

THE
PENANCE
OF
VALENTINE
CASH

REBECCA ROOK

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The Penance of Valentine Cash (*Pre-Order Now Available!*)

False Haven (Available February 2024)

A Strange Affinity (Available March 2024)

City of Graves (Available May 2024)

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For my mother.

I'm so proud to be your daughter. The best parts of me come from you. I miss
you every day.

CONTENTS

1. Chapter 1	1
2. Chapter 2	6
About the Author	17
Sneak Peek: False Haven	18



CHAPTER ONE

“This is it, kid,” Loretta said. The manager sat back in her chair and sipped on a Lariatini. “This is the start of something *big*.”

After Valentine’s album deal had been signed at Defiance Studios earlier that afternoon, Loretta had insisted on treating Valentine at their favorite bar, a gaudy pink refuge called the Hoity Toity. The rundown honky tonk was festooned with velveteen damask patterned wallpaper and bordello lamp shades draped in heavy fringe that rested upon worn wooden tables, and served Western-themed cocktails: Lariatini. Barrel Race. Saddlesore. Valentine knew that Loretta couldn’t get enough of the fancy concoctions, and if they sat in the minors’ section, with the tourists and their loud children, the barkeep didn’t bat an eye in their direction. Valentine always got the YeeHaw Tots – tater tots smothered in cheesy bacon heaven.

It had been a good day.

One of the best days of her life, actually.

Valentine looked up from the YeeHaw Tots after Loretta finished speaking. She swallowed hard, searching for the right words. Talking about the real things, the stuff that mattered, had always been hard for her. “Thank you, Loretta. For everything. I really... I mean it.”

Loretta waved away her gratitude, chuckling. “Save the thanks until after the first tour. You may curse me instead. Tours are brutal.”

“What were your tours like?” Valentine asked.

“Awful.” Loretta took a healthy swallow of her cocktail. “Of course, I traveled with my alcoholic ex-husband on a derelict bus across the country, so that may have been why.”

“Did you enjoy any of it?” Valentine ate another tot.

A child at a nearby table squealed as he dropped his toy on the floor. The parents sniped at each other, arguing over something Valentine couldn’t quite hear.

Loretta thought for a moment, her gaze unfocused as memories crowded in. “Yes. When the fans shared how much a particular song meant to them, or that they’d used one of my songs for a wedding or a funeral – I loved those moments. I felt like I had contributed something...decent to the world instead of just fighting with my husband at the time.” Loretta shook her head. “You’ll see. This road, it changes you.”

Valentine nodded, more to herself than in response to Loretta. She understood that compulsion, the want to give something to the world, something decent and brave and honest. She thought of all the work that had led up to this evening.

Loretta looked up from her salad. “So, what are you going to do with the money?”

Valentine paused, a tater tot in mid-air. Cheese dripped onto the plate. “I hadn’t thought about that, honestly.”

“Do me a favor?” The older woman sipped from a new cocktail, the Rhinestone Cowboy, with a pearlescent rim around the top.

“What?”

“Don’t spend it on women and drugs.”

Valentine gave a crack of laughter, then shook her head. She avoided looking at Cara, a pretty brunette waitress with a gap in her teeth and the widest, most welcoming smile, working across the dark room. Cara was the best thing about the Hoity Toity, as far as she was concerned. Even better than the YeeHaw Tots.

“No, I’m not gonna do that.” Valentine winced. She wasn’t exactly smooth with the ladies. She’d never even made eye contact with Cara. “I need someone to spend my money on first.”

Loretta snorted; her lips twisted. “Don’t worry. Once they know you’ve got money, they’ll come crawling out of the woodwork. Not everyone is a user but...” Loretta finished her drink. “But it’s better to be wary.”

Valentine ate another tot. “It’s kind of silly but...I want to buy one of those little shotgun houses. You know, one or two bedrooms. Simple. It doesn’t have to be big.” She shrugged, trying not to reveal the depth of her feelings. “I want my own home.”

A brief silence. Then, “I get that, kid.”

Valentine sneaked a glance over at Loretta. The older woman watched her with a tender look, equal parts of pity and understanding. Her throat closed, and Valentine looked away. She went back to working on the mess of tots in front of her.



Valentine said her farewells to Loretta inside the bar.

“Congratulations again, Valentine.” Loretta’s voice was somber, hushed. “You’ve worked hard for this. I know you’ll make the most of it.”

Valentine shuffled on her feet as a flush of warmth stole through her. “Thanks,” she said, her voice gruff. She wasn’t used to hearing praise from others. At least, ones that meant something to her. “Goodnight, Loretta.”

