second I was outside of Penny Harbour limits, the road turned to what amounted to asphalt cobblestone. Cracks lined the road in wide circles, clearly displaying where the ground underneath had shifted since the last time the road had been paved. Although, frankly, I'd been living in the area all my life and I'd never once caught anyone paving out that way. The last time it was paved could have been 1830 for all I knew.

A road sign that announced a 90-kilometre speed limit sat on the side of the road ahead, which was laughable. Only tourists did 90 on that road. You'd never catch me doing more than a light 50, which meant you also wouldn't catch me in a ditch either.

When Larry's house appeared around the bend, I sighed. No one had shovelled the driveway. It was good that we hadn't gotten much snow, but who knew how much ice was under there. I pulled in the driveway, the truck jimmying back and forth over the uneven gravel because its shocks were shit. The house itself wasn't looking too shabby. The outside of the old two-storey had been done up with wood shingles, which were in fine shape, but the harsh ocean air had been rough on the paint. The navy blue had chipped away in some places. But at least the shingles themselves seemed to be holding up well enough.

By the time I was out of the cab and pulling the drywall from the back, Larry was on the front porch to meet me. The man must have been in his seventies, and though he got around well enough, his back was severely arched from years of hard labour. Coal mining for a while, then logging, if I remembered right. He gave me a wave as I got closer, his olive-white skin almost translucent over purple veins.

"Well, hello, dear! Right on time, I see. Nancy put on the kettle already. Can't let you get to work without a tea, can we?" Larry's voice croaked, but his smile was bright, the lines around his face wrinkling with each motion.

"I appreciate that." Truth be told, I didn't need any more caffeine, but they'd already gone out of their way to make something. I was hardly going to say no. "How's she goin' today, Mr Turner?"

"Slowly! I'm more turtle than man these days." And it was true enough. As Larry led the way into the house, I waited on the step for him to get in through the door.

After a moment, I followed him into the mud room. He'd already started through to the kitchen in his slippers, and I set down my tool bag and drywall to undo my boots.

## Coal Gets In Your Veins

“Oh, you don’t need to take those off, Laurel—” Larry started.

“Just long enough to get the snow off them. Don’t want to track muck through your kitchen, do I?”

Larry waved a hand dismissively. “Suit yourself, then!” The kettle was already boiling, but Nancy was nowhere to be seen. “Nancy! Little Laurel’s here.”

I hadn’t been little in years, but they’d known my parents since I was a kid, so I guess I’d always be Little Laurel to them.

Nancy came into the kitchen as I was leaning over to inspect the backsplash behind the stove. “Good morning, sweetheart!” Nancy had a little more pep in her step than Larry, and she skirted around me to turn the kettle off and start pouring water into cups. “Nasty bit of gunk on that, isn’t it?”

It was, but no more than was advertised. The whole kitchen had probably last seen an update forty years before, but that was normal enough for the area. Some of the better-off families could afford upkeep. The rest of us tried not to let it fall down around our ears. Their walls needed a wash and a bit of the vibrancy had gone out of the paint. The cupboards were missing doors, as was the local style of their era. Nothing I hadn’t seen a hundred times before. “I’ll get that cleaned right up for you, Mrs Turner. A few hours of work and a bit of mess. That’s all it should take.”

As we sat down at the table, drinking tea and talking about the state of the kitchen and the world beyond it, I was reminded of why I was in the line of work I was in. They needed just a little bit of help, and that was something I could do. They’d pay me what they could afford, which wouldn’t be much. Sometimes it barely paid for the supplies, forget the labour.

But someone needed to do it. Someone had to help people have a quality of life worth living. A backsplash wouldn’t change much for two old people, but mould could make them both real sick, real fast. So I did it.

Greg, he’d rather I was bringing in real money. The kind that folds and buys extravagant stuff. He didn’t understand why I did what I did, and he probably never would. It was also the last thing I had that gave me any real sense of purpose.

*So naturally he wants to pry it from your hands, doesn’t he?*

Maybe he did, but sharing a tea with the Turners, it mattered a whole lot fucking less what Greg thought.

I drove home in the afternoon, and somewhere during that godforsaken drive, my phone found reception. It started pinging, and it was Greg’s name that kept popping up, so I peeked at the texts.



## Cat Rector

Greg:  
supper @ moms tonite  
home early

Fuck.

