



# House of Clowns (HUNT Trilogy #1)

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**Category:** Suspense Thriller

**Description:** JOKER

They called it the House of Clowns, but it felt more like a prison to me. A place where people were forced into roles they never chose, a refuge for outcasts with nowhere else to go. It was made for the amusement of others, but never for the happiness of those trapped inside. Slowly, it was draining me—stripping away not just my joy, but the core of who I once was. If I could remember anything from before this place, maybe I'd hold onto it. But all I know now is this—a life of smeared colors, an endless performance for an invisible audience.

They say what doesn't break you makes you stronger. But that's a lie. It doesn't build you up; it wears you down, piece by piece until all that's left is the mask you wear.

**Total Pages (Source):** 25

# Page 1

*Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 3:42 am*

ONE

ACE

The autumn of the year 2022 came silently, tinting the streets of La Maddalena mainly in shades of amber and brown. The first leaves from the oak trees fluttered down, mixing with the puddles and mud while rain drummed on the cobblestone. There wasn't a biting chill, but the rain—constant, atomized drizzle—wrapped the town in mist that seeped into the bones and made the air thick and damp. Even the familiar streets seemed blurred, as though seen through fogged glass, the world slipping into a slow, heavy stupor.

I trudged down Razzoli Street—my yellow raincoat sticking to my skin, weighed down by the constant onslaught of rain. I clutched three wilting sunflowers in my hand and a card, small and slightly crumpled: "Happy birthday, Mom."

Rain squeezed the life from the flowers, their heads bowed as if in mourning. Days of darkness and rain had stolen their bloom; the petals were now limp and sullen. Still, they were her favorite. And that was enough.

My curls, dark and unruly, were plastered to my forehead, each strand drinking in the downpour to then curl even tighter against my scalp. The streetlights danced, casting weak pools of yellow light reflected upon the slick pavement, making puddles appear like tiny shifting mirrors. Every step might have sent ripples through the water, the splash of my green rubber boots swallowed up in the rhythmic patter of the rain.

I glanced longingly at Mr. Beppo's little bookstore on the corner, its warm glow

spilling out onto the sidewalk outside—so comforting. How I wished to step inside, just for a moment, just to shake off the wet chill, and breathe in the scent of old paper and ink. But there wasn't time. I needed to be home before ten, before my little brother woke up, and the day's chaos began. Someone had to get him ready for school. Dad was no help. He was probably already slumped on the couch, a half-empty bottle beside him, the television babbling along with laugh tracks that filled up the house but left it more empty than ever.

Thinking of him tugged something in my chest—a dull ache, so familiar, and one I tried to shake off as I quickened my pace. He used to be something more. He was now but a shadow, his laughter tumbling not from the *joie de vivre*, but from the bottom of a bottle; rage was a tempest at his throat, waiting to break. And we, my brother and I were merely the casualties of this quiet war of his. Every blow, every word cut marks keener than any knife.

But I pushed it all away as I moved on, feeling the rain prick my skin like icy needles through my coat. The street narrowed as I reached the intersection, the gray sky darkening further. Instinctively my eyes darted right as I prepared to cross, and without thinking, I stepped forward and slammed into something solid. The impact sent me stumbling backward, and I barely managed to stay upright. The card slipped from my fingers, caught instantly in the swirling rainwater, skittering toward the gutter.

"No, no, no!" I gasped, dropping to my knees onto the slick asphalt as the rain battered my shoulders. The flowers fell beside me, their delicate petals bruised and torn. I felt so desperate as I leaned forward, fingers brushing the edge of the card just as a pale, slender hand reached it first.

I froze.

His fingers brushed mine, cold as ice, and my breath caught. Slowly, he lifted the

card and offered it to me; his gaze met mine. I looked up, and the world seemed to tilt.

He loomed over me, rain dripping from the brim of his hat, white paint running down his face like melted wax. His eyes were an ice blue, almost unnatural, the sort of blue that pierced through the grayness of the day. Black paint framed them, two harsh, smeared lines that stretched from brow to cheek, giving his gaze an eerie, hollow intensity. His mouth was painted into a garish red smile, the color smudged and bleeding at the corners so that it smeared in a wide, unsettling grin across his cheeks. And on the tip of his nose, a round, crimson circle stood in jarring contrast to the pale, painted skin.

I stared, my breath shallow, my heart hammering against my ribs. He was like a nightmare risen from bad dreams: an eldritch jester, cast in the rain, the hair of his head so white, dripping wet and plastered upon his forehead.

For a moment neither of us stirred. The downfall came harder, sifting ceaselessly between us like a curtain, yet I could not take my eyes away.

"I'm sorry," I probably whispered, my voice faint, hardly heard in the poundings of rain.

His lips twitched, a flicker of something that could have been a smile or a sneer. Then, in a voice so soft it was almost lost in the rain, he murmured, "There's no need to apologize."

I swallowed, a shiver running along my spine. His paint-stained fingers touched the card, smearing marks like ghostly fingerprints. He held it out to me, his eyes never leaving mine.

"Happy birthday," he said softly—the tone mocking, yet oddly tender—and that

weird, sad smile never wavered.

For a second, I couldn't move. Then, with shaking hands, I reached out and took the card from his hand, my fingers brushing his once more. They were still ice cold.

"Thank you," I whispered, but the words seemed empty, taken by the storm raging around us.

With a slow nod, he straightened, his head tipping slightly in what might have been a bow, and just as he moved, his other hand, from behind his back, clutching a bright red balloon. It bobbed very slightly, the string tugged taut between his long fingers. A logo in bold black letters read, "House of Clowns."

My breath caught in my throat, and my mouth fell open as fear crawled through my chest. I stood frozen, pulse hammering, it would seem, with every beat urging me to run. But I couldn't look away.

"Take it," he growled, his voice low and knobby, deep and gravelly—a sound that jarred hard against the gaudy makeup on his face. I forced myself to move, my fingers shaking as I reached out.

"Thank you," I breathed, and it was a small frail word against the storm noises around us.

He whirled abruptly, a red leather jacket creaking as he moved. The rain washed over him, soaking the black jeans molded to his muscular frame. I just stood and watched as he vanished into the fog. His silhouette shrank, swallowed into the grey curtain of rain, until all that was left of him became the faint bobbing of the red balloon, fading away.

Shuddering, I shook myself and knelt once more to gather the sunflowers that had

fallen. But their petals were bruised and broken, streaked with dirt.

Still hers. Still for her.

I stood, rain poking off my nose and chin, and started down the street, holding fragile stems as if actually holding them together could somehow keep me from falling apart; the park loomed ahead—a quiet oasis amidst the dreariness. I pushed through the wet grass, each step squelching under my boots, till I reached the small marble headstone nestled beneath the towering oak.

My mother's grave. Yet it was just a stone and a patch of earth—no body lay beneath it. She had never been found. It seemed like the wind whispered through the branches above, a soft, mournful sigh that echoed my thoughts.

"Hey, Mom," I said softly, dropping to my knees beside the grave. "Happy birthday."

I leaned the sunflowers gently against the base of the stone and watched as raindrops trickled down their stems and pooled into the creases of the petals. They looked as forlorn as I felt. A tear slipped down my cheek, its warm sting a contrast to cold rain. I hunched down broader, knees sinking into the wet earth as sharp pointy pebbles and blades of grass dug in—but I didn't care. The pain had grown just another element of me—something I hardly noticed any longer.

"I miss you," I mouthed softly, my voice breaking. I closed my eyes and tried to envision her smile, the way her eyes crinkled in the corners when she laughed. "I'm lost and I'm hurt... but I still love you."

The words spilled, each one a thread pulled at the frayed edges of my heart. I sat back on my heels, boots wet from the rain mingling with my tears as I did so. "I wrote you something." I unfolded the soaked card, holding it up with shaking hands. The ink had bled, words running together in dark smears, but I could still make out the lines

I'd carefully penned.

"Every day when I open my eyes, I see you," I began, my voice a strained whisper. "And every night, when I close them, I feel you fading away. I still feel your hand on my shoulder, and still taste the apple strudel you used to bake... but the scent of you is slipping away. Fading."

The card shook in my hand, the paper so wet it threatened to rip. I blinked onto my chest, forcing myself to continue even as the words blurred. "When you left, a piece of me disappeared too. I never got to say goodbye. I never got to say... I love you. But I won't forget you. I can't forget the way you made everything feel safe, the way you made life seem bearable because you were the best, Mom. The best. And I'll always be your little sunflower."

I choked, my voice breaking on the last word. A sob tore through me, raw and ugly, and I crumpled forward, clutching the card to my chest. Rain continued to lash down, relentlessly, washing away the last traces of ink, erasing the final, fragile words I'd tried so hard to keep.

Slowly, I straightened, my knees aching as I stood. My fingers brushed the headstone, tracing the inscription: "Arianne Serra, Nel cuore di chi l'ha amata, vive per sempre." ( In the hearts of those who loved her, she lives forever. )

I laid the card softly against the base of the stone, smoothing it as best I could, knowing full well it would be ruined by morning. I bent down, kissed my fingertips, and pressed them against the small photo set into the stone. Her face smiled back at me, forever young, forever beautiful.

"I wish I could hug you again," I whispered—voice swallowed by the rain. "I wish... I wish it didn't feel like nothing's safe anymore."

But wishes were useless. She was gone, and I was here, and all I had left was memories slipping like sand through my fingers. Slowly, I turned away, the ache in my chest expanding, threatening to swallow me whole. I made myself walk, one foot in front of the other, until the grave was just another shadow in the mist, and I was alone again.

The park was a blur behind me; the wind cut at my face. Somewhere, the red balloon was blowing aimlessly, caught in a branch—its bright color a jarring splash against the gray. I tore my eyes away and kept walking, clutching the empty ache in my chest.

No one would ever love me the way she did. No one could ever love me that much. And that thought was sharp and bitter, yet somehow keeping me on as I walked in the rain, promising me with every step, promising me with every heartbeat.

Just a small sunflower wilting in the rain.

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 3:42 am*

TWO

ACE

I walked home, step by step, along the same cracked road I always took. My feet followed the familiar path on their own, but my mind was heavy, burdened with the weight of it all. Carlo was only two when Mom vanished, and it became my job to take care of him. Our older brother, Christian, had made his escape to New York the moment he could, leaving us behind. He promised a thousand times he'd come back for us, but he never did. He got away, while Carlo and I were stuck here, in this wretched place where sin had a tighter grip than hope, and good days were a rare blessing.

When I reached the front door, I turned the handle slowly, slipping inside like a shadow, hoping to go unnoticed. This was supposed to be our safe place—mine and Carlo's—but it never felt that way. Deep down, I knew it never would.

The first thing I saw was the brown sofa, still swaying slightly. A crumpled lace cloth was thrown over the top, still warm from where my father had been. An empty bottle lay beside it, with just a few drops left at the bottom—never enough to drown his sorrow or his anger.

"Oh, look who decided to show up," he sneered from the kitchen, leaning against the worn countertop. His body swayed a little, just like the sofa. The kitchen was in shambles—the cabinets barely hanging on, some missing doors completely. We could hardly scrape together enough for food, let alone fix anything.

My eyes went to Carlo, huddled beneath the table, his small body curled into a tight ball. Angry red welts from the belt marked his skin. He was shaking, arms wrapped around his knees, rocking back and forth as tears slipped silently down his face. Eleven years old and already being taught what it meant to be a "man," according to my father. But no real man teaches through fear and pain. No real man breaks his child to prove a point. My father had never been a man, not in any way that counted. Just a bitter, cruel stranger we had to endure for the sake of having a roof over our heads.

Carlo didn't know how to be a man yet. He hadn't even been allowed to be a child.

I stood frozen in the doorway, glancing between Carlo and my father, trying to figure out what had triggered him this time. But I already knew. It was always the same—drink, rage, and that twisted sense of power he clung to.

"Where the hell have you been?" he barked, his voice thick with anger.

I stayed silent, my heart pounding in my chest. There was no good answer. I didn't want to provoke him, didn't want to give him more fuel. All I wanted was to grab Carlo and get us out. But keeping quiet never stopped him. Silence only seemed to make things worse.

"You think this is funny?" he growled, his belt cutting through the air before it slashed across my back. The pain was sharp, immediate, like my skin was on fire. I gritted my teeth, holding in the scream that built in my throat.

"You think you're smart, huh?" he sneered, stepping forward. Before I could react, his boot connected with my ribs, sending a shock of pain through my entire body. The kick knocked the wind out of me, and I gasped, feeling the ache spread through my bones.

"You think this hurts?" he spat, standing over me as I crumpled in the corner of the living room, curling in on myself, trying to shield what little of me remained intact. My vision blurred with tears, my body trembling as he loomed above, waiting for me to break—waiting for an apology, a plea, anything that would make him feel like he was in control.

But I gave him nothing. Not a sound. Just the rasp of my breathing as I held onto the one thought that kept me going: one day, I'll get us out of here.

One day.

He raised his hand, and I barely had time to brace myself before his palm connected with my face, delivering a blow with all the force he could manage. My head snapped to the side, and the familiar taste of blood filled my mouth from the split in my lip. The sharp sting radiated through my cheek, but in the midst of the pain, I focused on one thing—counting to three. It was my only escape, my small ritual. One, two, three... and I'd close my eyes, pretending I was somewhere else. Somewhere far away. Even if those places were born of nightmares, they were still better than this.

I didn't move. I didn't speak. I barely even breathed. With my eyes half-closed, I glanced at Carlo, still curled up under the table. His small body shook, but he didn't make a sound. He knew the rules of survival better than anyone—stay hidden, stay small, stay quiet. He wasn't trying to be brave or tough. He knew that at eleven, he couldn't fight a man so broken, so drunk, that he'd lash out for no reason at all.

I looked at Carlo briefly, then turned my head away, my heart racing as I shut my eyes again. I heard the soft click of the door lock. Carlo had done what I couldn't—he'd found a way to protect himself.

I wrapped my arms around my head and surrendered. The blows came, each one hitting me like a wave crashing against a cliff, relentless and unforgiving. The pain

merged into one dull throb as my body bruised, swelled, and went numb. I let it happen, giving up the last bit of resistance, as his fists kept raining down, lifeless thuds against flesh that had stopped feeling.

"You're pathetic," he spat between strikes, his words like poison. "Just like your mother. Fat, stupid, useless."

His words cut deeper than the blows ever could. They were sharp, seeping into my mind, festering long after the bruises would fade. Words didn't just hurt—they destroyed. Coming from him, they were worse than the beatings. Each syllable tore at me, reopening wounds that never fully healed. I had learned to numb myself to pain, to people, even to time itself, but his words stayed. They made me believe I was worthless, unworthy of love, unworthy of happiness, unworthy of anything.

I woke to the cool touch of a wet cloth pressed against my forehead. The relief from the burning on my skin was immediate, soothing, though the rest of my body still ached deeply. Gentle hands moved over my face, wiping away the dried blood. I could hear quiet sobs, the soft sound of tears hitting my hair.

"Dad said we can't take you to the doctor," Carlo whispered, his voice small and fragile. "And he doesn't want me going to school either."

The bowl of water beside him was stained red, and the cloth in his hands was soaked with my blood. He had been cleaning my wounds for who knows how long, doing what little he could with what we had. This wasn't the childhood he deserved. Carlo deserved so much more. I wanted to reach out, pull him into my arms, tell him I was okay, that everything would be fine. But I couldn't. I had nothing left in me. No strength, no energy. I was hollow.

"You're safe, Chiara," he whispered as if trying to comfort me. "I locked the door. Dad can't get in here."