“Goodnight, kid.”

Out in the parking lot, Valentine climbed into the worn-down lime green economy car she had purchased from a co-worker. The vehicle was on its last legs, or wheels maybe, and she had kept the little car alive through thoughts and prayers and curses, mostly. *Now I can afford to replace it*, she thought. She smiled, pleased by that thought, as she unlocked the driver's side and jimmied open the half-broken door. Valentine could think of a dozen songs about these feelings but hadn't felt them often in the last few years: Pride. Happiness.

Relief.

The roads were thick with cars, and rain had started up just as Valentine drove out of the parking lot adjacent to the Hoity Toity. Leaning forward, she peered through the sheet of water barely held back by the creaking windshield wipers.

Her phone buzzed in her shoulder pack on the passenger seat.

Valentine ignored it. *This rain is something else.*

The phone buzzed again.

And continued to buzz.

Without taking her eyes off the road, Valentine reached over to grab the phone. She glanced at the screen and almost dropped it. Shock, then trepidation coated her stomach.

Her parents were calling.

She hadn't heard from them in two years. *Why now?*

Bright lights sliced through the edge of her vision. Valentine whipped her head to peer through the obscured windshield.

Somehow, she had wandered across the double yellow lines, into oncoming traffic. A dark blue sedan approached her, its horn blaring a siren of danger.

The sound jarred her out of her shock, and Valentine wrenched the steering wheel to the right, hoping to get into the correct lane.

But it was too late.

Valentine heard the impact before she felt it.

Metal grated on metal, an accordion screech that hurt her ears. The headlights popped, and the lights went out. The windows shattered –

Valentine threw up her hands to protect her face. Then, the impact came.

Valentine felt the stinging cuts of the glass, the slam of her body first against the seatbelt, then to the driver's side door. Her left arm broke on the second slam. She heard the snap and looked down. Bone and blood rose from the serrated flesh.

She heard the screams from the other vehicle.

I'm sorry. Oh shit, I'm sorry, I'm so sorry.

Black crept across her vision. The cold and the pain that draped across her body grew dimmer and fainter, then ceased altogether.



CHAPTER TWO

Valentine woke up in a casino.

She poured into her body like the slow seep of a sunrise, her presence a creeping sensation from her torso to her limbs to her fingers and toes. She had the distinct feeling of being a passenger in a vehicle that wasn't quite hers. Her head felt right – kind of. She took a deep inhale, tried to fill her lungs, but started to cough. Her eyes teared up, and Valentine braced herself against the bar. She gulped air, noisy and desperate, until finally she could breathe again.

Valentine looked up. Her pale hands rested on a polished copper bartop that gleamed in the golden light of the room, stretching from either side of Valentine and encircling a raised dais of polished black marble inlaid with gemstones. Turquoise, amber, and emerald motifs interrupted the unrelenting dark in a repeated pattern across a floor that didn't seem to have edges. Within the dais, Valentine saw a cut crystal case that held every whiskey, liqueur, and tequila she knew of, and many more besides. Behind the crystal case, an ornate and heavy

mirror rose from floor to ceiling. The glass held imperfections, blemishes that twinkled, faded, and then brightened in irregular patterns. Almost like starlight.

Valentine saw herself in the mirror and did a double take.

Instead of her usual uniform of jeans and a shirt, Valentine wore an outfit that she, Loretta, and a stylist had selected for most concerts and performances: a black cowboy hat with sterling silver accents and a single blue feather atop a face as pale as bone bleached by a desert sun; black jeans sinking into black cowboy boots with blue floral stitching; and a black camisole under a thin white button-down blouse with an anatomical heart stitched in black and blue threads across the left side of her chest. Her stick-straight blonde hair hung down either side of her face, well past her shoulders and down her back. Her eyes were black, not blue or green like most blondes. Fierce red lips broke the monotony of the white, blue, and black color scheme.

Something niggled at the back of Valentine's brain. Why was she wearing these clothes in this place? How did she get here? Did she have a gig? Where were her instruments? The questions flooded her mind – and no answers followed. Valentine tried to remember how she had come to the casino. Had she driven? But her memories of the evening felt like vapor in a windstorm. Valentine turned away from her image in the mirror.

Down the copper bar, a barkeep – a slender woman with high cheekbones, brown skin, and corkscrew curls – talked with a patron who had glittering green scales on his cheeks and gills on the side of his neck. The beginnings of a head fin peeked from beneath the black velvet fedora he wore.

