

WE THE FREAKS  
A Collection of Linked Short Stories

by

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## **Tarot Cards**

Darkness comforts me. It's something people fear, the shadows and what lurks in them, the helplessness of not being able to use your own eyes even when they're wide open. It's something I've never been able to fathom, for me, daylight is more terrifying—because you can see everything that happens. I'd rather live in the night, where anything can happen in front of your blind eyes. Even now, as I sit, looking out into my tent lit by only a few sporadic candles, I see only shapes and shadows. The colors and textures are lost, the silky purple curtains and the antique rug, nothing but dull remnants of themselves. The last bit of light, peeking in from beneath the edges of my tent is disappearing, and I know without looking that the show is about to begin.

I close my eyes and center myself, taking in deep breaths in through my nose and letting them out through my mouth as I rest my hands on my folded knees. It doesn't take much to hone my mind in on the craft, to tune out the rest of the world and focus on just the elements. Telling and Readings are all I've ever known, what my mother and her mother before her taught me are my life now. The deck in front of me, worn and weathered from the years was my grandmother's first set.

The bells chime above my tent flap, letting me know someone came in and the sound echoes for a few seconds before stopping. I hear footsteps, too light to be a man—but not dainty like a woman in heels. Perfume. I know that scent—sweet pea, just about the opposite of the woman who is taking a seat in front of me. Diana Cutter, someone I've grown quite fond of since she started working here a few years ago. I open my eyes and Diana is sitting in front of me—mimicking my position.

She's wearing tight jeans and a snug plaid shirt that shows a lot of cleavage. I know that's just her outfit of the day for her job but compared to my robe-like purple dress with golden accents, we must look like quite the pair. I envy her looks in general but her eyes are entrancing. They're a beautiful mix of blue, green and gray, and some days one is more prominent. Today it's green. And the makeup surrounding her pupil amplifies the intensity of her stare—no wonder guys can't seem to say no to her.

"What, no cowboy hat?" I ask, my voice just above a whisper because anything louder sounds like yelling in this quiet enclosed space. She smiles and picks up a glass orb with a tarot card stuck inside. Each time you shake it, the card changes—a gift from Dalton from a few years ago, when we made double off one show down in Austin. He was so sweet, even wrapped it up in a little box with a bow and gave it to me during a fancy dinner that he said he cooked himself. I'm still not sure he knows how to cook.

"It's in the car, I decided it might be a little much. I did keep the boots though," she says, showing me her red boots. "They're the ones I wanted when I was little because of that girl in Footloose. They're a lot comfier than they look too."

I smile and shake my head, "No doubt. I never get tired of seeing these outfits you come up with, your closet must be an interesting mix."

"You have no idea. Last week I found a bridesmaid dress in there. I've never even been a bridesmaid."

I chuckle a bit, and she plays with the orb, looking down at it as she weighs it in her hands and shakes it. The atmosphere in the room changes and I know girl talk is over. We're not that great of friends—after all, I'm still her boss, but the part of me that feels hollow as of late wishes for more conversation about something other than work.

“Look, I came by to ask you something serious.”

I raise my eyebrow at her, “You have my attention.”

She takes a deep breath and it just all comes out in one long breath. “Well, you know I’ve been working here for three years, and well, my decision day isn’t ‘til November which is still like four months away but my husband is coming home from overseas next month and I was just wondering if there’s anything I could do to get that date moved up.”

I take in what she said for a few seconds, piecing together what I didn’t understand. She wants out early because her husband will be home on leave from the military and she doesn’t want this job looming over their relationship. My guess is that he’s been on tour for the last few years, because other than the few times he’s come up in conversation, she’s never mentioned worrying about him finding out about what she does here. I don’t see being a siren as something that will go over well in a marriage. Something about luring strange men to stranger places sounds a bit dubious to me.

“Why’d you come to me and not Dalton? He controls the contracts, not me,” I say, but I know the answer. We both do. Dalton only thinks he’s in charge.

“I don’t even see Dalton half the time, never mind talk to him. You’re the one I’ve answered to for the last few years, and I know you have the power to do it if you want to. I’m just asking you to consider it. I’ve enjoyed what I do here, Satine, but you’re going to have to find a new siren soon anyway. I can help with that if you want. Just say yes.”

“When does he come home?” I ask.

“September 5<sup>th</sup>. I’m picking him up down by Fort Hood.”

I nod my head and then smile, “You’ve been a great asset, Diana. I don’t want to say yes.” I see her hopeful expression start to droop, “But, our work is done here. You’re right. You’ve

changed so much since we first met, and I hope it'll stay that way. That may just be one of my conditions for letting you go."

"Done," she says before I have the chance to continue. She grins back at me and waits for more. "There's no real going back anyway—given how long it took me to get clean."

I have to agree with her there—that was hell for a lot of us. She didn't eat or sleep for a week when she got here, and kept us all up with her screaming. I never even bothered to ask what she was on, but I'm sure Dalton knew. He was the one that drew her name.

"Off the top of my head, I can think of a couple things. The first being Sebastian."

"Sebastian? The mime that I brought in?" she asks, waiting for some assurance in the form of a nod before continuing, "What do you need me to do?"

"Well, I'm sure that you've heard about his little escapades. Dalton's been watching him these past few weeks and tonight, he's being tested. We're back in the same town he was taken."

"And you think he's going to try something stupid," she says.

"Yes. I do. I'm getting a bad feeling about tonight, and that's one of the big reasons, I think. I'm not sure if he's going to try and play hero, or just make a run for it, but either way things are going to get messy. Dalton wants to pull Cira and see what he does on his own, which means I'll need someone to follow him unseen and report back."

"Sounds easy enough. But, I've got a better plan in mind if you want him tested."

"I trust your judgment Diane, just be safe about it."

"When have you known me not to be careful?"

She has me there. Maybe during the first few weeks we had her here, but ever since, she's proved her worth more times than I can count. She even saved my life once, which I tried to convince Dalton was enough for her dismissal, but he didn't seem to agree when I told him the

story of a freak we called Rudy breaking into my tent at night with a baseball bat. As if I wouldn't have seen him coming. I woke in the middle of the night with my body shaking, and the powerful need to move. That someone was watching me. When I got up, he attacked from the shadows by the entrance—but never touched me because a six shooter was aimed at his head. I didn't know then she was an army wife, but now I know she would have been plenty capable of using that gun.

“So, keep an eye on Sebastian, make sure that he doesn't try anything stupid, and if he does, report back...check. What else?” she asks, eager. Some people here are lifers, they'll never leave. They've either done something heinous to deserve a life sentence or keep screwing up and adding time. Sebastian has done both.

When Dalton and I took over this carnival, I knew it would be different. We'd both been born and raised in the comfort of freaks, stage performers and con artists. The smell of cotton candy, popcorn and corn dogs was just as familiar to us as a mother's home-cooked meal. But neither of us wanted to stay when we were teenagers. We talked so much about running away and living a better life, and when his father died, this place fell on him to take over. It fell on *us*. Not that I didn't want this life, after all, I grew up in it—but the same part of me that wanted to leave and lead a different life was the one so in love with a man she couldn't dream of leaving.

My eyes focus in on Diane, still waiting for an answer to her question. What else can I have her do? My chest tightens. I know what I could ask, but should I?

“For now, I think that's it,” I start to say, and then I pause, listening because in the distance I can hear the carousel is turned on. Which means the gates will be opening any minute. Which also means... “Dalton's coming. Wait for me outside the tent. Stay out of sight if you can.”

She nods and moves into the back of my tent, opening a small flap and sneaking out without making a sound. Not even a few seconds later, the bells jingle and I look up to see the man I've

loved since childhood. He smiles when he sees me and rushes in, lifting me to my feet by my hands and kissing them.

“Oh Satine, tonight’s going to be good. I can feel it,” he says, dressed for his show in a long-tailed coat and red suit vest. His dark hair and eyes give him a daunting look, one that I’ve grown accustomed to seeing every day. His hair is brushed back from his face tonight, and I find myself wanting to touch the skin that’s visible there, or the five o’clock shadow already forming along the contours of his jaw.

His intuition is not as good as mine.

“And why do you say that?” I ask, allowing him to sweep me about in his arms, trying to be careful around the glass and the candles. He stops spinning me and rests his hands on my shoulders. His hands are warm enough that I can feel them through the material of my dress, and it makes me realize how cold I’ve been.

“I have a surprise for you tonight when we close,” he says, and I can’t help but smile. His is infectious, a disease that could trick even the miserable to show a little teeth. I used to tell him that it’s in his blood, he’s a natural performer, and both his parents were too. His mother was a show girl, which means that his father could have been anyone, but one stayed and raised Dalton as his own. He even made him part of his disappearance act—he vanished off stage before everyone’s eyes claiming he was to travel back in time, only to have Dalton reappear in his clothes for the prestige.

“Well, don’t keep me in the dark, what is it?” I ask, and he just shakes his head, laughing and letting go of me to walk around—even though it’s as familiar as his own tent. He takes care where he steps, because he knows I’ll have his head if he touches his dirty shoes to my mother’s rug; her present to me when I took over her act. It’s where I do all of my readings, where I can feel

her more than anywhere else. Dalton is sure not to step on it again, not after last time, but he does pause to pick up my deck of cards and he starts to shuffle as if he's doing a card trick. He's the only one I've ever let touch them since they became mine.

"If I tell you, then it's not a surprise, you know that. In fact, I'm surprised you don't know what it is," he says, smirking as he runs his fingers over one of my crystal balls. I suppress the urge to roll my eyes. Trust me, I've heard all the psychic cracks, from the carnies and the customers. No one is a believer until I'm done with them. "I'm sure you could at least guess at it. It's been a long time coming now."

"Oh?" I ask. I do have some ideas, but I don't want to get myself too excited and be let down. Years ago, I would have hoped for a ring. It's been a long time coming, but if I think it's going to be that, it's going to be a new dress again. Last time he gave me a surprise, it was the dress I'm wearing now. These days, I just expect that we're as close to married as we're ever going to get.

"You remember what today is, then?" he asks, turning to face me and sitting on the edge of my bed towards the back of my tent. I walk towards him and stand in front of him, letting him snake his long arms around me to pull me closer.

"How could I forget? We've owned the carnival for twenty years today." I smile and reach up to touch his hair. His eyelids close as I stroke his hair, rubbing my fingertips against his scalp until he's sighing, content. It's moments like these that I don't question his loyalty to me, that I can forget all the work talk and pretend we're teenagers again—stealing a bottle of whiskey from his dad's trailer and running off to the fields for the night. I can picture us there now, waking up in a tangle of grass and each other and scrambling to find clothes before my mother found us. He was downright terrified of my mother.



Dalton pulls me so I'm lying beside him on my bed, and I let him lure me to a suffocating closeness. The feeling of being bound in his arms comforts me, and I can feel my body relaxing into his for a few moments before he whispers,

"You know that vacation you've been talking about for a few years now? The one we keep putting off?"

I nod against his chest, listening to each steady beat of his heart.

"After tonight's show, we'll be able to afford it."

I pull away so I can see his face and he peeks an eye open at me and props himself up on his elbows. I search his expression for some hint of amusement—which there is some—but I find more excitement than anything else. He looks younger, and has a wild sort of look in his eye. The one he used to get on a full moon, when he'd race me out to the fields and disappear into the brush. My heart would race as I called out his name only to get silence in return until I turned around and he succeeded in making me squeal.

"Peaked your interest, did I?"

"Well, yes." As much a part of us as this carnival is, it's tiring, and this break we've been talking about is more than just something we'd like to do. Our only traveling happens when we go from town-to-town with our chorale of freaks in tow. That's not a vacation, as I had to explain to Dalton. I plan to leave this place behind for a few days, maybe even a week and just relax—put someone else in charge and just go.

"Just me and you, and some margaritas while we lay in the sun. Sounds nice doesn't it?" he says, running his finger along my skin as he draws out different shapes. I close my eyes and visualize which one he'll draw next before he starts the first stroke. Circle.

“It does sound nice, but how can we afford it?” I ask, leaning up and brushing my lips against the stubble on his jaw. The hair tickles my lips and I smile as he rubs the side of his face against his shoulder and laughs. He gets to his feet, walking a few steps to get a look at himself in my floor-length mirror. I sit up in the spot that he just left and watch him continue to pace about the tent. It’s rare I’ve seen him still for more than a few minutes.

“I figured you’d ask that, so I’ll tell you. I have big plans for tonight. We’ve got to make our twentieth something to remember, don’t we?”

“I guess so, makes sense to. For our tenth we locked the doors early and trapped everyone that was left inside...”

“And picked them off one by one,” he continues, “It really got our carnival some attention too, which—any publicity is good publicity. But tonight, I’m thinking the carousel. I’ve been wanting to use it somehow, so I came up with a plan and now I think it’s ready. I’ve been working on it for months.”

“What do you mean?” How could I have not known about something that’s been in the works for months? Why wouldn’t he have told me? I try to chalk it up to it being a surprise, but it feels wrong. It’s not like him to keep things from me. It’s not like him at all.

“You’ll see what I mean tonight. I promise you’ll like it. It’s getting late though, you should finish setting up in here, and I’ve got to go make sure everything else is ready for tonight.”

He starts to walk out of the tent, giddy, and then stops, turning on his heel and making his way back over to me. I tilt my head up and feel his lips against my forehead instead of my lips. I force a smile as he leaves, because now his behavior is making me nervous again. He doesn’t keep things from me, and when they’re work related he never does. The carousel? What’s he planning?

I sit still for a long moment, thinking to myself. I can't shake the feeling that something is wrong, or off, with Dalton. My deck of tarot cards seems to appear beside me on the bed and I remember him picking them up and shuffling them. As the last one to hold them, they still have his essence on them. I reach out, fisting my hand when it falters.

Tower: Chaos. Destruction.

"I don't want to step on any toes here, Satine, but I don't know what you see in him," I hear, and my heart races for a few seconds to try and catch up with itself as Diane sneaks back in to the tent from the back. I'd forgotten she was still out there. "I mean, he seems nice and all, but way too into this job."

The Tower disappears back into the deck with one quick movement of my hands and I try to put it to the back of my mind. I know something is up now. His plan, whatever it may be, is not going to be worth the chaos that I'm foreseeing. What if he gets hurt? What if things go wrong and I don't see it in time to help? If this is what happens to get us vacation money, it can wait.

I focus back on Diane, and her statement. When did things get like this? Even a stranger can see through our romantic charade. Maybe the card isn't about his plan. Maybe, just maybe, it's about us.

"It wasn't always like this," I say, glancing to my left and picking up a picture frame from the small wooden table beside my bed. "He was my best friend, then more, and now we're more partners than anything."

I touch the edge of the frame in my hands and smile, looking down at a picture from when we were in our twenties and fooling around at the western photos booth. I'm wearing a red corseted dress—although the picture shows it in a dull gray—and boots that came up to my knees. A long lipstick-stained cigarette is cradled between my fingers on one hand, and in my other, a revolver.

My eyes follow the barrel to Dalton, who has one of my boots up on his shoulder and a fake moustache above his lip. He's dressed as an outlaw, fully equipped with the spurred boots, bandana around his neck and a five o'clock shadow to die for. In his hand, a rose.

"There's still something there between you," I hear her say, but I don't need to be psychic to know she's just trying to make me feel better. He's all the family I've known for years, aside from my son. He's my world—and I'm his, which is why I'm so hesitant on what I'm about to do.

"You said you'd do just about anything to get out by that date, well... opportunity arises, Diane. I need you to find out what he's up to. I want to know what he's been doing, what his plans for tonight are and how the carousel is involved. Got it?"

"You want me to spy on Dalton?" she asks, standing in front of me and glancing back at the door, I'm sure to make sure he's gone. But I know his routine better than he does. Right now he's at the front gates letting in the first few customers. He'll be there until about twenty minutes until his show starts, to give him time to make sure everything is set up to his liking.

"Satine, if he so much as sees me following him, he'll kill me," she says, looking at me with wide eyes.

"He won't kill you. He'll know I sent you and he'll come to me before he touches a hair on your head," I say. I know him too well. He's predictable, for the most part—at least, for me. However, I can't say for sure that he won't overreact if he finds out I hired a spy. All that anger would be directed at me...

"How can you be so sure? Following Sebastian is easy Satine, he's so paranoid that he's being watched that I could be in plain sight and he'd not know the difference...but Dalton? He's protected, Satine, those big lugs don't leave his side. And Maverick, to be honest, scares the shit out of me. Has since day one."

Maverick is Dalton's right hand, more bull than man, he used to be a pro-wrestler in his previous life. We had to chain him up the first few nights he was here—that is until he broke free and Dalton had to tame him. He still wears the chains around his wrists, wouldn't let us take them off. I can see how he'd be intimidating to some, but he's harmless unless provoked. Jesse, however, has a temper and that paired with the snakes he spends a majority of his time with can be lethal. My son, love him to death, but he's a firecracker, and always looking for Dalton to play the role of father—but Dalton doesn't know, I've never told him.

“Diane, I won't let anything happen to you. Trust me, if anything is going to go wrong, I'll see it and stop it before it can happen.”

She doesn't look convinced, but the cheerful music is getting louder outside and I'm starting to hear voices pass by the tent. It's show time.

“After I get back to you on Sebastian, I'll look into the carousel, okay?” Her beautiful eyes flick to mine and then the ground before she turns to leave. She looks uncomfortable, but there's no one else I would trust to do this.

I nod, because I know she'll do far more than that. She exceeds my expectations when it comes to jobs like this. Without another word, she leaves my tent through the front entrance this time, and the bells chime twice before leaving me in peace once more. The silence is comforting, but not relaxing. I can't shake the feeling of that card and what it could mean.

*You know what it means, Satine.*

My grandmother's voice. I walk over to my mirror and touch it, “I know what it could mean, but am I misinterpreting? What if I'm blowing this out of proportion?”

*Trust your intuition.*

Staring at my own reflection in the mirror, I swear I see my grandmother on one side of me, my mother on the other. But I know they're just spirits, trying to help guide me in the right direction. I look to where I glimpsed my grandmother standing,

“My gut is telling me that something is wrong and people close to me are going to get affected.”

*Maybe more than one.*

My mother.

My brow furrows and I look at my own reflection once more. My face is starting to show age, what if they're right? What if it is more than one person that is threatening my life in one way or another? Sebastian, threatening the carnival, my home and my profession. Dalton, threatening the life I've always known, and the life I thought I'd have. Myself, eager to jump on the chance that someone is up to no good—that they're going to betray me like my father had betrayed my mother.

*Your father was a cheat. I saw that the minute your mother brought him home.*

*She's right. She warned me, I didn't listen. I didn't trust myself.*

“And now you're warning me.”

*No. You have your warning.*

My deck of cards stirs in my hand and The Tower card flips over on the top—even though I know that I shuffled since then. I pick it up and look at the details. The tower in the center, once a strong foundation and a solid form now being struck by lightning, crumbling and throwing its inhabitants to the ground below. Flames consume everything. The carnival—I close my eyes and can clearly see my home burning during a lightning storm, my family members running for their lives burning with searing flames.

No. I won't let that happen. I will wait for Diane's report before I jump to conclusions. The tightening at the pit of my stomach mixed with the feeling of freefalling tells me that I should act now, but instead I open my eyes and sit down on the pillow on the floor where I do my readings. I run my hands along the rug beneath me and work on my breathing, calming myself once more until the feeling in my stomach is nothing more than a single butterfly reminding me that it's still there. I can't let my own worries affect my readings.

As I sit, my legs crossed in my lap, my hands resting on my knees palms up, I find myself wondering why now? I understand Dalton chose tonight for its significance, but he must have no idea that this plan of his is going to blow up in his face. I could tell him. I could be the one to crush his dreams, if he'd even listen, half the time he's so hardheaded I could break a rock. Or I could just let Rachelle figure things out and then spoil his surprise before it happens.

The bells chime someone entering. My eyes still closed, I motion to the cushion across from me on the floor. I had used a table for most readings, but I had one customer that was a skeptic and tried telling me that I was getting answers from under the table. So I read her fortune without cards—I followed the lines on her palm and told her the truth she wanted to hear but didn't ask. Her boyfriend was cheating on her. An ex-boyfriend now that I had myself another believer. I have to say, meddling in love lives is my specialty. It's by far more fun than people who come in asking about their future careers and whether they're going to rule the world someday. No.

"When you're ready, take a seat across from me and think of your question you want to ask," I say. The only light source is a couple of white candles on the floor beside me so I can see the cards and read the lives of strangers.

"I'm ready," she says, and I open my eyes for the first time to see a burly woman with corkscrew brown curls. She looks excited, but also nervous. I get that a lot. The signs are there.

Sitting up p straight, hands fidgeting in lap, wandering eyes, biting of the lip. Little things that most wouldn't pick up on, that I've been trained to.

"Since this is your first reading, I'll go slow and explain myself along the way. First, tell me your name."

"Peggy," she replies.

I smile, "Peggy, I'm going to have you shuffle for as long as you feel you need. Think about that question, and when you're done cut the deck."

She does as I ask, and I sit back in my chair as I wait. This part is always interesting. The intense look on their faces as they think of their question. This woman takes longer than most—which is all the more interesting to me. Magicians tend to shuffle their decks between five and seven times on average before a trick. When it comes to Tarot, there's no average. Some touch the cards enough to get their essence on them and others shuffle until they sense my impatience. Once done, she cuts the deck and places both piles face down on the table between us.

"Pick a deck."

She points to the one on the right and I get the feeling that she chose wrong. Not that there really is a wrong—the cards don't lie. I set the other deck aside and take the deck she chose in my hand. I hold the familiar deck for about a minute in my palms, cupping them together before I flip over the first card and place it in front of her on the floor.

"Past: The Empress. This card symbolizes beauty, fertility and all things feminine and nature. She calls upon you to connect with your femininity—whether it's in your love life, your innermost desires or she might be calling you back to nature. Oftentimes, she's trying to tell you something, such as you are with child or about to be."



The woman's shifts on her cushion like it's uncomfortable, although I know it's not. Her reaction is something I've seen before. She knows she's pregnant. She just doesn't know if she's happy about it or not. My guess is that there's something in her life that is making her question having one at all.

The next card I flip over is the Emperor, reversed.

"Present: Emperor reversed. It's not uncommon for these cards to appear together—however, the Emperor is a sign of authority and structure, but when he's reversed it's a sign of domination or excessive control. This card may have shown up because of a man in your life that is strict in his ways. The domination and control are dangerous signs, ones to be wary of in the future with a child on the way."

The woman is biting her lip, and her fidgeting has her turning a gold band around her ring finger. Her husband. The darker part of me wonders where her bruises are. The shoulders, where they're less likely to be seen? Her legs, covered up by pants? Or maybe they're internal wounds, inflicted by anger, resentment and cruel words.

"Future: Wheel of fortune." I look at the card and then the two before it. "This is a turning point. With this card comes a choice. If you choose right..." I flip over the next card, Devil reversed. "Power reclaimed. It's a detachment from the things weighing your spirit down. If you choose wrong, however..." I flip over the last card and look at it before I set it down on the table between us. Tower. Suddenly, I get the feeling that the reading is now my own. "Disaster. No avoiding it, something will happen that will ruin and break you."