Going to Greg's parents' was almost as much fun as stepping on a rusty nail. I'd done both before, and I honestly could go my whole life without doing either again. Unfortunately, that wasn't how relationships worked, so I fucking supposed I was going to their house for supper.

Greg's truck was at the house when I pulled in, and the sight of it created a knot in my gut. I turned my truck off and sat there for a minute. I didn't really want to go in. The likelihood was that he would be fine. He usually was for a few days after he had a blowout like the one last night. He had to build that rage up again. Get to a boiling point. Until then, he'd probably just act like I was barely there, so long as everything was washed and folded and cooked.

So I mustered up the courage to get out of the truck.

He was in the kitchen when I opened the door, spreading butter over toast. His hair was wet, probably from a post-work shower, and he'd changed into jeans and a white polo. He didn't look up as he spoke. "Hey. You get my text?"

"Yeah," I said, stopping to take off my boots. "Gotta shower real quick, then I'll be ready."

"Told Dad we'd be there in an hour." Greg picked up the plate of toast and went to park himself in front of the TV. Last night's hockey stats were being read off by some old bald man whom everyone thought I was supposed to care about.

Greg wouldn't be listening anymore, so I didn't bother saying anything back. I went to the bathroom, my body dragging the whole way. I spent the next fifteen minutes scrubbing the drywall dust from my hair, but when I got out of the shower, some of it was still under my nails. Greg's family hated it when I showed up to their house unkempt.

Hot tears welled up in my eyes from out of nowhere. I didn't even remotely like those two people. I had nothing to say to Linda—who had nothing intelligent to say back—and Arthur seemed to think I wasn't good enough for his son. I hated that the thought of them brought me to tears.

I stared in the mirror, the fog framing my face. My insides felt wrong. Like there was a fissure inside me and I was one wrong move from snapping in half. Could I stop the snapping? Was I brave enough to? Or would I just let it happen?

Sometimes, when things were worse than I could manage, that little voice rose up

## Coal Gets In Your Veins

to ask me all kinds of horrors.

Like what I'd be willing to trade for freedom from this life.

The visit was as dry and uneventful as I could have hoped for. I sank into myself for the duration. Spoke when spoken to. Linda asked questions about the house, and about Greg's job. Not my job—never my job—which was fine by me. My clients were none of her business. As usual, I shadowed Linda, helping with the cooking and the cleaning up, while Greg and Arthur sat in front of the TV, not saying a word except to curse out whoever was on the screen, usually including a litany of slurs. The whole thing lasted three hours, and by the time we left, my chest was hollowed out.

For whatever reason, Greg was happy as a clam. He chattered for the entire drive home, and though I was aware of having responded, I had no idea what either of us had said after the fact. He moved around the house, getting ready for bed, and I just stood in the kitchen. Leaned against the counter. Took long, slow sips of water.

I'd let this shit go on for long enough. Been stagnant long enough.

Something needed to change.

After the movement in the house died out, I went to look in the bedroom. Greg was fast asleep. He hadn't even said he was going to bed. He'd just gone, and he was out like a light.

*What if he just...didn't wake up?*

For just a second, I imagined smothering him with a pillow.

Instead, I got my boots and prepared to go for a walk.

The sun had been down for a while. Maybe Spencer wouldn't even be there. Maybe he'd actually murder me if I went back.

Maybe I was ready to be murdered if it meant not having to endure another day of my life.

The evening chill had settled in as I quietly closed the door behind me. I'd added extra layers to the ensemble and had a poor-quality folding beach chair tucked under my elbow. Something to sit on so I didn't end up with a freezer-burnt coochie. But as I walked down the path, I had the sneaking suspicion he wasn't there. I couldn't see the tiny bucket of fire in the distance, and I couldn't hear anything either.

When I rounded the corner to the clearing, it was empty.

I stood for a moment, deliberating. Then I unfolded the chair, plunked it down, and got to work creating a little bucket fire for myself.

If he showed, I'd have company. If he didn't, at least I wouldn't be with Greg.

# SPENCER

The two-lane highway stretched out in front of me, the long, rolling hills winding through thick forest on either side. Not a car on the road other than mine. I let the car coast down one hill, just to floor the gas to get up the next, slowly weaving my way up into the pass that separated one section of the province from the next. The night was clear, the seat warmer was as hot as it would go, and the thump of the music hit inside my chest like a heartbeat.

Driving was one of the last thrills left for me, especially in a place like the Harbour.