Valentine tried a discreet stare out of the corner of her eye. What the hell?

The barkeep looked over at Valentine and frowned.

Unease rippled through her. Valentine swallowed hard, then looked away from the woman and the patron with scales to the rest of the casino. *What is going on? This is...weird.*

Beyond the bar and the dais upon which it rested, the black marble floor revealed inlaid gold motifs, symbols Valentine didn't recognize. Lush carpets with art nouveau designs graced the walkways. Rows of slot machines with polished glass, old-fashioned font, and delicate filigree gleamed in the golden

light that filmed the entire room. Crystal and gemstone chandeliers twinkled against the lighted sconces that lined the walls, casting shadows that flickered and shuddered. Several tables with green velvet tops were surrounded by players, gambling in fine fabrics and jovial spirits. Loud laughter and a keening noise unlike anything she had ever heard echoed through the room.

Valentine cast surreptitious glances at the casino patrons. She usually tried not to judge anyone – goodness knew *normal* didn't exist – but the customers here were...unusual. A violet-skinned woman dressed in feathers and nothing else sang the blues at the edge of the room, her husky voice evoking the taste of whiskey and salt in Valentine's mouth. A man with the head of a panther, dressed in the tailored yet loose fashions of the 1940s, sauntered by and gave Valentine a wink and a purr when he caught her staring. A pair of women draped in beaded flapper dresses and adorned in bandeaus with feathers and gems openly stared at Valentine as they walked by.

"Is that a human?" one murmured to the other, their heads nestled together.

"No. Specter, I think."

They both giggled and hurried forward. Valentine saw gossamer wings, like those of a dragonfly, stretch up from the women's backs and extend out. The wings bounced and rippled as they moved away.

"Do you want a drink?"

Valentine turned away from the casino floor and found the barkeep staring down at her.

She ignored the offer of a drink. She was underage, but something told her that didn't matter in this place – whatever it was. "Where am I?"

A faint look of pity crossed the woman's face. "You'll find out soon enough. You may as well have a drink while you wait."

Valentine shook her head. "I'd like to keep a clear head, thanks."

The woman shrugged. "Suit yourself." She moved on to serve a tall man with six arms, the palest blue eyes, and night-black hair.

"Valentine Cash?"

A short woman dressed in the casino livery, metallic accents against hunter green stood before her. A pair of small gray antlers peeked through her red hair.

“Yes?”

“They are ready for you now,” the horned woman replied. “This way, please.”

The woman turned to leave, and Valentine stood and almost stumbled. She felt a pull behind the sternum of her chest, like an anchor being reeled into a boat. The horned woman led her on a circuitous path throughout the casino, weaving around patrons and service staff with ease. Valentine had to duck a few times; she also tripped twice.

Finally, the horned woman paused before golden double doors that formed an ornate arched entry into another room. She knocked once, then reached forward to push open one of the doors. She gestured to Valentine, her hand a sweeping motion. “After you, please.”

Valentine stepped into the room. Pink velvet couches lined the room, with a large, low wood table in a herringbone pattern in the middle. Luxe patterned wallpaper with a ginkgo leaf motif swept the walls. A large chandelier draped from the center. Large urns with pampas leaves, palm sheaves, and enormous feathers rested in each corner. The light was brighter in this room than the rest of the casino, and more silver than gold. Valentine heard the door close behind her.

Three people waited for her.

A white woman in a blue satin dress with elegant beading and a perfect coiffed bun smiled at Valentine, her ruby lips revealing white teeth. She seemed a tall woman, even sitting – long legs stretched out from where she sat on the pink velvet couch, an acoustic guitar resting against the cushions next to her. The guitar bore strings of silver and copper against a golden body along with an abalone backing and frets. It was beautiful. Valentine had seen a great many guitars, but never anything quite like this.

Then Valentine saw the lumberjack. A tall white man, thick with muscle and almost two feet taller than Valentine, dressed in old denim, thick boots, and a flannel button down rolled up to expose his forearms. Tattoos decorated the backs of his large hands. The left had a double-sided ax, the right a bright blue ox with a flared tail. His hands bore the scars, nicks, and calluses of a blue-collar

man, ones like the men Valentine grew up around in her hometown. A scar cut through his right eyebrow, white against the black line. The rest of his face twisted into a grimace. Valentine almost stepped back when she caught sight of his glare. She looked away, uncomfortable with the anger.