So there's no getting around it—the choice I make could end this place. If I tell Dalton my fears would he cast them aside and continue on with this plan? Would he listen? If I spied on him

to find out more and then confronted him, would he be angry enough to force me to comply or would he be entertained by my curiosity. There's no sure fire way to know which way to choose.

"That's it? You can't tell me anything else?" she asks, looking panicked.

I lean in close, "My advice is listen to the cards. You're in an abusive relationship. He doesn't love you, he wants to own you. Get out and the weight will be lifted, stay with him and the weight will crush you."

She gapes at me and I force a smile, motioning to the floor. "It's all in the cards."

"But the cards didn't tell you all that. They couldn't have. Please, read them again. What if I choose wrong? The baby is his, but he can't know about it. He'll...he'll..." Her breath hitches and a sob catches in her throat, "If I leave him, he'll come after me. If I stay..."

Her eyes are glistening, filling with water that cascades down in droplets of salty mascara. She's looking to me to answer all her questions—and that's not how things are done in this tent. I want to shoo her away, tell her that her destiny is written in ink, but she can change her own fate. Nothing is set in stone. But something tells me she won't take that as an answer.

"Close your eyes for me," I say, reaching under the table next to me and pulling out a glowing orb—my crystal ball. I reach out and place her hands on it, and rest mine over hers. "Picture his face." This is something Dalton has me do a lot, to help him find new people to invite in. It shows who I want to see, but when I don't have one in particular, it'll show me who I need to see.

She nods, her curls bouncing and her brow furrowed in concentration. It works though, I look down and a man is portrayed in the crystal ball. Brown shaggy hair, blue-green eyes and a smile that makes me understand just why she fell for his charms in the first place.

"Without opening your eyes, tell me, is he here with you tonight? At the carnival?"

She nods and I smile. He looks familiar.

“Answer me one more question: Did he get a special ticket to come here tonight?”

Peggy nods again. Perfect.

“You can open your eyes, sweetie.”

“What did you see? Can you tell me what to do?” she asks, her voice straining a bit. She’s desperate for answers.

“After tonight, you need not worry about him hurting you again. He’ll never come near you or your child, and he won’t track you down. Trust the cards. If you decide to walk out that door and forget about him, you will be free. If you run out that door and into his arms, I can’t promise the end will be pretty for either you or the baby.”

Peggy listens to my words, leaning forward in her seat as to hear every syllable. Once I’ve finished, she leans back and looks at the ring on her finger. In one quick movement, she has it off her finger and into my palm and she leaves the tent. Another satisfied customer. And another piece of jewelry for my collection.

The Tower is one of those cards that some psychic’s choose to withdraw from their deck for readings. It’s considered a “bad card” with very limited ways of trying to make it sound good to the individual receiving the reading. It’s too rare of a card to have come up so often today. It almost never appears in a reading. The cards...

Past: Our son, Dalton’s and mine... The one that he’s never known about, never even considered that when I went off to “school” it wasn’t for education. Present: The control I’ve let Dalton have over my own life. I’d follow him anywhere and listen to anything he would say. Future: A choice, one that if I choose right will result in finding myself and if I choose wrong, will ruin me.

*Could ruin everyone.*

*This is bigger than just you, Satine.*

“I will keep an eye on things from here until the time comes,” I say to them, looking down at the crystal ball once more. The image of the customer’s husband disappears and an image of the carousel appears. Everything looks normal, nothing out of the ordinary. Children and their parents are getting on in pairs, Charles is ushering them on. What secret could be hiding there? Am I looking at this the wrong way?

*Maybe you should go there.*

*Investigate yourself.*

“My duty is here, in my tent while the gates are open,” I say, trying to ignore them. Their voices are pushing me to stand up, to go out and do something. Their insistence worries me a little more. But if Dalton catches me not in my tent during business hours, he’d get angry with me. I don’t want to chance that. I look at my watch and nod to myself. His show would be starting any minute. And what if going there is the wrong choice?

*This is your one chance.*

*It gives you enough time.*

“I know. I know. Fine, I’ll go,” I say, and slip my gemmed slippers on over my bare feet and grab a deep purple cloak from the back of my tent. The fabric of the cloak brushes against my skin, soft, yet firm—not letting me enjoy its comfort while I’m on my mission. Part of me hopes that they’re wrong, and that this little field trip will prove it. That The Tower is nothing more than a card. But I know better, I’ve been in this business for too long. But if I get caught...

I wait another few minutes, pacing around my tent until I’m sure that his show has started before I reach out and turn my sign to closed and sneak out the back. Once outside, the night

embraces me, hiding me in the shadowed area between the tents and trailers as I make my way towards the haunting music of the ancient carousel. Dalton had bought it at a discount because no one wanted a rundown carousel thought to be haunted because of the sounds it made. It made itself right at home with our troupe. A freak show is supposed to invoke a sense of fear, bewilderment, perplexing wonder.

As I get closer, I can see our audience through the cracks between the tents. They're excited and fascinated by what they're seeing—because they see an act. They see us and decide we're all fakes before they take a closer look. It keeps us hidden, and keeps the show on the road. No one is surprised to see freaks at a freak show. They're amazed.

When I reach the edge of the shadows, I step into the flow of traffic moving towards the center of the carnival. People bump into me and move past me, because I blend in all except for my wardrobe—which is the last thing most people look at. When I get to the carousel, I watch from a distance as people get on, off and enjoy the ride so much they want to go again. I watch a young girl with blond hair and a red bow in her hair picks her favorite horse and gives him a fake name for the duration of her ride.

I see nothing out of the ordinary.

*You're not looking close enough.*

I frown at my mother's words, and try to focus in on the ride past the children and the adults filtering on and off of it. The horses, each hand-crafted and detailed to make each different, look the same. Their saddles, bridles, and names all intact. Past them, the pictures of landscapes alternate, spinning along with the carousel. And that's when I see my first clue—an edge to one of the paintings is torn up—curling towards the center. It's not much, but it allows me some insight on why I'm not looking close enough. I make my way closer.

I need to look inside.

The lack of commentary in my head is comforting in this moment, leading me to believe that I'm on the right track. But how? If there's a way to get inside on the carousel itself, there must be an accessible entrance. My eyes glance around, darting from the controls, to the line, to the area around the bottom. A small knob catches my eye on the far side of the carousel, and I narrow my gaze in on it. A fuse box perhaps? A storage for tools?

*It's more than it seems.*

I inch closer to it and then shrink back as the music starts back up louder and the ride starts to spin. The horses gallop, moving up and down on their tracks and kids laugh with wonder. My eyes focus on a child that looks so much like Jesse, when he was much younger of course. He's only about eighteen now, but far older in maturity. He hasn't been a kid like this in a very long time. He was eight years old when he started playing with the snakes in the fields around our many stops. He favored the venomous ones back then too.

He'll be getting ready for his own show soon, charming the women in his audience as well as his precious reptiles. Cold-blooded, warm-blooded, makes no difference to him.

The carousel slows and I make my move, sneaking to the back, where I see the knob and trying to stay out of sight. I reach for the golden knob and pull, but to no avail. It's stuck. A key lock looks back at me and I purse my lips, thinking. I've never seen Dalton with any key but the one to lock the gates at the end of the night. Maybe, just maybe. I reach for the necklace around my own neck and beside my mother's crystal is the same key Dalton has. I put it in the lock and it turns, causing a popping sound and swinging a small hatch open. Without wasting any time, I climb up into the hatch and see that it's a tunnel inside the carousel. I close the hatch behind me,

taking my key and following the clean metal tunnel on my hands and knees until I reach the center of the carousel where I can stand.

When my eyes adjust to the darkness, I look around in wonder. I don't know what I'm looking at but I can see a big screen, with multiple camera angled, and focused in on certain seats of the carousel. One camera zooms in on a boy with an orange bracelet and then zooms back out, deciding he's not what it's looking for.

“What is this place?”

*Looks like Dalton's been busy.*

*Perfecting his method.*

“Meaning what?” I ask them, sitting down in the chair as the room starts to rotate. I watch the screen and try to figure out what it's doing, but it doesn't look like its doing much of anything. Why would he put this room in here? Unless he wants to document what we're doing here? The carousel is, after all, where we capture them. No. These cameras aren't recording, they're looking, watching for our special guests. That leads me to a whole new line of questioning. I scoot the chair back and look at the machine he's built in here, trying to make sense of all the knobs and buttons in this small circular room. It's not coming together.

“Dalton's mentioned this before...an easier way to transform them...a befitting punishment...” I muse, running my fingers over the buttons and screens, waiting for something to stand apart from the rest and tell me what I need to know.

*The show isn't until tonight, Satine.*

*He plans to test this tonight.*

“Is it safe?” I ask, because part of me wonders if this machine could work. If so, it could make things far easier than trying to get Billy to create our designs from nothing. “How does it work?”

They don’t answer this time, so I focus in on my own intuition. I wait until the carousel stops spinning, the ride for some over. I reach out and find a notebook. I open it and flip through the pages—Dalton would know someone was in here if anything was out of place. I see sketches of different sideshow acts, freaks and some of them have familiar names next to them. Sebastian’s name, next to a mime who can’t speak. Small notes on the sides indicate he considered removing his tongue, but decided against it. I keep flipping through the notebook and come across a drawing of a tall, slender woman with thousands upon thousands of piercings. It’s disgusting. The nose, eyelids, cheeks, neck, everything all covered in silver and gold studs and hoops.

On the bottom of the notebook page, however, Dalton’s handwriting catches my eye. Written in dark black marker, a name—Diane—but it’s crossed out, and next to it, in dainty penmanship writing too feminine to be Dalton’s, my name.

*The signs were all there.*

“Enough,” I say, quieting the both of them in my head as I analyze the drawing. It’s not enough to see this drawing and know it could have been Diane if I hadn’t interrupted Dalton’s grand scheme, but to see my own name there is unnerving. If it’s a joke, I’m not laughing. If it’s real, then The Tower was right. Dalton is planning on making me as submissive as his freak collection. How dare he tell me that we’d be able to afford our vacation? Why bother going through the trouble if this is what he has planned? Maybe I’m jumping to conclusions too fast, throwing him under the bus while it’s stopped. I just need to think.



This drawing, the one that could be Diane or me makes sense in Dalton's eyes. Diane poked holes in her body to fill it with a high enough to get her arrested, hospitalized and even get into a fight that ended up maiming someone. My fate, however, if condemned to this picture would be because, as Dalton says, I like to poke holes in truth and logic. I've never known just why he phrased it like that, but if I'm right, he's been planning this for a while. And he's not alone.

The female handwriting on the paper makes me wish I had just left the meddling to Diane. Although, I'm glad I saw this picture and not her. I'm not sure what she would think, or do, if she thought she could have been punished the same as everyone else. She was lucky, because I saw usefulness in her beauty—too much to ruin it.

I set the notebook back down on the small desk and make sure everything is as it was when I entered. Right now, I know more than he wants me to know. If he's behind this, that is. My heart is aching with the knowledge, but instead of feeling hurt, I can feel a fire deep within me, building and wanting to find out why.

*Keep your emotions in check, Satine.*

*No use clouding your judgment.*

They're right, of course.

"How could he do this to me?" I ask them, the carousel starts spinning again, and the room spins around me. "Another woman? One that he seems to trust more than me if she's seeing his plans and helping him. And planning on betraying me? Turning me into a freak? He's got another thing coming if he thinks I'm going to let that happen."

*Calm down, child.*

*Diane has answers.*

“I need to get out of here. His show is over by now...” I say, but the carousel continues to spin. I start to crawl back down the tunnel towards the hatch, waiting for the ride to stop spinning and hoping that the hatch doesn’t open somewhere visible. I don’t want to be in here any longer than I have to.

The metal feels cold against my palms, wet from the sweat this knowledge has brought about. I feel the ride slowing, but I have to be sure that I can exit without being seen. My mind is clouded by my own rage and heartbreak, my chest tight. When the ride stops, I push at the hatch, opening it without double-checking my surroundings.

*Wait...*

*Don’t...*

Too late. The hatch drops open and I tumble out of the carousel and onto my knees. Shiny black dress shoes stare back up at me from the grass where I fell. My breath hitches and I hear the hatch being closed and locked once more. I don’t want to look up, because I know those shoes. I know because I bought them for him this past Christmas to replace his old pair that were dull and the soles were wearing. But my eyes follow up the long black dress pants, red vested torso and to the dark face of the man I thought loved me.

“Well, I see my surprise is ruined. I have to say, I thought better of you, Satine.”

*Don’t let him get to you.*

*Don’t let him know what you found out.*

“I had to find out what you were planning somehow. Quite the set-up in there,” I say, getting to my feet. My knees ache. They feel bruised from my small fall to the ground. “I can’t wait for you to show me how it works.”

Dalton smiles, and takes my hands, brushing the dirt and grass off of them. “Trust me, you’ll love it. It’s going to make both our lives a lot easier.”

“Peaked my interest,” I say, smiling and trying my best not to make it look fake.

He buys it.

“Until tonight, my dear. That’s when all will be revealed,” he says, moving in closer as he releases my hands and kissing my cheek. Maybe he forgot he left the notebook in there. Maybe he didn’t leave the notebook in there. I’ve never known Dalton to be much of an artist, except for mapping out his tricks for his show. Maybe he didn’t draw those drawings in the notebook.

What if he doesn’t know about that?

*For now, it’s better to be safe...*

*Than sorry...*

Dalton holds his arm out to me and I smile, weaving my hand into the arm of the man that I can’t seem to fathom would want to betray me after everything we’ve been through together. I’ve loved him since we were kids, and I thought he loved me just as long. But my mother and grandmother are right, the signs were all there. He distanced himself, never talked about marriage, and focused more on work than he ever did me.

The signs are all there.

What do I do?

Do I keep playing along like nothing is wrong? Or do I grab my son and get out of here as fast as I can? Leaving Dalton behind would be rough, and I think he’d come after me. Maybe. But is staying worth the risk of what he might do to me here? Of what might happen when the lightning strikes our tower?

I don’t think it is.

## **Fish out of Water**

“Stay here, and stay out of sight. Don’t let me catch you peeking out again,” Billy tells me, and I roll my eyes at his words.

“Fine, you won’t catch me.”

“Don’t start with me, Callie. I’m not in the mood to argue with you. Just don’t screw up. Do your routine just how I showed you.”

I nod as he helps me up so I’m sitting where I need to be to start my routine, not gentle, I might add. Good thing bruises on me have a bad reflection on him or I’m sure I’d have fingerprint bruises all over my arms. He’s not a bad guy, most of the time. I can tell I get on his nerves. I can tell he hates me. It makes no difference, he’s stuck with me just as I’m stuck with him.

He leaves me alone, disappearing past my red curtain and abandoning me in my poor lit stage. It’s not much—wooden floors, red curtain, a giant water tank similar to the ones Houdini would use in his tricks. Or so I’ve read. The rest of the stages are similar to mine, like numbers on a clock all the way around the tent, leaving plenty of room in the center for customers to turn and see everything.

I keep playing in the water, getting my body used to it by splashing myself as I listen to what’s going on around me. I can hear the loud chatter of the audience filing in, waiting for the show to start. I hear the tell-tale signs of the show about to begin as the audience quiets. Before I came here, I never even thought about going to one of the traveling freak shows that made their way around town. Sure, I went to the circus and the small carnivals that popped up overnight in mall parking lots, but to go see people put on display? Never crossed my mind. And now that I’ve seen it all up close, it is fascinating, and yet sad for some.

“Welcome, welcome, one and all. Gather ‘round, gather ‘round. It’s time you all got your money’s worth for this tent. Stand right here in the center, people, that way everyone can see the spectacular sights we have for you today.”

Inside the big tent, parents shuffle their children in towards the center of the dome tent, looking all around at the many curtains, waiting to reveal what they paid for. Freaks on display, for their enjoyment. There’s a hum of voices as they talk to each other about the banners depicting the acts, and which one they are most wanting to see. I hear my name a few times, popping out of conversations like it doesn’t belong.

I should rephrase: My stage name.

Billy, now the announcer, talks fast, excited. The pep in his voice is contagious and within no time the crowd is agreeing and cheering along with him. He jumps from stage to stage, tugging on the curtains and teasing the audience—making more of a spectacle of himself than those behind the curtains waiting to perform. Even without seeing him, I know from where I am he’s building suspense for the first act.

He does the same thing every show, says the same words, and does the same awkward dance moves he thinks the ladies love. And some do, I’ll give him that much. He’s had women throw themselves at him after shows, but he blows them all off because of me. It should make me feel guilty that he can’t have a life with me around, but there are times I feel nothing.

“The ten-in-one, folks. Ten acts for the price of one. Behind these curtains are the most bizarre, most revolting and even the most beautiful. We Carnies like to think of ourselves as collectors for your entertainment. And so, behind this first curtain was a woman who grew up a little bit different than most girls do. She was tormented and made fun of because people didn’t

understand just how special she was. Without any further ado, I want you all to meet Mrs. Penelope Hutchins... our Bearded Lady!”

Billy pulls down the rope attached to the first curtain and the spotlight illuminates Penelope, sitting on a chair in the middle of the stage. She’s a plump woman, a binge eater that carries a comb up her sleeve for her face, not her hair. I peek out of my curtain and see her posing, combing her beard before letting the gentleman in the front row touch it. They step back and laugh, touching their own beards in comparison. Her story may seem sad, picked on all her life until she came here, made fun of and called a freak—but a razor would have saved her from at least half of the torment. And the other half, maybe a diet and an attitude adjustment.

Billy doesn’t waste any time letting Penelope prance about the stage. He made that mistake once and our twenty minute show turned into an hour. She wasn’t even the main act. He pulls the next rope and the spotlight moves to the second curtain as it lifts and reveals a scary skinny man wearing only underwear so that every inch of his body can be seen. The sign behind him says he’s the world’s skinniest man. A human skeleton. And to make that point better, he’s had his body tattooed all over to outline the bones just under the skin.

“Mr. Charles Hutchins, ladies and gentleman. Husband to our bearded lady and the world’s only living skeleton!” Billy steps out of the way and lets the crowd shift forward to see Charles better. Part of me wonders just how he could stand to be married to the Penelope, but I know that it’s probably some deep psychological problem. He doesn’t say much, Penelope does the talking for him. I heard someone say that he doesn’t have a stomach, so food goes right through him. Maybe it somehow even ends up adding some pounds to his wife.

Charles leans in towards the crowd and they all lean away from him. It’s strange to look at him, and some look away when he makes eye contact. The bones on his face are what get to people.

The strange, realistic way they follow his movements as if he's a reverse skeleton is what makes him such a good act. A woman in the front row hides behind her husband's arm, tilting her hat down over her eyes when he looks right at her. When he ducks back into the shadows, I look at the crowd and there's a man staring right at me. I can see him from across the small room, but he doesn't look away. Faster than I ever thought possible, I close the curtain and duck back onto my stage, almost falling into the water from my perch on the edge of the tank. At least it wasn't Billy who caught me this time.

Billy was put "in charge" of me when I became an act. It's his job to take care of me and make sure that I'm contributing. To say our relationship is pleasant would be a lie, it feels like more of a business relationship if anything. He doesn't want to deal with me, is how he put it the other day. I'm too much of a burden. I told him that if I could reverse the process, I would. He didn't talk much after that.

The show continues, and I don't dare look out of the curtain at first. I know who's next. A girl that is more feline than woman. Her name is Marie, and when she introduce herself, she rolls her tongue, purring the R for emphasis. She wears a one piece skintight leotard that covers her from her neck to her ankles—but shows off her claws on both her feet and hands.

I made the mistake once of asking why her leotard was black and not leopard and let's just say she can be quite catty when she thinks you're making fun of her or her act. She doesn't have fingers, which is something that fascinates me. Instead, she has small nubs that she can move and the nails seem to come out of her knuckles and curve down to make the appearance of a paw. I can hear her purr and I know the men in the first row will be reaching out to touch and pet her as she crawls on all fours. She loves the attention.

I miss the world's strongest man's performance too, while I hide behind my curtain. But he's nothing too special. He asks for a volunteer, more often than not a woman wearing a dress or skirt, so that when he picks her up in the chair everyone gets a show, including him. He flexes and his turn is over. I know that I need to start getting myself ready, that the show is half-over already but instead I peek out again just in time to see a woman smile at the crowd.

I love to watch and cheer without a sound for the family that adopted me here. They might not all like me, but they're all I have here. Thoughts of home are long gone now, I belong here. And whether he likes it or not, I belong with Billy. Under that rough exterior of his and his perpetual five o'clock shadow, I know there must be a kinder side to him. There has to be. He can't be all bad. Then again, he's here, and he's never told me why.

"Gentleman, you're going to want to watch up close here. Because this could be the woman of your dreams. And if not, she might be the reason for a few wet ones if you know what I mean. Gina, show them a little something you can do," Billy says, smiling as he motions for Gina to start. His smile looks genuine, curled up just the right amount, dimples noticeable on both sides just a little bit. It doesn't look forced while he's on stage, but it shuts off the minute the spotlight does. It's almost kind of sad. Her body at once starts to fold backwards, until her head peeks out at the audience from between her legs. She smiles as her blond hair gets into her face and then she unfolds herself only to move right into another impossible position where she's balancing on her hands and her back bends, her legs stretch and the audience gasps.

Her outfit is red and black, skintight like the cat woman, but it follows her movements and so do Billy's eyes. Part of me deep down feels a pang of jealousy, although I'm not sure why. I don't have any feelings for him, he's just the one that has to keep me alive. I don't even like him as a person half the time. He's bitter, angry and too rough for me to even try and get to know him.



Although, I have caught myself thinking about what it would be like to live with him civilly—to perform with him each day and go home with him each night

“Next up, for all of you people is a man who can do it all. Or should I say he can swallow it all. Meet Peter Kingsley.” Billy pulls the rope and a man stands in the center of the stage, holding a sword in one hand and a box of nails in the other. The sword slips into his throat until the hilt touches his lips and the crowd gasps, then goes quiet as he pulls the sword back up and out of his throat.

There’s a trick to it, Billy told me one night. Sword swallows aren’t hard to come by, but what the people want to see is something they’ve never seen before. I’m still not sure how he does it without causing irreparable damage to himself, but he swallows hundreds of nails a night. The one time I asked, Peter just replied that it was relief for him, that it scratched an itch he couldn’t. I can’t imagine living that way. I mean, my handicap is still new. I’ve come to terms with it and how I’ll live the rest of my life. But some of these acts, I can’t imagine what it would be like in their shoes. I can’t even picture me in shoes.

I pull my curtain closed again and start to get ready. There’s only a couple more acts to go before it’s my turn. Billy announces the world’s ugliest man next—a man so revolting to look at that the fat lady has no right to say she was picked on growing up. He has thick skin that stretches and seems to bubble out like he has a disease no one has ever heard of before now. I don’t mind missing his show. Because I’m just like the audience and turn away first chance I get. Women have fainted. Even one man did once when we toured through the south. I shouldn’t look away, I know. But I can’t help but wonder what he must have done to deserve it. Was he a killer in a past life? Did he do this to himself?

I shift in my seat, nerves starting to get to me. Billy says I'm a natural, it's one of the only compliments I've heard him say, but I still worry about doing the act right, and not messing up. I bumped my head against the glass my first show. Of course, this was after the curtain opened and I stared at thirty-something sets of eyes. I've gotten better though, Billy made sure of that. He had me practicing for hours every day under his watchful eye until I could do multiple routines without trying.