A single tear slipped from the corner of my swollen eye—the one I could still open. The other was bruised and swollen shut, probably a sickening purple by now. I couldn't see much, but I felt Carlo's small weight as he rested his head gently on my chest, listening to the steady beat of my heart.

"Do you think she pretended?" His voice was soft, fragile, full of innocence that nearly broke me. "You know, to be happy?"

My heart clenched at his words, memories of our mother flooding back—the way her smile never quite reached her eyes, her laughter that always seemed forced, and the way her hands would tremble when she thought no one was watching. Carlo had been too young to remember the worst of it, and in some ways, I envied him for that. But he knew enough to ask the question. He understood.

I swallowed hard, the words catching in my throat as fresh tears welled up in my eyes. "I hope not," I whispered back.

But deep down, I knew the truth. She had pretended, to wear a mask, just like I did now. She had tried to convince us that everything was okay, that happiness was something we could still reach. But it never was—not for her, not for us. She had been trapped, just like I was now, and pretending was all she had left.

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 3:42 am*

THREE

JOKER

They called it the House of Clowns, but it felt more like a prison to me. A place where people were forced into roles they never chose, a refuge for outcasts with nowhere else to go. It was made for the amusement of others, but never for the happiness of those trapped inside. Slowly, it was draining me—stripping away not just my joy, but the core of who I once was. If I could remember anything from before this place, maybe I'd hold onto it. But all I know now is this—a life of smeared colors, an endless performance for an invisible audience.

They say what doesn't break you makes you stronger. But that's a lie. It doesn't build you up; it wears you down, piece by piece until all that's left is the mask you wear.

I shared a room with two other clowns. Chico, from Mexico, was here chasing a dream—a woman named Rosalinda. She ran off with Luigi, the butcher, but Chico never stopped talking about her. Then there was Bart, an American, who had romanticized Italy, convinced that it was full of beautiful, kind-hearted women. I couldn't help but laugh at both of them. Dreams don't come true, not here. Not for people like us .

Chico found out Rosalinda had married Luigi, and she told him she'd rather be with his dead uncle than him. Bart didn't fare much better. Instead of wooing an Italian woman, he fell for an Indian guy named Sanjay, who eventually shattered his heart. Bart quickly realized that even though Italian women were beautiful, their fiery temper was something he wasn't prepared to handle. He once joked that maybe he'd

be better off with Berta, an unattractive girl from his hometown.

And me? I used to have a dream too—that I wouldn't always be the orphan no one wanted, that someday I'd have a family of my own. I thought the world might finally see me as more than a joke. But the world has a way of crushing people like me. It doesn't hate what's different; it fears it. It's afraid that even something broken can still be beautiful.

I've told myself over and over that people will always try to tear you down. It's a reflex—they crush your hopes because they can't bear to see you rise above them. They want you in the shadows so they feel bigger and more secure.

I despise them.

And they call me a clown? No, the real clowns are the ones who wear fake smiles and pretend everything's perfect in their little worlds. It's all a joke—a joke that stops being funny when their world falls apart. And when it does, they'll drag you down with them, taking whatever's left of your smile.

That's the cycle. The never-ending, suffocating cycle of disappointment. If I went to therapy, they'd probably slap a label on it—anxiety, depression, whatever. Truth is, I'm anxious all the time.

"Rio," Chico's voice broke through my thoughts. He stood at the mirror, pressing a thick brush loaded with white paint into his face as if trying to erase himself. "Wanna hear a joke?"

I lit a cigarette, blowing smoke toward the cracked window, leaning against the sill. "Yeah?"

"Why did the clown get fired from his job?" He was painting blue shadows beneath

his eyes now, like bruises.

I already knew the punchline, but I went along with it. "Why?"

"Because he was fooling everyone!" Chico burst into laughter, his deep, hearty chuckle contagious. Bart and I couldn't help but laugh along.

Laughter. It was all we had left in this place. The only thing keeping us from falling apart completely.

"Maybe they're fooling us," I muttered, staring out the window at the dull, gray sky.

Chico turned to me, the red paint on his lips only half-applied. His wig lay on the dresser, a few strands of his hair sticking out wildly. He stepped closer, his voice soft, almost gentle. "Doesn't matter, kid," he said. "We always win."

Bart laughed from the corner, already dressed in his cherry-red suit, the bright fabric a jarring contrast to the bleakness of our room. "I feel a little funny today," he said, adjusting his collar.

"It's the air," Chico replied, his eyes meeting mine in the mirror. "You coming?"

I stubbed out my cigarette, flicking the ashes into a small tin can. "Yeah," I said, standing up. "I'll get ready."

And just like that, it was time to put on the mask again. Time to pretend. Time to be a clown .

I landed lightly on the dusty floor, feet thudding softly as I leaped from the window. The wood creaked with my weight. Thick age-scented dust and faded memories hung in the air. I moved across the room to an old cabinet; its hinges groaned as I pulled

the door open. Inside, tubes of paint stood at attention like so many soldiers waiting for command—white, black, and red. I grabbed them without a second thought.

My reflection beckoned from across the room, the cracked mirror resting atop a battered vanity. I set the paints down on the chair beside it—my fingers brushing against the rough wood—and reached for the white tube. I squeezed it without a second thought, feeling the cool thick paste on my fingertips. They always said to mix it with water or cream to soften the concoction, but what was the difference? I liked it thick. I liked how it cracked as it dried, giving me that nasty look that made people shiver.

I dragged white paint across my face, its color uneven as it pulled across my skin.

Every movement was deliberate, almost a sacrament as I layered myself anew. My fingers smeared the paint right into the lines in the skin, a ghostly mask. I spread on the final speck of white, then tossed on more cream in my hand, slicking it through my hair.

It was stiff and sticky, but I liked the way it pushed my hair back so that I looked wild and untamed. The black paint came next. I dabbed it onto the tip of my finger and closed one eye at a time, dragging the color down from atop my brow. It smeared in jagged lines, falling like dark streaks of shadow, accentuating the exhaustion that already clung to my gaze. The deep blue of them seemed colder now, sharper; the contrast only made them more unnerving.

Next, the red—one needed to carve that smile. But the paint was too bright, not dark, not deep enough. I bit into my tongue, my jaw clenching against the sharp sting of pain and the metallic taste of blood warming in my mouth. I allowed it to pool before spitting into my palm, mixing crimson with the paint.

I could feel a smile spreading across my face from one corner of my mouth to the

other as my fingers arced out over my skin, staining my lips and cheeks in an unholy grin of drying blood.

I looked up, catching my reflection in the mirror right as the white paint started to crack at the edges of my mouth and eyes. The laugh that escaped me was low, guttural, and echoed off the tiny room.

There it was, what I'd become: a clown, a monster. Something they loved to watch from a distance but never wanted too close. I turned back to the closet, jerked out the black-and-white suit, and flung it onto my bed. The fabric was tight, almost too tight, but perfect as it sheathed me, echoing each angle of my body. I wriggled into the suit; the material threateningly stretched with each of my movements. The finishing touch, gleaming black shoes, sealed the transformation.

I went out into the cool air nipping at my painted skin. Chico and Bart were standing nearby, talking in low tones about that night's acts. Neither of them noticed me at first; both were lost in their talk. They had prepared routines, but me? I didn't need to—my role was quite basic: terror in the maze of mirrors, fear in the dark rooms. I was the one who made the hearts shriek with rattling, beating loud, the one who savored the gasps, the screams. And I was good at that.

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 3:42 am*

FOUR

JOKER

The circus only opens its gates six days a month, just enough time for us to scrape by, trying to make enough to last the rest of the month. It's a hard way to live, scaring people for a living. Don't get me wrong—I love what I do. But when you need to eat, it's hard to frighten the same people you're relying on for tips. And tips... they're rare.

I walked down the dusty road that led to the woods. The hum of the carnival was behind me. A few tents were scattered here and there, but one huge one loomed ahead of me with its bold sign declaring, "Welcome to the Freak Show." I could feel eyes on me—children clutching their mothers' hands, peeking out from behind them, fear and curiosity threaded together in their huge-eyed stare. One small boy tugged at his mother's sweater, thumb firmly in his mouth, as if holding on to her would protect him from whatever he thought I was.

I wasn't sure whether their fear made me proud or sad. Maybe a little of both. Part of me was jealous if I'm honest. I never had a mother to hide behind. Instead, I had priests who would shield me whenever those nuns became a little too adventurous in giving their punishments, branding boys like me "wild" and "untamed." They tried to beat that out of me. But if there is one thing I learned, it is how to keep one's head high, no matter what. Conceal the pain behind a mask—a poker face nobody would ever know.

We were in front of the mirror maze, through whose entrance a blur of reflections and flashing lights pulsed. I reached for the flap, and a strong grip pulled me backward. I

turned to find Rocco, the boss, standing in front of me. He was wearing his old red coat, its gold buttons shining like conkers in the gloom, and his hat pulled low over his greying head. His face was lined like the bark of an old oak tree, save that his eyes told stories, not of wisdom, but of failure, destruction, and pain spread to others.

He jammed a wad of flyers into my chest. "Get these out there. We need new people."

"I thought we had a full house?" I replied, trying to pace the situation accordingly. Something didn't feel right.

"Clowns are missing," he growled, his eyes narrowing. "No one knows where they went."

He looked at me like I might know more, but the truth was we didn't really know each other here. Not really. Everyone was hiding from something—running from something—and no one ever asked too many questions. I nodded as he walked away, shaking his head in frustration.

Smoothing my blazer, I stood in front of the maze entrance and pulled a cigarette from my pocket. Lighting it up with a slow drag, smoke filled my lungs and cooled the restlessness inside me. I watched people passing by, kids still snuck a look my way; their eyes wide with that kind of wonder bordering on fear.

Then this boy ran toward me, about eleven years old, wearing a jean jacket and a black shirt. Pants that were just a little too small, frayed at the knees with holes in them. His enthusiasm was infectious, yet I hardly cracked a smile.

"Chiara, look! Il labirinto! " he exclaimed, gesturing to the entrance with wide, eager eyes.

I cocked a brow, tapping my chest as my smirk appeared. "I'm wearing makeup, okay, but I'm not Chiara."

"Huh?" he said, confusion crossing his face.

Before I could explain, a young woman appeared, breathless as she caught up to the boy. Her face was bruised, makeup failing to fully mask the swelling around her eye and cheek. Her hair was tangled into a messy bun; despite the pain etched into her features, there was something softly beautiful about her. Wearing jeans and a white shirt, the hollow of her waist was impossibly small against her hips and chest—so perfect, something fragile that had been mishandled.

She didn't run, but she slowed as she approached, her eyes meeting mine briefly before she looked away, pulling the boy close by the shoulder. I had to say something. She looked so familiar, like I'd seen her before, maybe in another life.

"New in town?" I asked, my voice softer than usual.

She smiled, though it didn't reach her eyes. "I'm local."

The boy tugged at her arm. "Can we go in? Please?"

She looked at me, her teeth clenched, lips barely parted as if the words were hard to form. "How much is it?"

I could see her discomfort—it was plain as daylight that she was misusing money that wasn't hers. Her silence spoke louder than what she said. And yet, despite all that, here she was for him—for the boy.

"Ten euros," I said, knowing it was probably too much for her, but also knowing I needed to make something tonight.

She fumbled with her wallet, worn leather peeling at the edges. She pulled out two five-euro bills, hands shaking slightly as she placed them in my palm. "Here. Thanks."

Her smile, though small, was genuine. It was all she owned, all the money she had left, yet she did it without hesitation. Not for herself. For him. And somehow, it felt as though she'd given it to me, too.

I stepped aside, placing a hand against my chest and bowing slightly, as they passed through the entrance of the maze. Just before she crossed the threshold, I handed her one of the flyers Rocco had pressed on me earlier.

"We're looking for people," I said softly, more offering than asking.

The boy darted ahead, already entranced with the mirrors. "Look, Chiara! I'm this short!" he shouted, giggling, as he stood in front of the one that made him squat and chubby. He moved to the next, waving his arms as if dancing, the reflection stretching his limbs out like rubber.

I just stood and watched. The way they moved, the boy's carefree joy, the woman's quiet relief as she followed him deeper into the maze. Their laughter tumbled off the glass, and bounded in strange directions, twisting around me. I didn't move right away, just let myself get lost in the sounds, in the way they seemed to drift farther and farther away, swallowed by the shifting lights and reflections.

The entrance loomed behind me as I finally stepped inside and on the creaky wooden floor. They were placed in a manner to twist reality, with walls and corners that seemed to make it impossible to get your way. The lights, shining red, then fluttering to an eerie blue, bathed everything in their glow, casting distorted shadows across the glass. Every few feet, one of those illusionist mirrors would distort your body in some odd jarring way—stretching you out or squeezing you down—until even your

reflection was unrecognizable.

I watched them disappear further into the maze, my eyes following the steps as I remained motionless at the entrance. With every step, they vanished a bit more, consumed by the labyrinth of ever-shifting lights reflecting on each other. The boy laughed and his laughter echoed feebly and then became distant, lost in the hollow maze.

And as I watched them disappear into the house of mirrors, a quiet unease settled over me. The thought wouldn't leave my head—would I ever see her again? The maze just had a way of swallowing people up, especially those who took too much comfort in the House of Clowns. Mesmerized by them, they often went in and never came out.

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 3:42 am*

FIVE

ACE

I had stepped into the maze, and with each cautious step, the wood would complain. The mirrors around me were twisting and distorting the reflection of my body into postures that it never wanted to take. Every glance seemed a trap as it drew the mind further into the maze of illusions. I kept my eyes down, terrified that if I looked too long, I'd lose myself in the reflections, in the maze.

I forced myself to look upward, praying for an escape from these distorted versions of me. Above loomed the three carnival tent roofs, their peaks ablaze with the flicker of red neon lights. These lights blinked rhythmically, almost tauntingly. A perfect distraction, but not enough to pull me away from the growing anxiety.

The laughter of Carlo resounded around me. I saw him dart between the mirrors, playing, having the weird funhouse amuse him, while I inched my way up, catching my breath with every step, claustrophobic. I could hear his voice, the sound bouncing off the walls, distant now, but no matter which way I turned, I only saw me: just me, surrounded by these unkind mirrors that refused to be kind.

I stopped and stared at a reflection that managed to stretch me out thin, like a toothpick. My body was unnaturally stretched out, almost disappearing into the mirror. Tears welled in my eyes. This was the version of me that I had always wanted—a version thin to the point of pain it was to look upon. I had spent years fighting my body, wanting to be this fragile, this weightless. And here it was, but it felt so much more like a mockery than a dream.

I blinked away the tears, turning to face another mirror and finding my breath catching in my throat. This time my body ballooned outward, chubby and wide, filling the frame from edge to edge. I pressed my palms against my face, the points of my nails digging into my cheeks as I stared at the person in view in every reflection, every day. The version of myself I hated more than anything else was this—the one I was stuck with, inescapable. The one that would always feel unacceptable.

My heartbeat quickened and the weight of a lifelong struggle weighed down upon me from this funhouse and its twisted images. Spinning again, wild for something different. But the mirror now framed a version of me that others still envied: small waist, thin arms, round hips and legs. It was the shape they told me I was supposed to covet, the body others might dream of. But not me. I stared at her—at me—and felt nothing but emptiness. I had never been able to love this version either. And deep down, I was afraid I never would.

The reflection facing me began to blur again as renewed tears spilled over, running in black mascara streaks beneath my eyes. It was a little like having that high school version of myself staring back at me. I could almost hear the snickers, and feel the sting of that boy's voice from the table beside me when he called me "fat" so viciously that shards of it continued to cut into me all the way into adulthood. He was heavier, heavier than me, but that did not matter. His words were knives, said to cut me down so he could build himself up. And each tear I cried in those days had only spurred his strength, while I withered inside.