For a county that was as impoverished as it was, every fifth car in the area seemed to be a sports car. Which meant *I* could have something resembling one and still blend in. Now, the definition of sports cars varied; some were Mustangs and Chargers, but most...most were souped-up Honda Civics. An affordable fast car, half a dozen in every parking lot in town. Most of them driven by young men and teenagers, the outsides covered in vinyl decals.

*My* baby was a blue four-door among a sea of them. Still thrilling enough to drive, but never something that anyone would take notice of, and *gods*, was I glad to have her. She let me *fly*, even just for a little while.

The thick guitar of the rock track ended and a '90s club song began. I tapped my fingers on the steering wheel and bobbed my head to the electric beat, waiting for the lyrics to begin. I'd danced to that track in a bar in Copenhagen nearly thirty years ago, on a rare night when I'd gone out alone. As the music poured out of the speakers, I sang along, practically able to taste the delightfully eager man I'd drunk from that night in the bar's back room. Half a lifetime ago, but a savoured memory all the same.

I'd been free once. Roaming the world with more love than I knew what to do with, gorging myself on alcohol and blood and bodies, one party, one town, one adventure after the other. Everything I could have ever wanted. An endless feast that would have made the old gods proud.

Now all I was left with was a car and some music, and the things I was running from.

The sinking feeling had been coming for me since the moment I'd woken up, ready to pull me under. When the music was that loud, when I was racing into the mountains with the night all around me, nothing could touch me. Not even the pain of losing them. Not if I could just keep going a little longer. Just keep running until daylight.

# PENNY HARBOUR

Even a place as small as Penny Harbour had two parts of town: a town centre and everything outside it. Away from the centre, streets languished in each major direction, sprawling out in large plots of land with generously sized homes. Not all were pretty and not all were faded. Some were shaped like trailers, while others had been built into spacious farmhouses. Fields ran along their backs, some full of hay, others full of cattle. And in the middle of everything, the harbour sparkled in the sun, a distant piece of the Atlantic Ocean.

In one of those homes sat a little girl named Tammy.

Her home had a basement and a middle and an upstairs. Big air ducts carried wood heat along the house, and sometimes they made it easy to hear what other people were doing in other rooms.

As Tammy played with her toys—a stuffed bear and a pair of big-eyed dolls—she listened to her parents in the basement. They thought she couldn't hear.

"But we can't afford a second car, Margret," her father said. "There are too many repairs to pay for here already."

"You don't think I know that?" her mother replied, her voice full of sadness. "But they're offering me a job in town, for more money. Couldn't we take on the extra for a little while?"

The wind blew on the house, a strong gust that shook the walls. Tammy looked up, and she heard the quiet *shhh* of dust falling off the walls and into the sheet plastic that kept it from raining down on her. It sounded like one of the toys at school. The rainmaker, with the rice inside.

Even with the plastic there, the dust still fell to the floor and scattered out across it. It was grey powder. Old drywall, from when the house had been built nearly a hundred years back. Tammy swept it away from where she was playing.

As she did, her parents kept arguing. About money, and resources, and time. About who deserved to be allowed to go to work, and what would happen to Tammy if they both were out of town all day. Good opportunities, bad opportunities.

Tammy didn't understand most of it, but she did understand that her parents were so, so unhappy. She didn't notice as the fine black powder floated up from the ducts and into the air in her bedroom. As she breathed it in, it settled in her lungs. Just a bit. Just for now.

She had so many more years to fill to the brim with it.

# LAUREL

Staring out the window with my morning coffee, I let out a long sigh. The snow was gone and it was raining, all the water collecting in puddles along the roadside. By the look of the forecast—freezing rain late in the afternoon, because of course it was—there'd be no outside work and no late-night walks for me.

I sent a text to my client of the day.

Laurel:

Hey Alex. It's going to be too rainy to do that shed repair today. I've got time on Sunday at 10 and the weather looks good, so I'll come by if it's cool for you.

I took a long drink of my coffee and looked around the house. A pile of laundry waited in the bathroom and I had chores I could do. Small repairs I'd been putting off. With a free day, I could sink myself into those thankless jobs and finally get ahead on things. Greg was never going to do them, and frankly, he only noticed I wasn't doing them when things started to really inconvenience him.

I hit Tabs messenger.

Laurel:

Timmies run?? No work today.