A third man emerged from behind the lumberjack and as he moved forward, Valentine found herself standing a little straighter, her spine stiff under his gaze. Slender but muscled, the Black man had a strong nose and amber eyes crowned by loose curls that fell away from his face. His tailored button-down, burgundy shirt had an asymmetrical drape that slashed down from one hip to the opposite calf. Black snakeskin pants encased his legs, and his shoes were gold and black Oxfords.

Valentine blinked, then squinted. She swore she had seen a crown upon his head, a thin circlet of hammered gold. But every time she tried to focus on it, the certainty danced away.

“Welcome, Valentine.” The woman spoke, and Valentine heard traces of the American South in her voice. “Please, do sit down.”

Valentine settled herself on the edge of a pink couch. She looked between the three. “H-have we met before?” Her voice shook. Nerves tapped along her spine like phantom fingers along the fret of a fiddle.

The woman smiled. “No.”

That didn’t clear anything up. “Um, where am I?”

“The Truckstop between life and death.” This time, the lumberjack spoke. He glanced over Valentine and gave a derisive snort, his lip curled.

“Paulie,” the woman scolded. “Be nice.”

“Why?” He jerked his head to Valentine, then shook it. “A young, silly human, practically a child, who killed others through carelessness and stupidity? Hardly original. She’s not worth our time.”

A hot smear of shame washed through Valentine, chased by cold fear.

“You know the rules.” The woman stared at him with a steel gaze. “She gets a choice.”

The Black man stepped closer, and Valentine almost saw his crown again. “Paul, calm yourself. Let’s get the formalities over with.” His tenor voice con-

tained echoes of an unfamiliar rhythm Valentine couldn't quite place, like an irregular heartbeat.

The three turned to focus on Valentine. She gave a hard swallow. She couldn't feel her heartbeat in her chest. Shouldn't she have a heartbeat? This couldn't be good.

The woman spoke. "Valentine Cash, you are dead."

Somehow, she had known that, deep down. The casino, the gamblers, these three – none of them were normal. Still, shock arced through her body. Grief seeped in, slow at first and then all at once. Finally, she *remembered*.

Valentine heard screams. She felt the impact of the seatbelt and the car door slam into her body again, jerking her back into the pink velvet couch. Air sawed in and out of her lungs. Her limbs trembled and shook. Tears streamed down her face. She could feel the others wait while she tried to get herself under control. Valentine thought of her parents, of Loretta, even of Cara and the stupid YeeHaw Tots.

Was this it?

Was this the end?

Valentine wiped her face and looked up. "If I'm dead, is this h-heaven or the afterlife?" Valentine struggled to find the right words. *Oh, God, is this hell?* Her old church said people like her went there.

The Black man looked amused. "A casino – an elegant casino, I grant you, but a casino nonetheless – is your idea of heaven?"

"High John, don't tease." The woman shook her head. "She's a fish out of water, this one. She's only trying to make sense of what she's seeing."

The lumberjack stopped pacing. "Let's get on with this."

"Paulie, you've absolutely no patience for an eternal creature." The woman heaved a deep sigh, then sat up straight with a proud tilt to her head and a broad smile on her face. "Valentine Cash, let's have some introductions. I'm Dale. This impatient one is Paul –" she gestured at the lumberjack – "and he is High John." The woman waved at the Black man.

Valentine studied Dale. The name combined with the face, the 1950s fashion, and the voice prompted recognition. “Dale? Dale...Wright? *The Dale Wright?*”

Paul rolled his eyes. “Another fangirl.”

Dale smiled. “Yes.”

Valentine shook her head. “I don’t understand.” She looked at Paul and High John. Paul Bunyan, she realized. “Paulie” was Paul Bunyan, the legendary lumberman of American tall tales. She looked at High John, who stared back with a challenge in his gaze and a slight smirk twisted on his lips. Valentine could see the hammered gold circlet on his head clearly this time. High John, High John, High... She didn’t know what prompted it, but Valentine remembered a single lyric from an old Muddy Waters song she heard sung in a bar a long time ago.

Recognition flashed through her mind like lightning, and she refocused on the man. “John de Conquer Blue?”

The man’s face was impassive. “Most often, I am known as High John the Conqueror. But yes, that’s another name.”

Dale chuckled. Paul – *Paulie*, Valentine thought in half hysterics – snorted.

Valentine looked at the three legends before her. Her grip on reality felt tenuous, loose. Panic set in, grasping at the edges of her vision. “If I’m dead, then why am I here?”

“Valentine Cash, you are one of the lucky ones.” Dale leaned forward. “You get a choice.”

“O-okay.” Valentine still didn’t understand.

“Do you remember how you died?” High John asked.