The green girl is on next. Billy announces her, joking about what happens when you eat your vegetables. She's an interesting shade of green that makes most people make alien jokes. Next up, the Siamese twins, Alice and Mandy. Connected at the hips, they both have separate bodies except they share one leg. They do everything through teamwork, and have gotten their routine so down pat that it seems their whole life is just a series of the same gestures and movements at the same time as the other. I think I'd hate having a twin, never mind one that was connected to me since birth. Although, they seem happy being with one another. All the power to them, I guess.

I can hear them bickering back and forth as part of their routine and I know my cue is coming up, so I lower myself into the tank, staying just above the water so I can breathe until he starts to draw my curtain. I close my eyes and take a few deep breaths. Billy says it'll help, that I'll get used to the stage someday—but my still heart jumps every time, and I don't know if I'll ever get used to seeing all those eyes staring at me.

And now, ladies and gentleman, the attraction you've all been waiting for... captured from faraway lands and brought here for your eyes only, the beautiful, the musical, the amazing Calypso!"

The curtain rises and I open my eyes as I dip down into the tank and look out at the audience. Smile. Hold your breath for as long as you can. Billy's voice echoes in my head as his eyes pierce me from the audience. I smile and sway in the water, giving everyone a view of the shiny black scales down my legs and the fanned out off-gray fins that help me swim. I wish I could say that I hated it and wanted it gone.

I pose and wave to the children, then when I can't hold my breath anymore I pop up above the water and smile at the audience, still moving my tail. One minute and thirteen seconds. Once I've caught my breath, I dive back under and flip my tail—splashing the first few rows of people. They're transfixed, just like every crowd, and that makes this worthwhile. Though, there's one set of eyes in the crowd that feels unnerving. The man that made his way through the crowd to get a closer view. I look at him and he licks his lips. Bubbles escape my lips and I swallow water on my way to the surface. My chest hurts with the need to cough up the water, but I don't do it. I hold back while the curtain is open.

From his usual spot on the other side of the crowd, Billy's eyes meet mine through the glass tank. His gaze alone makes my tail feel like it's full of weights, making me sink to the bottom until I somehow break free and surface for air. Before I know it, Billy is drawing my curtain. The show is over.

"That's all for tonight ladies and gentleman. Feel free to join us at our next show, which will be starting in just a few minutes. Don't forget to also enjoy the magic show just next door where you won't believe your eyes."

As he shuffles the last of them out, I hear curtains rising and some chatter about how the show went from the other acts. I tune them all out as I grip the handle on the side of the tank and hoist myself over the side about halfway—leaving my tail still in the water as I try and maneuver

myself to swing it over. It's not easy. I manage to get myself sitting upright on the edge of the tank, facing the water and I swing my tail over, spinning myself, but now dealing with the problem of figuring out how to get down and into the chair. As if on cue, Billy steps in past my drawn curtain.

"You can never just do what you're told, can you Callie? You have to be stubborn and ignore what I tell you. I told you, no watching the show from behind the curtain. How many times have I told you that if someone sees you, the whole show is ruined? And what was that routine? Did you practice at all earlier?"

Billy says all this before I even have a chance to speak. And when he's done, he stares at me and I look down. I can't tell him that he's right, that someone did see me and that's what made me screw up. That would just feed his anger. The air between us is thick with awkwardness and frustration—it sticks to us. He takes a deep breath and steps forward, offering me help getting down. I shake my head. I'd rather kiss a toad. But he grabs my arm and pulls me down, catching my waist and setting me down in the chair behind my tank.

"Stay here and don't move. Can you do that for me?"

I nod.

He leaves my stage in a huff, and I sigh and look around. It's not really like I can go anywhere. There is no walking around with this thing, although I suppose I can shuffle. I look down and run my hands along the woven black scales. They feel wet against my palms, but not slimy. Not like a real fish or mermaid would feel like. It's all for show. To make it look real. But it's more real for me than any of these people know. My legs are bound within, longing to be free—to be stretched and used to help me run far away from this place. But the tail is implanted too deep within my skin, sewn too tight to break free.

This is how I woke up one morning, unable to walk or stand, dance, jump, look at my toes. This black foreign object has become part of me now, and if I ever try and forget, all I have to do is try to move my legs apart and feel the skin underneath tighten as a warning. The scars have healed and this is the new me.

I lean to my right, where a towel was thrown beside a lamp and I turn the lamp on for heat as I wrap the towel around my torso—the only part of me that gets cold now. Although, that’s because of this top Billy has me wearing. It’s too thin, made of silk or something because it’s almost translucent when wet and makes me thankful that I grew my hair so long this time. The fact that it was dyed black for the show doesn’t hurt either.

“Billy, I know I screwed up, okay? You can leave me alone for five minutes,” I say when I hear the curtain move and see a shadowed figure step in. I squint against the dim light of the lamp and let my eyes adjust to a man I haven’t seen before. But wait. I have seen him before. The man from the crowd, the one who saw me and licked his lips. He’s tall, rugged looking, holding a beer bottle in his left hand and he’s walking towards me.

“Shh, fishy. I bet you’ve got a great body under there, don’t ya...” he says, his eyes wandering over me and I can feel my stomach drop as I realize that if he came at me, I wouldn’t be able to hold him off. I can’t outrun him. I can’t even run.

“Don’t come any closer,” I warn him, holding the towel tighter around my shoulders, trying to hide any skin that might be showing. I sink a little lower in my chair and look behind me, trying to come up with some sort of plan. If I could just get myself to the back of my stage, I could lower myself down and try to get away. But I wouldn’t be fast enough. And this man, a few beers in, would catch me before I even got off the chair.

“Aww, come on Calypso. You mer-people are all about seducing men. It’s in all the books. Come on... just show me what’s under that tail of yours and I promise I’ll be gentle.”

My skin crawls and I shiver.

“Billy...” I say, still trying to back myself away while sitting in the chair.

“You can call me that if you’d like. You can call me pretty much anything if you take that tail off for me.”

“It doesn’t come off,” I tell him, but that doesn’t stop him. He keeps coming towards me, and when he’s got me backed up against the wall he smiles and finishes his beer. I hear the glass break as he tosses it aside and it shatters. I smell pine and alcohol as he gets closer and I try another desperate plea for Billy. There’s no response and I hope like hell that he’s not choosing now to avoid or ignore me. I call his name again when my eyes catch the reflection of something metal.

Without thinking, or waiting to see what it is, I jump off the chair and land hand on my stomach and my forearms. I use my elbows against the wooden stage and try and army crawl away, but before I can get far, I feel the skin on my legs pull and I’m flipped over by my tail. But I manage to grab the broken bottle in a swift movement and smash it against his head with both hands. He keeps coming.

I don’t know what to do. I can’t defend myself and Billy is nowhere to be found. I feel like a fish out of water on the floor, and I can’t get past the man no matter which way I try. What choice do I have when all look bleak?

The man in front of me is holding a knife. I’m outmatched, but if I can get another good shot in...I know when he lunges forward that this is going to be worse than I thought. The man, clumsy in his drunken stupor almost crushes me with his weight and as he tries to kiss and touch

me I grab his wrist and stare at the knife—trying to keep it as far from me as possible. But I’m not strong enough.

“Are you ready my sea goddess? Because I am,” he says and my wrist gives against his force, the knife slices right through the black scales and into my upper thigh. I scream.

Within seconds, my curtain is torn off by the influx of people coming in. The men pull him off of me and hold him down as the women rush to my side and look at my tail, which is bleeding fast. I don’t touch it. There’s no way to tie a tourniquet around my upper thigh with the tail. What if he hit the artery? Tears gather in my eyes, I should have known something like this would happen. Why didn’t I tell Billy about the suspicious behavior when he came in after my performance?

“Honey quick, the towel,” Alice says, and Mandy grabs it from my shoulders and presses it down to my thigh. I suppress another scream as she applies pressure. The man is laughing and I wish I could do something about it. But I don’t have to.

Just then, Billy walks in, pushing his way through the crowd.

“What’s going on in...” he stops mid-sentence when he sees me. He looks at the blood on the floor beneath me, the broken glass still clutched in my hand and the man being held in place by the strongest man and the nail eater. Then he snaps, “You son-of-a-bitch!”

Billy lunges at the man and the two people holding him let go and step aside, smart enough to not get in his way.

“We really need Doc to come take a look at this,” Mandy says, and the rest of them agree to start moving me. The skeleton man went to go find him. I remember closing my eyes and when I opened them, Billy was holding me. Did I lose consciousness? I don’t know how or where he

came from—last I knew he was fighting, and that was showing on his face now. His lip was split, his eye bruising on one side. But if that's all he got, I'd hate to see the guy that did this to me.

"You're going to be okay, Callie. Just hold still for me."

I nod and realize that the top of my tail is bound in a couple towels, and he's somehow keeping pressure on my cut without hurting me. I close my eyes again and this time when I open them it's because I'm being shaken. My eyes meet a set of pure green ones that I see every day. Billy. He looks concerned.

"I need you to stay awake, okay? Can you hear me?"

I nod again and blink my heavy eyelids a few times before sitting up as much as I can. His job is to keep me alive, keep me performing. Will he get punished for this? I don't want that. Soon we're back in our tent. And Doc is here. And he's holding a needle. I start to shake my head,

"No, Doc. I can't. No needles. Please. Billy..." I look from the Doc to him and repeat the process. They're both giving me the same look. The 'we have no other choice' look. I let myself fall back onto the couch in our small tent and squeeze my eyes closed, covering my face with my hands.

"Make it quick Doc, I'll keep her still."

"Can do... she'll need about twenty or so. Won't be able to swim with them though. Not for a few weeks."

I peek open my eyes, glancing at Billy and expecting to see hatred or frustration in his expression, but I see no indication that he's mad about me not being able to perform. And even though I can remember him throwing a tantrum when Penelope broke her ankle, he says nothing about the show and instead says, "But she'll heal? What about the blood she lost?"

I don't know if he's aware that I'm staring, but I am.



“She’ll be fine. Lost a bit of blood though, so she’ll feel weak and groggy for a little while, but this here will heal right up in no time at all,” he says, pushing his circular glasses up his nose a little bit more. I can see blood on his hands and it makes me wish I fainted at the sight of blood. I don’t want to think about what he’s doing down there—stabbing the needle into my skin over and over again, fusing the severed tail back to me. I don’t feel any pain though, and if that’s my body’s reaction to the shock then I’m thankful.

“That should do it,” I hear Doc say after a few minutes, and he and Billy help me to sit up a little more. “Keep her awake and alert if you can. If she falls asleep, it shouldn’t be a problem. Just her body’s reaction to the blood loss. Just keep an eye on her. If you notice anything out of the ordinary, I’m only a few tents away.”

Billy nods, “Thanks Doc.”

And then we’re alone. It’s silent for the first few minutes—neither of us knowing what to say after something like that, I guess. But then he finally speaks, and any hope I might have had that he gave a shit about me is gone.

“What were you thinking Callie? Why wouldn’t you have called for help sooner?” he asks, pushing himself away from where I’m lying and walking away from me, his fingers threading into his hair and tugging at his roots. “I don’t get it. I tell you to do something and you do the opposite. If you’d just been a good little girl, I would have been there helping you get dried off and this never would have happened.”

I sigh and swallow hard, wanting to tell him that I did call for him. Only him. But I hold my tongue. He’s raring to keep going and I don’t have fight in me right now. I’ll just be the “good girl” that he keeps asking for and not argue. That’s what he wants, isn’t it? I tug the pillow under my head and turn myself so that my back is to him and I’m curled into the couch. If he notices, he

doesn't say anything. He just keeps going on about how I shouldn't have let the guy get so close to me and the guy would have done a lot worse if he'd had the chance.

"What if you had been alone, Callie?"

There's silence between us then—mine because I'm thinking about the answer, his because he must have noticed my back to him. I tuck my face deeper into the pillow that smells like dirt and sweat. It's not the best of smell, but right now it's comforting because it's familiar. It's drowning out the memory of alcohol. If I was alone, I could guess what would have happened to me. I had a friend back in high school that had it happen to her, only there'd be one major difference. The guy that attacked her didn't need to cut his way in. I lay still as I wait for him to continue to treat me like a child, but he doesn't say anything. I can feel his eyes on me.

"I know Billy. I get it. If I hadn't been your problem this never would have happened. I wouldn't have been around to screw up your show and your life."

I feel a hand on my shoulder and I jump.

"Callie," Billy starts, and I can tell my remark took him by surprise. Or maybe my surprise at being touched. I know it's his hand and not the man from before, but I can't help but think what would have happened if that man had been able to go further. He was trying to rip my tail off—not realizing that it doesn't come off. I'd be in a lot more pain right now if he'd gotten he chance to go further.

"Just leave me alone."

"All I was trying to say is that if I had been there... I should have been there."

His hand is still on my shoulder and he presses it down to try and turn me towards him again. I resist, trying to shrug his hand off of me. He doesn't let me. His hand is insistent. I fight him, not wanting to deal with what happened anymore.

“Yes, you should have.”

“Callie, will you just look at me, please?” I can hear his voice close. Right behind me. It’s a little unnerving now, having him this close behind me. But I’ve also never heard him say please, so I turn, shifting my body so that I’m lying on my back. Billy is sitting in a chair beside me, and I can’t read his expression anymore. It’s stiff, and his jaw is clenched tight, but his eyes look sad. And I don’t know why.

“What?” I ask him.

He shakes his head, “All I’m trying to say is I wish I had been there.”

“I called for you,” I say, wanting to see his reaction. “You could at least apologize, you know.”

Billy nods and runs a hand through his dark brown hair. It falls back into place, except for one spot. He bites his lip, “Callie, you’re not making this easy. I just wanted to tell you that... I’ll never let something like this happen again.”

I believe him, but that doesn’t change the fact that I got stabbed and it could have been a lot worse. If he had been here, it never would have happened. But it did happen, and I want someone to be mad at. I look down and wince as I move my tail and the muscles tighten at my thigh. The stitches hurt, and I know that once they’re healed the tail will be sewn up good as new, but for now...

I move the towel away from the spot that the knife cut me and I bite my lip hard as I pull at the tail and I can see it. It’s not much, and it’s tucked in there beneath the scales, but I can see skin—my legs that have been trapped in this tail for months, now peeking through and reminding me of what happened to me. I put the towel back over it and Billy seems to know what I’m thinking about.

“Can I ask you something?”

I nod, looking up, surprised that he said anything at all. He’s not looking at me, but instead, the towel covering my thighs, which he peels back again to look at the wound. He’s quiet again, and I wonder if he changed his mind after about a minute passes without a question.

“Are you miserable like this? Be honest, I just have to know.”

He has to? What does he get out of knowing if I’m miserable or not? This is coming from the same guy that dropped me into ice cold water as a punishment and made me do my routine without any flaws or he would leave me in there. He gave me every blanket he owned that night, which was sweet, but he still caused the discomfort in the first place. I told him I was over that, I guess I’m still sort of holding a grudge. But then I start thinking about the question. Am I miserable? If I tell him yes, he might make things more tolerable for me here. Then again, it would be lying, and I’m not a liar.

“No. Not miserable. When it first happened I was. I didn’t like feeling so helpless, you know? I was used to being able to do so much and then one day I couldn’t. I know why it happened though. Why it happened to me. I’ve come to terms with it.”

“Why do you think it did?”

“I don’t think. I know. It’s because I killed a girl. It’s karma. Payback. It was a few years ago, and no one ever found out it was my fault.”

“What happened?” he asks, and I don’t question why he’s asking. I don’t question why he cares. All that matters is telling someone, for the first time.

“Her name was Jenna Carlton. It was junior year of high school, she was trying to be our friend. I would say we were all responsible, but I was the one to tell her what to do. We all had to do something drastic to get in to this group, it was no big deal, no one had ever died from our

hazing...but I knew a storm was coming in when I told her to swim to the buoy and back fully clothed. It was a joke. She was supposed to tie her bra to the buoy and come right back.”

I pause, closing my eyes and picturing her out in the water. “She swam about halfway and I could see her struggling against the waves and the undertow. I worked as a lifeguard in the summer, I knew the risks. We lost sight of her head when she passed the waves and we waited.”

I squeeze my eyes shut harder and feel tears leak out without my permission. “When she never came back, it was me that said we had to leave and not tell anyone. She washed up on the beach a few days later, and it was me that lied to the police about what happened.”

Tears blur my vision. A mixture of pain and memory.

He leans forward and hugs me to him quick. I’m surprised by his action. It’s too fast to enjoy, too detached to be anything romantic, but there’s something calming in the gesture: the smell of dirt and sweat. Then the calmness is gone in an instant.

I hear a booming voice outside the tent, and then the flap open. Dalton. I don’t want to have to explain everything that happened to a man that terrifies me. Billy stands up and backs away from me so fast that the chair he was sitting in almost keels over.

“Let me do the talking,” Billy whispers to me. I nod.

“What’s going on in here?” Dalton asks, “Doc just told me Calypso was attacked.”

“It was just a rowdy drunk, Dalton. It won’t happen again. Doc says she’ll be fine,” Billy says, and his voice has changed. No longer the authoritative, commanding tone that Dalton now filled the room with, but a submissive peon. I’m not used to hearing him like this. He’s so demanding all the time. Of me, at least. And I’m not a submissive peon, as he’s made a point of telling me.

“See that it doesn’t. Where were you when it happened?” Dalton asks, and I can feel his eyes on me. I keep my eyes down, but when he touches the sensitive area around the stitches I wince. I can’t help it. What was he trying to do? Make sure it wasn’t fake?

“I was ushering the crowd out of the tent after the show. I didn’t see the guy sneak past me, when I saw the others running onto her stage, I knew something was wrong.”

“And I see you took care of the problem,” Dalton says, meaning Billy’s appearance.

“That I did, sir,” he says. Sir? I feel like I might faint. Oh how the mighty have fallen, if I’m less mad at him later, I might make a quip about that. “Hope you don’t mind another special guest tonight.”

“One more couldn’t hurt, considering they attacked one of our own.” Dalton says, and there’s a short silence, in which I feel a small sense of belonging that I haven’t felt since I’ve been here. Since ever, really. Other than my friends at school, I’ve been a loner. Being part of their group, however destructive, was where I felt like I was part of something. And that’s what landed me here in the first place.

“I had the same thought,” Billy says.

“Good. I’ll have Doc come by from time to time to check in and make sure that cut stays clean. We can’t afford to fight an infection.”

“Understood,” Billy replies.

“Keep me updated. I’ll have Cira and Maverick take over the Ten-in-One for the night. I have to get back to work,” Dalton says, and I peek my eyes open just in time to see the back of his tall frame slip out of the tent. I told Billy once he reminded me of death—tall, skinny, always wearing black. Even his face, there’s a darkness there I can’t explain by claiming insomnia. It’s in his eyes.

Billy says nothing for a long moment, returning back to my side with a glass of water. He offers it to me and I take it, sitting up and sipping it. I watch him from over the glass. He pushes his hair back away from his face, looks at me and looks down again. I can tell he's itching to say something.

"What?" I ask.

He looks at me surprised, "I can't, just forget I said anything..." Then he gets up and paces slightly around our small tent.

"You haven't said anything. That's why I asked," I clarify, watching his every movement.

"Callie, please, just let me think, please," he says, stopping his pacing and sounding aggravated. "I have you and all your questions, Dalton breathing down my neck and a migraine from that stupid heavy weight champion's right hook."

I stay quiet this time as his pacing starts up again and I see him pinch the bridge of his nose. It's obvious he doesn't want me bothering him anymore. Any warm feelings I thought I felt before Dalton entered are replaced with the coldness of his annoyance with me. Once again, I'm just his burden.

"Just help me to bed," I say, sitting up and wincing as I scoot to the edge of the couch.

He doesn't move at first, and then I feel his arms around me, lifting me once more and carrying me over to my small bed in the corner of our rather bland tent. Well, his tent. I've gotten used to the earthy tones though, and dirt floor with little patches of grass here and there.

When he sets me down, I move away from his hands and do the rest myself, even though he tries to help. I tug the blanket away from his hands and turn on my side, away from him. The position isn't comfortable, but it doesn't matter.

"Goodnight."

“Callie, please, don’t be angry at me for this.”

“Why shouldn’t I be?” I ask, my eyes closed and my voice half-muffled by my pillow.

“I would have stopped it if I could,” he says, his voice quiet.

“But you didn’t,” I say.

“God damn it, Callie, I can’t be everywhere.”

I don’t respond this time, I just turn a little more away from him and bury my face in the pillow. He takes the hint and I hear him walk away. The couch creaks with his weight and I hear two thuds as he takes off his boots. On any other night, he’d be so exhausted by the day’s work that he’d pass out on the couch, but I have a feeling he won’t be getting much sleep. Neither will I. My thigh is throbbing now, and I’m fully aware of the pain that seemed distant until now. I shift my position, to relieve some pressure and it helps a bit.

I feel his eyes on me, then, but I ignore him. I just listen. I hear a sharp crack and hissing as a can is opened and he sighs. I lay there in silence for so long that I do start to fall asleep, and then I feel my mattress shift as someone sits on the edge of my bed. I know it’s not my attacker, I know it’s Billy, but I can still feel the rippling in my stomach, the strange presence of fear. Why is he sitting on my bed?

I feel him pull the covers down off me and his hand touches my thigh as he inspects my cut. Of course. I should have known. He’s just inspecting his property. But, against my better judgment, I continue to lay still. I don’t want to argue with him right now. He can tell me time and time again his version of an apology, but when it comes down to it I yelled his name above everyone else’s. There were people in the curtains beside mine that would have been easier to call, faster to react, and they were. Billy was the only name I called, and he was the last one there.

Simple as that.



I wanted a knight in shining armor, and I got a late to the party handyman.

“Please don’t be mad at me, Callie...” he says, and I feel his hand still on my thigh—the warmth starting to seep through to my skin. It feels nice and I can’t explain to myself why. Maybe it’s the physical contact, but he carries me daily so I’m always feeling his touch. Maybe it’s something more that I don’t want to admit to myself.

I don’t respond. I don’t think I’ve ever hear him say the “P” word so much. But I still haven’t heard what I want to hear from him, so I continue to listen.

“I know I should have been there. I was mad and stormed off, it’s this stupid temper of mine. It’s part of the reason I’m trapped here, same as you. But I bet you could have guessed that.” There’s silence after his words, followed by a humorless laugh. “You know, I was the same age as you when they found me, took me in. I got lucky, cut a deal to save my own skin. Threw three friends under the bus to do it. And my sentence got cut shorter every time I’d do something for them. I’m down to less than a year, Callie. We’ll be getting out about the same time.”

I’m not really seeing what he’s getting at.

“You can’t hear me, and I know that. Someday, I’ll have the guts to say this to your face, but for now I can’t. It’s too risky,” he pauses, like he’s waiting for me to answer, then continues, “I’m just trying to say it would be nice to have someone when we get out of here. Back home, I have nothing. And your family will never understand what you’ve been through. If we stick together then maybe things will be better for us.”

Is he saying that he thinks we should stick together when all this ends?