Why people are so cruel, I don't know. Standing here at the moment with this maze around me, broken reflections of who I was and who I could never be, one thing still echoed in my mind; people always seem to see others first—to compare and judge—never satisfied, not enough, not perfect.

Turning again, there he was, just beyond the glass. His figure half-concealed by the mirror stared at me with eyes of piercing blue that followed every movement I made.

The white-knuckled hands gripped the wooden frame of the mirror against dark wood. I felt his presence, thick and far away at the same time as if a shadow were standing at the edge of reality.

He looked like he wanted to say something, but something caught him short. The clown mask he wore, bright colors covering the face, masked these words well and truly. It was as if he had hidden from the world for so long that he forgot how to step into it. I also wanted to say something, but the silence between us lengthened, heavy and unspoken. We stood there, two broken pieces staring at each other—fractured and incomplete, like jigsaw puzzle pieces that had never quite fitted into any picture.

"It's okay," he whispered, words almost lost in the space between us. He cleared his throat, forcing his voice louder. "To be like this."

"Like what?" I asked, wiping the smudged mascara from my eyes, the makeup blending with tears.

"Imperfect," he said softly, the outline of his body receding behind the mirror, as though the word itself was glass.

I smiled with a bitter edge to the curve of my lips. "But isn't it easier to pretend?"

He didn't answer, just turned away, the sound of his footsteps fading faintly as he vanished into the maze. It was as if I had said too much, and crossed some line I hadn't meant to cross. But before I could ponder that, he spoke again—this time from behind me. I whirled, startled, to see him behind me, a red rose in his hand. He offered it to me, the roped petals still catching the dim light outside from the carnival.

Pleased yet curious, I took it from him. As my fingers wrapped around the stem, I felt a sudden sting. A thorn pricked my skin and a drop of blood welled on my finger.

"Ouch," I muttered, instinctively bringing my finger to my lips to stop the bleeding.

"Roses have thorns, darling," he said softly, low and moderate. "Nothing perfect is beautiful."

Bringing the rose to my nose, I inhaled the sweet scent even as my finger throbbed in a dull ache. I wanted to thank him, to say something—anything—but looking up, he was gone by then.

"Chiara," Carlo's voice echoed through the maze, distant but clear, calling out my name. I spun around, searching for him. All I saw were mirrors reflecting my confusion back at me, distorted images of myself, and the red lights overhead started to flicker. The maze closed in tighter, mirrors multiplying, lights flashing like warning signals. I was running in circles chasing a voice that seemed to vanish in high-heeled silence with every step.

"Chiara, where are you?" I heard Carlo's voice again, this time more faint, swallowed up by the maze.

"I'm here!" I yelled out, my voice echoing back from the walls, but nobody answered.

I ran, desperate, through reflections of myself that fluttered in and out of existence, always taking me in the wrong direction. But no matter how hard I tried, no matter how fast I moved, I wasn't able to find him.

"Carlo?!" I screamed, my voice raw, torn from a deep part of me. Finally, I could see the end of the maze, the exit, but something was wrong. There, beyond the last few mirrors, stood a man. His figure was hunched under a wide-brimmed hat, its brim shrouding his face. He walked very slowly towards Carlo, proffering something from the pocket of his red coat, whose golden buttons shone like so many lamps in the gloom. He stooped towards my brother, holding out his hand with a piece of candy.

"Want to play?" this man asked; his voice was smooth, too smooth.

Carlo hesitated, his small hand reaching out.

"No!" I screamed, my legs kicking into motion finally, but my body felt like it was trudging through the water, every step slow, dragging. He turned far enough that I caught a glimpse of him. It was his jaw hidden beneath a mask—a twisted, crooked smile, white teeth sharp and uneven. The rest of his face was shrouded in darkness, but those eyes, those wicked eyes, locked onto mine. I sprinted, my heart racing as I closed the distance. Still, right before I reached them, two clowns appeared. One of them was tall, his body wrapped in a blue suit, a green wig covering his head, face painted in the exaggerated smile of a clown. He stepped forward and pushed a mirror in front of me; the distorted reflection blocked my way.

The other clown was short and round in his red suit, with a wild mess of black curly hair, and ran another mirror into place and sealed me in.

"Carlo!" I screamed, beating against the cool glass with my fist. My reflection stared back, twisted and distorted, my desperation a mockery of myself. Between the narrow gap between the mirrors, I saw the man start to drag Carlo away, his small hand disappearing in the stranger's. I pushed harder, rocking my weight against the clowns.

I couldn't reach him.

I pushed the taller clown—my body slamming into his—and sent him tumbling to the floor. The mirror fell with him, landing with a dull thud but not shattering. I scrambled over him, but the shorter clown grabbed my arm, yanking me back.

"No!" I screamed, thrashing in his grip. The hand flew out in a panic, catching his face, and my nails dug into his painted skin, dragging through the white grease paint. He let out a sharp yell, the paint smeared under my nails.

"You bitch!" he snarled, voice dripping with venom, as he let me go and stepped backward.

I barely noticed. Already running, my eyes had locked on the spot where Carlo had been. The rose that had been in my hand fell, crushed under the clown's boot as I pushed forward; petals scattered across the dirt. A burst of pain shot through me at the thought of them trampling something so fragile, but I didn't stop.

My brother. I had to find my brother.

I ran through the maze, through the carnival—in all directions, it seemed—pushing past strangers. The faces around me were a blur of wide eyes, judgment, and watchfulness as I stumbled and screamed for help. I grabbed at people, pulling at sleeves, and hands, desperate for someone to care, for someone to stop him, but they looked at me like I was insane. They shook me off, their faces blank, indifferent. No one cared. No one ever really cared.

"Carlo! Somebody, help me!" My voice broke, and I felt tears course down my face. But the crowd flowed on, not interested in my hurt, in my desperation taken in by the noise of the circus. Lights and laughter were wrong on every level; it was like some sort of twisted nightmare.

I whipped around, eyes wide, searching for him, breath hitching in ragged gasps. My heart thundered in my chest with each beat harder than the last, the reality cold and sharp, like a knife, really setting in. I might have lost him. I might have lost the only person who ever really cared about me. Lost him over a piece of candy from some strange man.

I began to sob—a loud, hollow sound that cut through the circus noise. The world seemed to blur, spinning as I grasped the truth of this place. The stories, the warnings—they were true. The House of Clowns was a trap, a place where people

disappeared, swallowed whole by its twisted games. And if you weren't one of them—if you found yourself in some kind of trap—you needed to run. So I ran. I ran as fast as I could, away from the maze and away from those tents, away from the clowns and their painted smiles. I ran until my lungs were burning and my legs folded under me, and still, I ran on. All I could think of was home.

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 3:42 am*

SIX

ACE

The walk home was a complete blur, just a blank void except for the rhythmic beat of my heart and the squelching of my shoes as they sank into the mud. Each step felt heavier than the last as if the earth itself was drawing me deeper, trying to swallow me up. I didn't dare look back. When I finally had the house in my sights, all I could do was stand momentarily in front of the large door. My hand rose, hovering over the handle that levered and rattled beneath my fingers as I quivered. I didn't know what waited on the other side. My father's mood was like a wrecking ball, but I needed to tell him about Carlo. We had to call for help, we had to get the police involved.

The door opened before I had quite decided whether to knock or enter. He stood in the doorway, filling it like a shadow that had come to life. His shirt, once white, was now befouled, clinging to his frame like the ghost of what he had once been.

The smell reached me before his voice did. Feral, a mix of sweat and alcohol, it was as if something was decaying. His eyes were glassy, unfocused, floating somewhere between rage and some kind of narcotics-like fix that kept him tethered to this half-life. In his right hand, which hung low by his side, was the leather belt. It swayed just a little and didn't seem to be swaying at all, yet its view depressed my stomach. The urge to run, to turn and flee back through the clearing, back to the circus, back to the clowns who suddenly seemed so much less perilous than my own home, seized me.

Before I could move, his hand shot out and there it was, tightening around my arm like a vice.

He yanked me inside and threw me onto the floor without even acknowledging I was more than a rag doll. I squirmed backward, trying to crawl away, and the coarse-grained wood was like sandpaper against my skin. But he followed me, his heavy boots clomping with every step, the floorboards groaning with each move he made. The belt slapped against his calloused palm in a sickening rhythm as he loomed over me.

My back went against the wall, trapping me.

He smiled, but it wasn't a smile. It was twisted, and cruel. The belt smacked harder against his hand warning.

"Do you know what time it is?" His voice was low, threatening. Then louder, "Do you?!"

My voice was but a whisper. "Carlo's missing," I managed to say, my voice catching in my throat. "We have to call someone, we have to—" Crouching, his knee slammed into the floor as he leaned in close, so close I could smell the decay on his breath.

"No one's gonna help you," he hissed; his laugh sharp, cold. "No one!"

I flinched as his hand shot out, clenching into my jaw, and forcing me back against the wall. His fist followed, connecting to my face with enough force to send my head snapping to one side, vision swimming in a sudden blur of pain.

One, two, three... I counted as if somehow the numbers could take me out of this terrible here, take me anywhere else.

But the hits just continued his fists, the belt, whatever that would be used to beat the life out of me. All I could hear was the thud of leather against my skin, the sharp crack of bone and flesh, but all seemed so far away, like it happened to another

person.

I closed my eyes and wished to be elsewhere, wishing for a dream that would swallow me whole. I drifted far away, slipping beneath some cold dark ocean. The water was heavy and thick; it pulled me lower, weight growing upon me. My white dress floated around me, my hair swirling in slow motion as the sea consumed me. And then as I reached the bottom, I saw her.

She was there, her pale face soft, her hazel eyes brimming with the love I have ached for all these years. She reached out her arms, embracing me close, rocking me as we lay together on the ocean floor. It was so peaceful. For a minute, I just didn't want to go. If this was it, I was ready.

But then she let go. A sad smile, though something in those eyes-something told me that was not it. I was not done yet. I was not ready.

I fought to the surface, lungs burning with the struggle of trying to breathe. My whole body ached, screaming, but I didn't stop. That had me clawing back up toward the light, gasping for air.

I came to, sprawled out on the floor, my cheek against the cold wood. It was dark; the only sound was the snoring of my father from down in the living room. He had fallen asleep, his rage tired out for the night. But the pain was still there, sharp and searing, cutting through every bit of me.

I tried to move, but my body would not budge. My muscles screamed in protest, my skin bruised and raw. I pushed with the little energy I had left; my arms were trembling and finally, after a long time, I managed to drag myself on the floor inch by inch. Silent tears slid down my cheeks; my body was too broken even to sob loudly. I thought of Mom again, her face, her arms holding me tight at the bottom of that ocean. I missed her so much, it hurt more than the blows. "For you," I whispered low

and forced myself to move another inch. "For you."

She needed me to fight back. She needed for me to survive, not give up. Even when I had no longer the strength to give up, I crawled on.

My body dragged itself across the cold floor; the touch of every scrape of my elbows against the surface burned like fire. Inch by inch, I pushed my body forward like the hall was an endless tunnel. Gasping for air, I reached my room. My fingers shaking, I grasped for the doorframe and dragged myself upright, holding on to the wood as though it was the only thing holding me in this world. After one step, I sent the door slamming shut behind me, and my hand scrabbled for a lock until I heard the faint click.

And then I collapsed.

I hit the floor hard, the white carpet coarse against my skin as I rolled over, staring blankly at the ceiling. My body hurt, all my muscles shrieking in protest, but none of it mattered against the dull ache inside. I wanted something—anything—to make it stop so badly, but the room was silent, uncaring.

My phone buzzed in my pocket, a sharp vibration that seemed to echo through the room. I twisted my body, groaning, reaching for it, but by the time my fingers brushed the screen, the buzzing had stopped. Christian. His name was still there on the display for a second or two before it flickered off and was replaced by a message.

"Why is Carlo at the House of Clowns with Rocco?"

The words weren't even digested before the phone rang again. My hand shaking, I swiped to answer; the coolness of the screen beneath my fingers was a stark contrast to the burned wounds on my skin. Christian's voice exploded through the speaker—in anger and panic.

"What the fuck is wrong with you?" he yelled, and it was like a sharp blade cutting through the fog in my brain. "You left him there? In that hole with those freaks?"

"Hi," I mumbled, the word barely escaping my lips. I could feel the weight of his frustration, but he had no idea what was happening. He was too far away to know that I lay broken on the floor, locked in my bedroom after my father had beaten me.

He didn't know I'd sat and watched as Carlo got dragged away by strangers while I was detained by clowns, trying to get to him. He knew nothing. Nobody knew anything.

"Are you fucking high?" Christian's voice was raised again, laced with disdain. "This is a new low, even for you."

"Stop," I whimpered, and then the sting of tears hit my eyes again, but he wasn't done.

"It's not enough that you've slept with half my friends. You're now getting high and misplacing our brother?" His voice finally cracked and frustration boiled over. "Jesus, Chiara, pull yourself together."

Hot streams of tears escaped down my cheeks, warming the cold numbness around my face. I sniffed, just trying to keep it together. "Can someone just bring him home?"

Christian laughed cynically, all incredulous. "Oh yeah, sure, I'll ask a bunch of clowns to do that—NO!" His voice caught on a hitch, the anger heavy and alive. "You go get him."

"Look," I choked, "I'm—I'm pretty beaten up right now." My voice came out strained, hardly above a whisper. "I really can't... please..."

There'd been a moment of silence between us, heavy and tense. Then he relented with a frustrated sigh. "Fine. But this is the last fucking time."

"Thank you," I breathed, my voice cracking with exhaustion. There was just dead air and the nothingness that surrounded me. I lay there; it was an eerily quiet room, with only the hum of the air conditioner. It was finally silent, and that was all I wanted. But it wasn't the kind of help I needed. My big brother, Christian—the one who was supposed to be looking out for me—saw only what he wanted to see. He judged me and thought I was nothing but a screw-up, incapable of thinking about anyone but myself.

But then he forgot. He forgot how I played hooky from school to make sure there was food on the table when they came home. How I held it all together while everything else fell apart. But no one saw that. No one wanted to.

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 3:42 am*

SEVEN

JOKER

A moment before, as I saw her within the maze, something stirred deep inside of me. It was not a very curious thing, but it was just a prime, aching hunger. I had to know her, possess her, find out what lay behind her bruised smile and the way she moved as if something was not quite there. There was a purpose in her walk, the slight swaying of her hips drawing attention but being careful not to let too much linger. It was that hint of secrecy in her eyes, the way her lips curled despite all the bruises on her face, that invited someone to notice her but dared them to come closer.

OK, I'll bite.

Who are you? I wanted to ask. Who are you beneath the sleek, polished surface? The idea of taking her on moonlit walks, secret, quiet, where nobody else would know, went into my head. I'd let her lead, let her walk just ahead of me, watching the graceful sway of her hips, the way her body moved in rhythm with the night.

I shook the thought away, leaned back against the rough wall of the house, and lit the last cigarette from the crumpled pack in my pocket. Night hung heavy, cloaked in a thick silence where only the far-off hum of circus music weaved a haunting melody through the air. And I slept to the sound, even most of those eerie, hypnotic tunes that followed us all, a shadow we couldn't shake.

Chico was back out from the woods, the footsteps slow across the hard-stomached ground. Victor trailed behind him, like a ghost. As they drew closer, I caught Victor's

face scratched up, raw, like he'd been in a fight with something wild. Chico's face was tight, fear written across his face as he guided Victor inside the house. Nobody knew the story that lay behind Victor, but the conjecture was already enough.