Emma:  
GOD YES

Mary-Jo:  
My break is at 11, see you hoes there

The drive from Penny Harbour was thirty minutes of winding back roads. An enormous forest separated the village from the rest of the world, including the town of Hammonds, which most of us just referred to as *town*. The trip could be horrific in bad weather, and it wasn't all that uncommon to find a car in a ditch a few times a year. But even pouring rain in winter wasn't enough to keep most people from taking a trip to Timmies.

It wasn't that the coffee or food was good. In part, it was that the Harbour had

## Coal Gets In Your Veins

absolutely nothing in it, and in part, it was an affordable tradition for the dirt poor. A force of habit, even. I mean, what the fuck else was there to do in town, honestly? *Shop?* With what money?

I wound the car through the roads to town, my eyes on the ditches. Not for cars. For deer. A person might get lucky and see a head poking out from below the road line. Deer were stupid fuckers. If someone got too comfortable driving, that was exactly the time a deer would spring out of a ditch and ruin your truck and your year. Maybe kill you in the process.

At least it wasn't bear season.

When I arrived, Emma's baby-blue Yaris was parked on the side of the building. We could've carpooled from the Harbour, but she'd insisted she had other errands to run while she was in town. I parked my beat-up old truck next to her little clown car and went inside.

Timmies was moderately busy, as always. It was the local watering hole for anyone over fifty. Men with grey hair tucked under ball caps with sports logos and hunting slogans sat in most of the booths. A sea of long-sleeved plaid shirts with people inside them. Emma waved from the back corner and then pointed at the drinks on the table.

"First round is on you, eh?" I said, laughing, as I approached and sat down in the booth, opposite her.

"It's not like you ever change your order." Emma stuck her tongue out at me.

Emma looked as tired as I felt. A dedicated child of the '90s, she still wore her shirts in layers, a lilac tank top over a pastel pink one. Her hair was layered and piecey. Some of it came down past her chin, while tapering off at the back of her head, all a mix of brown and blonde highlights. Her skin was always too pale—except when sunburnt—and whenever she was tired, the grey circles showed under her eyes.

"What if I did want something else?" I teased. "What would you do then?"

She slid the French vanilla cappuccino across the table. "I'd make you drink it anyway."

I quickly checked my phone, but no notifications had popped. "Any word from Mary-Jo?"

Emma shook her head, partway through a sip of her potent-smelling green tea. "I guess her boss isn't great at letting her start her breaks when she's supposed to. I'll be happy when she finds a better job."

I rolled my eyes. "You know she's never going to do that."

The look on Emma's face could only be described as weary patience. "We all come to our own changes in time, right? You know that as well as anyone."

Emma had gotten way too introspective since she started her psych degree.

## Cat Rector

“Don’t give me that look.” I scoffed, still somewhat bitter from yesterday’s comments via Tabs. “And I know you both think I’d be better off without Greg. MJ certainly doesn’t make any effort to hide it.”

Emma’s lips became a thin, hard line as she clearly shoved some feelings back down her throat. “Mary-Jo loves you and she’s concerned. That’s all. You’re a big girl. I trust you to take care of yourself.”

I crossed my arms over my chest. “At least you don’t hound me about it.”

Emma reached out and took my hand. “If and when you want a change, you know we’re here for you. *Besides*, you can’t say much about either of us. I don’t even think *you* like Greg.”

A dark laugh bubbled up in me. She had me there.

“Well, hello, strangers.”

Mary-Jo strode over to the table and plopped down next to me. Two versions of Mary-Jo existed, one of them more socially acceptable than the other. The version that sat next to me was dressed for success. Her long brown hair was tied up in a severe bun, not a strand loose anywhere. She took off her black wool coat, and underneath was a white-and-black pinstriped blouse and a black pencil skirt. Seeing Mary-Jo on a workday was like seeing someone’s Good Doppelganger, considering how she dressed the rest of the time.

She exhaled dramatically and slid down the seat.

“How’s it goin’?” I asked.

“*Fucking great*. Don’t be a secretary when you grow up.” Mary-Jo took the Timmies cup that Emma was offering and took a long inhale of the dark roast inside. She craned her neck to look at the line of people at the cash. “Fuuuuuuck, I’m going to kill so much of my hour in that line—” But in the time that she’d turned around, Emma had pulled a hidden takeaway bag out from the seat beside her and put it in front of Mary-Jo. “Is that for me? I swear, someday I’ll have your babies.”

