



CHERRIES BAR CHERRIES

It soothes me.
Numbs all my worries in a way nothing else can.

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FRESH SNOW CONCEALS the rough corners of our town. Its surface is still unmarked, untouched by anything except the yellow orbs of streetlights and my solitary footprints. It bears witness to this thing I'm doing while everyone else sleeps; tracking me from my silent home to where I'll surely end up.

In the morning people will shovel their sidewalks. If they're generous, they'll shovel their neighbour's walkway too. Then they'll head off to work and to school and to all the acceptable things good citizens are apt to do. But for now, the town sleeps. Except me. Instead, I'm out in the cold and in the dark.

I could turn back; could turn my back to the wind and head home, keeping my promise to Grah. But I don't. I can't escape my worries at home, awake and restless while everyone sleeps. No, that doesn't work. My hand curls into a fist around the strap of my purse, and I keep slogging through the untouched snow.

I leave Main Street behind and make my way to the highway. Before long, obnoxious commercial light filters through the wispy brush. It illuminates my way toward the twenty-four-hour trifecta that sits on the outskirts of every small town in the province—gas station, licensed diner, convenience store—and it draws me in like a beacon for the lost and desperate.

It's not long before I'm pulling the iced-up glass door open, heat escaping into the night. I slide into the building

and force the door closed behind me faster than the automatic hinge wants to go. The warmth makes my face and fingertips tingle after the crisp temperatures outside.

A young woman sits behind the gas station counter, a shelf of chocolate bars and gum separating us. She looks up from her phone, and I point toward the diner. She nods and returns to whatever she's scrolling through.

The diner is the kind of establishment that sells both breakfast and dinner all day and all night. As soon as I walk in, the night server spots me and walks over.

"Menu?" he asks by way of greeting.

I decline and motion with one cold hand toward the back wall. It's why I'm here. It's what pulled me out of bed and through the quiet snow.

He nods and turns back toward the kitchen.

"Maybe a coffee," I decide at the last moment.

He glances back over his shoulder and gives me a nod.

I make my way to the back wall and turn into the little alcove. No one's back here, so I sit down on the middle stool, the lucky one, and rub my hands together to get the blood flowing. Blow into my cupped hands and rub again. The server brings my coffee and I add two sugars. Stir.

Okay. I'm ready.

I stand for a second, lightly stomping my feet to get the blood flowing through my cold extremities, then take my wallet

out of my purse and pull out my cash. I don't have a credit card; had to give that up as part of my deal with Grah.

I rub the small stack of bills between my fingers and thumb. I'll have to be careful.

I feed the first twenty into the machine.

The red and orange light on top of the lottery terminal lights up. I play three lines—three magical chances to win. I press the red spin button. Press it again and again. And again. It soothes me. Numbs all my worries in a way nothing else can. The lights. The spinning images. The slow settle.

It's weird how this machine sucks me in. I've never been able to explain it. Not to myself. Not to anyone else when I've needed to justify it, but I know how it works. As soon as I get low on credit the machine throws a small win. Somehow, I know this is to give me hope even if none exists.

It works. Every time. I slide in another bill.

Tonight the money goes fast.

I switch machines. Slide my last tenner and a five in.

The server leans into the alcove. "It's almost 3:00 a.m." I nod. I don't have long.

Before I know it, I have a single five left and I'm out of time anyway. I pay for my coffee, pull my toque back on my head and begin the walk home.

Pressing the spin button again and again is easy. It's the long walk home, the return, that gnaws at my conscience.