Whispers told that he belonged to some secret society or even a cult, with several versions of the story up in the air. Some said he'd escaped, but there was always a price paid, the kind of price where someone had to be sacrificed every year to keep those things from coming for him.

The door creaked shut behind them, and Chico stepped back out, lighting a cigarette as he came to stand beside me. He took a long drag before speaking; his voice was low.

"They tried takin' that girl," he muttered, shaking his head. "She fought 'em off. Scratched him up good."

I looked over at him, raising an eyebrow. "Why'd they go after her?"

He shrugged, and the cigarette dangled from his lips. "Game. Fun . Who knows?"

"A game, huh?" I repeated, my gaze drifting into the distance. And then I saw Rocco approaching us, the silhouette of a boy following close behind him. The kid clutched a notebook, whispering something to Rocco, who barely acknowledged him as they approached.

When Rocco reached us, he gave me a quick nod. "You free?" he asked in a gruff voice.

"Yeah," I said, eyeing the kid.

"Good." Rocco gave the boy a nudge in my direction. "I need you to take him home. I

owe his brother a favor."

He staggered a little, his eyes wide, looking up at me, clutching his notebook as if it were the only anchor to reality.

I exhaled hard and turned back toward the woods. "Alright," I said, pushing off the wall. "Let's go."

I approached the kid and, with an open hand, delicately took hold of his jacket collar, drawing him toward me and pushing him forward with a nudge. "Hasta la vista," I tittered over my shoulder to the others, a grin spreading across my face.

The child trotted to keep up as we crossed the field and headed toward the trees. His legs were short and striving, unable to keep pace with me. In a little while, I turned back, seeing the gap between us was growing.

"You keeping up?" I asked, slowing just enough to let him catch up.

"Y-yeah," he muttered, head down, eyes fixed on the ground. "It's just... you kind of scare me."

I burst out laughing, striding to a stop. "Kid, I'm the least intimidating person in this place." To prove it, I squatted, brushing my hair back to reveal a sliver of my face, free from the smears of paint and grime. "See? Just a regular guy under all this."

"I know," he whispered, a little smile tugging at his lips. "It's still... kinda scary."

I straightened and laid a hand on the back of his head, pushing him farther down. "Good. Scary's not always bad."

He looked up at me, his eyes brimming with innocent curiosity. "What is your

name?"

"Rio," I said, glancing at his oversized jacket. It hung on him like a borrowed coat, two sizes too big. "What's yours?"

"Carlo." He stirred, his pinkies tracing the edges of the worn notebook in his hands. Gaze down but cutting through the silence between us, his words cut into my thoughts.

"Do you have... a favorite person?"

I stopped and shook my head, a smile playing on my lips. "You?"

His voice gentled, a tenderness seeping in. "My sister," he said almost reverentially. "She is my favorite person."

I nodded, waiting as he seemed to search for more words.

"She takes care of me," he said—only his tone was even, laced with something more. "When everything's bad, she always manages to make it feel good for me."

"Is it always bad?" I asked, the question slipping out before I'd fully considered it.

"Not always," he whispered, his voice barely above a whisper. His eyes shone bright, staring down at the notebook as though it held secrets he couldn't share. "But when it is... it can be scary."

"And where's she now?" I asked, nodding toward the notebook he clutched so tightly. "Is that hers?"

He swallowed, eyes dropping to the ground, voice trailing off. "Home. She's home..."

with Dad."

I clenched my jaw and turned out towards the dim lights of the town that twinkled down below us at the bottom of the hill as we walked.

"I like you, Rio," he said finally, the first to break the silence. "You're a smart clown."

I stopped and raised an eyebrow at him. "Well, glad to know I'm not a dumb one."

Carlo chuckled, easing his notebook under his arm. "My dad says all clowns are."

"Clowns aren't stupid," I said irritably and rolled my eyes. "Sounds like your dad might be, though."

He laughed, shaking his head. "I can't wait to see his face when you show up at our door."

I couldn't help but grin. "Me and you both, kid." I felt the paint crack around the corners of my mouth as I smiled, little flakes of color crumbling away.

We tramped through the tall grass until the earth gave way to a wooden path beneath our feet. Tree shadows lengthened and stretched in the pale moonlight.

"How much farther?" I asked, peering down the switchback-heavy trail ahead.

"Five minutes, maybe." He clutched his notebook tightly to his chest now, and in a softer voice, asked, "Have you ever been scared?"

I looked down at him, something familiar in the desperate clutch he had on that notebook, like a shield. "Yeah, a few times," I said, memories flickering to life-like old snapshots: me standing alone in that orphanage as a kid and feeling like a ghost

among strangers with an ache in my heart that asked one question over and over again, whether anybody would ever care.

"Me too," whispered Carlo, his small voice cutting through the quiet of the night. "I'm scared my sister will leave me. Like my mom did."

"Favorite people don't leave favorite people," I said, looking down at him as we reached the fence that divided the field from the road.

I swung a leg over the fence and leaped, landing on the other side. Carlo tried, but his arms barely reached the top. I reached out and steadied him as he clambered over and hopped down beside me.

His feet landed on the ground, and he looked up at me. "Why do you think that? That she won't leave?"

I shrugged, digging my elbow into his ribs to keep him walking. "Because she makes you feel safe. Like she's holding things together, even when everything else is falling apart."

As we walked into town, the cobbles beneath our feet changed, each one slightly uneven and worn. Time was stuck here, the sort of place where everyone knows your name yet judges you for every small difference. And here I was, a clown, leading this quiet kid who, for reasons I couldn't fathom, trusted me.

We stopped in front of three narrow houses that leaned on one another, peeling paint and small entrances, but all sharing the same crumbling stone walls. "OK, which one is yours?" I asked.

He turned and lifted his finger toward the small house on the far left. That house was the most run-down, with a sagging roof in several areas, steps leading to a narrow

porch, and a single light over the balcony casting a warm glow across the yard below. He pointed at it. "That one."

We crossed the road, heading towards the house. Just before we reached the yard, I placed my hands on his shoulders, turning him toward me. "Listen, kid," I said softly, waiting for his eyes to meet mine, "Which window is yours?"

He looked down, his voice barely above a whisper. "The second one," he said, his hand gesturing toward it.

"If you ever need my help," I told him, "just turn your light on and off three times. I'll come right up."

He nodded toward the window on the ground floor. "That's my sister's room," he whispered thickly. "She... may need your help more than I do."

I followed his gaze to her window, heart sinking as I thought of the bruises she'd tried to hide, all the pain she carried alone. "Does she need help often?" I asked, my voice low. He nodded, his face weighed down.

Without another word, he led me to the porch. The house was constructed from old, weathered stone, and the door was thick, splintered wood that seemed to seal out decades of storms.

A growling voice rumbled from inside, just as Carlo raised his hand to knock. The door creaked open, and there he stood—his father, his face twisted into a sneer, eyes bloodshot and unfocused, barely steadying himself in the doorway. He spotted me, and his upper lip curled. "What are you doing here, you freak?"

"Dad," Carlo said immediately, stepping between us.

My fists were clenched, a wave of burning anger coursing through me, every instinct screaming for me to knock him down. But then I saw her creeping from the hallway. Bruises had swollen her face; purple skin like painful secrets, had blossomed there. And without thinking, I dug my nails into my palms, biting down hard to keep my cool—not to hurt him the way he'd hurt her. But she looked up at me, her eyes steady through the pain. For one moment, it was like she was begging, though for what, I had no idea. Much as the churning anger urged me to move, to strike, I forced myself to remain still, to hold back.

## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 3:42 am*

EIGHT

ACE

With a loud whoop, Carlo launched himself into my arms—hard enough to send me backward until my shoulders were pressed against the wall. For one instant, a burst of pain shot through my back, but I wrapped my arms tightly about him, holding him as steady as possible. I swallowed the pain. He'd be okay, and that's all that counted.

My dad lingered in the doorway, his drunken gaze fixed on the stranger who had brought Carlo home, his words slurred but sharp. "Freak," he spat, disregarding the help lent to us. My stomach twisted at the insult, the way he'd wield it so easily, so carelessly. I knew very well how words like that could cut deeper than anything else.

I steadied myself, stepping forward as Carlo clutched my hand, as though he sensed what I was about to do. I shot a glance back to him, beseeching him to stay there, then looked up at our visitor.

"Thank you," I said, managing best a faint smile as I met his eyes. For a moment, we simply looked at each other. Beneath the painted face, the smeared colors, I saw something—an understanding, a kind of sadness he tried to hide. And in that second, I wanted nothing more than to reach out, to be able to let someone hold me.

He nodded silently, his gaze lingering for a beat longer before he turned and stepped off the porch. The quiet was cut by Dad's scowl following him.

"That's right. Leave, freak ."

"Stop it!" I shouted, feeling anger rise in me. "Why do you hate them so much?"

He slammed the door shut, turning to me with a face twisted in bitter hatred.

"Because I married one."

I stared at him, the words coming much harder than I could have prepared for. My mind was reeling as I glanced over to Carlo, who sat patiently, looking up to me or his father with an innocent expression, and my urge to shield him from all of this was almost overwhelming. "Go to your room," I whispered, my grip tightening on his shoulder.

"But—" he pulled at my shirt, his wide eyes darting between us.

But then it clicked, and with a strong voice not taking objection: "Go!" He suddenly turned and ran to his room. I was left with Dad in the dimly lit hallway.

Anger churned into something stronger inside me, something sharper. I moved one step closer. "You can throw me around all you want, but you can't call Mom a freak." My voice was low, but it didn't shake. "She left the circus because of you, and she left home because you never appreciated her. You don't get to tear her down."

He let a bitter laugh loose as his fingers ran over his face as if he could rub away the anger. "She left because she wanted to be normal, and I'm the one who had to pay for it."

I couldn't help it anymore. "I'm glad she's gone! You didn't deserve her." The words were stronger, fiercer, and more vicious than what I had intended. "You're the monster here."

Something darker washed in and took over his eyes, his face changing with it. He lunged forward, reaching for a bottle on the table, his grasp on it tightening. "What

did you just say?" Slurred words, deadly tone. Then he lifted the bottle and smashed it against the wall. Shards flew everywhere around us. "You will respect me, you little brat," he yelled at me, taking another step closer—the jagged edge of glass clutched in his hand.

A lump rose to my throat and the urge to scream pounded in my chest, but I couldn't show fear. I took a step back, but the searing pain from earlier on kept me from going any faster. His shadow loomed closer, his face twisted in pure rage while he dove forward. I went backward, desperate to get away, but his hand was already reaching for me. And then I felt it. The broken edge of the bottle sliced into my shoulder, a burning, blinding pain spreading like wildfire through my body. A scream was torn from my throat as the glass bit deep into my skin, the warmth of the blood pooling down my back, soaking my shirt thick and slick against my skin. The bottle stuck there as if heavy, unbearable, and with every pulse, every heartbeat, I could feel it, as the dimness of the world surrounded my soul.

My reaching hand had grasped the handle of the bedroom door and, shaking, flung it open. My knees buckled just as I started through the doorway, and I crumpled to the floor, half aware of Carlo's scream as he sprang into the room behind me. He leaped for the door and spread his body against it, straining to keep it shut against the pounding force from the other side. Dad's fists landed on the door, each slam rumbling and booming in the room like thunder.

His hand fumbled, flipping the light switch on and off in a frantic signal to the outside. It flickered three times before he dropped down beside me, his face buried against my chest, his small body shuddering over his sobs.

"It's my fault," he whimpered, his voice muffled in my shirt.

"No," I whispered, brushing my hand over his hair. "It's not, Carlo. It's not."

Plopping my head onto the carpet, the world began to blur around the edges. Some way, I found myself counting, something to cling to; as I reached three, in wafted a memory, sharp and warm.

The tent inside of Grandma's, in the middle of the circus; her little world, all lace and old wigs, glitter scarves, and those thick, dog-eared tarot cards she kept tucked away under her bed. I remembered pulling those cards out once with some girls and holding the deck in my hands, playing pretend fortune-teller.

I drew the death card, and it's as if a chill ran through me. But as clear as day, I heard Grandma's words: "Death isn't always an end. Sometimes it's a new beginning. An old path closing, a better one waiting."

The memory made me smile, a quiet comfort anchoring me to something soft, and safe. If this was the end with me, then perhaps I could hold onto those memories: a past where magic still lived, a dream before it all had twisted wrong. Maybe my future wasn't something I had any reach for, but just this—just a small hand holding onto mine, a memory wrapped around me.

## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 3:42 am*

NINE

JOKER

Every step forward was a betrayal. With every breath, I cursed myself for walking away from that house, from her, but what was I supposed to do? I was just a stranger, just some guy cloaked behind a painted mask. She probably thought I was a freak—a twisted, painted-up clown messing with her family.

She was right. What was I to her?

I kicked a loose stone in the road, feeling the sharp jab of its impact against my shoe, but kept on, each step heavier than the last. Reaching the end of the road, I paused, straddling the fence, and looked back. Her house was quiet, shadowed in the faded light. Was I ever to see her again? Would she even remember me?

But then I saw it—the flicker in her window. Lights, flashing on and off. My heart seized. My fingers dug into the wood of the fence, splinters stabbing under my nails as I jumped back down and broke into a run, cutting through the darkness back to her house.

The night seemed to stretch on, the distance between every step elongating into eternity. My breathing became wild with my heartbeat, a raw urgency tearing through me. Her face filled my mind: the bruise on her cheek, the way her eyes held onto that last spark despite everything being torn from under her.

When I came closer to the house, my muscles were screaming, but all the same, I

didn't halt. I heard a crash inside, the unmistakable sound of a struggle, and saw her father, his drunken shadow flailing through the window. I moved to the side, peering through another window, and there she was—collapsed on the floor, blood pooling around her. My mind went blank.

I lunged for the wooden frame of the window, hoisting myself up and ignoring the sting as shards of glass sliced into my fists. I pounded at it until the glass shattered, sending pieces flying across the room.

Carlo turned to me, "Rio, you have to take her. Get her out of here."

"You're both coming with me," I said, swinging myself through the window, ignoring the blood now trickling from my hands. The pain didn't register. It simply didn't compare to seeing her like this.

"No," he whispered, turning a fearful glance over his shoulder. "He won't hurt me. I'll call my brother, Christian, to come for me. Just... get her out of here. Please."

Nodding, my jaw was set. There was no time for arguments. I knelt beside her sliding my arms under her fragile bruised body. She felt so small, so weightless, but I held her tight being as careful as I could lifting her. Carlo reached into his jacket pulling out a notebook. He pressed it into my hand. "Tell her I'll be okay. Tell her not to worry."

With a final nod, I moved to the window, lifting her in my arms. As I climbed through with her clutched in my arms, Carlo gave me one last look, gesturing for me to go. There he was, all alone, trying to be brave. I ran the cold air nipping at my skin, without looking back. Barely stirring, shallow breaths against my chest, yet I pushed on. Her blood stained my shirt and my hands were growing numb—each step driving shards of glass deeper into my palms. But nothing mattered except getting her away from that place.

By the time we reached the tree's edge, my arms ached and my legs were burning. We went that far at least when, hidden from the road, I finally reached the old fence. Laying her down on the cool grass, I knelt and brushed a stray strand of hair from her face.

"Hey," I whispered, my fingers brushing gently against her cheek, the minor friction prodding to stir her. "Come on, stay with me."

Her eyelids fluttered, and her face contorted in a grimace as she slowly opened her eyes. I didn't know what she'd gone through, but I could see the hurt, the fear, and somewhere, the strength.