“It’s dumb logic, I know. We bicker like nobody’s business and you drive me crazy more often than not, but it makes sense and well...” I feel the covers come back up over me and his hand

rests on my arm now. I don't tense at his touch this time. "It's stupid, but I can't have feelings for you here Callie. I'm not allowed, trust me, I've paid the price for trying."

God, I have so many questions that I can't ask. What price? Feelings? What feelings? They're not for me if that's what he's saying. And if they are, he has a funny way of showing it because I thought he hated me.

The mattress shifts once more and I feel his fingers in my hair, too gentle for the Billy I've come to know. But after this one-sided conversation, I'm realizing that there's so much more to him than I know. But this speech makes me want to know more. Why would he of all people want to stay together after we leave here? Do I want to stay with him? No. But his hand caressing my hair is making me second guess myself.

"I've fallen in love with you, Callie."

Do I speak at this?

Do I love him back?

"I know you don't feel the same, I've been a dick to you for the last few months. I've tried to keep distanced, to push you away with my anger, and I know it works. Tonight is the perfect example, isn't it? I can see it in your eyes, the contempt, irritation, outright hatred."

I want to tell him I don't hate him. I don't think I've ever outright hated anyone. And how could I hate him? As much of a pain in the ass as he is, he still takes care of me. He could have given me a bathtub to sleep in and given me only anchovies to eat—but he didn't. He cares more than that, as much as he never admitted to it. There's a reason why he bought me this bed with his own money and gets food that I'll eat instead of whatever he wants. There's kindness there that I don't give enough credit to most days.

“Why you’d even consider it, I’m not sure. I’m not even sure why I’m saying all of this now, or why I can’t just say it to your face. Call me a coward, but if Dalton found out I said any of this to you, I’d never get out of here. And maybe you wouldn’t either. I’d end up so mangled my own mother wouldn’t recognize me, and you... would get someone else to care for you at the very least. I’d take your punishment a thousand times over, Cal. And if that makes me weak, then okay. I’m weak.”

I don’t like the sound of anything that just came from his lips. Why is he saying any of this out loud if this information could get him hurt? What if Dalton was still outside listening? He wouldn’t be able to hear him, I convinced myself. The sounds of the carnival were still in full swing, and if I was any further from Billy, I myself wouldn’t be able to hear a word he’s saying.

“I guess I just feel guilty about everything, and I know that’s part of it. When they brought you in and needed someone to turn you into one of us, I volunteered. It was before I knew you Callie, and I’ve felt guilty every day for it. Trust me, it wasn’t worth the time I bartered for it. Even unconscious, your screams...” his voice softens, “and at my own hand. I never had nightmares like these before you came along Callie. It kills me every day to see you like this. And tonight, to see you in pain again brought back all those memories fresh.”

Is he saying? I can feel myself pale.

My stomach is replaced by tight sailor knots, and I feel sick. My eyes open, without realizing what I’m doing. Why does this entire relationship have to be love-hate? Just minutes ago he was saying he loved me, and then this—he was the one who ruined my life? No. Not ruined. I told him that I didn’t hate it, the tail. I was serious. I don’t hate it. It’s changed my life, sure. I hate not being able to walk or do things on my own, but I’ve grown used to it. But just the knowledge that his hands were the ones to fuse this thing onto me has me shaking.

Billy pulls the blanket higher, over my shoulders. I close my eyes again and focus on slow breathing. I have to focus on anything except what he's told me. It's too much, too soon. Or is it? Why am I surprised he told me all of this when he thought I couldn't hear him? Why am I nervous that he told me he's in love with me and can't do anything about it? Why am I not angrier that he was the one to turn me into a freak for my crimes?

"Callie...I know you're awake."

He can't just dump all of this on me and expect me to love him back and run away with him. And he's the one keeping me here in the first place, which is just icing on the cake, isn't it? I can tell him that I don't believe him, or that his gushy session was way too much to deal with. I could yell at him and cuss and scream about him turning me into a freak, but I can see he beats himself up over it. So I decide that the best thing to do is to not decide.

"I know. I heard you." I say, and I don't give him anything

## **Speaking Out**

The gates of hell are wrought iron. They're too tall to jump, too pointed to climb and they squeal on their own hinges. Closed, the gates stand firm, keeping out intruders and anyone who might come looking for trouble, and keeping the freaks contained within the limits of the carnival and anyone misfortunate enough to be trapped inside at the end of the night. Open, the gates reveal eager faces, waiting for us to beckon them forward, waiting for the invitation into our world of wonders. If only they knew. Closed, it's all the circles of hell.

Beyond those gates: Proulx. My hometown. I'd know those wind turbines anywhere. It's a small town, with nothing to do but drink, party and work the fields. My parents were sheep farmers and I'm sure they expected me to follow right along in their tracks but the idea of shearing sheep all my life is more terrifying than getting shot in action. I miss it, but I won't get to see Proulx tonight, only its inhabitants as they mingle their ways into this freak show carnival.

I take my position at the ticket stand with Cira, looking out past the gates and knowing where we are exactly. When I was a teenager, this field was where me and the boys would have bonfires. Each of us would bring a girl and a six pack, a guitar or a banjo depending on our mood. We'd sing and dance like nobody's business.

Cira appears beside me at the booth, nudging me with her elbow. I look down at her four foot frame and raise my eyebrow at her. Her short black hair is spiked up today and she's wearing one of her skintight leotards that she wears for her routines. I bet it feels like she's wearing nothing. She waves her hand, holding the five orange wristbands.

“Ready?”

I don't even have a chance to nod before she motions the first few people forward and the line splits on either side of us. The first few people step through the gate and look around, the smiles on their faces dropping when they look at me and my outstretched hand. I have that effect on people nowadays. I suppose I did before too. No one gives Cira the looks they give me as they shuffle past—she's normal compared to me, and I've seen her put her feet up behind her head. It's quite the sight.

Most people stare, some point—and the stupid ask questions, even knowing I can't answer. Something about my lips being sewn shut makes people ask questions. What did I do? Why are they sewn shut? Who did this to me? How do I eat? Trust me, they don't want to know. Jokes about me trying to tell them something, which they say to me as if I can't hear them. I'm mute, not deaf.

I've heard them all. And they don't really want the answers.

Of course, I can never tell anyone the answers to their questions anyway. I can't tell people what really happened. Cira knows. I wrote it out for her one day when she asked—but telling anyone what I remember is painful. It's like reliving it. She's been a good friend to me since I've been here, and also made it clear that it's never going to go beyond that friend point with us. Not that I've been thinking about her romantically or anything. It's just...nice, to have someone to talk to when you can't talk.

It's hard not to try and bark orders at the crowd, telling them that their massive blob is not a line and that things would go a lot smoother if grown adults wouldn't push and try to cut each other in line. I'm used to people looking to me to control the situation, and now they look right through me, asking questions I can't answer and stepping right on through me. It's torture. I was a cop before I came here, an enforcer of the law, protector of the people. I loved that job. The

power, the authority, the ability to pretty much walk on water. I joined the academy as soon as I graduated high school, and wore a badge for thirteen years before I ended up here.

“How much for the rides and such inside?” A gentleman, wearing a crooked tie and an untucked white shirt asks me as he rifles through his wallet looking for cash. He looks up when I don’t answer, staring for a few seconds before handing me his cash and shuffling past me inside. I watch him walk away and roll my eyes. A young girl in line, wearing a yellow sundress giggles and I wish I could smile without making my lips bleed at the fact that this kid might be smarter than a forty-something year old man.

I wave her in free of charge, even though I’m not supposed to.

Then I see our first special guest. A golden-yellow piece of paper in his hand, he grins, one woman on each arm. The women are getting more than their fair share of glances from those around them. Or their bodies are—because their outfits don’t consist of more than a bikini top and a skirt that doesn’t leave much to the imagination. I know who this gentleman is.

The police file surfaces in my mind—I remember him getting busted for prostitution a couple years back. He had thirty women working under him and it took months for police to even take notice. It was my old partner’s case, but as hard as he tried, the court only gave this guy probation due to lack of evidence. Not to mention every girl that “worked” under him, denied they were working the streets and no suitors came forward to speak against them.

As he gets closer to the front of the line, I reach over and grab one of the wristbands from Cira’s hand and fasten the band around his wrist. He’s not one of the ones I feel bad for that he’ll end up like me. He managed to get away with pimping out girls for their bodies and he raked in a majority of their profit, I’m sure. He lifts his chin to me and pays for the girls, then steps inside.

He might've recognized me before I started here, but now with my face black and white with tattoos, and my mouth sewn shut, I doubt anyone would recognize me. Even my former fiancé.

Cira told me to forget her. That my life is here now, but I'm still desperate to leave. It's only been a few weeks for me, maybe a month if we're circled back to this same area, but I miss home. My fiancé Rachelle. Being back in my hometown has me wondering if they plan on keeping me here for ten years, like the contract said, or if that's just a number and they have parole hearings. I don't want to stay here for ten years, by the time I'm out I'll be forty-three and Rachelle will be married to someone else with one, maybe two kids.

I'm getting desperate. They all know it too—which is why Cira is not to leave my side. And all the others watch me closer than most of the newbies. It's a one way gate for some of us—knowing that the world out there won't accept you as one of them anymore. They'll point, laugh and call you a freak, even if underneath you're just like them. It's a punishment twice over.

"You know, this is a pretty good turnout for a Thursday night. A lot of kids here on a school night." Cira says, trying to make conversation with someone in her line. I listen to her flirt with him and shake my head, readjusting my black top hat, I nod, focusing instead on taking the money in the outstretched hands. It's a mindless, remedial job—even a monkey could do it, and they might've if we had any here, but it passes the time. And I know my shift is almost over. To be honest, it just surprises me that they put me there in the first place. They know how bad I want out, and the gate is right there.

Once it's dark, Maverick comes out and takes my place. He just scares away customers most of the time with his beast-like appearance. Someone told me he was born with bull horns, others have said he's an honest to god Minotaur. I just think it looks like a good wig and make-up job. But I know better than to think anyone isn't what they say they are here. And he doesn't talk



much, other than one word answers and grunts, so asking him would get me nowhere. That's if he can read.

Another golden-yellow piece of paper catches my eye and I zero in on an older gentleman, balding, wearing a wife beater with what looks to be bear stains down the chest and stomach. A boy stands behind him a step or two, and I see them talking. It's rare that any of our special guests come with children. Although not unheard of. It just promises to be a little bit more complicated when it all comes down to it.

The kid pays for himself—which makes me doubt they're together, but they walk off together talking about which way to head first, so they must be. Two down, three to go if they all show up. Cira says that not everyone accepts the invitation. The only reason I did was because my fiancé thought it would be fun. And I owed her a date night. I look to my right, and perched atop the gate a clock reads eight-fifteen. Maverick will be here any minute.

"The plot thickens," I hear Cira say from behind me. I look and she points to the man and boy that just walked through. They're heading right for the magic tent—Dalton's show. I'm sure he'll be thrilled that he can meet his guest so soon. After all, he's the one who hand selected and invited them. Although, I still can't figure out how. The cop in me wants to know if it's a matter of reading a local newspaper or something more.

"Short stuff. Note. We go." I turn and Maverick is holding his hand out to Cira, a folded piece of paper. I move to hand him the wad of money I've collected he shakes his head. Cira holds up a finger to me, seeming to know that I'm asking what's going on. I watch her read through the note, not really paying attention to the customers as I take their money. When she looks up, she shrugs.

“Looks like you’re in charge for a while Sebastian, something happened and Dalton needs me and Mav to take over at the Ten-in-One.” I try to tell her with my eyes that I don’t want to be left in charge, but she just holds up the note saying, “Dalton’s orders” before handing me the three remaining wristbands.

“He’ll send someone else to help, don’t worry. Just help one customer at a time. If they start getting mad then just give them a scary look,” she says, making this off to be a joke. I furrow my brows and glare at her, “That works too.”

With that, she turns and walks away with the beast of a man. I can never get past the smell, every time he walks past it’s a mixture of low tide in the marshes by the beach and horse shit that’s been roasting in the sun all day. But I suppose it makes sense. He sleeps with the horses and it goes with his whole beastly persona. Doesn’t make him any less terrifying though. I wouldn’t want to be the one to tell him he needs to bathe.

Of course I’m stuck here. But for the first time in a long time, I’m left alone. At first, it’s exciting, and then I start wondering why. They wouldn’t have just left me alone. I’m sure I’m being watched somehow, although I don’t see anyone when I glance around. They wouldn’t plant spies in the crowd, would they? No. I would recognize them, I’ve been here long enough to know pretty much everyone.

I look back at the gate, sighing and continuing my meaningless, mundane job of the day. I pass out another band along the way—a girl this time. She looks like a junkie. She’s got moose tracks playing connect the dots up both her arms. My guess is heroin. I wonder if she came in thinking we’d sell her something. Little does she know we’re cleaner than a rehab in here. Another one of their picks that I don’t feel too bad for, and I keep having to remind myself that this is

wrong. Look what they did to me. I didn't deserve this. I can't start thinking like them. This is not how the law works, for good reason.

That's when I see her: Rachelle. I knew it. I somehow knew that tonight was going to be different. Everyone is on edge, and they should be, because she's going to get me out of here and have police crawling all over this joint. If I can just get her alone. As she walks through the gate, I recognize her familiar form, her petite body and long wavy brown hair.

A customer clears their throat to my left and I notice for the first time that even though I'm the only one here now, the line splits on both sides of the podium. A teenage boy holds out a twenty for him and his girlfriend and I take it, not offering him change as I move to the next customer on the other side, alternating until I'm face-to-face with the woman I've been trying to get back to for weeks.

For the first time I notice that her arm is draped over another man's. I look him up and down and sneer—she could do so much better than a balding man in a plumbing shirt that doesn't fit right over his pot belly. I can see graying chest hair peeking out from the top of his shirt, and he wears a golden chain around his neck—thick, clunky and the most expensive thing he owns. He hands me a yellow ticket. Thank god. I move to fasten it to his wrist and he stops me,

“I'll pay for my own. She wants all the rides and games anyways. Stick it on hers.”

I pull back, looking between the two of them. If I put it on him, if I make them believe that I can't do that, she'll be in the crossfire. If I put it on her wrist, she's a target. I want to put it on his, but he's holding her wrist up and they're starting to look impatient. Vowing to get to her before things get out of hand, I fasten it to her wrist—holding her arm for just a fraction of a second longer than I should. She pulls away fast and the man glares at me as they walk past. I hear him mutter

‘freak’ under his breath. I look over my shoulder and meet her gaze, how I’ve missed those eyes. So unique. So wild.

And heading for the funhouse.

“Sebastian, Dalton sent me to help out with the line,” I hear, and I turn, not even registering who spoke at first until I see Gabby, another of the acrobats that Cira works with. She’s a pretty redhead with too much make-up and too many freckles for my liking. She’s sweet and innocent—much like Cira. It makes no sense to me how they ended up here, or why they’d stay if they had a choice.

I try and lie to her, giving her a pleading look with my eyes and pinching my thumb between my forefinger and middle finger, tilting it from side-to-side. Toilet. She cocks her head to the side a bit, looking confused at first. Then she seems to get it. Or at least, she pretends to.

“Go, go, I’ll cover for you.” She shoos me away with a smile and I nod, heading away from the podium in the direction of the bathroom. Once I’m sure she’s not watching, I veer off towards the funhouse. When I get there, I look around, trying to see if they went in there before I find myself lost for ten minutes in the damn reflections. With no way of knowing for sure, but no sign of her elsewhere, I run into the funhouse and cringe at my own reflection staring back at me from the mirror at the entrance.

Keeping my eyes, low, I feel my way through the mirrored section of the maze until something catches my eye and I look up to see the unnerving sight of Ollie the Clown dancing with a limp brunette. The image plays on a thousand screens around me and I crash into a few of the walls in my haste, groaning and cursing inwardly at my slowing clumsiness. When I see him, my eyes widen. He’s holding her upper body in his lap, her clothes are coming off. My god, if

that's Rachelle...I'm too late. It's either that or I fight Ollie, who I've been told never to underestimate.

Cira says he snapped someone's neck one day when he was trying to help grab one of the special guests for the "game," as he calls it. I stare at him from a distance. His sunken eyes and lack of nose are what freak most people out the most. His eyes, a dark brown look almost beady because of the dark circles beneath them. And his nose, I'll never forget having to listen to that story. He mistook my silence for curiosity.

All I remember is that he failed out of clown school and they took back his nose, something about his parents disowning him and winding up here looking for work. It all sounds pretty fucked up to me. The most being the part about why he failed. Dropped a screaming child from his shoulders while he was on a unicycle...juggling.

He doesn't look up at first, he just continues to smear bright red lipstick onto and around her lips. This is the reason why people hate clowns. When he notices me standing there he stops, dropping the lipstick. It's not her. Fuck, it's not her. But god damn it, Ollie. I don't see any blood, but the cop in me kneels beside them and has to check for a pulse. I find the man's, but pause as I reach to touch the girls. Ollie twitches.

"Oh good. It's you. Not master. I was just cleaning the mirrors, like the master said. Just cleaning."

I nod, because I don't care what he says he was doing. There are no cleaning supplies in sight and two unconscious bodies here instead. It's like someone holding a gun with only their prints on it saying they aren't the killer. You just happened to be holding that gun over the body? Sure, tell it to the judge. The gun's not yours? Sure it isn't.

“I swear. They’re just sleeping. They were tired. He pulled something out of his sock and they ate it. I kept the baggie, see?” He holds up an empty Ziploc bag and I look at it. It’s empty. No residue. My guess is ecstasy. That would explain why they’re out of it enough to let him do this to them, but not why they’re unconscious. I motion for him to go on, not liking that I’m sitting here investigating when Rachelle is out there wearing a wristband, but I’ve got to know. And they won’t grab her just yet. They save the women for last, they put up less of a fight. But if I know Rachelle, she’ll fight tooth and nail to get free. The thought is comforting. I’d taught her some self-defense while we were together. It might come in handy tonight if I can’t get to her in time.

“They were doing something bad. So I kicked them.”

Come again? Kicked them? To knock them out, he’d have to kick them hard in the head. I look down and inspect both of them. No bruises that I can see and still no blood, plus they’re still breathing. I’m past the point of caring for the two of them. Ollie can figure out what to do with them, and if he gets caught, that’s on him. I can’t be here if Dalton chooses now to waltz through the funhouse. I hoist myself back to my feet, angry and uncaring of their fate. These aren’t them. She’s not here. I push my way past Ollie and I can hear him following me.

“You won’t tell him, will you?”

I stop, exhaling, frustrated. I hold up both my hands, palms out towards him.

Stay.

I back up a few steps. He moves forward a few more.

My hands make fists before I take a deep breath and try to get through to him. I point to him, then the unconscious couple and then try and play charades with him as I make the motions of sweeping them up. Clean up. He seems to get it and smiles and nods. I look away from his smile

and give him a thumbs up before trying to ignore him and be on my way. I've lost too much time to that stupid clown. I need to find Rachelle.

The next section of the maze is clear—Plexiglas so translucent that you could walk two feet and hit a wall without realizing it. But you can see through it, which I take advantage of. I let my gloved hands wander along the walls, searching for edges and openings as I squint and try to see if there's anyone in the maze. After I'm most of the way through it, I decide this was a waste of time. She could be at the magic show or the Ten-in-One that's down this way. I thought I saw her walking right towards this place though.

I pause and look past the maze, outside the flashing lights and music playing above my head and into the crowd filing by the funhouse outside. Of course. She was right there this whole time. Playing games with her back turned. I should have known that in my haste I'd walk right past her. Dammit. How do I get out of this stupid thing? Hastening my pace, I try and maneuver my way out of this god forsaken funhouse and then I'm free of it.

She's still over by the games. She's still with him. I need to get closer, keep an eye on her until I'm able to get her one-on-one. If I can just get her alone, I know I can make her see it's me. I'll point to her engagement band, I'll write it all down, act it out, anything to get her to believe that it's me. As I make my way through the crowd, I hear kids gasp, watch as parents hurry them past, watch grown men unable to keep eye contact. And I slip into a crack between two of the booths, waiting and watching for my moment to strike.

As she moves, so do I, hurrying to the next spot where I'm able to see her. I smell cigarette smoke and I close my eyes, hating that it's so much of a distraction in this moment. I've smoked since I was twelve years old, but this new gig forced me to quit cold turkey or I'd still be smoking two packs a day. I can hear Rachelle talking, so I move closer to the edge of the tent to listen.

“Oh come on, they’re not going to care if you throw the ball. It’s my free game, right?”

“Alright fine, you win. I’ll throw it. But if I knock those blocks over, I’m keeping the stuffed giraffe.”

She laughs and I close my eyes at the sound. It makes me wish that I enjoyed it more when we were together. I worked so many hours, racked in the overtime whenever possible and blew her off more than once for a night with the guys. What if after all this time I’ve been gone, if she’s moved on? This guy with her doesn’t seem so bad. I’d still like to see his background check, but he seems nice.

No, stop it Sebastian. You’re better than this. He has an orange wristband. He must be a bad guy somehow or they wouldn’t have chosen him. Why the hell didn’t I put the wristband on him like I was supposed to in the first place?

“Two outta three aint bad,” the guy says and I can picture her pouting. Her bottom lip jutting out just so, her face tilted down, her incredible eyes meeting mine. I shake myself, opening my eyes. I can’t keep thinking like that. I’m thinking about after we get out, while we’re both still trapped inside. I hear their voices moving further down and without thinking of where I’m heading, I follow them parallel down behind the tent I know to be a little shop with collectables and jewelry. I see her through the opening. She must be looking in a mirror or something, because she’s holding a necklace up to her chest and smiling.

She’s moved on, Sebastian. Forgotten about you.

I briefly wonder if this is my chance, but I know it’s not. And I’m glad I don’t try, because I’m not alone. I can feel eyes on me. I turn to my right. I see the trailers and tents of some of the other carnies. But no windows or flaps open. I do the same to my right, but all I can see is The



Twins' tent. That leaves behind me. I look down at my black and white pin-striped clothes and shoes as I take a few steps forward and turn around to walk the few steps back.

As I look up, I see two sets of beady eyes. The first set I know—I think everyone here does. The eyes that make you want to avoid eye contact at all costs—deep black at the edges, then a dark gray towards the middle, and a black vertical line in the center. The second set, just below the first matches them, but smaller.

Snake eyes.

“Good evening, Sebastian...” the voice says, a deep bass that accentuates the first letter of my name with a hiss that makes my skin crawl. Jesse steps out of the shadows and breathes smoke out of his mouth as he takes one last drag from a cigarette and stomps it out. “Where are you off to tonight? Oh right. You can’t answer. I knew that. What I meant to say is...you better not be getting into any trouble tonight. I hear we’re in your town tonight, revisiting for the first time since you joined us. I’d be truly disappointed if you tried another stunt like last time.”

I shake my head and look at the snake wrapped around Jesse’s midsection and shoulders. It looks back at me and sticks its tongue out a few times. Smelling me in the air. I want to step back, but my feet won’t move. Jesse is one of the creepiest freaks here—those eyes, they look almost pitch black and they’re beyond anything human. But he also has a forked tongue, with piercings and tattoo sleeves of scales along both arms.