Valentine flinched. “Car crash.”

He nodded. “Yes.”

“And you took two others with you,” Paul added. Contempt coated each word like honey on a comb. “Because you were careless.”

Nausea swirled up Valentine’s chest and into her throat. She heard the screams, then remembered dying while her phone buzzed in the distance.

Valentine looked up. “There was a couple. In the blue, uh, blue car? They died, too?” Her voice broke on the last word.

Dale nodded. “Yes. They both passed.”

Ice congealed in Valentine’s chest. She bent her head. She didn’t pray; she wasn’t religious, not after leaving behind a Southern Baptist church who had made their opinion of homosexuality quite clear. She just cried. The silent tears filmed her vision before they dripped down her face and onto her clothes.

“I’m s-so sorry,” she choked out. Valentine didn’t know who she offered the apology to, the two people who had died or the three legends before her.

“Dry your eyes, girl.” Paul’s harsh command drew her gaze up. “You’ve got a choice to make.”

Valentine looked between the three. “I don’t understand.”

“Valentine Cash, your careless action cost those two their lives.” Dale leveled the crime against her with no judgment or censure. “You have the choice to do penance, to amend for the loss that you caused. If you complete the tasks we set before you – and trust me, there will be many, and they will be difficult – you may win back your life. As it was. Record deal and all.”

“She doesn’t *deserve* this,” Paul muttered.

“Paulie, we agreed.” Dale didn’t look away from Valentine. “She gets the choice, and she will succeed or fail. It’s that simple.”

“I could have my life back?” Valentine didn’t know what to think. Would it be possible? “I could live again?”

“*If* you succeed at completing each task,” High John answered. He didn’t seem confident about her chances.

“So, I complete these tasks, and I will be alive again?” Valentine thought of Loretta. The manager who had become a friend and a mentor would be so disappointed with her death. They had only just signed the record deal earlier that day. Her parents, who called earlier after a silence that spanned two years. Another thought intruded, black ice coating her insides. “What about the couple? The ones who d-died?”

High John stared at her, a faint frown across his face. “They don’t concern you.”

Valentine flinched. She looked at Dale. “What do I have to do?”

“First, answer this. Do you accept this offer?”

The room fell silent. The legends went still, watching Valentine with sharp, watchful eyes. She felt the weight of their gaze like anvils on her chest, and it was too much. She had to look away. Glancing down at her hands, she saw the calluses on her fingertips and the knobby joints of her fingers, any softness worn away by years of playing instruments and making music and working shit jobs to pay for her meager existence. Valentine remembered the thrill and the sense of relief when she and Loretta had signed the record deal. Finally, she could focus on the music. Finally, she wouldn't have to work two jobs, squeezing the music, the reason for her existence, in between banal duties. She wanted that future, the one of potential and success and acceptance, back.

She wanted her possibilities back.

Valentine looked up. “Yes, I accept.”

Dale smiled, her ruby lips and white teeth gleaming in the silver light of the room. “We recognize your choice.” The words were formal, almost an incantation of sorts. Paul sighed. High John looked bored. Dale continued, “The penance begins.”

Fire encircled Valentine's wrists, and she cried out in pain, doubled over. Looking down, she saw black designs of ash traced into her skin like wood burned by lightning. She blew hasty breaths on her wrists, trying to alleviate the burn. The pain faded as the lines darkened. A residual ache gave a slow pulse as Valentine studied the design: lines from a musical sheet wrapped around her wrists with twelve notations.

“What the hell?” Valentine scowled at the three.

Paul smirked. “Already upset? That ain't a great start for you, brat.”

High John rolled his eyes.

“These are the symbols of your acceptance.” Dale sipped from a cocktail that Valentine would have sworn wasn't there a minute ago. “Your penance requires you to complete several tasks. As you complete, or fail, each one, those notes” – Dale nodded at Valentine's hands – “will track your progress.” Dale took another sip. “They will also tell you when you are running out of time.”

Valentine shook her head, her thoughts like mud at the bottom of a dark pond. “Out of time? What does that mean?”

High John spoke. “The penance must be completed within an allotted period. You don’t get forever to make amends.” He stared into the distance, and Valentine had a feeling that he saw something no one else in the room could see. “Mortal time and our time are difficult to reconcile; they are too different. You have, perhaps, two months?”

Nausea swirled through Valentine. “I-is that enough time?”

Paul sneered. “Guess you’ll find out.”