"You're safe now," I murmured. "I've got you. Just breathe."

She parted her lips, her voice was barely more than a whisper. "My brother... take me back." Her body tensed, trying to sit up, but I pressed my hand firmly against her chest, holding her down.

"No." I met her stare, my brows knit tightly. "He stayed to protect you."

Her face crumpled, and tears slid down her bruised cheeks. "He can't protect himself," she choked, the words cracking. "If anything happens to him, I'll never forgive myself."

I leaned in close, steadying her with my stare. "If you're going to blame someone, blame me," I said low. Her gaze flickered, studying my face, swollen eyelids heavy with bruises her father had left in his wake. She turned her head to the side, retreating from the intensity of my words.

"I can take it," I murmured, soft but resolute.

She was so fragile, so ravaged by the life she'd lived, that the most warped part of me felt... possessive, maybe protective. She was like a broken doll left in the dirt, and I was that man who'd found her, ready to piece her back together—broken edges to match my own. I hated that I enjoyed it; it was there nonetheless, gnawing at me with every passing moment.

"Can you walk?" I asked, slipping an arm around her shoulders and gently lifting her. She planted her feet on the ground and stumbled, her balance going as she leaned into me, her weight pressing into my chest.

Her eyes, vulnerable, searched and found mine, and I exhaled sharply, grumbling under my breath as I shifted in place. Before she could protest, I slid one arm under her legs, the other supporting her back, lifting her easily.

"I know a place no one will find you," I said low, sure of tone, carrying her toward the woods as the trees closed in around us.

House of Clowns.

TEN

ACE

A strange pull tethered me between worlds, and with this the familiar struggle of drifting from a perfect dream into reality. I am everything in that world: unbound, in control, a master of my own fate—I'm limitless, unshadowed by doubt, alive with the kind of freedom that feels like an endless sky. But my eyes open, and I feel the thought slipping from my grasp, leaving me to face another day that tastes of survival. Every morning brings a sense of a lost battle, a new test.

You can do this, I tell myself, while in a whisper immediately after, What if I can't? Yet somehow, I always can. No matter how serrated yesterday was, every sunrise is a thin thread of hope, promising it cannot get worse than yesterday.

I am a survivor, not a victim.

I blink, taking in the soft light filtering through the room, the soft hum of silence all around me. His shirt clings loosely to my shoulders, its fabric carrying a faint scent of smoke—sharp, earthy tobacco wrapped in something richer, dark oudh and a crisp edge of bergamot. The odd mixture soothes me and grounds me here. I look around. The room is spare, a quiet peace: three beds lined against pale walls, though I am the only one here. The large window hauls in the early morning light, the soft glow skimming across a pair of closets and a mirror dominating the wall across from me.

It feels like a balm, a shelter for my weary body and soul, this bare simplicity. And for the first time in so long, I feel relief—a sense of being loosed from the pain and

chaos, unchased.

My muscles feel weightless, each bruise and cut tended, each ache a distant reminder, yet somehow bearable. And though each wound sings a song of hurt, a strange peace fills me, coaxing a faint smile to my lips. For now, it isn't pain that owns me; I am free, suspended in a calm.

I shift a little, my eyes fixed upon the door as creaks in old wood whisper that footsteps near. My heart beats faster. I shut my eyes, but then comes the easing of that door and I blink them open, and he steps in. He's balancing a coffee cup in one hand, a hunk of bread clasped between his teeth. He kicks the door shut with his foot to nudge it closed, then turns to face me. He stops.

"Hi," he mutters, words muffled by the bread at his lips.

I let out a chuckle, hugging the blanket higher, very aware of the sudden heat rising to my cheeks.

"Hi."

He's no longer hidden behind a painted face. His skin, smooth and bare, catches the light; pale as winter frost, his hair is slicked back, though a few rebellious strands fall across his brow. The piercing intensity of his icy blue eyes seems to bore into my skin, but behind them, there's warmth—a tug that pulls at me, softening the edges. A serrated scar carves down from his forehead, and slashes through his right eyebrow, tracing a line down to the middle of his cheek. There's also a pair of scars framing his lips—curving outwards in the near-perpetual dark smile. I find myself wondering what stories lie behind them if they were self-inflicted or branded there by someone else.

We are all scarred, secrets stitched across our skin in pieces of stories we're not

willing to share yet.

He carefully placed the cup on the chair beside the empty bed, balancing the bread on top since he hadn't bothered with a plate. Then he sat down on the edge of my bed himself, his eyes on me with an unreadable expression. I felt his gaze trace over my face, pausing on each bruise and cut, and I couldn't tell if he was waiting for me to speak or just cataloging the damage.

The silence stretched, tension winding tighter between us until finally, I broke it.

"Is that for me?" I asked, nodding toward the bread and coffee. The scent of fresh bread had stirred my stomach awake, and hunger gnawed at me.

He looked from me to the bread and back, an amused glint sparking in his eye.

"No." His hand brushed through his hair in that lazy, self-assured gesture that seemed so characteristically him.

Jerk, I thought, the word flashing in my mind.

"But if you want..." He let his voice trail away, taking the bread from its perch and rising to step closer. "We can share."

I smiled, warmth creeping into my cheeks despite myself. "Okay."

He sat down beside me and broke the loaf in two, pressing the larger piece into my hands. I took it greedily, teeth sinking into the hard crust. The bread was stale and tough, but after days of near nothing, it tasted like a feast.

"Good?" he asked, a hint of a smile curving his lips.

I nodded. "Yeah, thanks."

His eyes fastened on mine as we dined, the silence stretching but not so strained this time. I felt within me the quiet tug of curiosity heave and rise, my mind circling back to the scars carved across his face, the secrets they intimated. Unable to resist, I reached a tentative hand toward his cheek.

"What happened... to you?" I whispered, my fingertips hovering less than a millimeter from his skin. But before I could touch him, his hand whipped out to catch mine, fingers wrapping firmly around my wrist.

"Don't," he whispered, his tone edged with a soft warning.

My hand fell back to my lap as my heart began to pound in my chest.

"I'm sorry," I said softly, feeling both the sting of rejection and the need to understand.

His eyes dropped to the floor, voice low and gravelly, "I don't like being touched there." The scars almost appeared deeper, his jaw clenched. "I... wasn't in the best place when I did this. But it's a reminder that even when life tore me to pieces—I survived."

"That's... okay," I muttered, instinctively reaching for his hand. But he pulled it away, tension running along his frame. Despite myself, a small smile pulled at my lips. "Don't tell me you don't like holding hands either?"

He looked away, shifting uncomfortably. "I... don't," he whispered.

"Oh," I whispered, pulling back and sinking into the bed. I tugged the blanket up to my face, feeling the heat bloom over my cheeks. "I'm so sorry if I made you

uncomfortable," I mumbled into the fabric, hoping he could still hear.

The blanket lifted from my face, and his gaze softened as it met mine. "You didn't," he said, a cautious smile tugging at the corner of his lips. "I'm just worried that if you did, I'd be the one hurting you."

I let a smile form even though it tugged painfully at the bruises dotting my cheeks.

"Then... when the time is right," I whispered, steady but laced with something deeper, "you can."

He chuckled, the sound serving to ease up some of the tension in the room.

"Promise."

But my thoughts vanished, plucked back into the bog of panic.

"Where... where's Carlo?" I managed to whisper, barely audible.

"I spoke with my boss," he assured, his tone low and soothing. "He will deal with that tonight. For now... you need to rest."

As he stood to leave, he paused, something almost forgotten glimmering in his eyes.

"Oh, wait," he murmured, reaching into his jacket. "I almost forgot this." He handed me a worn and familiar notebook. His fingers lingered for just a second, meeting mine before he let go.

I clutched it, the weight of it grounding me, and whispered, "Thank you."

The response was to light up with a warm smile, brief but real, as he stepped to the

door. "See you later."

The door latched shut, and I was left to the dim room alone, its silence almost comforting and company enough. The notebook lay serene against my lap, waiting. I opened it, holding a shaky breath. Two tarot cards slipped free instantly and floated down to lie in my lap face-up: Death and The Lovers.

My breath caught. For a wild moment, I could almost feel my grandmother's presence, her sly smile, the way she always seemed to know more than she let on. And those cards had such a comfortable feel to them... her, like a whisper.

I turned back to the notebook in my hands. And there, just beneath it, words sprang off the page—as if waiting for me all this time: "Tarot tells the truths we often don't dare to tell ourselves."

A quiet smile pulled at my lips as this reminded me of Grandma. Grandma knew how I liked those cards. She knew somehow that one day I was going to find where I belonged. I pushed another page, feeling the worn paper under my fingers, and there it was—a letter tucked between the pages, its date from some years after my mother disappeared.

Rocco,

Hope this letter finds you in the best of health and spirits.

I know that I made a big mistake leaving you there; that is my only regret. But I do know we will meet again someday.

I now have three beautiful children who depend on me. When they grow older, someday, I will tell them stories about us. I will tell them that you were the one who saved me from falling apart. Vincenzo doesn't understand much yet—even that

Chiara does not belong to him. He does know that I was in the Circle and that I had to run from there, but since he discovered this fact, he has changed. It's as if he resented me for it. But I'm good at playing along. The kids don't even suspect a thing. I never loved him, Rocco. You were the only one I ever did.

But if you feel by the end as I do now, meet me at the maze on the night the House of Clowns hosts its ninth performance in the year 2022. I'll be waiting.

Love, Arianne

My fingers drifted to my lips, tracing the breathless silence that had fallen over me. I grasped the notebook in my hands, its pages dog-eared and faded from touch, a person I would never know yet who, in another important way, had always been a part of me. Though I had assumed this belonged to my mother, it was his—it was my real father's.

The pieces fell into place, but they also shattered just that easily. Who am I? Not my mother, who sought to shield us behind walls that broke far too easily. Not my father, a shadow who was lost even before I could have known him. I was just... me. But the bruises, the raised voices, the ache in my bones —those were whispers of her battles. She hadn't left us; she'd fought for us in ways I was only now beginning to understand.

And when she did make that final decision, she left out of love—or maybe because she didn't have any other choice.

But in this stranger's bed, the man who pulled me from the ruins of that home was the first time I'd known a different sensation—safety. A warm peace around the pieces of me that had been so sharp and fractured for so long. And then I knew why she did it. She had to, even if she had to let us go; I understood her choice.

Now, finally, the cards made sense. Love was a double-edged promise that could pull you under into the depths to leave you buried in darkness, or it could mark another kind of ending—a different kind of end at a new beginning. It would depend upon my choice: allow love to take me under, or let it be a spark to ignite something I'd mold just the way I wanted.

## Page 11

*Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 3:43 am*

ELEVEN

JOKER

The knock at Rocco's office door came out with too much force against the silence, and I felt the tension ripple through my fingers. I'd never asked for anything before, not like this. I'd just kept my head down and worked harder than anyone else, ignoring every muttered insult and sidelong glance that painted me as a freak .

"Come in," Rocco's voice boomed from the other side, all rough and impatient.

I eased the door open and stepped inside. His office was darker than the hall, illuminated only by a few dim, amber lights that barely cut through the gloom. Rocco slouched over his desk, one arm wrapped around the bottle of rum like it was his only lifeline. Papers lay strewn across the table; a few glass ornaments lay shattered on the floor, shards glinting in the faint light.

Without raising his head, he mumbled back, "What do you want?"

"I... remember when you said we needed more people?" I ventured, choosing every word with caution.

He didn't even look at him. "I said we needed more clowns, " he replied, each letter cold, deliberate. "C-L-O-W-N-S."

I swallowed, fighting off the dry knot in my throat. "Well, I found one. A female... clown."

Finally, he lifted his head, eyes sharpening as his gaze latched onto mine. "You're joking."

My hands twisted behind my back as I shifted on my feet, uncomfortable under the scrutiny. "She doesn't have to necessarily be a clown. She dances, does magic... she's versatile."

Rocco raised an eyebrow. "You like her, don't you?"

I shook my head. My voice was low, "It's not that. She... she needs our help."

Sighing, he struggled to his feet, liquor tilting his steps. "Do we even know who this girl is?"

I looked down, my voice barely above a whisper. "She's Carlo's sister. The boy you asked I bring to the town."

In a split second, he fell upon me, his hand closing in on my throat as he hissed, "You brought her here? What the hell were you thinking?"

I pushed him back, bristling. "I wasn't thinking, alright?"

Rocco turned me loose, staggering back with a wince. "She can't stay here."

"I already told her she could," I said, my voice steely. "And I told her we'd bring her brother too."

The next thing I knew, his voice thundered, "YOU IDIOT!" He slapped a hand over his face, groaning. "Lock that damn door."

I turned, crossed to the door, and twisted the lock, feeling his gaze boring into my

back. When I faced him again, I dropped the words I knew would press him: "I'm not an idiot. And if you don't tell me what's going on, I'll make sure everyone knows how clowns around here are just disappearing. "

Rocco's eyes darkened as he reached for the bottle and took a long drink before setting it down finally with a dull thud. "Fine. Those clowns?" His voice was low, this strange calm beneath the words. "They're people nobody cares about, nobody's looking for. I made a deal. They get traded, out of sight, so they don't have to take innocents."

The admission landed between us. "You struck a deal with the Family?" I spat, the bitter bile rising in my throat. "What the hell, Rocco? I was bluffing."

"I know," he said, settling back into his chair—older, it seemed to me, than he had any right to look. "But I needed someone to know."

I moved closer, leaning my hands on the edge of his desk. "So what does that mean for us?"

He looked at me with sunken eyes. "It means that they could also come for us."

I collapsed onto the chair beside Rocco's desk, finally feeling the weight of it all settle onto me. Instantly, my mind wandered to her—the girl I had promised safety, and swore to protect. I had made that promise out of nowhere, but now, as I sat here, I wondered if I was even capable of protecting myself. My life itself had always been a gamble, something that I had so gladly taken under my wing and cared nothing for. But for her? For her, I would kill if it ever came to that. Disturbingly, how fast she'd seemed to slip into my heart—a stranger who'd managed to poison the veins with an appealing pull I couldn't shake off. She was under my skin, seeping into thought, infecting every corner of my brain until I barely felt like myself.

I was snapped out of that long-ago scene by the sound of Rocco's voice. "They used to gather here, in the basement, and if they come asking for it again, no one will be safe."

"I heard rumors, but is it that bad?" I asked, dread creeping up my spine.

He merely shook his head. "Tell the girl she can stay with the Aerialists. They're down a performer, so she'll need to learn how to dance and perform if she wants to stay here."

"And her brother?" I pressed on, knowing I couldn't leave without some kind of assurance for him too.

Rocco was chuckling, a dark throaty sound that raised the fine hairs along my neck. "He's small enough to work with the cannonballs," he said with a cruel grin, tipping back another sip of rum.

I couldn't help the glare that shot his way. "Your heart is stone cold, you know that?"

"Fine, fine," he laughed louder, the bitterness cutting in his voice. "He can be a clown. It's fitting, isn't it?"

I stood, rolling my eyes as I headed for the door.

"Goodbye, Rocco," I muttered, not waiting for a response as I slipped out, closing the door firmly behind me.

As I walked down the hallway, my mind was able to race. Rocco had told me things, but it was just as obvious he was withholding. He spoke in half-lies, circling the meat of what mattered. Whispers of secrets lay soft in the air around him, razor-sharp and deadly enough to slice through the lives of everyone here. And now—Lord knew

somehow—I was connected with them too.