Emma put a hand up, waving the idea off. “No thank you. I already have more baby than I can handle.”

“Where is Logan today?” I asked.

“Mum took him.” Emma watched Mary-Jo dig ravenously into the BLT bagel that had come out of the bag. “Bless her, because if she didn’t step up from time to time, I think I’d be toast. Hubby is back on the road again, probably another week before he’s back. Between trying to keep the house clean, studying for this psych exam, and taking care of Logan, I’m basically not a person anymore.”

Emma had decided a few years ago that she was going to be Penny Harbour’s first and only psychologist. Unfortunately for her, that also meant she had to go from

## Coal Gets In Your Veins

having just a high school diploma to becoming a thirty-year-old university student. She and her husband had also had a baby partway through that, as if she was determined to do things the hard way. Emma had a tenacity I never had, and I was pretty proud of her for it.

“I don’t know how you do it,” Mary-Jo choked out from behind a bite of her bagel. She swallowed and took a drink. “I couldn’t function with the lack of sleep you get.”

Emma gestured to herself. “Generous of you to call this functioning.”

“All I’m saying,” Mary-Jo started, “is that if it had been me, I’d have been either a student or a mom. There’s not enough MJ to go around. There’s barely enough of me now. The boss wants more every day and yet he *never pays more*.”

Mary-Jo had been working for a local construction company for nearly five years, making the trip back and forth to town five times a week. Some of the employees often acted like complete lechers and her bosses weren’t inclined to correct the behaviour. So she’d increased the amount of fabric she wore to work, and in her off hours, she’d started leaning hard on beer, scratch tickets, and bar fights. Though she’d promised to cool it with punching people in their “stupid drunk faces” since I’d had to drive up and rescue her from the drunk tank a year back.

“So did you ever find that Spencer guy you were looking for the other day?” Emma asked.

“Not since the first night, no. I went back out to the woods looking for him, but that was, like...a week ago.” I took a long drink while their reactions came through.

“Dude, you should not be wandering around the woods alone at night,” Mary-Jo chided.

“You don’t even know him,” Emma followed up. “What if he’s not from here?”

I shrugged. “He’s not. He said he moved here to be a hermit basically.”

“This is some city girl shit that you’re up to.” Emma was not impressed. She even put on a prissy little voice. “*I think I’ll just go into the woods at night alone and talk to strangers and get eaten by coyotes*. You know better.”

“Now, now, let’s not be too hasty.” Mary-Jo wiped mayo from the corner of her mouth. “If she starts fucking this rando, maybe she’ll finally have a reason to leave Sir Gregs-elot.”

I gestured to her in dramatic irritation. “Are you serious right now?”

“Oh, I’m always serious, girlfriend.” Her smirk was borderline evil.

Emma rolled her head back to stare at the ceiling. “Just last week you promised to lay off the Greg thing.”

“And I will, as soon as she lays on some Spencer.”



## Cat Rector

I looked at Mary-Jo. “I hate you.”

“I know.” She kissed my cheek and ducked away from the false swing of my hand. “It’s a star-crossed love between you and me. Frenemies to bros story arc, I promise.”

I rolled my eyes. I did love her, even if she drove me nuts. “You read too much smut.”

It was her turn to scoff. “What else am I going to read? Literature? If I don’t read smut, I’ll lose my entire sex drive to those construction workers and their weird fucking comments.”

“What was the last book you were telling me about?” Emma asked.

“Mmm.” Mary-Jo swallowed excitedly. “Potato shifters. But I didn’t read that ’cause it’s sexy; I read it ’cause it’s ridiculous.”

More than an hour later, I was staring out the front window of the truck again, the wipers clearing the rain away. Back on the road, back toward home. I found my chest tightening the closer I got. I would get there, and then it would be a handful of hours before Greg would arrive, and it didn’t seem to matter anymore how long I was without him. The thought of him coming back *at all* left me wishing he never would.

It was getting harder to tell myself everything was fine, and I knew no one else believed it either.

Just like I’d run to town in order to escape my life for a little while, I was tempted to take off into the woods in the pouring rain on the off chance that Spencer would be there. That little speck of shiny new hope that had appeared out of nowhere in the shape of some blond stranger. But no sane person would be out in the muddy, cold, wet woods. Especially once the temperature dipped again overnight and the whole world turned to ice. I sure as hell wasn’t going out in that, so surely he wouldn’t either.