“Have you met Sheila?” he asks, catching my gaze lingering on the snake moving its head up towards me a little more. I don’t nod or shake my head this time. No sudden movements on my part. Not at all. “She’s my favorite. A Black Mamba... a true beauty, isn’t she?”

I nod, the movement so minute that I don’t know if he even saw it before continuing.

“Such dangerous creatures,” he goes on to say, running his hand down her body across his chest. “Very aggressive. Fatal precision when they strike. Fastest land snake in the world...”

Why is he telling me all of this?

Jesse pauses his monologue to reach up and let the snake wind around his arm—the body shifts along Jesse’s torso and shoulders as it follows, the black scales shimmering in the dull light. It looks as if she’s getting ready to coil herself around him, strangle him. Part of me wouldn’t mind. I wouldn’t save him.

“You know, if I gave her the command, she’d strike anyone I tell her to,” Jesse says, looking at me. This time I do step back. Sheila lifts her head a little more and hisses in my direction. “I wouldn’t make any sudden movements if I were you. If she feels threatened, she won’t need a command to attack.”

I don’t move.

I don’t breathe.

“Good thinking. I wouldn’t risk it if I were you. She can strike up to twelve times in a row, injecting enough venom to kill up to twenty-five men. It’s horrible too. The venom...” Jesse says, petting her head. She opens her mouth and her fangs show, but she doesn’t try to bite him. “It starts with just the pain at the bite, then a tingling sensation in your mouth and limbs. Soon enough you’re sweating, foaming at the mouth and can’t control your muscles. Can’t see. Then severe pain in your stomach, nausea, vomiting, then convulsions paralysis and a very tragic death.”

I swallow hard. My mouth too dry.

Jesse smiles. It’s a twisted smirk, like he’s enjoying his little game.

“Terrifying, isn’t it? Depending on where she bites, you could die in just fifteen minutes. That’s if she gets a vein...but at most, once she bites, you’ve got less than three hours to live before you can’t breathe, your body goes into shock and you die a painful death.”

Jesse steps towards me, the snake and him way too close for comfort now. I’ve never been scared of snakes. I used to play with garter snakes when I was a kid, chase them with sticks and play catch with my dog. But this feels much different than a fear of snakes. The feeling in my stomach is fear—without question, but it’s fear for my life. The snake on his outstretched arm leans in towards me and I stop breathing as it moves its head around my neck, its tongue slithering in and out.

“Have I made myself clear, Sebastian?”

I don’t dare move. I just look at him, and he looks back. The snake moves back around his shoulders and they both move back into the shadows. That is, by far, the scariest thing I’ve ever heard. Even someone threatening to shoot you isn’t that terrifying. Sure, a gunshot wound will hurt. If it gets you right, it’ll kill you, but looking down the barrel of a nine millimeter is nowhere close to looking into a venomous snakes eyes and hearing detail by detail what his poison will do to you.

“That’s what I thought.”

I let out the breath I’d been holding in one large gust through my nostrils and then try to calm my breathing after that, looking around as my chest thrums with the acceleration of my heart. I close my eyes when I see that Jesse and his lethal snake are gone, and I sigh with relief. I’m safe for now, but for how long? How much could he know? All I know is that my police training did not prepare me for this place.

I can picture it following me, watching for me to do just one thing out of line so it can report back to Jesse—or worse—maybe she'd just strike without warning. Would I want a warning? Or would I want the venomous snake to bite the limb that stepped out of line before anyone can find out.

The Black Mamba has me boxed into a box only I can see.

Watching its prey and waiting to strike.

And I can't say a word.

It doesn't matter. Any plan I had working towards fruition in my head is out the window, down the stairs, over the cliff. Any hope I might have had earlier tonight that I'd get out of here is now gone. I'm left with no choice. I'm forced to stay here and suffer, or die and suffer. But if I can save an innocent, isn't it worth the risk? Isn't that what I've been trained for? Protect and serve. She's wearing the wristband, so she's at risk every moment I wait. Then again, so am I.

If I can find a way to get Rachelle alone, maybe all I have to do is get her to take off the wristband. That alone could save her life. If I could get her to take it off and leave here, then whatever punishment they come up with will be on me to endure not her. I can't stomach seeing her end up like me in here. She didn't get that special ticket, she's not one of the victims here tonight. But the target on her wrist says otherwise.

Watching my movements, I make my way away from Jesse and the snake. I'm careful where I step, just in case, until I step back into the crowd of people and I feel a little more at ease. A snake trying to get at me in this crowd would cause chaos. Maybe I've been doing this all wrong. All this time I've been trying to be secretive about this, to lure her to a dark corner to talk, but what if it's easier than that? There's a reason why behind the tents is dark. People are afraid of the dark. They like to see what's in front of them.

I look around the crowd and spot her once again, but this time, I hurry past her and stop in my tracks—doing what every mime is supposed to do—play charades with themselves. At first, she’s not paying attention. The guy she’s with nudges her and she turns towards me, her smile fading.

“Come on, let’s go somewhere else. This mime is freaking me out,” she says.

“Why are his lips sewn shut?” her guy asks. I almost growl.

I do my best to ignore his stupid question and play the part of a normal mime. I’ve gained the attention of a couple people, but not the couple I’m seeking. Thinking on my feet as I see them walking away, I conjure up a fake lasso, circling it above my head before letting it go and pretending to feel a tug. I fake-tug on it once to fake-tighten it and then I almost trip forward as I pretend I’m trying to stop them from walking. I never understood miming. They don’t notice until a couple more people watching laugh. She turns towards me, and I stop my feet, this time she doesn’t look right through me. It looks like she’s waiting for a show.

Miming was all new to me when I started here. I sucked at charade games, guessing games in general—I was a sucker for the cold hard facts. There’s no gray area there, a fact is a fact. Holding up a hand could mean: hand, palm, fingers, five or hello. I point to her and then point to her boy toy, then shoo him away and usher her closer. A few people laugh, including her, but she moves a couple steps towards me regardless.

I point to me, then to her. She shakes her head. I hold up both my hands, palms facing her. She just stares at me. I guess she was never good at charades either. Who knew it would be so difficult to improvise telling her it’s me? I motion to her to put her hands up too. She gets it and her hands face mine. I roll up my sleeves, showing her the bald eagle tattoo on my forearm, with the rippling American flag in the background. I watch her eyes. She looks at it, but doesn’t seem

to comprehend. I didn't think she would with my first clue. I motion for her to go next. She looks confused, but rolls up her sleeves and I point to her tattoo—a small heart on her wrist, just above her pulse.

She looks up then and puts her arms down, looking back at her date for the night. He just shrugs, so she looks back at me, then the eagle, then my eyes. It's coming together in her head, I can see it.

I hold up four fingers on one hand, then five on the other. May 5<sup>th</sup>. The date we decided on to get married. I point to her left hand and I can almost hear an audible click. She holds up her left hand, the diamond ring still on it that I gave her.

By now, the rest of our audience has gone their separate way and we find ourselves with only a third wheel to get rid of. I motion to him with my chin and she follows my gaze.

“Paul, I'll be right back. I think I know this guy,” she says, and looks back at me quickly before grabbing my hand and pulling me out of his earshot. I look around to make sure no one else is listening too.

“Sebastian? Is that you?”

I nod my head.

“What the hell happened to you? I've been worried sick,” she says, too loud for my liking. I put my index finger to her lips and she nods. I make a pen writing motion on my hand and she nods, reaching into her purse. I'm getting antsy with being in the open like this, but if I'm right, this is the safest place for this kind of conversation. If I had done this back behind the tents when I wanted to, she would have screamed and even if I could get her to calm down enough to realize it was me, Jesse would have heard every word.

I don't even want to begin thinking about what he'd do then.

Rachelle distracts me from those thoughts by handing me a pen and a piece of an envelope she must have found whilst digging through her purse. It'll work. My message is short enough. I scribble it down, then glance around once more, making sure no eyes are staring back before passing her the note. She opens it.

*Take off wristband.*

*Get out now.*

*Run.*

Rachelle looks up at me, "The carnival...these people did this to you, didn't they?"

I nod.

"Sebastian, we've got to tell someone about this. We have to call the police. I mean, look at what they did to you. Oh god, last time...when we came here together you had the wristband. Is this...?" She looks from me to the wristband and rips it off in one quick motion, letting it fall to the ground.

"When you disappeared, I thought it was a joke. I thought you were just playing a stupid prank or something. God, Sebastian...I'm so sorry. I feel like this is partially my fault."

I shake my head, touching her arm and pointing to the paper. She looks down at it, like she's going to read it again and then nods and readjusts her purse on her shoulder.

"Let's go, right now. Let's run and get out of this place before it's too late." She grabs my hand and pulls, but I don't move from my spot. Even if I try to leave, they wouldn't let me. Deep down, I know why I'm here. She doesn't deserve this fate. I, on some level, do. I point to her,

when she looks back and then points beyond the carnival. If I leave with her, we could both end up dead—if I can help her get free, well, I’m sure I’ll be punished, but she’ll be safe.

“If you think I’m leaving you here, you’re crazy.”

I just nod, wishing like hell I was able to tear these stitches from my own lips so that I could speak to her. So that I could urge her to go without me, tell her why. But mimes don’t speak, and they made it pretty damn impossible for me to be able to get these stitches out myself. It’s excruciating. I’ve tried. Twice.

I look into her eyes, and I want to tell her yes. I want to tell her that I’ve missed her and that we were never coming to a carnival ever again. I want to kiss her and take her home for a home cooked meal and some wine. But I don’t want to put her in more danger. By being here, she’s accumulating more risk by the minute. Her eyes are telling me to stay with her, to help her, to escape this prison with her—and I’ve never been able to say no to those eyes.



## **Dealt a Bad Hand**

“I’ve already lost half my wallet and my granddads old watch to this game, I’m not sure I can bet anything else,” I tell the boys, all gathered ‘round a picnic table in the grass out by my tent. The cards, tucked in close to each of us are only illuminated by the propane bug lamps and the moon, and even without seeing them I know I have shit cards. I have every other hand. My good friend Jesse’s having all the luck, and he doesn’t even have Sheila with him tonight. He claims she’s his lucky charm. His favorite of all his snake companions. “I think I’m out.”

“Oh come on, Bill, you still got a few bucks in that wallet of yours you want to give us,” says Kevin, a man that must have had a gambling problem before he met our little poker group here. He’s down about twice what I am and still raring to go. He looks like he’s in a biker gang, what with all of his tattoos and his leather jacket that looks like it might rip off him if he flexes. He’s a good guy though, from what I can tell from talking to him. But then again, I know he’s here because he killed a man in a bar fight.

“Just let him go out so I can beat Jesse before we have to go back to work,” Greg says, spitting on the ground beside him and eying his cards again.

“You’ve got to work on that poker face of yours, buddy,” Jesse says in response, a cruel grin creeping to his face. I know he’s bound to have an ace, somehow, it’s as if someone else is passing them to him under the table, he somehow manages to find them when we play. There’s no way he’s *that* lucky.

I lift the edges of my cards off the table once more, looking at my cards. I’ve got a two and a queen. Two pair, a full house if that last card shows me some favor. I bite at my bottom lip and set the cards back down, taking a chance,

“I’ll call,” I say, opening my wallet again and removing the last couple dollars.

“Oh you’re just asking for it now,” Greg says, and I look over at the guy. He’s been in on our little poker night for the past few weeks. He’s not bad, just a little blunt. He’s one of the new bouncers over at the girl show, got partnered with Kevin because of his size and general muscle mass. There’s just something off about him that I’m not seeing yet. I wouldn’t mess with him, and I kicked a guy’s ass his size just earlier tonight. I glance down at my bruised knuckles and then back at me tent. Callie hasn’t called for me at all since I’ve been out here. She said she needed some time to think about what I told her. Can’t blame her though, I’m not good at the whole emotional side of things, so I’m sure my confessions came out lackluster.

We have a year for her to decide, it’s not like I asked for an answer right away. If she doesn’t want to stay with me after all this is over then I’ll figure something else out. I’ll change her mind. That’s if she’ll ever forgive me for the other thing I told her. I’m sure she had her suspicions along the way, knowing that I’ve done some pretty dirty work for this place, but I don’t think she thought I’d sink that low. I never thought I would either.

This place has made me a worse person than I was when I got here. Before this place, I worked the same job except on a farm. I fixed what needed fixing, cared for the animals some days and went to the bar almost every night. Until they kicked me out. My dad taught me never to start a fight, but to finish every damn one of them. And I did. Motion on the table catches my eye and I see that the last card has been drawn. A three. A goddamn three. I push my cards away from me and shake my head, trying to be a good sport about it but it’s hard when I’m losing to a full house that’s one card higher than mine. Damn it.

“One more hand,” Greg says, and Kevin checks the time with my granddads watch that’s on the table.

“We’ve got time for one more before our shift,” he looks from me to Jesse and I shrug.

“I’m out of things to bet, guys, sorry. Tonight’s not my night.” In more ways than one.

“Jesse, you in?” Kevin asks, leaning on the table as he gathers the cards and starts to shuffle.

“And risk losing all this cash? Nah, I’m set,” Jesse says, smiling as he gathers all of his winnings. “Another night boys. Let Billy recover from his loss.”

The two men shift the table as they get up, too big to avoid hitting their tree trunk limbs on just about everything on the way up. I stay seated, because I feel like a dwarf to these guys and I don’t think Jesse is leaving just yet. Getting together tonight was his idea. He heard about Callie and came to check in on her. Of course Callie was being stubborn and only gave him one word answers when he asked about how she was and if she wanted him to fix the tail once she was healed. I should be in there with her.

“Next time, I’m going to figure out where you’re hiding those cards, Jesse. I’m not losing again,” Kevin says, grinning as he gathers his small amount of winnings and he and Greg head back towards the hustle and bustle of the carnival. I watch until they disappear and then glance at my tent again. I can’t help it. She said nothing. I told her everything. And she gave me nothing.

“Dude, she’s fine. She’s tougher than she looks,” Jesse says, and I laugh a bit. Yeah she is. She puts up a fight for just about anything. Spoiled little brat that she is.

“I know, I just keep beating myself up over the whole thing. If I hadn’t come in when I did, it could have been a lot worse.” That’s a lie. I got there last. I was angry with her for not listening, she was driving me crazy and I was the furthest from her when I heard her scream. It’s killing me.

“I bet, he got in there pretty deep from the look of it. Just shy of her artery,” Jesse says, counting the last bit of cash in his pile of winnings before splitting it in half and passing it to me, along with my granddads watch. I smile and nod,

“Thanks. But yeah, you should have seen her wielding a broken beer bottle right in his face. Braver than most, that’s for sure.” I grab the cards and shuffle them once more, “Go again?”

He nods this time, “Sure.”

As much as we like the extra company to our poker night, both of us are sort of loners and get annoyed with the two brutes. Our poker nights only involve them for about an hour or so, then it’s just us.

“You asked her, didn’t you? If she hates the tail.” Jesse asks, out of nowhere.

“What? How’d you know?” I ask.

“It’s all over your face, Billy. You’ve been distracted all night, and it’s not just worry that her stitches will bleed.” He gives me a pointed look and takes the cards I deal him. “What did she say?”

I look at my own cards before I speak, they’re better than I have been getting. A jack of clubs and a queen of diamonds. Maybe it’ll get me something this round. “She didn’t answer how I thought she would, to be honest. I thought she’d tell me that she hates it, that she’s miserable and wants to kill whoever did this to her but she said no.”

“She said no?”

“No, she doesn’t hate it,” I say, matching his raise and drawing another card face-up on the table. I can’t tell him everything she said, but the gist won’t hurt. He’s the best friend I have in here, but even he can’t be trusted with some things. He’s too close with Dalton, and his mother is the psychic. “She’s smarter than half the people we bring in here, Jess, I swear. She told me she knows what she did to deserve this and she seemed content to take her punishment.”

“Interesting,” Jesse says, looking at his cards and tugging at the top of one. “That must make you feel a little better, right?”

“I guess. I mean, I still wish it wasn’t me who did it, but at least now I can move on. I live with the girl, feeling guilty all my life would be exhausting.”

Jesse laughs and raises again. I match it and draw an ace, putting it face-up beside the other cards. I don’t look at my cards. I know that I’m bound to get at least a pair, maybe a straight at this rate. “You’ve got to toughen up, man. She’s here for a reason, just the same as you.”

I nod. “I know.”

But I leave it at that. I used to believe I deserved this a lot more than I do now. Now I just believe that I deserve to get out and live my life. I’ve done my time. And Callie, she only got a year. That’s one of the shortest terms I’ve seen while I’ve been here. I’ve seen many come and go, but I knew before Callie told me her story that she didn’t deserve this. I still believe it.

“You still seem on edge,” Jesse says. His eyes, although I’m used to their snake-like appearance watch me. He’s always watching. I’m surprised he doesn’t smell with his tongue too. I can’t trust him with everything.

“It’s just this place tonight. I don’t know what it is, but everyone seems out of sorts, then Callie getting hurt and having to clean up the mess Ollie made in the mirrors... I’m just ready for bed, to be honest.”

“It’s like eight thirty,” Jesse says, laughing. “But I see where you’re coming from. I’ve got a mime about to lose his head if he does anything stupid and Dalton’s big reveal tonight.”

“Big reveal? What big reveal?” I ask. I don’t realize we’ve stopped playing until he pulls at my cards to see if my hand beat his.

“Something about the carousel, I have no clue what he’s going on about. Keeps telling my mom that it’s a surprise. Hasn’t told me a thing.”

“The carousel?” I press.

“Yeah, sounds like something I’d avoid if I were you. Those bad vibes you’re getting are coming from that cursed piece of junk. You know that’s been passed down through Dalton’s family, right? My mom said spirits are trapped in there from a freakshow years ago. Some townsfolk burned the whole carnival down to drive them away, ended up killing hundreds.” He points to his cards, “You aren’t having any luck tonight either, so it might be better for you to go in and get some sleep.”

Jesse gathers the cards and starts to put them away, but I’m too distracted to play cards anymore. Dalton is going to get people killed at this rate, I told him the machine wasn’t finished yet. It still needs a lot of work before it will be ready to do what he wants it to do. We need more trial runs before we outright use it on people.

“Listen, I know you look up to the guy, but he’s insane if he thinks he’s using his cool new toy tonight,” I say, getting to my feet and tying my boots back up. “Trust me, it won’t be pretty.”

“And you’re off to convince him otherwise?” Jesse asks, raising an eyebrow and laughing as he sits back in his chair. “Good luck. He’s told people he’s using it. He won’t back down now.”

“Then stay clear of the carousel tonight, just in case. I’ll see you tomorrow,” I say, gathering my portion of the winnings from tonight and filling my wallet back up. I look towards my tent and decide I’ll be fast. I hope she won’t need anything in the next ten minutes that she hasn’t needed in the past hour.

“Get some sleep,” Jesse calls after me, but I’m too far away to answer and too focused on getting to Dalton to care about answering. It’s after his show, so pinpointing his position is going to be tricky. I get to the main tent by the ten-in-one and see Penelope and Charles, the weirdest couple I’ve ever met strolling along towards the girl show. I jog to catch up with them and when I

do, I try not to make a face at Penelope's beard being in a small ponytail. Instead, I look at Charles, his bone tattoos are easier to look at.

"Have either of you seen Dalton? It's important," I say.

"Saw him down by the gates a little while ago," Charles answers, and I'm sure he would have spoken more if Penelope didn't cut him off.

"How's your pet? Is her tail fixable?"

"I'm not dealing with you right now. If you see Dalton, tell him I'm looking for him." With that, I leave the both of them to bicker between themselves. I can't stand her. She thinks she's so privileged, and I'll never understand why she thinks that beard of hers gives her the right to judge others. You'd think being judged your whole life for something you can't control would make you a kinder person, but she gets worse every day.

I weave through the crowd, ignoring someone calling my name along the way. I hope it's not important, but then again, compared to what Dalton's up to, not much else could make the top of my list. My eyes dart from booth to booth, glancing inside tents along the way, but there's no sign of his tall frame. He can be seen above the crowd, as tall as he is, but I can't be running around looking all night, so I turn around when I don't see him at the gates. There's one other place he might be if he plans on doing this tonight.

The carousel.

The haunting music reaches my ears as soon as I think about it, and I remember the conversation between me and Dalton when he asked if I could create this beast of a thing. At the time, I had no idea if it was even possible. But I'm good at making things, working with my hands, and then there's the technical stuff. I taught myself all that computer business. When I showed him what the music alone could do, his ideas got bigger.

At first, he just wanted to lure people to the carnival. And then he wanted to be able to pick who he could target easier. And the list goes on and on until he decided that the machine would be used to create his freaks. The music would lure people in like a siren's song, targeting the ones with the orange wristbands at a certain time and once they were all gathered, the machine would cause the carousel to spin until those riding received their befitting punishments and the carousel would stop when all the freaks had been made.

That was the idea anyway. Right now, I've got the music sort of working. People are entranced by it, but its haunting melody isn't enough to make everyone drop what they're doing and hop on a pony like Dalton wants. All I've managed to do is figure out how it creates freaks, which was the easy part. The machine targets, then does nothing. Unless Dalton figured out something I didn't, it's not ready.

As I get closer, I notice that more people are on the carousel than usual. That must be the music working, which means Dalton turned on the undertones. This doesn't feel good. I come up on the controls and one of the contortionists stands at the controls. I know her name, but it escapes me as she leans against the small podium, sticking her rear end out away from her.

"Hi Billy."

"Hey, you seen Dalton?" I ask.

She nods and snaps her gum. God I hate that. "He was here a few minutes ago. Said he had to check on something for tonight. Looked under here." She pats her hand beneath her and spreads her legs so I can see. As much as I don't want to lead her on, I don't see another choice at the moment. I reach beneath her and open the small door to the cabinet. These are the controls for everything on the carousel, including the new additions we've been creating. I look at the buttons



and knobs for a few seconds, but everything seems normal. And then I touch the blue button off to the left and numbers appear on the screen.

58:08.

And it's ticking down. A timer. God damn it. He's doing it. I close the door fast and get up, almost knocking over the pretty blond in my haste. She giggles and waves as I head away from her, right for the carousel, which is still moving. I watch it, looking for the knob, but it's hard to see. I motion for the blond to stop the ride and she nods, then stares down at the controls for so long that I almost have to walk back over there to show her which of the three buttons she has to push. She has one job.

As the carousel starts to slow, I see the knob pass me once, and watch for it to come around again before I catch up with it. I pull it and it's stuck. No, not stuck. Locked. There's a keyhole there that wasn't there before. He's locked me out. Goddamn it. I reach in my back pocket and grab my set of keys anyway. I try each one, even the ones I would never think to try, and each one fails me. Frustrated, I hit the side of the carousel hard and run my hands through my hair. This isn't good. This isn't good at all.

I look at my watch. 9:06pm.

The timer is set to go off in less than an hour. At ten o'clock, to be honest, I don't know what will happen. And I built the damn thing. At the very best, it targets everyone on the carousel and turns anyone on it into a freak. It could work, if Dalton altered it. But from what I remember while working with him, he didn't know much about any of the stuff that goes into making a machine like this. Engineering, electricity, music, technology, nothing. Which is why I can't see this as being good for anyone involved. I don't want to be anywhere within the carnival limits when this thing starts up. And I don't want Callie to either.