Valentine stared at the legend, and a familiar resentment flared up. She had been heckled and yelled at by old men with broken dreams and long-deserted gumption too many times over the last two years. Thanks to performing gigs in every venue that would have her, Valentine knew what angry, dismissive men sounded like. *I’ll show you, you bastard.*

She ignored him and turned to look at Dale. The woman – ghost? Creature? – had finished her cocktail.

Dale continued as if High John and Paul hadn’t spoken. “You have until the marks fade to complete the penance. Once the ash is gone, so is your chance at renewed life.”

Valentine swallowed hard. Suddenly the pain in her wrists felt comforting somehow.

“We acknowledge that you are new to the liminal lands that lie between your reality and the others. To navigate this wilderness alone would be akin to sending a babe into the woods without food or shelter. So, to even the odds, we offer you a gift: a guide to assist you along your journey. You will find them at the bar.”

Valentine took a deep breath. The room was redolent with ozone and amber and the unfamiliar scents further unsettled her. “What exactly am I supposed to do?”

“At the bar, Valentine Cash,” Dale scolded lightly. “Find your guide. They will have instructions for you.” The other woman shook her head. “You had best get started. Your penance will take time – and you don’t have much of it.”

**Excerpt of *The Penance of Valentine Cash*
Coming January 16, 2024!**

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Rebecca Rook designs tabletop games, manages a little free library dedicated to sequential art and comics, writes young adult fiction, and lives in the Pacific Northwest with two wonderful dogs. A 2021-2022 Hugo House Fellow in Seattle, WA, she also attended the 2021 Tin House YA Fiction Workshop in Portland, OR. Rebecca was selected as one of the 100 invited writers to participate in the Write Team Mentorship Program's curated Pitch-a-Thon event before being chosen as a Mentee for the 2021 Program. Prior to this, she completed the wonderful Yearlong Workshop for Young Adult and Middle Grade Fiction at Hugo House.

Learn more here: <https://byrebeccarook.com/>

Sign up for her email newsletter, The Rookery, to stay up to date with new releases, giveaways, and more!



SNEAK PEEK: FALSE HAVEN

Coming in February 2024!

***False Haven* by Rebecca Rook.**

Seventeen-year-old Vivienne Barston's life has fallen apart.

With her mother recently dead, her father disappears into his grief – leaving Viv to deal with her sadness and anger alone. Viv turns to destructive behaviors like petty vandalism, but after a disturbing stint in a juvenile detention center frightens her, Viv agrees to a court mandated service opportunity designed to

expunge her record. The deal: work for six weeks with a trail conservation crew in the rural woods of southern Oregon, and she'll be free with a clean slate.

She knows it's her last chance to fix her life.

When Viv arrives at the small town of Hard Luck, Oregon, she meets her motley crewmates, all with troubles of their own. The unusual group travels to Grafton Stake, a remote and derelict former asylum with a haunted history—and now Viv must face the ghosts of the past while fighting for her future.

False Haven is a young adult horror novel for fans of *Anna Dressed in Blood* by Kendare Blake, *Asylum* by Madeleine Roux, and *Fiendish* by Brenna Yovanoff.

Chapter One

The Greyhound breathed cold, sterile air on the near comatose passengers. Vivienne folded further into her seat, her forehead resting against the window despite the chill. She traced a single drop of rain across the fogged pane with a fingertip. Her backpack rested in the seat beside her, a sentinel against the few others that remained on the tall and narrow bus. After a moment, the raindrop flicked away, and Viv dropped her hand. She resettled her black hood atop her head.

The bus had shed more and more passengers as the vehicle wended its way south along I-5, until only Viv and three others remained. The bus driver, a weary but capable Latino woman in her fifties, switched on the PA system.

“Hard Luck, Oregon, in five minutes.”

The PA switched off with a sizzle.

That was her stop. Viv forced herself away from the bus wall, and gathered her phone, earbuds, and wallet into a tidy pile before tossing them into her pack. She watched the trees and the underbrush along the road thin, becoming less dense, less green, as signs of human habitation took over. Billboards stood stark against a dark gray sky and promised great grub at Honey's Diner or a cozy stay at the Hard Luck Motel. As the Greyhound sliced through the outskirts of town, a worn wooden sign welcomed newcomers to Hard Luck, Oregon,

Established in 1898. The bus slowed, coming to a stop in front of the foretold Honey's Diner.

The PA switched on again. "We have arrived in Hard Luck, Oregon. If this is your stop, please gather all of your belongings before leaving the bus. Greyhound is not responsible for lost or stolen items."