So back I went, into the cage that had been made for me.

Or had I made it for myself?

# SPENCER

Sleeping in for a vampire meant getting up at nine at night—at least in Canadian winter it did; summer was another thing entirely—but it wasn't as if I had responsibilities or people to hunt. So it didn't matter that I rolled out of my soft queen-sized bed at almost one in the morning. Freezing rain pinged off my windows like little pebbles, coating the wet ground with ice.

Absolutely not.

My stomach growled and I sighed. I shouldn't have put off hunting the night before. Even if I had the will to go out there, almost everything would be hiding. Besides, it hadn't gotten easier to return to room temperature since I'd lost my pulse. It wouldn't kill me to be that cold, but it would be damn uncomfortable.

I trudged to the kitchen in my pyjamas, rubbing my eyes. I pulled a double boiler from the space below the stove—nearly the only thing in there since I didn't eat—and put it on the stove with water in the bottom. Inside the fridge was a collection of hanging medical bags, each filled with deep crimson blood. Too apathetic to be bothered with scissors, I grabbed a bag from the fridge and bit down on the top corner, piercing two clean holes through it. With a steady squeeze, I emptied half the bag into the double boiler. Low heat, and wait. Thirty-six degrees was all I needed. If it got much warmer than that, it would start to cook. Cooked human tasted almost as wrong as the locals.

As I waited, the thoughts started to creep in. Thoughts that would turn into remembered screams if I let them. I went to grab a book from the coffee table. A compact little thing about Paris in the 1850s. Violet had loved Paris. As I read, waiting for the stove to creep steadily warmer, I stopped seeing the words describing the architecture and the social movements. I saw her—I saw us—

The four of us ran through the narrow streets, laughing. Sirens and shouts rang out from the distance. We were far enough away that nothing mattered. We'd gone at least five blocks and no one had come looking for us. I stopped first, staring back at the way we'd come from. Waiting for something else to happen. For the consequences to arrive, as they sometimes did. But no one had followed, not that time.

I tried to let go of the worry, if only because my loves had none.

Violet passed me, holding the collar of her new mink coat to her face, delighted. Her blonde hair hung in loose waves around her cherub cheeks, bobbing as she ran. "I love it!"

It was Astra who went to her, slipping inside Violet's arms until she too was inside

## Cat Rector

the coat. Astra was taller, and she held Violet against her, lifting her into the air to spin her before setting her down again. “It was a fine choice,” Astra said, pressing a kiss to Violet’s hair. “Too bad we weren’t quicker. I’d have killed to see you in that black evening gown.”

Willem approached, a grin on his stained lips. He was nearly a head taller than me, so I had to crane my neck up to look him in the eyes. His trim beard framed his jaw in a very dashing manner. Princely, which was ironic for a devious rogue like himself. He slid his palm across my middle, resting his hand on my hip. “Don’t fret. No one’s coming, love.”

And he was right. No one was coming. No one would be able to touch us for decades, but I didn’t know that until later. I feared it constantly. Feared that if I were too in love with my life, it would disappear. Feared that because I fought so hard for it, it was fragile and limited. That someone would steal everything from me if I didn’t guard it closely enough.

I reached up to slide my thumb against his lip, my skin staining red. “You’ve got someone on you,” I whispered, arching my neck up for a kiss.

Willem obliged, the taste of his mouth both savoury and sweet, the way young drunk lovers often tasted when we ate them. The kiss was deep, his hands running up my sides, pulling me tight—and the memory of that kiss blurred my vision and brought me back to the cold of the kitchen, the smell of blood in the air.

Hot tears streamed down my cheeks. I threw the book and it crashed against the wall in the other room. I could still feel his lips on mine, still hear all their beautiful laughter. We’d gone home after that. Lain curled up in bed together, drinking wine and telling the story of the night over and over, until the details were exhausted and daybreak was threatening to sneak in from behind the curtains.

Gods, I’d loved them so much.

I wiped my tears away, frustrated at myself. It had been *so many years!* Wasn’t I supposed to be better by now? Over it?

I scoffed, just to break the overwhelming silence of the house around me.

Over the greatest love of any of my lifetimes? *Sure.*

I fished around in the cupboards for the large, faux-shattered wine glass I kept on the top shelf. I filled it to the brim with warm blood and tossed the pot in the sink with a violent clatter. Tears leaked out the corners of my eyes as I went into the living room and turned on the speakers, navigating the songs on my phone. Something dramatic and sad, that was what I needed. The music poured into the room, loud and alive, and I swayed, drinking as I did.