If I wanted answers, I'd have to get him to trust me. Trust enough to open up the vault of truths he was hiding behind all his drunken stories. We all had secrets—some darker, some deeper—but I knew one thing: eventually, they would all claw their way out. And when they did, the truth wouldn't just come out quietly. It would tear through our lives, piece by brutal piece.

I slipped into the room, shutting the door softly behind me, the click of the lock loud in the quiet. With Bart and Chico still out, I had the space to myself, and for one brief moment, the silence was a weight I wasn't sure how to carry. I took a step forward toward the bed where she lay, her breathing steady and deep. I couldn't help it—my gaze followed curves outlined half-hidden beneath the blanket that had shifted just enough to reveal the line of her hip, the smooth stretch of her thigh. My shirt was draped over her, hiked just above her waist, and she held one arm over her chest, the other tucked beneath her head, her face peaceful.

My hand drifted to my side, my fingers twitching as I wrestled the urge to reach out. She looked like she belonged here, like I'd always known her this way, wrapped in my shirt, breathing my air. And the need simmering under my skin was almost painful, sharp in its intensity.

She's teasing me, even in her sleep.

The concentrated low of heat stirred every nerve, and I gritted my teeth, looking aside for a moment to gather myself. I turned back to the door, rechecking the lock, knowing it was just another excuse to stall what was wanted upstairs. Coming back to her side, I let my shirt slide from my shoulders; cool air grazed my skin.

I dabbled my fingers over her skin, wondering what she'd feel like, wondering if she liked soft touches or something rougher, something that'd leave a memory in her

bones.

Do you like being touched? I thought, almost said to her as my hand hovered over the curve of her hip.

I let my fingers glide gently down her thigh, only skimming enough to feel the soft warmth of her skin. I stopped myself, lifting my hand away as I shook my head.

No, I told myself, but it was hard not to want more. The blanket fell further and revealed her back and shoulder, a vulnerable exposure of her body, and my fists knotted in the restraint I had to call.

Then she stirred; a soft murmur escaped her lips, and I turned, catching my breath.

"Hi," she said with a low, very sleepy voice as she sat up and rubbed her eyes.

"Hi," I replied, my back still to her as I tried to drag every thought back that had run across my mind. I could feel her shift closer, and the warmth seeped into the space between us, it took every ounce of control not to turn and close that distance between us.

"Sorry, I must have fallen asleep," she whispered, her breath against the back of my neck. I could feel the tension coil tighter, the pull to reach out and claim her overwhelming. But I knew better. If I moved now—if I let the hunger take over—she'd think this was all I wanted, that this was why I'd saved her. I clenched my fists tighter, the faint sting of glass buried in my palm drawing me back to reality, a quick, grounding pain.

Her eyes dropped to my hand, her brow furrowing, and she reached out. "You're bleeding," she said softly, grasping my hand in hers. Her touch was soft and warm, but the second her fingers made contact with mine, something inside me urged me to

pull away.

"It's okay," I muttered, trying not to let the favorable urge inside me to keep her hand there, to cling onto her touch just a little longer.

"It's not fine," she insisted, stepping closer, her expression softening as she caught my gaze. "Let me take care of it."

Her eyes locked with mine, those large, expressive orbs filling with warmth—a softness that cloaked a fierce side, one I knew could be merciless towards anyone who crossed her. But somehow, I was the lucky one to whom she seemed to care. Something inside me stirred at her look, a small spark, curiously even comforting. I leaned my head sideways, nodding toward the closet. "First aid kit's in the bottom drawer."

She walked across the room, and my eyes followed her. The way my shirt shifted over her frame as she moved made a hot pulse run through me. I turned away, trying to regain myself as she snatched up the kit and sat beside me on the bed, placing the box on the sheets.

"Can I?" she asked softly, her fingers already reaching for my hand.

I nodded, and she took my hand delicately, but at the same time firmly. I swallowed, feeling the warmth of her fingers as she started to pour alcohol over my cuts, sending this brief sting through my skin. Her face was inches from mine while she focused intently on leaning in with the tweezers to remove a shard of glass.

"This might hurt a bit," she said, her face close enough that I could make out flecks of gold in her eyes looking up at me. I didn't flinch, just felt my pulse thudding evenly. Then she drew out the first shard, and her fingers touched mine as she readied to reach for another shard.

One stray strand had kept working its way out from behind her ear to tickle her face as she worked, and she kept pushing it back with just this little sigh of annoyance. And the second time, when it fell again, and the third, and the fourth—but the fifth time, I couldn't help it. She was just... so adorable.

I didn't think, just lifted my free hand, my thumb brushing against her chin to angle her face up toward me.

I gently tucked the rogue strand behind her ear, my fingers lingering near her cheek. Her eyes locked onto mine, and at that exact moment, the world faded into the silence between us. All instincts yelled in my head to pull away, to keep the boundary I'd set between them and me. But my heart had other plans, and I found myself thinking, screw it.

I leaned in and closed the space between us, my lips finding hers in a soft, tentative kiss. She met me there, and all at once, that light, tiny spark roared into being, something all-consuming. Her lips parted, and our tongues danced together, exploring, tasting, moving as if we'd done this a thousand times before.

I tugged her closer, deepening the kiss, savoring each second of it until a smile tugged at the corner of her lips and broke us apart for a breath.

"I'm not sorry I did that," I muttered, clenching my jaw as I looked at her, anchoring into the now. "Just so you know."

She gave a soft, quiet chuckle. Her voice was still soft as her teeth bit into her lip. "I'm not sorry either."

She turned back to my hand then, her touch light as she cleaned the remaining wounds, dabbing the blood away with care. Finally, she wrapped my hand, the warmth of her touch lingering, even through the bandage.

"Am I all fixed up?" I asked, raising my hand playfully.

She laughed, her eyes rolling as she got up and went to clear the bloodied shards of glass. When she came back, she lay on the bed, stretching out beside me with a faint smile.

"Maybe."

"Just maybe?" I said, lying down beside her, no more than a few inches of mattress between us.

"Or maybe neither of us can be fixed," she whispered, her voice barely audible.

We lay there, side by side, our hands brushing, connected by that single touch. The silence that had built around us grew, the most unlikely peace, the kind of peace that digs into your bones and makes you want to linger, to grasp every second. I could have stayed this way forever, and in that silence, I knew I did not want it to end.

### TWELVE

### JOKER

The bell tower struck noon, its sound circling the room as I turned over and opened my eyes. She wasn't there. The beds around me were unused, but the door was still locked. I chuckled, thinking Bart and Chico were probably cursing my name from somewhere since they had to crash outside. Then, the sound of water caught my ear—a faint rhythm coming from the shower.

I rose quietly, moving toward the bathroom, half-convinced it had all been some dream. The shower stall was open to the room, screened only by a half-wall. We were used to it, but something about her, standing there in that quiet vulnerability, stirred something deep in my bones. She was in there, standing under the water, her back to me. Droplets traced down her skin, accentuating the bruises scattered across her body, like dark shades of green, blue, and purple marking her shoulders, her ribs, and her arms. My heart clenched as I watched her glide the soap gently over her skin, skipping over the bruises—maybe because they hurt too much to touch.

As she reached for the faucet, I retreated into the closet, standing back and feigning absorption in picking out clothes for her.

"Good morning," she said, stepping out of the bathroom wrapped in a towel, droplets of water still glistening on her skin.

I kept my eyes on the closet or tried to. "Good morning," I replied casually, though I knew my face betrayed more than I'd admit.

She stepped closer and took my hand, her finger tracing over the cuts that were bandaged. "How's your hand?"

"Better," I said, meeting her eyes. Her eyes were warm but uncertain.

She cleared her throat, looking away. "About... the kiss. I..."

"It's alright," I said, offering a small smile. "It was just one of those things that we both needed at that time."

She looked down at the floor, her shoulders sagging somewhat. "Yeah," she murmured, nodding to herself as if trying to make her mind agree. "Exactly."

I watched as she turned toward the bed, letting herself fall onto it with a sigh. I took another step forward. "I talked to my boss. He said you can stay with the aerialists in the west wing."

Her gaze rose, a flash of surprise mingled with something that almost looked like disappointment. "Oh," she said softly.

I pulled a shirt out of the closet and slipped it on. "I'll get dressed and take you around. Feeling better?"

"Yeah," she said, rubbing a towel through her damp hair, though there was a faraway expression in her eyes. "How far is it?"

I chuckled, coming closer. "Just a floor below. If you hit the ceiling with a broom, I'd hear you."

That etched a small smile on her lips, a little spark chasing away the sadness that had lurked there.

"OK," she said softly.

I leaned down and pressed a kiss to the top of her head before I could think better of it. "I'll let you get dressed," I said, giving her a moment of space.

I turned, unlocked the door, and stepped out, easing it shut behind me. The wooden frame creaked, and I exhaled, my forehead leaning into the frame. Opposite, down the hall, Bart and Chico were lying on the floor, sleeping, their jackets wrapped around them. They'd have some choice things to say to me in the morning, and I'd owe them a favor. At that moment though, it felt like it would've been worth every ounce of trouble.

A soft knock came from the door, and I straightened, knowing she was ready. I opened it, and she was standing there, her eyes still etched with that quiet sadness. Her hair was still damp, and she wore only my shirt, which fell like a dress around her, her bare feet brushing the dusty floor.

"Let me," I said, reaching down to lift her into my arms. She smiled softly, laying her head against my shoulder as I held her close, an instant in which the rest of the world melted silently away.

The further down we went, she nestled closer in, her heartbeat matching mine, her warmth seeping into my skin. When we reached the bottom floor, I set her down gently on the red-carpeted floor. She looked up at me with soft eyes and whispered, "Thanks."

We walked towards room number 234 , where Ruby leaned against the doorframe, her red hair tied into a tight bun. Her striking figure was accentuated by a corset and lace skirt that barely grazed her thighs. Her makeup was bold and bright—the face every man who came to this house knew well. But her voice had the kind of sharp edge that grated on anyone's nerves. "Please don't tell me you have yourself a

girlfriend, honey?"

Ruby asked, crossing her arms and raising an eyebrow at me.

Chiara stepped forward, extending a hand. "I'm Chiara," she said cool and matter-of-fact. "And we're not dating."

Ruby's brow arched a bit higher. "You sure about that?" she asked, her tone laced with challenge.

I shot Ruby a look, and she raised her hands in mock surrender. We moved past her into the room.

"This is Ruby," I told Chiara. "One of the silk dancers."

As I proceeded further in, I saw Dhalia seated cross-legged on the bed, a deck of cards spread before her. She sat under a black veil, engrossed in the cards before her. Rocco called her "crazy," but since she'd foreseen he'd lose his leg—and she was right—no one used that word anymore. She listened to an insight, to a knowing beyond any of us, yet she was one of the most sensitive people here.

"This is Dhalia," I whispered to Chiara, nodding toward her.

Chiara stepped over to the bed, perching lightly on its edge. She leaned over, laying one finger on one of the cards. "Unity," she breathed, her voice barely audible.

Dhalia pulled her veil back, studying Chiara with surprised eyes. "How did you know?"

"My grandma taught me to read the cards," Chiara said in a smooth voice. "The only truths in the world, according to her, were three; two belong to the people and one to

the cards."

Dhalia laughed, reaching over and touching her arm. "Oh girl, that's deep," she said, shaking her head with a smile. "I just look at some cards and tell folks what they want to hear. Whether it comes true... well, that's another story."

Ruby rolled her eyes and crossed her arms. "But it does come true," she muttered.

"Oh, shut up Ruby. Don't spook the new girl," Dhalia said, waving her off. "I wasn't even reading right now. Just getting high enough to read later." She winked, tapping the side of her nose.

I let out a deep sigh, rubbing my forehead before taking a step toward Chiara. "I think you might be safer sticking with me," I suggested—leadingly—but with enough clarity to make it a command.

Dhalia laughed, her voice teasing. "What, safer with the clowns?" She smirked. "You and I both know you couldn't even keep a goldfish alive." She and Ruby burst into laughter, making dramatic hand gestures of a fish flopping over.

Chiara turned to me, her gaze steady. "I'll be alright."

I nodded, though I couldn't help feeling a knot tighten in my stomach. "The show's at eight," I said while I backed out of the room.

The door shut with a slam behind me courtesy of Ruby, and as I made my way upstairs, Chico and Bart waited for me at the top of the staircase.

"My ass is stiff," Chico complained, rubbing his backside. "Feels like it might fall off if I even touch it."

Bart chuckled, nudging me right in the ribs. "We saw her, the girl," he said with that smirk of his. "Did you... you know... get any?"

I shoved him aside, scoffing. "No," I muttered. "I'm not that lucky."

They laughed, following me back to the room, ribbing me the whole way. But despite the jokes, I couldn't shake the feeling Chiara was already tangled in something deeper than any of us realized.

## Page 13

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THIRTEEN

JOKER

The night wrapped itself around me, comforting me with the realization that normal was only a dream I had long abandoned. Tonight, more than ever, I felt just like the clown everyone expected me to be.

I slipped into a pair of cherry-red suit pants, catching my reflection in the mirror. Lean and cut, my torso was half-covered in a wild patchwork of inked stories with no plot, no purpose.

Each was a souvenir with no meaning—an etching to skin that told no story. Yet, here they were, scattered over me like a roadmap to nowhere. My face stared back at me: expression calm, eyes unreadable. Strange, considering how somber I felt for a guy painted up as a clown.

Why is a clown expected to be smiling anyway?

I let out a soft laugh at the thought, a bitter chuckle that evaporated as soon as it came.

Reaching for the brush, I plunged it into the thick, white paint, letting its cold cream coat my fingers before I spread it across my face, one careful swipe at a time. With a separate pot of black, I pressed two fingers into it; the color was dark, heavy, and unforgiving. Slowly, I eased it down off each eye high onto my cheeks, tracing shadows down my cheekbones. The face staring back at me had transformed, its

edges softened, and the eyes hollowed. I clapped my hands, the sound of my fingers against paint-slick skin loud in the quiet room.

"That's more like it."

I grinned, leaning in closer toward the mirror. With the brush red from where it had first kissed the pan, I painted a small circle on my nose, then pulled it in an uneven swipe over my lips. I looked... complete, like a puzzle that finally had all of its pieces put in. No mask could hide it. I wasn't running from the clown inside of me, not tonight.

I washed my hands, the water running crimson and black as I reached into the closet. My fingers stumbled across the fabric of a deep green shirt, smooth and cool against the chaos smeared across my face. I shrugged it on, let it fall across my shoulders, and slid my arms into the sleeves before fastening each button, leaving the top two open to breathe.

Next came the cherry-red blazer, and slipping it on, the picture in the mirror was... complete.

I turned and, with one backward glance, closed the door behind me. As soon as I got inside the hall, the faintest strains of music seeped through the walls—some sort of a circus tune wafted in, entangled with the unmistakable voice of Pink half mocking, half haunting. "This used to be a funhouse..." I muttered, shaking my head with a smile that felt anything but amused. I spun on my heel, letting my shoes slide across the polished wood as I hit the floor, a quick, smooth moonwalk that took me to the edge of the staircase.

I paused, one last breath, then threw myself down the stairs, letting each step thud beneath me, laughing when I hit the bottom.

Bart and Chico were waiting at the bottom of the stairs, Bart with a radio sitting on his shoulder, cigarette drooping from his lips as he swayed to the beat, growling out the chorus, "Burn it down, down."

I landed beside them with a solid thud, and they erupted into giggles.

"Bene, sì?" Chico snickered, poking me in the gut with a playful punch. His attempt at an Italian accent was as clumsy as his grin was wide.

"Let's stick to English, huh?" I shot back, a laugh bubbling up despite myself.

Bart turned, blowing a cloud of smoke straight into my face. "Someone's a real bitch tonight."