Shit. Callie.

It's going to take time to get her out of here, and it won't be discreet. But I can't leave her. I don't even care about finding Dalton anymore. It's clear now that he's decided on using this weapon tonight, there's no talking him out of it. He made that clear enough by locking up the only way I could turn it off. He's left me no choice.

I rush back to my tent, past the crowd, past the rides, food and unsuspecting people. They'll all probably still be here at nine. And if they're near the carousel, they're in for a show—regardless of how that show pans out. When I get back to my tent, I pause to catch my breath before I go inside. I check my watch again. 9:17pm.

We won't have much time, and this won't be sneaky. When I step inside, Callie is sitting up in bed, her tail splayed out over a majority of her bed as she lounges, looking somewhat relaxed given what happened tonight, and what's about to happen. Granted, she doesn't know about the second part yet, but I don't think we have much time for me to explain.

"Callie, get up, grab your things. We've got to go."

She huffs and goes back to reading a magazine I'd bought her. I don't have time for this. *We* don't have time for this.

"I'm serious, let's go."

"If you think I'm going anywhere with you, you're crazy."

"I'm not crazy, but someone here is and we're both going to be long gone before nine o'clock when his surprise goes off."

She looks up, her black hair blocking some of her face as she arches an eyebrow at me. She's not going to budge unless I tell her. Damn it, I should have known her curiosity would slow us down.

“Callie, the carousel has a machine in it that is used to turn people into freaks. It’s not ready yet. Dalton plans on using it. Things could get ugly. Let’s go.” I point towards the door and then start shoving my essentials into a backpack. I grab a few of hers too and throw them in as I walk around the room.

“And you know all of this how?” she asks.

“Because I built it, Callie. We don’t have time for twenty questions, grab your stuff.” I toss the backpack on the bed at her and look around. Most of this stuff is replaceable. Money I have. Medical supplies. I grab what Doc left me to care for Callie and throw them onto the bed for her to put in. Her hands are slow moving, but they grab the items and put them inside.

“What’s going to happen?”

“I have no idea. But let’s just say that right now, the process of turning you into a mermaid can be reversed. It’s complicated, but it can be done. If that thing goes off and we’re too close, you may need water to breathe.” I raise my eyebrows, looking at her, “Understand?”

She just nods and zips up the backpack, “Where are we going?”

“We’re leaving. For good,” I say, and think of the few people that I’ve seen try to leave. They got caught because they were being sneaky about it. There’s a much easier way for us. I’ve been here for so long that I’ve walked through those gates time and time again without anyone questioning me. And that’s just what we’ll do. Everyone here expects that I’ll be back every time I go, what makes this time any different? Callie. I can’t leave her.

The gates close at ten, and I intend on being on the other side of those wrought iron gates when they lock for the night. It’ll give us a full night head start if all goes well tonight and they come after us, or it’ll mean we’re free.

I grab the backpack and sling it over my shoulders, then reach out for her. She latches her arms around my shoulders without hesitation and I lift her up, cradling her against my chest and looking around.

“Grab the bloody towel you were using earlier,” I say, bending my knees so she can reach the towel on the table. She grabs it and holds it in one hand. “Just follow my lead. If anyone asks, Doc is worried about infection and we’re going to get antibiotics from the hospital.”

“And the towel?” she asks, as I head out of the tent. I look around and answer in a quiet voice,

“In case anyone thinks you’re faking. It’s either the towel or we rip out a stitch.”

She’s quiet again, and stays like that as we make our way through the crowds. She even leans her head on my chest, which I’m sure adds to the effect. She looks weak already by me carrying her, even though it’s more a necessity than anything. When we come up on the gate, Maverick is up at the ticket booth. Fantastic. We don’t see eye-to-eye.

“This is going to be harder than I thought.”

Callie turns her head and makes a small sound before turning back towards my chest, “Stick to the plan. He’s not the brightest of bulbs.”

“But if there’s anyone to squeal, it would be the one who can speak pig,” I say back. She laughs softly, even though I wasn’t really trying to be funny.

“Just walk past him, if he says anything, show him my tail.”

“I don’t think it’s going to be that easy. And I’m not up for fighting him tonight,” I say.

“It won’t come to that, trust me,” she says, and she sounds so sure that I almost believe her.

Moving towards the gate, I do just as she told me, just as I planned. I head right for the parking lot. It won’t matter when we get out there that I don’t have a car, or that he might squeal.

We'll be out, and we'll have a head start. Maverick looks over at us, but doesn't say anything at first. Then I hear his gruff voice as we step past him.

"Hey! Where you go?"

I turn back towards him and lie like I never have before, "I figured Dalton told you. Callie was attacked during the first ten-in-one show, that's why he had you take over as the headliner. Doc stitched her up, but when he came back just now he says she'll need antibiotics to last through the night. I've got to get her to the hospital."

His beady eyes stare at me, and I guess that he only half understood what I was talking about. I watch as he sniffs the air, and Callie readjusts the towel on her thigh so the blood on the cloth is visible. He looks at her and the blood, sniffing again. I'm sure he can smell the blood, and I hope he can't tell that it's not bleeding at this exact moment. That might hurt our chances. He's quiet for a few seconds and then motions behind me.

"Backpack. What's inside?"

I turn my back to him and hear him grunt as he tries to find the zipper. I can feel Callie looking up at me, but I keep my focus over my shoulder as Maverick pulls the backpack open and looks inside. I close my eyes, hoping that he doesn't see the rations of food—too much for just one night, even for the two of us. I wonder if he smells it, but it's at the bottom, covered by the change of clothes and such. Thank god I remembered to bring the medical supplies. All he must see is the t-shirt and medical supplies, because he zips it back up and nods.

"You go now."

"Thank you. Be good. I'll see you in the morning," I say, once again lying through my teeth. But he doesn't know that, and I'm not sure I would have gotten away with anyone else guarding the ticket booth. I step past him once more and this time he doesn't move to stop us as

we cross the threshold of the gate, he doesn't say a word as I walk towards the parking lot and our ticket to a life free of this place.

Although, she never did say that she wanted to stay with me when we got out of here.

## Siren's Song

"Sebastian, hold still," I say, grunting as his chin turns away from me once more. It reminds me of the time he came over after a call and I had to stitch up his cheek. The man just can't seem to hold still, and for a man claiming to be so macho, he's a baby when it comes to pain. "It'll go a hell of a lot faster if you'd let me just do it all at once."

His dark eyes search mine, looking for me to tell him what to do, where to go from here. I've seen that look before. We haven't been together all that long, and I'm not sure he'd even know a real relationship if it shot him in the face with his own berretta, but I've thought in the past that he could be redeemed. Sure, he's got a bit of a dark past that led him to this dark present, but he hasn't learned anything from being here—me showing up here is the first proof that he just wants his old life back.

But there's no going back. That's why I'm testing him. He hasn't changed, hasn't learned anything from his experience here—attempting to escape would be definitive proof of that. So I've planned a few stops along the way, before I condemn him to stay here forever or whatever fate Dalton has lined up for him, I'll give him one more try at redemption. Because I believe in second chances.

"Just don't move. I promise, it will hurt a lot less that way," I say, wielding the scissors close to his chin again. He nods and I have to contort my face a bit to show concern. When his eyes close I position the scissors and ignore his protests and yelps as I cut straight across and each

stitch snaps apart. His lips, now free are bleeding a little bit, but not as much as they would've if I'd pulled them out one-by-one.

I step back and watch as he feels his mouth with his hands and I look around, trying to pretend I'm nervous as I peek out the tent we'd crashed. I know that we're in Satine's tent, and she won't be back for a while. But I have to play the part. My acting classes back in undergrad are paying off. Not that they weren't when I was conning people out of just about everything they owned, but it did pay off all my school loans. So that's something.

Sebastian breaks the silence in the tent after a few minutes, his voice so hoarse he sounds like a different person—a mixture of morning voice and strep throat. It looks like it pains him to speak, so I inch closer to listen to what he has to say. His voice is the least of his problems, I got a whiff of his breath. Part of me wants to sew his trap shut again. It's that mouth of his that got him in trouble in the first place. Men like him like to talk, like to brag about their deeds—good or bad.

“We have to get out of here.”

“Sebastian, what we need to do is call the police. We've got to warn someone about what's going on in here. If they come see it for themselves then they'll have to believe us.”

“We'll call after we're out. If the police show up, they'll know it was me,” he says, wiping his mouth on his sleeve and pacing around the tent. My eyes follow him from where I'm standing and a white piece of paper catches my eye. I don't remember seeing it before, but it's just sitting there on a table in plain sight, my name etched across the front in her handwriting. I glance up at Sebastian who is rifling through a drawer over by Satine's bed.

“What are you doing?” I ask, although I want to yell at him to respect her privacy.

“We need some sort of proof of what’s going on in here to bring to the police. If some lunatic came up to me and told me all of this dressed like me, I’d lock him up and call a shrink to pad the walls.”

He’s got a point.

“Sebastian, what are we going to tell the police?”

He stops rummaging through things and seems to think about it and then shakes his head, “We tell them what this place is doing to people.”

“And what’s that?” He looks away and I move over to him, placing my hand on his arm. He has to believe that I’m on his side or my plan won’t work. He has to believe that I believe him, and the first step is getting him to tell me everything he knows.

Sebastian looks at me and then sighs, “Rachelle, I don’t even know where to start.”

“Just tell me what happened, baby,” I say, sitting on the edge of Satine’s bed and letting him come to terms with telling me. I am his fiancé after all. Well, sort of. He did give me a ring and I did say yes. I just didn’t mention at the time that I am married. It’s not like I hated Sebastian, I mean, I didn’t care for him the way I do my husband, but we spent a lot of time with each other for a couple of weeks while I gauged on whether or not he’d be a good candidate to lure in. Getting engaged sort of just happened along the way.

“The last thing I remember from that night is going to the magic show. We had filed out with the rest of the crowd and I turned and you were nowhere to be found. I went looking, searching the crowd until I got to the snake show and then nothing. When I woke up, I was like this. And they read me their rules.”

“They have rules for kidnapping you?” I ask, raising my eyebrows, playing my part.



He nods, “Oh, they have rules all right. They make them sound so simple, but they’re all encompassing and don’t leave much room for loopholes, not that you’d survive getting away with a loophole anyway. And when you’re just waking up to this, not knowing where the hell you are and unable to ask questions, it was crazy.”

“What were the rules?”

### Rules

*1.) Do Not Try To Escape*

*2.) Do Not Tell Anyone What Happens Here*

*3.) Act Your Part Until Release Date*

*4.) Following These Rules Will Result In Early Dismissal*

*5.) Not Following These Rules Will Result In Punishment*

Sounds simple enough. Do what you’re told and get rewarded. Do the opposite and reap the consequences. My first week here, I told Dalton no. That’s something I will never dare do again, and he didn’t even have to touch me. He just left me in a room, by myself, for three days. No food, water, bathroom breaks. It sounds harsh, but in those three days something changed in me. I got clean, and realized why they chose me to save. It was the best and worst time of my life.

“They’re taking the law into their own hands, Rachelle, someone’s got to stop them,” he says, regaining my attention. But now he’s heading towards the door. I follow him, and as I walk past the table, I grab the envelope and tuck it into my sleeve so he won’t see it. I consider opening it now, but there’d be no explaining that away. I should have grabbed it sooner, while he was looking for something to take down this carnival. Not that Satine has anything like that just lying around. And if there is, she’s the only one who can see it.

“Then let’s get out of here so we can shut this place down,” I say, almost bumping into him as he stops short, peeking out the doorway of the tent. I can hear voices just outside the tent. One of them sounds like Cira. She’s looking for him—I didn’t let her in on this whole plan of mine. It was kind of last minute, I’m more of a planner, but I’ve resorted to the three strikes rule instead.

I pull on his hand and he looks at me. I nod towards the back of the tent and then let go of his hand as I return to the back where the bed is and open the flap that I’ve had to use today more than once. I pretend to tug it loose and slip out first. I stand on the opposite side and look back, thinking that he’s not going to follow me.

Maybe he caught on to me. He was a cop, maybe he pieced together that something wasn’t right in me showing up here tonight. Maybe I should have done this from a distance, with a disguise. My doubts take hold until I see his arm and head peek out from beneath the flap. He’s holding something, but I don’t see it right away. When I do, my need to read this letter tucked up my sleeve takes hold.

Satine’s deck of tarot cards.

She doesn’t go anywhere without them.

I’m not sure if I should worry or not. If anything bad were to happen, she’d see it coming. Wouldn’t she? She’s a tough woman too. I’ve seen her put a few people in their place over the past few years.

“What’s that for?” I ask once he’s outside, whispering because now the voices sound like they’re coming from inside the tent. Right on time too, we need to get on to step two. Which is going to tell me whether or not step three is even worth attempting. Something tells me that he’s going to need the push from step two to decide to break the first rule. He broke the second.

“Just in case. We might need it as leverage if we get caught. I know how attached she is to these. I’d hate to see them go up in flames.” He motions for me to follow him and I do, although I keep picturing him trying to burn the cards and instead lighting himself on fire. I’m not sure what, if any, magic lies within that deck and Satine, but I sure as hell wouldn’t be messing with it.

*Strike one, Sebastian... it’s not very nice to steal. Even worse to blackmail.*

“You think it’ll come to that?”

“I hope not, but getting out of here isn’t easy. I’ve tried.”

“You’ve tried to escape before? How?” I ask, hushing my voice as I speed up a little to catch up to his stride. We’re coming up on the scene I want Sebastian to witness, and I don’t want to miss his reaction. It is nice that he’s trying to get me out of here, even though I’m not the one who needs saving. It’s maybe the one redeeming trait so far, and if he didn’t bring it back to himself every time, I might feel a little bad for him. It really does feel like he loves me.

“I ran straight out—right from the ticket counter,” he says, and I see him wince. I want to know what they did to punish him for that one but I don’t ask. I’ll bet it’s a sensitive subject for him and if I press too hard he’ll start asking the questions. And we can’t have that.

“How’d they catch you?” I ask, after a few seconds of silence.

“I made a rookie mistake and went for a car instead of taking off into the woods.” I know he’s basing this on his work experience, but I think I would have made the same mistake. A car seems like the logical way to get as far away as possible, as fast as possible. Then you have to take into account people locking their cars, and not leaving the keys ready for the taking, and hotwiring the engine. By the time they notice you missing, you haven’t even found a car unlocked, or if you did, it wouldn’t leave enough time to hotwire it into helping you.

Before I can ask another question, Sebastian grabs my arm and pulls me into a crevice between two tents. Step two must be starting. It didn't take much convincing to get him to help me—something about scaring the shit out of people must make him all giddy inside. Jesse, the resident snake charmer—almost always equipped with one of his little friends around his neck, moves through the shadows—blending in with his dark clothes, dark hair and even darker Black Mamba.

His eyes are visible though, which still creeps me out—even though I've worked with the guy for years. Half of my jobs were to keep him out of trouble, after all, Satine and Dalton as his parents—boy is bound to be troubled in some way. Given he doesn't know who his father is. It's a secret Satine told me a few years ago, one she threatened me that if I told anyone, she'd turn me into a freak so ugly, repulsive and crippled that no one would ever be able to undo what she'd done. That was more than enough to shut my lips and keep them shut.

I mouth “Who's that?” to Sebastian and he shakes his head. I watch his face change as Jesse gets closer, watch his pupils dilate and the quickening of his heart rate. He's scared. As well he should be. Sebastian is trying to play it cool, be brave, and not let me know that he's close to pissing himself. Then again, before he came here, he was doing this to innocent people. Payback's a bitch.

He also doesn't know that I was there when Jesse threatened him the first time, hidden in the shadows. I had hoped that it would be enough to make him forget his life before the carnival, or at the very least diminished his need to get out. But he just kept coming, kept trying to get me to see that it was him until I couldn't act clueless anymore. That's when I knew he was up to something for sure.

“What’s wrong, girl?” I hear Jesse ask, and he sounds like he’s close. I close my eyes, trying to act scared. “You smell a rat?” he asks, and I’m just going to assume he’s talking to his snake, Sheila, and not to me. Although, I do smell a rat, and his breath is making me want to vomit.

I peek my eyes open and Sebastian is sweating, watching the alley—as if preparing himself for a fight. Yeah right. Doesn’t he know how fast that snake can move? Oh, right. He does, because Jesse told him. He wouldn’t get a hand on the charmer’s shirt before Sheila sunk her long fangs into it three or four times.

“Go ahead. Go get it,” I hear Jesse say and assume he let the snake down. Sebastian is stiff as a brick wall, and I can’t hear him breathing as we wait for what’s next. The kill. Step two, fear and guilt. Jesse scares the shit out of Sebastian, has since the beginning. Then again, I planned that too—Sebastian has always hated snakes. Ophidiophobia, as they call it. Told me a story once, about when he was a kid and at a friend’s birthday party they had a reptile show. He walked three miles to get home because he didn’t want to be anywhere near them.

He told me a lot of stories, and I told him a lot of mine. Maybe I did lose myself in the act a little along the way. He didn’t seem like a bad guy at first, his true colors came out after a few months of staying over his apartment and a lot of snooping. When Dalton or Satine would call, I’d snap right back into work mode, no matter where I was.

I wonder what’s going through his head in this moment—wondering if he’s going to die, if Sheila smelt him out and knew something was going on. I watch his face, and it twitches, by his forehead and chin. I’ll bet he’s wondering how much it’ll hurt, how much pain each bite will bring and how long he’ll survive the poison. That’s my guess. The almost silent hiss of her striking something is somehow magnified, and Sebastian’s eyes open and he leans his head back.

“Good girl, Sheila. Got yourself some dinner,” Jesse says, and I peek out. Sure enough, just a few feet from us she’s swallowing a mouse whole—the tail still showing between her teeth. Jesse looks up and winks at me, and I duck back into our hiding spot.

“They’re leaving,” I breathe, and I can see the tension in Sebastian leaving one muscle at a time. He wipes his sleeve across his forehead and peeks out himself. All that’s left to see is Jesse’s back as he walks farther away and Sheila following after him, a lump—still moving—inside her throat waiting to be digested.

Once he’s gone, I turn to Sebastian and his brow is furrowed as he watches the alley.

“Rachelle, I know why they picked me. I was an awful cop, and I did things I’m not proud of to get ahead. If we get out of here...”

I wait, here it comes. Guilt. This is the turning point, Sebastian. Have you learned your lesson yet? I can feel myself getting excited over that simple fact, that after all of this, I won’t have to carry out the remainder of my plan to get him two more strikes. Home is calling, and Sebastian is my ticket out of here and back home to my husband. Then again, what if we both make it past the gates? Will he want to continue our fake life together? That won’t do, not at all.

“If we get out of here, no one can ever know about any of this. I’ll be a better cop, and we’ll leave all this in our past.”

I can hear the incorrect buzzer sounding in my head. Strike two.

I would have taken: A.) If we get out of here, I’m going to the police to turn myself in, or B.) If we get out of here, I’m going to right all my wrongs and be a better man. Close, but no cigar. On to step three, which I don’t think is going to go very well judging based on this little scenario. He was afraid, but the fear didn’t bring out any guilt—nothing real.

“Come on, let’s get out of here. This place is freaking me out,” I say, stepping out of the hiding spot we’d been cramped into and looking around—trying to pretend I don’t know which way is out. Sebastian takes my hand and leads me in the opposite direction Jesse went, which is taking the long way. I can’t blame him for that though. When I first got here I met Jesse in a dark alley like this one night and I thought I was going to get murdered on the spot. And he didn’t even have a snake with him then.

I let Sebastian lead, and as he does I use my free hand to try and open the envelope tucked in my sleeve without him noticing. Something tells me that what’s inside is important, and I should read it sooner than later. Call it intuition—hers, not mine.

When I get it open, I let go of Sebastian’s hand. He looks back and motions me to follow him faster and I do, rubbing my shoulder from the force of him pulling me. Faking it, of course. I really do think I missed my calling as an actress. He turns away from me and I pull the letter out of the envelope and pull it out of my sleeve just enough that I can see Satine’s handwriting.

*I found what Dalton’s hiding.*

*Get out now. Something bad. Hurry.*

*Don’t wait for me. I won’t make it out.*

*10:00pm*

Shit. What time is it? I look around, trying to find a clock and find none. I push Sebastian to go faster and once we break out into the crowd of people perusing the carnival, I can see the clock up by the carousel. 9:33pm. The letter has me worrying about Satine. As much as I didn’t want to make friends with anyone here, I did like Satine. She seemed like a good natured person

stuck in a bad situation. She and Dalton were a bad mix from the beginning, and I can't help but wonder what'll happen to her. She was so kind to me.

"We have to make a run for it, the gate is right over there. I say we just go for it," I say, looking around and seeing that there's hundreds of people here. This was Dalton's plan all along. The gates will close at ten and whoever is still inside when the clock strikes—it won't be pretty. And I want to be long gone before then. Step three is going to have to happen fast. Make a break for it.

"You go," Sebastian says after a minute. And I look back at him, studying his face. He's staring off at the exit. Maverick is standing guard at the ticket booth. He's who caught Sebastian the first time he ran. There he goes again, putting me before himself. My safety above his. If he could be like this all the time, he'd be perfect.

"What do you mean? I'm not going to go without you, Sebastian."

"It's not safe for me this way. I'll find another way out."

"I'm not just going to leave you here," I say, touching his arm and looking up into his eyes. He used to tell me that he could never say no to my eyes.

"Rachelle, I won't make it."

"We have to try," I say, and he nods.

"Okay, fine. Let's go. When we get out, we'll run right into the trees. If we get separated, don't stop or slow down. Just keep going."

I nod my head and try to resist the urge to pull away when he kisses me. Between the kind of man that he is and his bloodied lips, him kissing me has me wanting to vomit. But I don't pull away, he does and he leans his forehead down to mine. As much as I did get to know him, I didn't want to *know* him.



“On three?” he says. “One, two, three.”

Sebastian takes off like a bat out of hell towards the exit. Maverick’s back is towards him, but at the commotion of a few people surprised to get bumped and pushed out of the way, he turns his massive bull-like head in Sebastian’s direction. He doesn’t let that slow him down, in fact he seems to run faster. Me on the other hand, I follow behind. I’ve never been much of a runner. When Sebastian makes it through the gates he looks back and sees that I’m falling behind.

“Rachelle! Come on, hurry!”

I keep running and then I slow, pretending—well, sort of pretending—that I’m winded and can’t run anymore. I place my hands on my knees, bending over to catch my breath.

“Rachelle, don’t stop. Keep going, you’re almost there!”

And then I start to laugh.

“Rachelle?”

“God I hate that name...” I say, still laughing as I straighten up and look at Sebastian—who’s looking between me and Maverick. Rachelle was my mother’s name, and every time I hear it, it makes me think of her. She was someone who would have received a free ticket in the mail to this place. My younger brother Timmy wouldn’t be alive today if I hadn’t gotten home from school when I did. He was floating face-down in the bathtub and my mother was in her room watching television.

“What are you doing?” Sebastian asks, and I hear Maverick laughing too.

“You failed Sebastian. Time and time again. Failed.”

“What are you talking about, Rachelle?” I’m so glad this place fixed me before I could end up like her.

“Will you please stop calling me that? That name is so annoying.”

