

## **The Return of Audrey Rose**

Audrey Rose's heart sat lopsided in her chest, edging towards right side up. Her big toe touched champagne powder, light, fluffy, parting for each step of her foot. Audrey Rose had been gone a long time. Months had passed where she danced with black bears turned white, left from the last ice age. Their veins were turquoise, frozen waters still running through them. Bald eagles were peering down at her from above until she climbed trees to look down on them, their light in their eyes and the span of their wings. She swam with seals, breached with whales, found the world that had been born in her cells, a world almost untouched by man, where grizzlies never learned to fear, where salmon still swam up streams, through the arteries of the land that stretched before her. Sea foam caught in her hair, flowed through her, washing away the places inside that needed cleaning. No houses lived in these walls of color, where layers of green enveloped, but just one step could open you onto a landscape of water and sky and green became a distant memory to blue. Audrey Rose had shed the shelter she had lived under for so long.

Her toes led her to her old house, the home of the J's: Joe, Julie and Justin. Flowers held no petals, bulbs hid underneath snow. Leaves had fallen and bare limbs stretched upward, exposed to the sky. She climbed the closest tree, resting, looking over her memories. She could not bring herself to climb through a window, to see if any of her friends still lived there. She went to the only place that was safe: Sunpie's.

The lights were warm and beckoning against the prickly sky; clouds gathering, gathering, teats ready to shower frozen milk over the land, to quench the thirst of the powder hungry. Emilie was behind the bar. No words were spoken before the first Giddy-up was placed on the bar. Audrey Rose shot it down before the girls hugged.

"You're back."

"I left some pieces of me here."

The bar had changed. It hadn't changed. The stools were the same. Dangus was here still hung on the wall. There was a streamer from the New Zealand New Year's Party, and there were new Mardi Gras balls hanging from the ceiling.

Audrey Rose hopped onto the bar and let her body move. Her skirt was shreds of what it had been, the surviving sparkles catching the light, bouncing off the walls, spinning around in time with Audrey Rose's body. Her breasts rose and fell with her inhales and exhales. Her feet remembered the rhythm of this bar, of this town and suddenly it all came crashing in - how much she had missed every little detail.

She hopped off the seat, opened her mouth and motioned for Emilie to pour a Giddy-up down it. One after another, the first alcohol to reach her body in more than half a year. Each drop raced around, into her heart, numbing her brain, fogging her eyes. Friends came and left, her body wrapped in hugs, wrapped in the smells of shampoo, cologne, dirt, sweat, flowers. Each person filling her senses. When the lights went out, Audrey

Rose skipped out of the bar to a white Jeep. She climbed in and sat with her head against the back of the seat. Emilie offered her a ride home, but she assured Emilie she could drive the Jeep.

Shortly after, a guy knocked on the door. Audrey Rose rolled down the window.

"You're in my Jeep," he said.

"You are surely mistaken, this is my Jeep."

The guy took a few steps back, looked at the Jeep, then approached again.

"Listen, I'll give you a ride home if you need it, but this is my Jeep. I have the keys right here."

"You can try if you like."

The guy got in while Audrey Rose scooted over to the passenger seat. The Jeep started right up.

"Hmmm. That's strange. I thought this was mine."

"Do you want a ride to look for yours?"

Audrey Rose smiled. Then she started giggling.

"What's so funny?"

"I don't own a Jeep."

"You don't?"

"I don't even own a car. I only own these." Audrey Rose gathered her toes to her mouth and kissed each one.

"Can I take you somewhere?"

"You already have." Audrey Rose gave him a kiss on the cheek and hopped out, twirled and curtsied for him. She danced down the street as the Jeep drove away. Each Jeep she found she clambered into, sniffed around, until she found an old rust colored CJ7. She struggled with the door to get in. The window was lopsided, tilted inside the frame, a crack between inside and out. Audrey Rose reclined the seat and rested her feet on the steering wheel.

The sky exploded with a confetti of snow. Crystals chased each other out of the sky. A single flake drifted through the crack in the window landing on her lap.