Chico snorted, chiming in, "Yeah, must be 'cause he didn't get any."

I growled, "Go to hell," and pushed past them toward the door.

Behind me, Bart's voice dropped into a half-drunken whisper. "Then why was he dancing?"

I heard Chico's low reply just before their laughter exploded, "Can't a clown dance?"

I didn't break my stride but raised my hand in the air and flipped them off. The gesture was received; their laughter cut off and left the night still, full of the hum of carnival music.

I crossed the path in front of the house, feeling the pulse of the carnival before I saw the tents. Music, heavy and strange, wafted through the air, twisting around the scents of spun sugar and roasting peanuts in its curves. As I drew closer, lights flashed on the stands, each one packed with parents and their kids clutching candy apples or

sugar canes, sticky hands reaching for more.

Pressing deeper into the crowd, I spotted Vitto and Gio, sending arcs of fire into the night, the flames twisting against the dark. A ring of kids watched, the firelight warming their faces. Not far off, clowns on stilts wove into the crowd, moving forward, their laughter shrill and unnerving. And just then, directly ahead, near the entrance to the house of mirrors, I saw Rocco. He was casually leaning on a cane, fanning himself with a handful of flyers, which he was distributing to the public while his eyes scanned the crowd until they finally rested on me.

When I reached him, I slid a cigarette from my pocket, lighting it as I settled in beside him. "What's with the crowd?" I asked, watching him hand another flyer to a young couple who looked back at us, amused and a little wary.

Rocco grinned, nodding at a stranger who took a flyer without breaking stride. "Our friends in The Family spread the word."

I dragged in, the smoke curling up between us. "Good thing?"

"The best," he chuckled, eyes glinting. "We need the cash."

"Yeah, no kidding," I muttered, blowing out a thin stream of smoke. "Where do you need me tonight?"

His eyes strayed to the mirrored maze entrance now. "You're scaring people in there first. Then Hypno wants you in the big tent."

I groaned, flicking ash off the end of my cigarette. "No way am I letting that guy hypnotize me."

Rocco chuckled, his face not so much as twitching. "It wasn't a question, Rio.

Besides, he's paying you."

"Alright," I scoffed. "How much?"

"Five hundred," he said, lips barely moving as he watched the crowd. "Plus tips."

"Five hundred?" I choked a little on my smoke. "Provided he doesn't make me cluck like a chicken or something."

Rocco finally cracked a smile, tapping his cane against the ground. "Nothing like that. Just needs you in the ring. With the tiger."

I froze, eyes going wider. "A tiger? So, what, I'll be dead. Hypnotized dead."

He turned partially, shrugging as he looked over his shoulder. "Nah. Dead with five hundred euros in your pocket."

I smiled wryly, raising an eyebrow. "Alright, sounds good to me." Rocco jammed the flyers into my chest, pressing the cane up firmly into my shoulder. "One thing, though: clear your head while you're at it, Rio. I mean point-blank clear. Otherwise, you'll end up like Victor."

I nodded.

Victor had been down this path before. Months before, he took on Hypno's "suggestions," but there came a day when something inside of him started to twist. He became moody, yet it led him to a savage mentality—a raw, violent edge slicing through every interaction, possessive, brutal; in short, someone who needed to be chained down during his act, just to keep him in check. It got so bad that Hypno had to hypnotize him again just to bring him back to something resembling "normal." We all have our brand of crazy here, but Victor? He was like a man possessed. For the

past week, he'd been acting better, but Bart mentioned he'd tried to take some girl, and since then, I couldn't shake the unease.

I knew full well what that meant. But would that remove her from my consciousness, too?

Chiara, she haunted me, even now. Her face slipped into my thoughts, vivid as daybreak; every waking moment felt stretched thin when I couldn't see her. Minutes became hours, and time simply didn't exist without her.

What the hell is wrong with me?

This wasn't love—couldn't be. I didn't know what love was, hadn't even been built for it. Someone like her, so vibrant, didn't deserve someone like me. Yet, here I was, helpless in attraction to her, heart and mind at odds. It wasn't rational; it was an addiction, one I could feel sinking deeper.

But she'd never love a clown.

The maze had filled, shadows shifting as voices and laughter ricocheted off the mirrors. Showtime.

I stepped inside, caught in a fractured world of reflections. The painted face stared back at me from all angles—twisted in a funhouse of distorted versions, each one a different nightmare. Screams started before I moved, shrill voices chanting, "Clown! Clown!" as though naming me would save them.

No shit, Sherlock. I'm a clown.

I strode through the maze, the laughter and screams only getting louder as I turned the corners of the twisting passageways. A bunch of girls were posing in front of a full-

length mirror, their phones flashing in pictures. Perfect. I slinked up behind them, leaned in until my face was only inches away from theirs, and then slid into view, hollering, "BOO!"

They scattered with shrieks, and I couldn't help but break into laughter as they bolted from the maze, almost tumbling over each other.

And then I saw her.

Chiara stepped into the maze, and everything else was dulled into nothingness. She was also wearing one of Ruby's crimson lace corsets, a work of art in sharp lines and curves that just exaggerated her figure into something impossibly arresting.

Her short skirt barely grazed mid-thigh, while a small ace of hearts was pinned over her heart, her hair twisted into an elegant bun under a tiny red and black hat tilted to one side. Crimson heels completed the look, glinting under the small lights. She was porcelain-faced with a perfect, red-lipped heart; a tension line of makeup drew from brow to cheek—a dark, dramatic accent between her piercing eyes. She was the Queen of Hearts, or maybe just the Ace—the one who'd stolen my heart, no question. My breath caught, everything else forgotten.

I pushed myself against the back of the mirror, breathing heavily, my heartbeat racing as if trying to jump out of my chest, my rhythm tuned to the muffled sounds of the maze.

"So, I guess you won't scare me, huh?" Her voice slipped through the glass soft, close.

"I don't have to," I whispered, barely setting my voice above a whisper, "I don't want to scare you."

Her laugh was low, a quiet hum. "What if I want you to?"

I shifted, making her work for it. "Then you'd be nuts."

She leaned her body against the mirror, her figure a shadow on the other side. "Aren't we all?"

I stepped into view, the mirrors reflecting a hundred versions of me, each one focused on her. "We are," I agreed, the tilt of my head watching as her eyes held me there, her teeth pulling at her lower lip.

God, that's one thing I loved when she did.

"Tell me, darling," I said, closing the distance between us, "what do you want? You really can't expect me to believe you came here only to get scared."

She shook her head, her eyes sparkling. "No. I came for something we both need right now ."

I leaned in, my chest almost brushing hers, close enough to feel the heat radiating off her.

"And what's that?" I exclaimed, my hand coming up to the mirror beside her, pinning her in. Her breathing hastened, and I could see the rise and fall of her chest, a mirror to my heartbeat, running wild. "Say it," I demanded, my voice thick as I dropped closer, my fingers tracing the line of her jaw down to cup her chin and tilt her face up to mine. "Say it."

But instead of a response, she bridged the distance, her lips crashing against mine, sucking the air from my lungs and filling me to bursting with a thick, woozy warmth. I yanked her closer, my hand moving down the small of her back, pressing her into

me, deepening the kiss until I was lost in her, drunk with every taste, every touch.

Then, a loud crack cut the moment.

We parted in alarm, her eyes darting over my shoulder. In the reflection stood Rocco, arms folded across his chest, eyes fixed on us with an edge of amusement. He reached back and slapped his hand on the back of my neck, yanking me backward into his chest. "Kiss her later, Romeo. You've got a job to do."

I cast a look over my shoulder and bit back a groan.

"Fine."

I turned away and walked, but my gaze fell upon her, still standing, frozen, fingers pressed against her mouth, a smudge of lipstick trailing off from where we'd collided. Her eyes—through reflection—held mine, and in that fraction of a second, it was as if she was holding me there, suspended in that heartbeat that we'd just shared.

### FOURTEEN

### JOKER

I wasn't into performances. I'd always been behind the scenes, doing my job and not needing the limelight, but when Rocco dangled a few extra euros in front of me, I saw it as a sign. With that money, I could finally get something for Chiara—something real, not just some rose pilfered out of some vendor's cart.

As I stepped into the circus tent, a wave of laughter and hushed whispers rose from the crowd. People came to brush shoulders with danger, to teeter at the edge of the bizarre, but none of these people wanted to be the clown. Just to get close enough to look.

Who would willingly want this life? But my answer, as twisted as it felt, was me . Not because I want to, but sometimes, when the world sees you as a freak, that is all there is to be. At least clowns have the cover of a painted face, a mask to hide the chaos beneath.

The multitude saw the face—thought they knew it all from one look. But clowns, real ones, keep secrets darker than anybody would have thought possible. We're human, too. We can break and hide, and get shattered like anyone else.

Already inside the tent, Hypno waited in the wings, casually leaning with an air of dark mystery that became his signature. A wild green wig poked out from under a crooked purple top hat, the kind of look that just seemed meant for nightmares. He'd made Ruby cover his face in thick white makeup, his brows erased to make room for

thin green lines above his eyes, and he wore purple contacts that masked any true expression.

His teeth, crooked and yellowed, peeked out between a greasy sheen on his lips, and each cheek wore a twisted spiral in black and white paint as a jigsaw cutout came to life.

Everything about Hypno was a mystery I'd never been interested in trying to explain. He carried with him a flute, saying something about how music hypnotized people, rhythm opening doors to the mind. I'd always thought he was talking hot air, but I was about to find out for myself tonight. Ruby pulled back the curtain for me and ushered me into the tableau they created.

She was dressed like Chiara, but in black, some dark mirror of her elegance. Maybe she wanted to play the part of the clever spade—sharp, quick, and evasive—but with Hypno, it was hard to see her as unlucky. Yet she burrowed close to his side, loyal, as she tied herself willingly to his chaotic star.

"Hey, Rio," Ruby's voice was barely above a whisper, her gaze flicking from me to Hypno. She moved to sit beside him; her eyes were black as coal, brimming with curiosity. "I heard you're in the next act."

"He is," Hypno said, his grin twisting as he smothered a giggle behind his hand. "Our dear Rio will be riding a tiger."

"Yeah, right," I muttered, eyeing him suspiciously. "So what do I have to do?"

"Nothing." He smiled. "Just relax and make your mind... run wild."

I raised an eyebrow. "Rocco said it needs to be blank."

"Rocco said, she said—" Hypno waved a hand dismissively as he drew near, his purple eyes glinting. "Who cares?"

"I do." I stepped in, my voice low. "You mess with me, psycho , and I'm gonna make sure you get what's coming."

Hypno chuckled, retreating with his hands raised in mock surrender. "Alright, alright, big guy ."

"You two are up," Ruby said, yanking open the curtain.

I gestured for Hypno to lead the way, and his purple suit cut a bright swath through the gloom as we stepped down onto the sand-covered floor. The lights flared, beams of white-hot brightness striking my face, momentarily blinding me. We were standing at the heart of the circus, a ring surrounded by row upon row of eager faces—faces that loomed, laughing, staring, voices blending into a chaotic hum.

Hypno laid a heavy hand on my shoulder, digging his fingers in as he urged me down to sit. Then he raised his arms to the crowd.

"Welcome to Circo del Destino! " he roared, and the crowd erupted into applause. He bowed floridly, gesturing to two other performers who led in a pair of tigers on heavy chains. The huge cats padded closer, their growls humming in the air.

"Tonight," Hypno continued, his tone bending into an evil singsong, "we'll make this clown..." he stopped, letting the audience laughter wash over him, "into a JOKER."

He circled me slowly and approached the tigers, his hand brushing against one's coarse fur as he passed. "I will hypnotize him to believe he is born in the wild, raised amongst these great beasts, so that he can approach them...ride them, even!"

The crowd let out a gasp, murmuring in half-shocked, half-fascinated awe.

"What else would you like to see?" he called out, leaning toward the crowd, a devilish grin plastered across his face.

A voice from the stands shouted, "Put his arm in the tiger's mouth!"

Another added, "Make him jump with the tiger through fire!"

Then a third, still laughing darkly: "Let the tiger eat him! One less clown in the world!"

Laughter poured from the stands, a jarring, fractured noise.

Hypno raised a hand, laughing along. "Alright, alright! Let's get this over with!"

He strode over to me, then knelt, his eyes sparkling with promises left unsaid. He pulled his flute from his pocket and leaned in close. "Think of something—someone—that ties you to this place," he said, his voice low and soothing, "then something that will set you free."

I nodded, my jaw clenched.

"Close your eyes," he instructed, his hand pressing over them as I did. "Listen to my voice... and on the count of one ..." his voice dropped lower, wrapping around me like a shroud, " two ..." I felt him stand, the faint shuffle of his feet the only sound in the silence, " three ..."

The flute began to play, a haunting, eerie tune, circling me, dragging my thoughts into a tight spiral. The tune wrapped itself around me, tugging at my mind until everything went black.

And in that darkness, she arrived.

Chiara.

My Ace of Hearts.

She stood there, her red dress blood-red in the dim light, her skin soft as porcelain, dark curls tumbling around her shoulders, dancing as she moved toward me. She smiled, her eyes holding onto me, and I felt the tug of her presence, anchoring me. She whispered, her voice soft as silk, "You are the Joker now, born in the wild, far from the crowd."

I didn't want to let go. If she was what tied me here, then I was happy to stay bound to her forever.

Her voice drifted into my mind again, more softly this time, coaxing: "Walk to the tiger... so close... closer... closer."

My body moved in a strange, uncharacteristic calm; every step was pulled toward the very "white noise" of Hypno's flute, each sound absorbed by the grit of the sand beneath my shoes.

The tigers loomed ahead, their breaths hot against my skin, their roars vibrating in my chest; yet, I felt no fear, only a strange stillness. My hand lifted of its own accord, and my fingers stroked in gentle motions beneath the tiger's mouth. The great beast leaned its huge head against my chest, its weight a real anchor yet surreal.

"He likes you," her voice whispered to my mind, soft coaxing. "Now... put your palm in his mouth."

I took my hand closer and felt the tiger's coarse breath against my fingers, as its jaws

opened to expose a set of sharp teeth shining in his mouth. But just as I started to push my hand inside, something yanked me back. Laughter swirled around me, jeering, mirthless, but I paid no heed, the tug of the flute drew me back toward the tiger. The rhythm swirled around me, luring me forward until, without warning, I found myself lying against the tiger's side, my body flung upon its fur.

The softness pressed into me, so soft, so soothing. As though I'd melted into it. My arms and legs—even they were weightless, suspended at lullaby stage through the music.

Then her voice cut in again, soft, warm: "Come back to me."

I wrenched myself from the tiger in a sudden jerk and half-stumbled backward toward the center chair in the ring. The notes of the flute softened, now fading as her voice set in, counting in a lumbering rhythm: "One... two... three." A loud, shrill clap of hands, like the crackling of thunder, verged on the darkness.

But even in that black, I still felt her, an ache gnawing inside me that needed to see her face. I struggled, pushing against the pull until I saw her again. This time, she was deep within a forest; her red dress was the only color in the dark woods, and her movements were frantic as if she were running, wounded, and vulnerable.

My voice was raw, desperate, as I tried to call out, but she couldn't hear. The dream spiraled into an endless nightmare, her form slipping from me with every taut moment that passed.

Applause.

I blinked, and she was standing there, near the edges of the tribunes, her face streaked with tears, eyes wide and shining. I reached for her, only to feel her slip away once more. The murmur busted through the crowd, with voices rough and taunting.

"Just throw him to the tiger!" someone said, answered by an eruption of laughter.