“We don’t have time for this. Come on, let’s go,” he says, beckoning me to follow him. So far, Maverick hasn’t moved. He won’t until I tell him to. Sebastian won’t get far if he tries to run—especially with Maverick chasing him raging bull style.

“I’m not going where you’re going, Sebastian. In fact, you’re not going anywhere. You’ve broken every rule we gave you tonight, and failed at any hope of redemption. You’re staying here, probably for the rest of your miserable life.”

I nod to Maverick and he moves towards Sebastian.

Sebastian turns and runs off towards the woods, like we’d planned—but Maverick catches him no more than twenty feet away by tackling him to the ground. When they get to their feet, Maverick is holding Sebastian tight and dragging him back into the carnival. I watch, arms crossed across my chest as Sebastian is brought in front of me.

“Who are you? How could I have not known?”

“My name is Diane, sweetie, and you didn’t know because I didn’t want you to know. I brought you here to punish you for the kids you orphaned by murdering their parents, the innocent lives that didn’t own a gun until you planted it. The families that you ruined trying to further your career as a cop. Let’s see if you make detective now.”

“You brought me here? It was you all along?” he asks, and I can hear his voice getting louder with rage. He struggles against Maverick’s hold, but it’s futile.

“Yes, yes, make me out to be the bad guy all you want Sebastian, but all I did was show you who you really are. You’re a freak, and now I know that you will always be a freak.”

“You’ll pay for this,” he says, spitting on the ground in front of him.

“On the contrary, Sebastian. You were the ticket to my freedom. I’ve paid for my crimes, and now, I’m going to walk out that gate and watch as this whole place is overrun with people like you. I might even come visit as a paying customer someday.”

“You fucking bitch!” he yells and I smile as Maverick holds him tighter and forces him to his knees. I walk over to Sebastian and lean down so that my face is level to his.

“You know, I liked you better when you couldn’t talk.” I smile and look at the clock, 9:46pm. Well, would you look at that? It’s time for me to get going. “Maverick, honey, see that he doesn’t leave again. Cut off his feet if you have to.”

Maverick nods and Sebastian screams.

I, on the other hand, walk just outside the gate and look back on the life I’m leaving for a few seconds before reaching for the gate and closing it. Time’s up. 9:50pm.

Just ten more minute before we see everyone’s true colors. I lock the gate with my key and turn my back on the carnival, walking straight to the parking lot, where my car is waiting to take me far away from this place. Do I feel guilty about locking people in there? Yes. Do I want to go back inside to try to save them? Yes. But it’s too great a risk, and I know what this machine will do. Before Satine even asked me to look into what Dalton was up to, I knew. Hell, I helped him design what would happen to people. I gave him the idea to make the punishments fit the crime. An eye for an eye.

He showed me the punishment I had been in for before Satine stood up for me, and I remember looking at it one day and crossing off my own name and writing hers instead. Not that anything like that would’ve happened to her. She runs this place, and without her intuition, we wouldn’t know who to go after, who to target. We’d need to resort to newspaper articles and talk

around the town to get our freaks. And that just sounds like so much work, when her psychic abilities can do it in a second.

I never thought Dalton would see it, but when he did he wasn't mad. Instead, he seemed amused, and told me just how much she hated piercings and needles. He kept the drawing, and I haven't seen it since. But I've seen Dalton since. Keeping that from Satine was a tough one, because she found comfort in me and telling me about her worries with Dalton. She did tell me she thought he was having an affair. I didn't confirm or deny it, but I wasn't sure I could lie to her about that. Not that they're married or anything, he told me he didn't want that restriction.

I did feel guilty about it for a while, because I am married. But Dalton assured me it wasn't something we should feel guilty about. And Satine, when I told her I'd slept with another man, she told me that my husband would forgive me if I'm honest with him. It did make me feel better about it all. Although, I don't know why it happened. I feel no guilt as I walk away from the gate, trapping Dalton in there, Satine too and Jesse. They're people who have helped me get back on my feet—but the way they did, that's why I feel like they deserve what's coming to them. When this carnival implodes, I want them to be there for it.

When I got the letter from my husband late last week saying he would be coming home from overseas in just a couple months, I knew there was no choice but to do something drastic. As much fun as I've had here over the years, I do miss my husband. I can't wait to tell him that I'm clean and have been for almost as long as he's been gone. I keep picturing the look on his face when he sees me at the airport after four years apart.

My car comes into view and I hear the clock chime ten. I unlock my car, open the door and slip inside—facing the carnival. One by one, the lights go out—all fueling the machine inside the carousel until there's no light left except for it. I hear some screaming, my guess because the lights

went out, but then they stop when the carousel's music starts to play. I turn my car on and watch as two figures make their way towards the parking lot. I turn on my headlights and see Billy holding Calypso in his arms. I raise my eyebrow and he stops walking, squinting against the light. Callie's tail moves and she lifts a bloodied rag from her tail.

Well, now I have to help them. These two, have passed my test. The only reason they kept Callie here was because she was a moneymaker when it came to the Big-O. They were trying to replace her so she could be set free. And Billy, he's been here longer than I have and done everything he's ever been asked. They, in my opinion, are worthy of a second chance. I lean over and open the passenger side door, yelling for them to get in. The relief on Billy's face is visible—in fact, he might have another gray hair from just this encounter.

“Diane, we have to get out of here. Callie needs a doctor. If you can bring us to the hospital, I'll pay you everything I have.”

“Get in the car, Billy. You don't have to pay me. I'm leaving too. What happened to Callie?”

“Attacked by a rowdy customer, got a gash on her thigh that's hard to get to with the tail in the way,” Billy says, helping the resident mermaid into the back seat and sitting up front once he gets her settled. That's when he looks back at the carnival for the first time. “He's actually doing this.”

“You know what he's up to?”

Billy nods, looking back at Callie to make sure she's okay as I pull the car out of the spot its been in and head down the road away from the chaos behind us

“Just be glad that we're not in there right now, that's all I can say,” Billy says, looking into the side view mirror as we drive away.

“What’s going to happen?” Callie asks from the backseat, her voice so sweet and innocent, I wonder why they ever picked her in the first place. She doesn’t belong in a place riddled with rapists and murderers.

“The carousel is going to turn everyone into a freak,” Billy says.

“What do you mean everyone? I thought the carnival targeted only those that deserved it?” I say, gripping the steering wheel tight.

“Not this time. Dalton wanted it to target everyone.”

“How do you know all of this?” I ask.

“Because I built it for him,” Billy says, looking down. Callie’s hand rests on his shoulder and he rests his own hand on top of hers.

“It doesn’t make sense though, why would he want to target everyone this time?” I ask, because it just doesn’t sound like the system that he and Satine have been running all of these years. It doesn’t sound like something that he would do, but then again, I don’t know him very well. Billy doesn’t answer right away, and the car goes quiet except for the sound of my engine, then he speaks,

“Because we’re all freaks.”

I look over and he’s looking in the side view mirror, at Callie’s reflection. Something tells me that there’s something I’m missing, but I can guess that their relationship is a little strange to begin with given that she has flippers. He has a point though—who of us can say without a doubt that they are innocent and have never done one thing wrong?

If someone does, they’re lying.

And that alone, would make them one of us.

## Slither Away

“I need everything to go as planned,” Dalton tells me, for the thousandth time tonight. And I have to admit I’m having second thoughts about all this after Billy’s little outburst earlier when I hinted at something big happening tonight. It was weird, he said it wasn’t ready and ran off, then when I went to his tent a little later he was gone, and so was Callie. He ran for it, and I can’t tell if it’s just Billy overreacting like usual or if there’s something to worry about.

Dalton seems in his right mind to me, he seems confident that this’ll work. He does seem to be in his own little world though, I’ll say that much, I’ve asked a few logistical questions and I don’t even think he heard them. He just kept going on about how everything had to be perfect and that come ten o’clock, this place would be changed forever.

Maybe he is crazy. I do remember when I was younger my mom told me a story about how Dalton jumped off the Ferris wheel to get to her when she was upset. I've never really seen him as the thoughtful and caring type, but then again, that attention is spent on my mother. My upbringing was a lot of strange milestones. I went to school, snake in my pocket and a permanent transfer letter so I could attend wherever we travelled. I loved it, but then high school brought on the tough kids with nothing better to do and mom thought it was a good idea to be homeschooled from then on. I still don't agree with the decision and it's been three years.

"What do you need me to do?" I ask, leaning against the side of the carousel as he fiddles with the lock, making sure it's locked before he starts walking back towards his tent. I follow alongside him, trying to gage based on his responses how prepared he is for what might happen or what might go wrong tonight. Billy said the machine wasn't ready yet, but what if Dalton finished it? Then we have nothing to worry about and Billy is just being Billy—though he'll get punished for leaving, so will Callie.

That'll be the worst part of this. I'll have to be the one punishing them. Billy can take it, but Callie? She's so young and beautiful, so innocent and I don't think that she'd make it. Chances are Billy would take her punishment for her though, which may kill him, but he'd do that for her. He tries hard, but he's pretty transparent when it comes to his feelings for her. Boy fell for her within a week of her being here, didn't even give anyone else a chance to get close to her.

"I need you to stand by me during all of this, Jesse," he says, and I look over at him as we walk the main path back towards his tent. "This is going to be the start of something new and revolutionary, and I'll need someone to know how to work this machine when I retire and pass the torch to the next generation."



“You want me to take over the carnival?” I ask, raising my eyebrow and slowing my walk a bit. Well, that came as a surprise. I don’t want to say no to him, but at the same time, I don’t know if I want this place. This carnival is all I’ve ever known. I was born here, raised here, learned so much here. But to run it?

“Yes, you will be my successor,” Dalton says, and smiles, stopping and turning to me. He grips my shoulders and looks at me, “Think of the legacy we will leave, Jesse. Consider it.”

I look at him and nod, smiling. When you put it that way—even if this carnival crashes and burns tonight or fifty years from now, no one has ever known a place like this one. It’s never been done. And we’ve never been caught.

“I’m in,” I say, and his hand grips mine in a powerful handshake.

“Very well, let’s get going. There’s not much time left before we have to get back to the carousel and ready ourselves. I need to grab those papers I told you about and then I’ll show you how I set everything up.”

“Sounds good to me,” I say, and we both keep walking. My eyes scan the crowd around us and it gets me wondering how many of these people deserve this fate. My guess is most. Dalton once said we’re all freaks, because we’ve all done something deserving punishment. It could be as simple as pushing your sister off the swing so you can have a turn or as complex as a father of four that murdered his wife and made them all watch. These people, no one is innocent. I can’t say that I am either, but I’ve never laid a hand on anyone. It’s always been my snakes.

Dalton slips into his tent, leaving it open for me to follow in and my eyes adjust to the darkness of the room while Dalton stumbles to find the lamp. I look around and stop as I see movement in the back.

“Dalton. We’ve got company.”

He flicks the switch and Maverick and Sebastian are in the corner. Sebastian is tied up and gagged—he somehow managed to get his lips free, my guess is with Diane’s help. That must have hurt like a bitch. Got what’s been coming to him. He’s been begging for it since he got here. The only reason his lips were stitched closed in the first place was his own fault—some people just can’t follow rules.

“Well, well, what do we have here, Maverick?”

The bull-man steps forward and nods, the horns on his pointing to us, “Mute ran. Need Punish.” He’s loyal, I’ll give him that, but he’s just muscle—there’s nothing going on in that horned head of his.

Dalton laughs a bit, a dark, ominous laugh that even I have to admit sounds a bit maniacal. He walks up to Sebastian, who is looking between us both. He doesn’t look afraid. He looks defeated. His shoulders are slumped, he looks tired, and I’m guessing he found out his fiancé worked for us. His day is about to get worse too.

“Oh Sebastian, all you had to do was play by our rules for a little while and then you could have gone back to your life, but you couldn’t do that, could you? You just had to break my rules and try to make us out like the villains. But are we?” Dalton asks, pulling up a chair and sitting in front of Sebastian, who Maverick is forcing to look up at him.

Sebastian makes a gargle noise from his gag and Maverick pulls him back a few inches.

“Think about it Sebastian. Think about why you’re here. Think *really* hard. It’s because we caught you before the police did. If anything, we saved you from spooning with someone you put away for the rest of your life. That is, if they didn’t kill you first.” Dalton pauses, letting that sink in. “This carnival isn’t a prison. You don’t have chains here. We give you rules to live by while you’re here, if you do, you get out, if you can’t, well...here we are.”

Sebastian's eyes narrow. He thought he was above punishment, above the law. He accused us of taking the law into our own hands, but that's rich coming from a dirty cop.

"I believe Jesse warned you about what would happen if you were to try anything again," Dalton asks, raising an eyebrow at Sebastian. The mime nods and lowers his eyes. He knows what's going to happen. He's accepted it. I can see it on his face, just pure defeat.

"Maverick, why don't you help Jesse get Sebastian to his tent so we can deal with this problem," Dalton says, getting to his feet and brushing off his suit like he got it dirty talking to Sebastian. I look at the mime and he lets Maverick drag him to his feet and push him out the door of the tent. I go to follow and Dalton calls my name. I turn.

"Quick and quiet. Then meet me by the carousel."

I nod, "I'll be there in ten minutes max."

I slip out of his tent and follow behind Maverick as he drags Sebastian to his death. I don't have a choice, do I? Before, I thought the threat of death would scare him enough to stop whatever he was up to. But it wasn't. And now, if I let him go, he'll bring the police right to our doors. If I just injure him, Dalton will look down on me. If he's dead, then our problems are over. My tent, only a few down from Dalton's comes into view and I stop Maverick from entering first. My snakes will attack if someone other than me comes in, unless of course that someone is with me. Then I can calm them down.

I don't remember how old I was when I first started playing with snakes. My mom said I was too young to remember anyway, a crawling age. She said she set me down on the grass just for a minute while she set the table and when she went to pick me up, she almost dropped me because the snake clutched in my hand almost stopped her heart. She didn't discourage it though, because she knew how much a part of my life they would end up being.

When I step inside, I turn on the light and greet my many pets hanging all over, and a few in cages. A coat rack by the door makes a perch for Hades, one of my first snakes, eight feet long with black and red designs all down his back. A coral snake, when I got him he was only a few inches long and fit in my pocket. I run my hand down his back as I walk past my door guardian and say hello to the rest, including Sheila, who is curled up on my bed, eyes open as she watches me. I lean down and she slides up my shoulders, making herself comfortable and wrapping her tail around me. I pet her and smile as her tongue tickles my cheek.

“We’ve got work to do, girl,” I say, turning back towards the door and telling Maverick to come in with Sebastian. He does as asked and drops Sebastian in the middle of the room. “That’ll be all, Maverick. I’ll take it from here.”

Sheila looks at the both of them and then starts to slide herself down my arm towards Sebastian. She knows this scene. She’s seen it before. A few months ago we had a similar circumstance with a fire breather and although it started as just a punishment for breaking a rule, she ended up dead because Sheila was protecting me. They all were. Although not all my snakes are poisonous, they are all fatal when they feel threatened. Fire breather thought she’d protect herself by spitting some fire at me. She managed to singe up my arm, but before I could react, my pets did for me. The amount of toxins in her body killed her almost instantly, but I’ve never seen that kind of pain in my life.

I’m hoping that Sebastian will take this like a man. I’m not sure I want to witness him struggling to breathe, seizing and foaming at the mouth while screaming in pain and bleeding out every orifice. It’s not pretty.

“You should have listened,” I say to him, and he doesn’t look up from his knees. He knows he should have listened. There’s nothing left to say. I reach down and pull the gag out of his mouth,

forcing his chin up so he has to look at me. “This is going to hurt. But it will be quick. Don’t leave this tent.”

He nods and I hesitate. I have my orders, but if I do this, the scars I’ve made for accidents turn into premeditated acts of murder. I’m not a murderer. I’ve been called one since the first situation with my snakes attacking, and I defend to this day that I’m not a murderer. But if I do this, that all changes. And if I don’t, I don’t know how Dalton would punish me—but I can guarantee I’d be out any hope of running this place someday. Even if I did want it.

I take a few steps back and Sheila lets herself drop from my arm to the ground as I do, slithering towards him and arching her head up. Her tongue flicks out every few seconds, smelling him, trying to sense his threat. He looks at her now, waiting. I kneel beside her and run my hand along her smooth black scales.

“Sheila, strike,” I say, and don’t bother to look as I hear her start. I leave the tent, and with each step I take I hear Sebastian scream. I almost feel bad for him. Almost. But he brought himself here. He forced my hand. We had no choice. My mother’s voice echoes in my head that there’s always a choice. But I weighed my options and this was the only real choice. I take out my knife from my pocket and flick it open, pulling up my sleeve on my left arm and looking at the three little cuts on my forearm. Small little reminders of the people who have died at my hand. I make a forth by pricking the blade in and I roll down my sleeve before I have the chance to see the blood.

Four people. Including the mime now. The first was an accident. But I still feel it’s necessary to include it. He was a friend, someone I’d grown up with and he made the mistake of thinking that my snakes were as welcoming with everyone as they are with me. Before I could stop it, Hades had bitten his neck. The neurotoxin had gotten into his bloodstream faster than I could grab my anti-venom. He stopped breathing before I could save him.

The second, a customer that stumbled into my tent—by mistake or on purpose, I’ll never know. I found him a couple hours later, sprawled across the floor. Poor guy shit himself too. I had to have someone come clean it up. It was disgusting. Third was the fire breather. And forth, Sebastian. If I take over this carnival, how many more marks will I have to make on my arm? How many is too many? One? Fifty? I’m not cut out for this life, and I keep telling myself that one day I’ll leave and go to college. But I’m still here.

As I walk back towards the carousel, I rub at my arm where I pricked it and Sebastian’s screams grow distant, and then I can’t hear them at all. I wonder how many times she struck him, how much venom she gave him. How fast his body shut down. And that makes me sound sadistic, but it’s just curiosity. I’ve been studying these snakes since I got them, and I love to watch them work—just not on people.

I’ve had all these snakes since they were babies, and people tell me all the time that they can’t be trained. I beg to differ. Other countries train cobras to dance, I can train mine to listen to me. During my show, I show off their talents and show the audience how quick they can strike, and how tight their grip can be. I love seeing the admiration in the audience’s eyes once they believe that their lives are not in danger. Of course, then everyone wants to hold and touch them, and there are only a few of them that will let people they don’t know do that.

“Jesse, have you seen your mother?” I hear a voice ask, and I turn to see Cira standing a few feet away. She’s wearing another of her skintight jumpsuits that she wears for her acrobats show, and way too much make-up. She also comes up to my stomach, she’s so damn short.

“Not since before we opened, why?” I ask, trying to read her expression. She looks worried for some reason, and the fact that she’s asking about my mother starts to worry me.

“I just stopped by her tent to talk to her and the place has been tossed, Jesse. Papers, books, her things just thrown everywhere and she was nowhere to be found.”

I don’t waste any more time by talking to Cira, instead I find myself rushing back towards my mother’s tent—which is right beside mine. Why hadn’t I checked in on her after the whole Sebastian thing? I do check in on her a few times every night just in case. She’s capable of protecting herself most of the time, but I can’t help but feel like I need to protect her. Lord knows Dalton won’t.

When I step through her door, I look around and Cira wasn’t exaggerating. The place is a mess. I look around and pick a few things up, trying to get a hint of who did this. I can pretty much guarantee it wasn’t my mother, she’s such a clean freak—always has been. She always said dirt and disarray messed with her readings. With no sign of her, or any clues, I know I have to go to Dalton. This whole plan of his is going to have to be put on hold if we can’t find her.

I make it to the carousel without any interruptions this time, because I don’t stop to listen if anyone calls my name. If something’s happened to my mother, I’ll never forgive myself. I tried to convince her to let me keep Hades in her tent but she refused. She said snakes were a bad omen and would scare her clients away. As right as she may be about scaring people, I’ve never seen snakes as a bad omen. She’s seen it her entire life.

Dalton is nowhere to be found when I get there—and I realize it’s been more than ten minutes. He’ll be angry about that. He’s a very punctual man. But I couldn’t care less right now. The door on the side of the carousel is unlocked and I pull the handle of the door and it pops open, allowing me entrance. I propel myself inside, closing the door behind me and crawling up to the center of the carousel. I see Dalton sitting at the desk before I’m out of the tunnel and I call his name.

“In here, Jesse,” he says, without turning. He’s doing something on the computer screens, and I can only assume it has something to do with this machine he’s going to premier tonight.

“Dalton, my mom’s tent has been gone through and I can’t find...mom! Dalton, what the hell is this?” I yell, angry as I get to the end of the tunnel and see my mother tied up beside where Dalton is sitting. I get to my feet and rush to her, readying myself to untie her.

“I wouldn’t do that, Jesse,” Dalton warns me, but I don’t listen. I tug at the rope around her wrists and feel myself being pulled away as Dalton attempts to stop me. I push him up against the wall and hold him there—he’s not stronger than me. Not by a long shot.

“Why is she here? Why is she tied up?” I ask, and I can feel the wildfire in me blazing, fueling my anger. And he laughs. He deserves the bloodied lip I give him. “Answer me.”

“You had your doubts about running this operation, Jesse, but look at you now. Look at this anger, hatred, power—use it!”

I almost growl at him and I throw his skinny body towards my mother, “Untie her. Now.”

“And why would I do that? She wants to stop me, wants to stop the plan we’ve been working on for all this time. Jesse, don’t you want to know what this machine can do? Don’t you want to change the world?” And now I think he is going insane—why would he ever think that this was going to be okay with me? My mother is all I’ve ever had. I don’t have siblings, I don’t have a father, all I have is her, and I’d never hurt her.

“Not like this,” I say.

“Think of it, the three of us could run this machine from in here and watch as it works. Watch as it brings out the worst in people and punishes far more than we could ever imagine. This could change everything, Jesse. And we’ll be the ones to do it. Then your mother and I will retire



and you'll be the one running things. You could carry on the legacy we'll leave," Dalton says, on his knees as he stares up at me. He's dreaming, he has to be.

"Untie her," I say again, and he moves closer to me. I reach down and grab a small dagger from my boot. I don't have my snakes to defend me here, and for once I'm glad I have a plan B. I hold the dagger out towards him and Dalton stops moving, looking at it.

"Jesse, don't be stupid."

"I should tell you the same, I told you to untie her. We're leaving. Now."

"There's not enough time. You'll never make it out," Dalton says, and I can see a darkness in his eyes and face that wasn't there before. I've never feared Dalton, if anything, I've admired him most of my life. I never understood what people were talking about when they said he scared the shit out of them, but I see it now. The darkness underneath that he must have been hiding from me all this time.

"We'll take our chances. There's no way we're staying here with you," I say, and keep the dagger steady as he starts to untie my mother, taking her gag out first.

"Jesse, we're safer in here. The machine won't work on us in here."

"You're on his side?" I ask her, the dagger lowering. "Do you even see what he's doing here? Hundreds of lives are going to be ruined tonight if he succeeds. You want to be part of this?"

"No, Jesse, no. I don't want to be part of this, but you can't be out there when it happens. We can't know what will happen to you."