Viv joined the short line to get off the bus. Outside, the rain-laden air was damp against her skin. She smelled exhaust and cold. Viv pulled her hoodie tighter around her body. She watched a mother and a daughter with matching dark rims around their eyes wrestle four enormous suitcases off the bus, struggling to move them onto the nearby sidewalks. Viv eyed the pair. *They look exhausted.*

Once they stepped away, Vivienne ducked into the carriage hold and grabbed her large, navy hiker's backpack. She waved off the bus driver's attempt at assistance and shrugged the pack onto her shoulders, holding the smaller backpack in her hands.

Viv felt her phone vibrate and glanced at the screen.

A text from her uncle: *At Honey's Diner. I grabbed a booth.*

Viv looked up at the restaurant in front of her. Well, she wouldn't have far to walk.

The diner was busy. A line of people trailed out the door and into the parking lot, which housed trucks, Suburbans, and motorcycles. Viv stepped inside, dodging the line and the irate looks cast her way. She searched for her uncle, inhaling the scents of deep-fried foods and coffee.

He sat in a booth by a window, chatting with a man in a booth nearby. They sported similar outfits: jeans and work boots, with plaid flannel over a worn T-shirt and a baseball cap over thinning hair that had seen thicker days. Viv trudged through the aisles, dodging a harried waitress with a stained apron and comfortable but ugly sneakers. Stopping in front of her uncle's table, she waited for a pause in the good-natured conversation. After a moment, the stranger in the next booth cast her a sideways, skeptical glance.

Viv knew what he saw: A rail thin teenager with long brown hair and black eyes, in a black hoodie and blacker jeans, decent work boots (a gift from her

uncle), weighed down by an incongruous hiker's backpack so full it strained at the seams. Silent and dark, she stood out like an inkblot in the colorful noise that echoed through the diner.

She waited.

Without looking at Viv, Rick spoke. "Tell Honey I'll have the number two with a side of minestrone soup."

"I don't know who Honey is, Uncle Rick," Viv replied.

Her uncle stilled with recognition. His eyes twinkled as he stood up to hug Viv. She returned the hug with a tight embrace of her own. Never a tall man, Rick seemed even shorter than she remembered. His auburn hair, a family trait on her mother's side, had faded in his middle age but his enthusiastic manner of conversation, punctuated by wild hand gestures and boisterous laughter, remained the same. Viv remembered how his often bawdy sense of humor had offended her father. Her mother had enjoyed his silliness, though. Viv remembered the pranks Rick pulled in the hospital to cheer her mother up during treatment: rude noises made by balloons and machines, snakes that sprung from a can... Her mother would chuckle until she started to cough. Then her father would frown at Viv and Rick until they fell quiet.

I haven't seen Rick since the funeral, Viv realized.

Rick stepped back. "Good to see you, kiddo. Sit down, sit down."

Viv tucked the hiker's backpack into the booth, then slid herself onto the bench seat opposite of her uncle. The tabletop was sticky with soap residue. *I hope it's soap*. The harried waitress with the ugly shoes came to collect their orders – a Rueben sandwich and a burger – before Rick leaned across the table.

"How was the ride down?"

Viv shrugged. "It was quiet, for the Greyhound."

"No trouble at all?"

Viv shook her head. "No. Cold, smelly." She shrugged again. "It could have been worse."

"Did your father see you off?"

"He dropped me off at the station."

Rick frowned, then shook his head. "Well, how is he?"

Viv rolled her eyes. “Like you care.”

Uncle Rick chuckled. “We’re not besties but we both love you.”

“You can admit it: He’s kind of an asshole.”

“Hey.” Uncle Rick’s voice sharpened with disapproval. “Be respectful. He’s still your father.”

Viv stared down at the tabletop, her teeth grinding together. Her dentist had wanted her to wear a nightguard. Viv hadn’t cared enough to tell her father. That was the least of her problems.

“Vivienne.” Her uncle gentled his tone. “I’m sorry to be short with you. You both lost your mother and I feel for him. It’s not easy.”

Viv looked up. “You mean, it’s not easy to lose your wife and to gain a loser for a kid.”

He shook his head. “That’s not what I meant. At all. I’m just saying the man means well.”

“I got a reuben and a burger here.” The waitress and the sandwiches had arrived.

Grateful for a distraction, Viv dug into her burger. They ate in silence. Viv was pleasantly shocked by how good the food was. *Or maybe I’m just hungry.* She hadn’t expected much from Hard Luck, Oregon.

As the food dwindled away, the tension returned. Viv fiddled with a french fry.

Rick broke the silence. “You ready for this, kiddo?”