The pain hollowed out my chest as I danced in silken, sultry movements, the wine

## Coal Gets In Your Veins

glass held delicately in one hand. Self-indulgent and desperate. Trying to drown out everything I'd lost. The lyrics dripped out of the speakers, and I sang them back.

*You're dead as dead can be; you won't feel a thing.*

I laughed—a choked, evil noise. “Darling, you have no idea.”

A long drink of blood, and as I moved past it, I scooped up the open bottle of rum I'd been working on three nights prior, along with three shot glasses. I set them on the coffee table. A glass each, for Violet and Astra and Willem.

My parents and my people had taught me to honour the dead with drink and song, but that had been so, *so* long ago. Old habits, I supposed, pouring them out a drink. But there'd be no joy, not from me.

I was going to get very drunk and sing sad songs until the cat began to croon with me.

I drank back the rest of the blood, my lips wet. Stained red, like his had been.

“To the past,” I whispered, and set the glass down.

# PENNY HARBOUR

Sandy dreaded the news.

Every night at six, the TV would come on and her father would sit in front of it and start to yell. The subject would change, but the message was always the same. *You're wrong; I'm right; go fuck yourself.*

It seemed to be one of his favourite things. He'd sit in that armchair, staring at the thing and waiting for it to say something he didn't like. Over the years, Sandy had listened from different places around the house as her father gave his sermons into the universe, full of rage and slurs and contempt. It was impossible not to, really. The only way to block it was to drown it out with music, or to not be in the house at all. His voice *carried*.

Maybe he thought no one was listening. Maybe having everyone hear him was the point. No matter what his purpose, it drilled fear into Sandy. With every viewing, she learned more about what she could and couldn't be, who she could and couldn't love. What friends she could and couldn't invite to the house. Not Sarah, because she was Black. Not Avery, because she was Indigenous. Ben had long hair and Dad hated hippies, but he also hated the Harper family, so Nathan and Aaron were out.

Her father yelled and her world got smaller, one broadcast at a time.

Every month, every year accumulated, until she had gathered so much secondhand hate that it felt suffocating. Dangerous. As if she was one step away from being the target of that anger at any given time if she dared show up at the house with someone like *them*. And *them* seemed to amount to everyone.

After a while, the perpetual one-sided screaming match felt like a nail gun, adding a new bolt into her private personal coffin one at a time. Trapping her inside, away from the world.

*These fucking foreigners!*

Thunk.

*The government just wants to keep us down.*

Thunk.

*They think they're so much better than us!*

Thunk.

It wasn't until she was sixteen that she started to notice the comments that *really* ate at her. It was all hateful, yes. But over the years, some had started to feel personal. She tried not to notice, because to notice was to admit she might just be one of the

## Coal Gets In Your Veins

people her father hated so much. And that...that was dangerous.

*Fucking faggots.*

Thunk.

*What the fuck do they need to be married for anyway?*

THUNK.

*Disgusting. Absolutely disgusting. Buncha' fucking queers.*

THUNK.

Sandy disconnected. Admitted how hard it would be if he meant *her*. Was grateful that it *couldn't* be her. And she let the coffin shut on her because it was the safest thing to do.

It would be *years* before Sandy looked up and realized the box she'd been nailed inside wasn't a coffin at all. Out in the world, far from home and all the trouble home had brought, she noticed things through the cracks. Pretty women and trickles of feeling and regret. So much regret. She'd been in that box for *so long*. Trapped in the dark with no air, black dust settling in her lungs and grit coating her skin. She had mistaken her trap for a pine box. But it wasn't.

No, not at all.

Her father had ever so slowly pushed her into a closet and nailed it shut.

*Thank you for reading!*

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# ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Cat Rector grew up in a small Nova Scotian town and could often be found simultaneously reading a book and fighting off muskrats while walking home from school. She devours stories in all their forms, loves messy, morally grey characters, and writes about the horrors that we inflict on each other. After spending nearly a decade living abroad, she returned to Canada to resume her war against the muskrats. When she's not writing, you can find her playing video games, spending time with loved ones, or staring at her To Be Read pile like it's going to read itself.

Coals Gets In Your Veins is her fifth book.

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