"I'd rather take my chances out there than be trapped in here with him. If you want to stay, fine, but I'm getting the hell out of here while I still can." I say, tucking the dagger back into my boot and waiting for her to change her mind. Dalton keeps picturing us as a big, happy family running this operation, but we're not. This is not what families do. I look at my mother and she's

shaking her head, her brown hair swaying from side-to-side as she attempts to warn me. Staying here would guarantee my safety according to them, but if this is what this place is going to turn me into one day, I want no part of it. Without saying anything else, I turn and crawl back down the tunnel.

“Jesse, no, don’t go out there!”

“Let him go,” I hear Dalton say and I push through the door, leaving it open as I look at the clock and take off in a run towards my tent. I can’t just leave without my snakes. They’re part of me. I have time. I know I do.

When I get to my tent, Hades hisses at how I enter. I’m sure he was ready to strike an intruder and then saw it was me. I grab him and let him wrap himself around my arm, and I grab Sheila from the bed, having to step over the body of a dead mime in the process. I feel a pang of guilt and groan at my conscious. I grab a sheet from my bed and drape it over Sebastian’s body on my way out. I wish I could take the others, I really do, but Sheila and Hades add enough weight to me. If I can, I’ll come back for the others.

I run out of my tent and the two snakes wrap tighter around me, holding on so they don’t fall off. They must know something is off, because they don’t seem to question my running or squeeze me to try and get me to slow down. They just curl close to me, letting me run without distraction.

The people around me are oblivious to what’s about to happen. Customers and freaks alike, all laughing and enjoying their blooming onions and cotton candy, no idea of what’s to come. They stare as they see me running, make comments about my snakes and I tune them out as much as possible as I head for the gate. But when I see it, it’s closing. I run faster and this time Hades gives my arm a tight squeeze of protest, but he doesn’t understand what this’ll mean for us.

“Open the gate!” I yell, and I see that no one is guarding the gate. Damn it. I try to pull the wrought iron apart, pulling at the handle and nothing. It’s locked from the outside. Shit. I pull out my key and reach my arm through the bars, trying to maneuver the key into the lock I can’t see. The clock starts to chime and I look back, just in time to see the lights starting to go out. By the tenth chime, this place will be chaos. People start screaming.

Three. Four. I fiddle with the key some more, and almost give up until I feel around with my fingers and find the keyhole. Seven. Eight. I fit the key into the hole and turn it as the tenth chime sounds and there’s silence. I consider that Dalton’s plan didn’t work, that his machine was a dud, and then I feel it. I almost scream as the pain in my head threatens to split my skull, and I push the gate open. My snakes hiss in my ears and squeeze my arms as I slam the gate behind me and look as my arms start to change, snake scales appearing one by one over my skin. I turn the key, locking the gate once more and run. I’m too late, but if I can get farther away, maybe it won’t be so bad.

My legs carry me a few steps and then feel like jelly beneath me and I fall. Sheila and Hades don’t seem to like that, and hiss at me again, showing their fangs. I look back and hear nothing but screams. I see people banging on the gate, trying to climb over each other to get out, but it’s no use. They’re trapped. I did that.

I pick myself up again, trying to steady myself as I walk away from the carnival. My arms are now covered in the scales, along with my hands and fingers. I wonder if that’s the extent of it, but something tells me that I didn’t get off that easy. When I stumble to my car, I curse at my reflection. I look more like my pets than ever, the scales have made their way up my neck to my jaw and I pull down my shirt to see my chest covered too in these skin-colored scales. If I had been in there longer, what would have happened to me? Would I have fully turned into a snake?

I pull my car door open and slip into the driver's seat, letting Sheila and Hades move about and leaning my head back against the head rest. I look around and my vision, snake-like, is becoming more acute. Everything is sharper, shapes, movements, my reflexes faster. I can't stop it, but I can't help but wonder how far this will go. How much will I change because of this godforsaken machine? Would I have been fine if I had stayed in the carousel? Is my mother okay? Or did something like this happen to her as well? I left the door to the carousel open, would that have changed them too?

Oh god. I look back and consider returning for my mother—maybe I'm not too late. If she stayed in the carousel she should have been safe. Damn it, if I had just been thirty seconds faster in my running I would have made it out fine.

I reach out and break the air freshener off my vent with my surprising grip and I bring it towards my face. I don't smell anything. I close my eyes, focusing on my nose as I breathe in again and there's nothing. The smell of pine is nowhere to be smelt. Then it hits me. Snakes don't smell with their noses. I open my mouth and close it, not wanting to do that just yet. I look over and Sheila is staring at me.

"What are you looking at?" I ask her. She cocks her head to the side. "Just go back to sleep. We've got a drive ahead of us." Shocking me, she rests her head down on her tail and her eyes close. I look behind me and Hades has done the same thing in the backseat. This is amazing. I've always wanted to know what it was like to be a snake, and this is incredible.

A flash of white catches my eye in the rear view mirror. I tilt it down towards me and see that a piece of my skin is sticking out. I reach up and tug at the white film and groan as I pull it and it the top layer of my skin sheds right off. I make a face in the mirror, showing my teeth, and my canines show before I close my mouth, scared of what I might see. I'm shedding my own skin.

I've picked up enough replicas of my snakes over the years to know that much. The hollow casing would crunch under my feet as I woke up in the morning, or I'd find it hidden behind something they used to help get it off.

I start up my car and I feel the vibrations everywhere—what was once noticeable occurrence now feels like an earthquake beneath me. I look over and Sheila hasn't moved. This is when she gets into my lap because she doesn't like to be on the vibrations, but she sleeps still. I call her name. Nothing. I do it again.

“Sheila, wake up.”

Her eyes open and her tongue darts out as she looks around once more and then makes her way over onto my lap. She curls up in my lap and her head moves about, her tongue smelling me all over. She senses the changes in me.

When her face comes up to meet mine, she seems to just look at me. I open my mouth just enough for my own now narrowed tongue to slip through my lips in her direction. She mirrors me and I close my eyes. I smell everything, Sheila, Hades, the exhaust, the food rotting beneath my seat and pine from the air freshener.

I open my mouth once more, this time looking at my elongated canines. They're long and pointed and I wonder if they'd pierce through flesh, like a snakes would. I debate trying it on myself and decide against it, not knowing what might happen if I do. I look at my arm and the four lines are now replaced by four black scales. I examine them and then I look up, sensing someone coming closer. I see the girl before she gets to my car. A once beautiful blond, a customer that now had burns all over her, scars and blisters.

She knocks on my car window, “Please, help me!”

I reach over and unlock the passenger door without a second thought. Sheila looks over at the girl as she gets inside and then moves to the back of the car. The girl doesn't seem afraid of her or me, in fact, she seems more afraid of herself and her own reflection.

"We need to get out of here, quick, you have no idea what's going on in there. It's crazy!" she says, and I look at her burns, watching as new ones form without any help and she cries out. She must have caused a fire of some sorts, which would be the only reason why the machine would choose this fate for her. She'll never be the beautiful girl she once was, this is her punishment.

My tongue darts out and I smell the charred flesh, blood and burning hair that is now filling my car. But there's something else that has me watching her. There's something deep within me that can't look away.

"What are you doing? Come on, we have to get out of here!" she said, turning towards me and I don't know what comes over me but I jump at her and I can feel my fangs sink into her neck before she can push me away. When I pull back she's not moving, she's gasping for air and looking at me. I touch my mouth and feel the wetness of her blood. She stiffens and I can see her veins beneath her skin filling with a blackness until it gets to her face and her body goes limp.

What have I done?

My arm burns and I hiss as I look at it, a fifth scale burning into my skin. Something tells me it's one of many, many more to come if I live on like this.

## The Prestige

I've never been a very religious man, but my father was, and when he told me the secrets of the carnival, he told me it would one day be mine and I had to run it right. He sat me down in a rocking chair outside his tent and had me practicing card tricks while he peeled potatoes for dinner that night.

"This here carnival is one of God's secrets," he told me, rocking back and forth as the peels fell to the floor and his lap. His gray hair and beard were speckled with grime and dirt of a man that sees hard labor on a daily basis, and his hands, calloused and cut up just like I always remember them being. "He thinks we're doing right in here, that's why he looks the other way."

"What do you mean, dad?" I asked, flipping the cards in my hands like I'd been practicing. The magician there, The Amazing Thantos, had been showing me new tricks with close-up magic. It was okay, just not my style. I wanted to do bigger tricks with props when I had my own show. I'd been designing them in a notebook I kept under my bed, making tweaks as I tried things out with Satine.

"We're the good guys, Dalton. You, me, the family we have here. We were chosen to rid this world of evil everywhere we go. It's why he made this carnival in the first place."

He was still making no sense, but I knew better than to tell him that. He didn't take kind to criticism. And he hated having to repeat himself.

"How do we rid evil here?" I asked, and he stopped peeling the potato in his hand and looked up at me. I wondered if I asked the wrong question, or if he thought I somehow knew what he was going to say, but he answered with a serious tone to his voice.

"We find the worst in each town we're in, and they become one of us. They think they've gotten away with everything they've done bad all their life, and then they meet us and see the power of God in what we do to them."

"Is that why we have so many freaks here?"

"Yes son, there's a little freak in all of us."

It all made sense to me then, and I never felt guilty or even questioned the morals I was being taught. Bad people get punished, it's what prison did, what karma bit and my dad believed that we were doing the work of God. I was never very sure about that last part, but everything else he said hit home with me. When he asked me to take over the carnival, I jumped at the chance to prove that I could keep it going. I wanted to do more, be better at choosing who we targeted, and my dream was to be able to find a way to punish them in a way that fit their crime—even if I didn't know it from Satine's research.

Tonight, my dream comes true. She sees this machine as evil, but it's all I've ever wanted. Billy had been trying to figure out how to pinpoint the machine on a particular person—such as one of the targets—but it was unpredictable, volatile in its focus. That's when I got to thinking about whether it could target everyone. It's why I chose to use it knowing it wasn't ready for individuals—I'm ready to test the masses.



“I hope this whole plan of yours blows up in your face,” she says, and that catches my attention. I turn towards her once more and she’s holding the crystal around her neck and looking at the clock. She looks like she’s praying—but I know she’s more spiritual than religious. The clock drives my attention now, Satine and her worries can wait until this is over. We’re down to the last few minutes. At the stroke of ten the carousel will suck up all the energy within the gates and use it for the machine.

“It’s almost time, my love,” I say, looking over at Satine, who is untied and yet hasn’t stopped sobbing since Jesse ran off a few minutes ago. She should have made him stay, there’s no way he will get out in time. She cries for her son, I mourn my successor. He was the perfect choice, so eager to help whenever I needed anything done. So enthusiastic about getting me to trust him and prove his worth. He was perfect.

As for Satine, my blubbing mess sitting against the wall a few feet away, telling me she hates me every few minutes, she’ll change her mind once this is all over. We’ve been growing apart for years now, but this will bring us together again. Because it’ll be just us, no more distractions. The clock ticks down, my timer getting closer to zero as I wait. The excitement is growing inside me. All of my plans and dreams tonight come true. She’s fighting it now, but she won’t for long. This has been our dream together since the beginning.

We used to be so good together, as if we were on the same wavelength, then one day that all stopped. It was back when we first took over this carnival and became partners in crime, working together to keep the carnival running at first and then later making it better. I miss how we were before this place, but not enough to let it go. This carnival is my life, and it will be my legacy to pass on to a successor, since I don’t have a son.

I close my eyes and remember back to one of our first shows, back when she was my assistant.

“Satine, I would like you to become something else for me. Can you do that?”

She nodded.

“On the count of three, I want you to become a human Barbie doll. Okay? Are you ready? One, two...three!”

On three the lights went out all around us and all that was left was a spotlight on the stage—on Satine as her body jerked and twisted. She seemed to stand up straighter, push her chest out, and she smiled unblinking at the audience in front of her. She didn’t move. The look on her face was priceless. The smile was way too much—so happy that there’s something that’s got to be wrong. And her eyes. I hadn’t seen her blink once. She was really getting into this.

“Did you all know that Barbie’s head comes off? My sisters would kill me if I popped their dolls heads off...” I walked over and stood behind Satine, my hands cupping around her jaw so that my fingertips were almost touching her lips.

“Shall we have another countdown then? Three...”

“Two...One!” the audience finished. Another popping sound and the spotlight shone only on Satine’s head, which I held. Her face hadn’t changed. In fact, it looked downright scary now. Her eyes were glossy, and the corners of her lips were twitching. When the lights went out, we kissed on stage until the applause died down and we’d take our bows.

We practiced that routine for hours every day until we got it right. We’d amaze the crowds and there was no trick that could beat it. It was perfect, and it was all her idea. She knew it would be successful before she showed me, and even gave me other trick ideas along the way. What more could a man want from their best friend?

Nowadays, it's hard to find a good assistant. Someone who is in-tune with you enough to know your movements and be able to read them and respond instead of just acting out her part. Satine made my tricks come to life, they were realistic and believable with her working with me. I wanted nothing more than to keep working with her, but she wanted more and my show suffered when she left it. But I could never tell her that.

"How could you not be enjoying all of this, Satine?" I ask her, "Like we use to."

"I don't know who you are anymore, Dalton," she says, not even looking at me as she says this. "The Dalton I know would know when to stop this craziness before people get hurt."

"And what's that supposed to mean?"

"You're not the man I fell in love with all those years ago," she says, this time looking up so I can see the purple glint in her wet eyes. But there's an anger there today that I haven't seen in a very long time.

"Because of all this?" I ask her, motioning around us. "Satine, we're sitting in one of the most brilliant inventions ever known to man. When this starts up in just a few minutes, we'll be able to sit back and watch what we've been working so hard to do over the years happen in just a few moments. Doesn't that excite you?"

"Why would it excite me? Jesse is out there, because of you Dalton. Whatever happens to him is on you, and I'll never forgive you for it." She turns her head away from me then, her eyes on the tunnel leading out of the carousel. I wonder if she's thinking about going out there after him—which would be stupid, and I wouldn't allow it. She needs to be here with me. She's always been by my side. And if she didn't leave with him, chances are she's not going to at all. She's tied to this carnival just as I am, and our fate rests in this machine. If it works, we'll change the world. If it doesn't, she'll forgive me for Jesse leaving.

He's a good kid, but he's got a temper on him that I have to assume came from his father—because Satine's never been much for violence. She's more of the sit back and watch as everyone kills each other type. Which could explain why she's not as excited as I am that this is going to happen. Soon each and every person out there will pay for their wrongdoings—everyone who has ever called one of us a freak will feel what it's like to be society's freak. Every rapist, murderer, racist and pedophile, liar, cheat, drug addict and his dealer will be seen by the whole world for what they are. Freaks. No one is without sin.

“This is going to hurt people, Dalton. When we hand chose them all, and kept a close eye on four or five at a time it made sense. We made sure they followed the rules and lived out their punishments, but this...” she trails off, looking at the monitors showing video of people on the carousel and around the carnival. “There's hundreds of people here, and when the police coming looking for them, looking into what happened to them, then we're going to prison for the rest of our lives.”

“We're not going to prison, my dear,” I say, smiling and turning back towards the videos. One is showing a little kid getting onto one of the horses of the carousel we've named Caramel. I never really thought about what this machine would do to kids. I guess we'll just have to find out—they can't have done so much wrong in their lives to deserve the punishment this machine is going to place on people.

And once the machine gets going, the fireworks begin.

“Oh, my poor baby...” she says, her voice quiet as tears appear in her eyes once more. “What's going to happen to him? He never meant to hurt anyone. He feels guilty for all that's happened. He's never killed a man on purpose...what will this cursed machine do to him?”

She sounds desperate, and I bite my tongue at first, wondering if I should tell her or keep my secret to myself. Before I choose, I see that she's reading my face. It's too late.

"You did something, didn't you? What did you make him do?" she asks, getting to her feet and stalking towards me. The anger is back, replacing the disappointment and resentment from just a moment ago. She's looks like a tiger, ready to strike at any sudden movement of its prey. Telling her that I asked her son to kill a man will not go over well in any scenario, so I take a deep breath and let it out, composing an answer.

"He's not as innocent as you think he is, Satine."

My cheek stings where her palm hits and I glare at her.

"I had planned for him to be in here with us, he would have been safe in here but you let him run off," I say, and this time I catch her hand before it gets to chance to hit its mark. She struggles against my grip and I throw her down to the ground. She glares up at me, a fire in her eyes that I've never seen before.

"How dare you try to blame this on me? He's out there because you dragged me in here and didn't like that I was going to shed some sanity on this predicament."

"Ha! Sanity, you?" I say, laughing.

"You should talk, do you even understand what you're about to do?"

"I understand, without voices in my head, mind you..."

She looks hurt by my snarky comment, and I'm not sure if I took it too far or not. I've been the only person she's ever told about hearing her mother and her grandmother in her head. She used to think that she was going crazy, but they only appear when she needs them and she's learned to cope with their chattering. She tunes them out most of the time, but I still catch her responding to them from time to time. I wonder what they tell her, but I'm sure it's along the same lines as

when they were alive: you're doing this wrong, you deserve better than Dalton, you know what to do...blah, blah, blah.

They never liked me, thought I was too conceited and didn't spend enough time with Satine. I never adored them either. I thought they looked down on everyone and meddled in things that weren't their business—much like they still do.

"You know, I knew that you'd use that against me someday. I never should have told you that," she says, and her hands her hands are shaking.

"Satine, I'm just trying to tell you that I'm not insane. This is going to work and all will be punished. They'll all be freaks. We'll pack up and be gone by morning, but they..." I point to the computer screens, "They'll have to go back to their lives as outcasts, showing people just how corrupted they are."

"And Jesse?"

"If he made it out, should be fine," I say, avoiding the real answer, even though I know that she'll pull it from me anyway.

"And if he didn't?"

"He'll still be Jesse, I can't know what the machine will decide his fate should be," I say, although I have a pretty good guess as to what his punishment would be.

"How can you say that like he's going to come back the same Jesse we've known?" she asks, her voice getting higher pitch as she talks.

"He's a tough kid, a survivor," I say, smiling as I look at the clock. I don't want to miss a thing. This show will be my greatest achievement in life, I'm sure of it.

"Of course he's tough, but he's not a murderer, Dalton!" she says. I should have known that she'd find out—she always does.

“He was following orders, just like any second in command would.”

“He’s not a second in command, Dalton, he’s your son.”

I turn in my chair, facing her. I couldn’t have heard her right. There is no way she would keep this from me. Why lie about a father that doesn’t exist when I could have been the father he didn’t have all these years. No, she must be just trying to get a rise out of me and I won’t let her get to me just minutes away from the greatest moment of my life.

“What did you just say?”

“You heard me Dalton, Jesse is our son,” she says, and this time I know I hear her right but it still doesn’t register in my mind. I can feel rage bubbling up inside me every second the timer counts down, because she’s ruining my moment.

“And you never thought to tell me this before now?” I ask, because I can see relief on her features, her muscles relaxing and her eyes softening. She’s being sincere. “I’ve told you time and time again that I needed a son, a successor to carry on our work... I chose Jesse because he was your son, damn it...if I had known he was my son...”

“You wouldn’t have treated him any different. I wanted to tell you, but I could never find the right moment. You were always so caught up in your work and the carnival to care,” she said, her voice so soft I almost can’t hear her over the first strike of the clock. I look at the clock and it reads ten, and I look around, desperate to stop what just a moment ago was my life’s devotion.

“Satine...there’s no way...I can’t stop this, there’s...” I push buttons, frantic. Nothing works, the machine keeps counting down the strikes of the clock and ticking down to ruining the life of a son I’ve known his whole life and never considered till now might be mine. All these lies, Satine cheating me out of being a father and this is the kind of father I will remember being—

unable to stop a whirlwind of pain, panic and confusion, mass hysteria and chaos from hitting him dead on.

I keep hoping he managed somehow to get out, but I know before Satine tells me that he won't get out unscathed.

"He's at the gate now," she says, her eyes closed as she concentrates and listens to her voices. "He's trying to get it open, someone locked it."

"He has his key, doesn't he?" I ask, and I find myself all too invested in a story I can't even see. "Is it in the lock?"

Satine goes silent and still as a board as the clock stops chiming. I look at the screens and every screen goes dark except for the ones surrounding the carousel. It's too late, if he didn't get out then he's getting hit with this. Satine is right, this is my fault—anything that happens to him is my fault. I close my eyes as screams of all registers echo all around us, and I will Jesse to get out in time.

It's amazing how just one piece of information could choose how you view things.

"Dalton...he got out, but..."

I look at her, watching her eyelids flutter, her eyeballs beneath zipping back and forth. She's shaking her head, the corners of her lips turned down in a frown. Before I can stop her, she's making her way down the tunnel, heading outside.

"Satine, don't, it's not safe."

"My son is out there, and he needs me now more than ever. You wouldn't know how that feels, Dalton. Your family is right there," she says and points over my shoulder to the screen full of freaks of all shapes and sizes.

And I'm left alone.



# We the Freaks

When the lights start to come back on, they illuminate the struggle—an invisible battle in which no one won, but everyone is a casualty. People are lying on the ground, hiding beneath tent flaps and each other, and no one is moving. Maybe it was the blackout that stunned us, or the carousel music deafening our ears, or maybe it was both, disrupting our reality with a surreal kind of horror. We all thought that carousel was creepy before the lights went out, and when only that ride spun in the light, everyone's eyes were fixated.

The horses seemed to jump on their own, their hooves jumping from nowhere and allowing them to float, weightless in the night. It was mesmerizing, and the music was intoxicating and all the while we wondered why people screamed in the dark when there was so much light. We watched the invisible riders gallop in circles and waited for our favorite horses to ride back around. The children wanted to ride, and their parents wanted to relive their childhood and join them.

We felt like children, wide-eyed with wonder, waiting for the inevitable show they must be setting us up for—or a parade weaving through our mass of bodies. The joke was on us, there was no parade, no show at all until a young girl starts crying. Nothing seems to be wrong with her, but she's clenching and unclenching her hands into tight fists and when she looks up, her eyes are wide—no color but white as she looks around, blind to what is happening. And what is happening? Why does it look like she scratched out the color herself? Were her eyes not blue a minute ago? Was she not just batting them at the boy a few feet away from her?

Everywhere something new and horrible, everywhere tears and fears come to life until everyone is changed. No one in sight is as they were before.

The first few could have been freak accidents—but as they kept happening, it was getting harder to understand, harder to watch. But all we could do was watch. The gates were locked tight, and although people banged and begged, no one heard. Some resorted to climbing, and some managed to get out that way because we saw them running and called out to them.

“Get help!”

“Call the police!”

“Break the lock open!”

Our pleas fell on deaf ears, or unbelieving eyes because they kept on running and they didn’t come back.

One by one, it happened, then all at once. We screamed and writhed as our own torture commenced and then we saw our new reflections and wondered what we did to deserve this. Were we bad people? Were we being punished for what we did?

This didn’t happen by accident. They all know what they did to deserve this.

We all do.

As we look upon the faces of one another, gaging where we stand among this new mass of people, we guess at why we ended up like this. Some are clear, some can be guessed, but not one person admits fault—because we’d rather keep it hidden. Only now, we can’t. Our secrets are on display for everyone to see. The deeds we’ve done have surfaced, and no one is untouched.

But that’s it, isn’t it? All of us have something to hide? We’re all corrupted, and now it shows. None of us are innocent.

We’re all freaks.