Viv looked at him. Worry wrapped across his face and his thick auburn brows pleated in concern. His beard had so much silver that he had a roan rather than rust coloring.

He deserves the honest answer. “Probably not.”

He let loose a gravelly chuckle. “That’s comforting.”

Viv gave a half-smile. “How did you even find this program, anyways?”

Her uncle sipped from his coffee mug before answering. “Working for the Bureau of Land Management, I encounter a lot of third-party contractors and nonprofits tied to land conservation and stewardship.” A pause for another sip of coffee. “Your program is loosely based on the Civilian Conservation Corps

from the 1930s, part of the whole New Deal environmental initiatives. But it's different because it focuses on helping kids get back on track, expunge their records, and the like." He focused on Viv, his tone hard. "From what your father shared with me, this program is your only chance. Don't waste it."

Viv dropped her French fry onto the plate as a tremor shook her hand. She leaned back against the booth seat, grateful for its solidity. She thought about her nights in the juvenile center in Portland, only weeks ago. After the first night on the thin, hard mattress, she simply didn't sleep. She couldn't relax. She didn't trust any of the others in the ward. Viv had napped during the day but even that was hit or miss. The concrete walls, tile floors, and metal bars across the windows had wrapped around her like an unwanted quilt. The very air had tasted of astringent cleaners, body odor, and somehow, anger. Then there were the other girls. One of them, a large girl with unnaturally yellowed hair and teeth, had pinned Viv to the wall and breathed foul imprecations into her ear while choking her with a single hand. The ward guard had been slow to intervene, irritated by the extra fuss rather than concerned for Vivienne.

Viv had almost sobbed with gratitude when her father had picked her up a week later.

He hadn't noticed anything unusual. But then, he never did these days. *Not since the funeral.*

Viv refocused on her uncle. "I only have to get through these six weeks, right? Then I get to go home?" She cleared her throat. "I don't go back to the detention center?"

She saw sadness seep into her uncle's gaze, like he could see inside her head. "This program is literally a get out of jail free card. You just got to do the work, okay?"

Viv nodded.

Her uncle cleared his throat. "You want something else to eat?" he asked with forced cheerfulness. "You've got to put some meat on those bones if you're gonna do trail work."

Viv shook her head.

Her uncle checked his phone. “When do you check in with Helen Whiteaker?”

“4:00 p.m.”

“We should get going then.”

Uncle Rick carried her hiker’s backpack as they walked to the Bureau of Land Management office and commented on the limited points of interest in the small town. Many of the buildings along Main Street were decorated in the Wild West tradition, with false balconies on the second floor and signs inscribed with Ye Olde West typeset. They strolled down the old-fashioned walkway, covered in wooden beams fixed together in a snug fit. A large, wooden silhouette of a miner with a pan of gold rose above the main drag of shops and stores, and the town’s main street doubled as the freeway that wove through it. The overall result was a calculated attempt to cash in on the nostalgia for the town’s historic appeal. Aside from the tourism angle, the town seemed to have one of each establishment: One diner, one general store, one hardware store, one gas station.

Viv shivered. The day had grown chilly.

“Wait.” Rick’s sudden command interrupted her thoughts. “Your sponsor. They know you’re here?”

Viv looked up at Rick. “She knows. We text and talk when we need to.”

Rick looked doubtful. “And that will work for you?”

Viv shrugged. “It will have to, won’t it?”

Rick lapsed into silence, worry and skepticism veined across his face. Viv studied him with a sideways glance, and her heart sank within her chest. *He doesn’t trust me*, she thought. *Not anymore.*

Fog had settled on the mountains surrounding the town, cloaking the green with gray. Just past the post office, Viv saw the Bureau of Land Management office. Reminiscent of a log cabin, the office was obviously built to retain the rustic Old West aesthetic, with a low roof and log walls. Only the small metal overhang that projected over the glass double doors modernized the office.

The American and State of Oregon flags flew at the top mast, rising from a manicured lawn.

They paused before the double doors.

Her uncle scrutinized her. "If you need anything, you call me."

Viv nodded. "Sure."

Uncle Rick dropped her backpack, then wrapped Viv in another hug. He smelled of Reuben sandwiches, coffee, and soap, and his beard was soft against her forehead. Viv leaned into him, grateful for the warmth. He felt like home.

"You're gonna be fine." His voice was gruff as he released her. *He sounds like he's trying to convince himself.*

Viv didn't respond.

Time would tell, wouldn't it?

***False Haven* by Rebecca Rook.**

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