Suddenly, my head had written another whole scene of my escape, running far from all this madness. Instead, the face hovering inches off mine belonged to Hypno; his eyes aglow with a sick pleasure as he leaned over me, giggling.

His voice was sickly sweet, almost whispered, and full of malice. "Deep down we go, clown... deep down."

FIFTEEN

ACE

The clock struck midnight, the ticks loud in the quiet; I could still hear the faraway cheers of the circus, faint but alive. The maze had me in its clutch, the mirrors reflecting back at me a hall of myself, broken and strange, while shadows from my mind contorted through their gaps. Every terror I had ever known seemed to lie in wait here, speaking in the silence.

My mind reeled, jumping between memories of my brothers, the lingering ache of being an outsider, always trying to belong, and then, always, back to him. That one clown who somehow slipped under my skin, who had laid a fire on my lips I couldn't ignore.

My fingers still brushed my mouth, as if tracing where he'd left his mark. It was crazy, but I wanted to be his, wholly and without question, unlike with anyone before. Sure, I'd had others, one-night distractions—but this was different. I wanted someone to see all of me and still choose to stay. And maybe, somehow, he was that person.

I saw Dhalia standing at the maze's exit, her figure lit far away, in her usual black gown with roses on her chest. I hastened my pace toward her with a greeting, but just as I reached the crowd, I tumbled into someone, and she fell uncomfortably to the floor. The girl whirled around; blonde hair spilled over her shoulders, and when our eyes met, I gasped.

"My god, Thalia! I'm so sorry!" I exclaimed, reaching out a hand to her.

She looked at me, her face a mask of confusion, something cold in her eyes. "Who are you?" she said, her voice flat and uninterested. Two other girls joined her, both wearing matching jackets.

"Chiara, remember?" I said, faking a smile, resting my hands under my chin, hoping for a spark of recognition. "It's me."

But she merely laughed, her eyebrows arched. "Listen, freak," she said, avoiding any politeness, "I don't know you, okay?"

Words cut deeper than any slap ever could. The sting of it—this familiar face turned into that of a stranger. Once, our mothers were friends, and so were we. But now? I was just another circus freak, too small for even a memory.

My voice caught in my throat as I turned away.

"Sorry, I... I must have mistaken you for someone else," I stuttered, taking a step back. She said nothing, just looped her arm through the other girls, and they walked away without a backward glance.

A tear traced down my cheek, the sharp ache of being forgotten tearing through me. It's amazing, and so wrong, to stand there and watch someone act like you don't even exist, someone who once knew every single piece of you. Once a friend is transformed into a stranger, there is no going back. Some wounds never heal; all they do is fade, lingering in the quiet moments.

"There you are." Dhalia's voice jolted me back, her presence a soft balm to my hurt as she came closer. "Come, I want to show you something."

I followed her, hit by the irony that sometimes strangers feel more like family than the people you once shared secrets with. Perhaps strangers are best friends, and

maybe best friends eventually become strangers.

She led me to a small tent with a round table draped in deep purple cloth and a crystal ball that gleamed under the dim light at its center. Inside was Ruby, waiting.

"These are yours now." Dhalia gestured to the deck of tarot cards laid out on the table. "And Ruby is your first client."

"My first client?" I laughed, looking between them uncertainly.

"No joke, darling. Read her cards." Dhalia pulled out a chair for me, and I settled in, staring at the cards in front of me.

The cards seemed to breathe beneath my fingertips, almost urging me closer, as if something lay just beyond the surface, waiting to be unlocked. I laid my hand on the deck, closed my eyes, and amidst the silence of the tent, it was as though I was the only one there. My fingers shuffled through the cards, and then two slipped free, landing face-up on the table: Death and The Lovers . My breath caught as I opened my eyes.

"Take four cards," I said to Ruby, sliding the deck toward her.

She drew slowly, almost nervously, laying them down one at a time: The World . The Devil . The Magician . The Fool . I studied her face, catching the flicker of something in her eyes, a flash of recognition that even she seemed surprised by. She chewed her nails, staring hard at the Magician card. She was keeping secrets—more than one—but what I knew was enough to make me guess that someone close was pulling her into a world she might not have wanted to enter.

"Any questions?" I asked, watching her, trying to read the story that lay between her clenched jaw and tense shoulders.

"No," Ruby replied hastily, without looking up, her gaze fixed on the cards.

"What do they tell you, Chiara?" Dhalia asked, settling beside me.

I looked at the spread as the meanings took shape, one after another. "You're in a relationship that's on the edge of breaking," I said, and Ruby stiffened as I looked up at her. "You feel bound to this man who's draining you, but you're too afraid to stand up to him. To you, he's 'The Devil,' and though you talk about breaking things off, it's as if you don't quite believe you can. Deep down, you know you're clinging to comfort rather than facing the truth, and you're forcing yourself into playing the Fool."

Ruby's eyes grew wide, her mouth opening in a mix of incredulity and exasperation. "Damn, Chiara. You know who the Devil is?"

I chuckled, shaking my head. "I only know you, Dhalia, and Rio. The rest of the circus is pretty much a mystery to me."

She visibly relaxed, a sigh escaping her lips. "Good. That's good."

Dhalia leaned in closer, her eyes twinkling. "Anything else you see?"

I looked at Ruby, still staring at the Magician card. "There's more, but I'm not sure it's mine to tell."

Ruby's laugh was weak as she turned toward the exit. "May I go cry now?" she half-joked, half-said in defeat.

Dhalia and I exchanged glances, nodding as she slipped through the tent flaps, leaving them open just enough for a breeze to flicker the candle flames, shadows dancing in the sudden draft.

Dhalia turned back to me, her hand resting on mine. "You have a gift, dear. I haven't seen intuition like that in ages."

I laughed, brushing it off. "What, noticing things? I wouldn't call that a gift."

But she shook her head, drawing my attention to the Death and Lovers cards still on the table. "These two fell out because your mind—or something deeper—pulled them out for you. You're connected to them."

I traced the edges of the cards thoughtfully. "Magic's only scary if you believe in it. I think it's just a coincidence."

"There's no magic here," she chuckled, "and you're no witch."

I laughed. "Right—witches don't exist."

"Oh, they do," she said, leaning in, eyes intense. "They're regular people with different beliefs, practicing their own faiths. Witches, Christians, Buddhists—they all pray. They all believe. But they don't always believe in the same things."

She crossed to a small cabinet and returned with a bottle of clear, amber-hued brandy. She poured two glasses, the potent aroma hanging in the air. "Rakija," she said, sliding one glass toward me. "Good for the throat, clears the mind—and the soul, if you're lucky."

I took a sip, the liquid burning its way down my throat, making me cough. "That's... stronger than tequila."

She laughed, downing hers in one gulp. "It burns, but it's good for you."

I looked at her, warmth spreading through me. "My grandmother was like you

believed in... everything."

Dhalia nodded, her eyes softening. "And what happened to her?"

"She's dead." The words caught in my throat, barely above a whisper.

Dhalia poured another glass, raising it to the candlelight. "Life has to end," she whispered, "but love doesn't."

I nodded, my fingers brushing against the cards absently. "She used to say I had a gift too."

She watched me with that knowing smile, her voice almost a whisper. "Do you think she was right?"

I shrugged, running a finger over the card edges. "I don't know. I just feel things, notice things others might miss."

"Sometimes all it takes is that," Dhalia said, taking my hand. "Intuition, dear, is as near to magic as anything."

Dahlia's words lingered, charged with an intensity that held me captive. "You know what I think?" she pressed, her voice low. "I think someone in your family is a Shadow Walker."

I laughed—a nervous, uncertain sound. "There's no such thing."

Her gaze didn't falter. "They slip between light and dark, moving in and out, but they're anchored by someone here in the living world. You... you're that anchor." She lifted the Death card, holding it between her fingers. "Someone died," she murmured and then held up the Lovers card.

Her gaze softened. "Do you ever talk to your grandma?"

I shook my head. "Not really."

She nodded slowly, like she'd expected it. "And your mother?"

The question lodged in my throat, memories of Mom swelling inside me, raw and unfiltered. Her grave was empty, her body never found, though the world insisted she was gone. To me, she wasn't dead. I'd always felt she was somewhere, just out of reach. Dad had said she left us, but I never believed it, not in my heart.

"Sometimes," I managed to whisper.

"There you go." Dhalia's voice was warm, barely above a murmur. "Talk to her. Believe she's still with you, and she'll speak to you, too."

A chill traced down my spine, goosebumps prickling my skin. My hands shook as I tried to push the feeling away. "But she's not..." I mumbled, unable to finish.

Dhalia's eyes narrowed slightly. "You don't think she's dead, do you?"

I looked down, a tear escaping as I forced the words out. "She disappeared a long time ago. Dad said she left us, and no one has seen her since. But... I don't believe it."

"Oh." Her voice was soft, her hand warm as it rested on mine. "I'm sorry."

Memories cascaded over me, stirring up every fear and bitterness I'd buried. A sick feeling churned in my stomach, the room spinning just enough to remind me I needed air, space, and silence. I needed to be alone.

"I... I should go back," I said, barely above a whisper.

SIXTEEN

ACE

I could never have found that what I was looking for would find me here, in a place like the House of Clowns . Here I was, heartbroken and homesick, aching for pieces of life I had left behind: missing my old room, missing Carlo, and the shared warmth when Dad was not around during those rare moments. It was just the memory of Dad's fists, the way each blow fractured a little more than bone, that reminded me why I couldn't stay. Sometimes I felt like I'd left one prison only to stumble into another.

My thoughts tore through me as I walked, my eyes fixed on the ground, desperate to ignore the glances from the crowd around me. I wondered what they'd think if they could see right through me if they even recognized me. If only I could drag myself out of caring about what others thought, perhaps I'd find at least some happiness. But there was insecurity inhaled deep inside, carved over the years.

I hastened my steps, and in sight of a way ahead offering an escape, a voice cut through the cold and stopped me in my tracks.

"Chiara!"

No. That couldn't be.

"Christian, is that your sister?" I heard Vincenzo, my brother's best friend, shout.

Then, my brother's timid voice followed, "No, it can't be."

I willed myself to disappear, to sink into the crowd, but when you were part of a freak show, blending in wasn't an option. My heart raced and I pushed forward, trying to lose them. But then a strong hand grabbed my arm yanking me back.

"What the fuck are you doing here?" Christian's voice was sharp, angry.

"I..." The words caught in my throat, freezing as his gaze swept over me, heavy with judgment in his eyes.

"What the fuck are you wearing?" he spat, shrugging off his jacket and pulling it around me, to shelter me from the staring-goggling of his friends. "Dad said you left, but he didn't say you joined a damn freak show."

"Yeah," I said quietly, putting his jacket on. "I left."

A redheaded girl materialized, reaching around him possessively to lay an arm over his and set a possessive hand on his shoulder. "Who's she?"

"This is my half-sister , Chiara," he said in a tone I barely wanted to acknowledge. "Chiara, meet my girlfriend, Amber."

Half-sister. The word sliced through me. He'd never called me that before. Once upon a time, I'd been his sister, full stop.

Now, with his new friends, his new life, I was a stranger to him, some kind of uncle he wished didn't exist. Memories popped up of me pulling him out of bars, cleaning up after him, covering up for him from Dad. I had been that rock, that shoulder through every nightmare, and yet here I was, extinguished by the phone when that same person kept me saving time and again.

Amber laughed. It was cold, cutting laughter that seemed to scrape against me. "You're related to a freak? Christian, tell me you're joking."

Chris's eyes fell to the floor, his face beat red, and he wouldn't meet mine.

"Yeah," I said, tossing his jacket back to him. "He is."

I laughed, the bitterness of the words like a rough edge. "My mom was a freak, my grandma is, and so am I."

Christian forced a laugh, hollow, uneasy. "Good thing we don't share a mom, huh?"

Something in me, surgical in nature, twisted in my tummy, a simmering anger, and before I knew it, my hand moved. My palm landed on his face in such a firm slap that he staggered sideways, his mouth open in shock.

"Yeah," I said, voice low, "You didn't deserve her anyway."

Amber's face twisted and contorted, hand raised and ready to strike. I latched onto her wrist before she ever touched me, holding her still.

"What?" I dared her, voice steady. "Go ahead, say it. Freak. I dare you."

She froze, lips parting as if the word burned on her tongue, but something held her back. With a huff, she turned, yanking Christian along with her. He lingered and stood motionless as if a word was caught in his throat. But he didn't speak, and in their silence, a strange courage welled up in me.

I yelled after them, stamping my foot on the ground. "Yeah, that's right!"

"Run, you cowards!"

A voice cut through the tension. "Hey, Rio," Christian said, about as casual as a person could get.

I spun around and felt my breath catch. Rio was behind me, his shoulder bleeding and his face streaked with drying blood. There was something feral in his eyes, a darkness that with seeming ease swallowed the ice-blue hue I'd known, leaving them almost black. Even I stepped back, unsettled by the hardness in his gaze like he was someone else altogether.

"What... what happened?" My voice came out smaller than I'd intended, my hand gesturing toward his injured shoulder.

"A tiger bit me," he said with a crooked smile, his voice some odd cross between humor and something darker. "So I bit him back."

He turned to me then, his features hard, his face a mask of something far colder, distant, as if he wasn't even the same person.

"Should I...?" My voice sounded unsteady and I made to press closer in, but he pushed me away with an impatient look, his teeth clenched.

"What?" His tone was a challenge-sharp and resistant. "Afraid?"

I swallowed hard, not trusting myself to answer. Yes, I was scared—not just of the look in his eyes, but of what it meant. Was this the same Rio I thought I knew?

Or was he someone else, someone who turned to the dark?

In that heartbeat, I was afraid, truly afraid, that I was falling into something I didn't know - that I might end up trapped in the same kind of nightmare I'd left at home. But I forced a response. "N-no," I stammered, though my voice cracked under the lie.

He growled low and menacingly, "Maze. NOW!"

The command bucked through me, and I gasped, automatically launching into a dead run toward the house. Behind me, Rio and Christian spoke but not distinctly enough to make out what was being said. A piece of paper passed between them, but I didn't stop to speculate. I ran, the weight of Rio's cold stare still pressed against my back. I didn't want to be in that maze with him—not like this. So I turned and made for the House of Clowns, fleeing from the darkness I'd seen in his eyes.

Narrow, barely wide enough for my frantic steps, the path echoed with the loud clatter of my heels against the ground. As I rushed along, one heel snapped, and that jerked me to a halt.

"Fuck," I muttered, turning back. Rio was close now, the folded paper from Christian tucked into his pocket, eyes fixed on me.

I booted both heels off without a second thought, leaving them in the dirt to sprint towards the woods, cool earth sharp beneath my bare feet. Every time I turned and peered over my shoulder, I saw him too—running, closing the distance between us with his longer strides. I could feel the strains of music from the circus fade behind me, swallowed by the looming trees and shadows cast in a silver light emitted by the moon. The moonlight soon seemed to thin, too, swallowed by the dense canopy above into naught but shadows, stretched between the narrow pathways that twisted through the woods. I could hear him now, his breathing just behind me, closing in.

His hand had dug into my arm, pulling me backward, twisting me around. Suddenly we were falling together onto the ground in a bed of dead leaves beneath a huge oak.

Rio was over me, his face inches from mine, his breathing ragged, eyes shadowed and deep, catching what little light filtered through the branches. His knee pressed between my legs, forcing them apart, grounding me where I lay.

"Get off," I shouted, struggling, but his grip strengthened and he pinned my wrists above my head.

"Why would I do that, hmm?" he whispered, the low rough sound of his voice in my ear. "Bambolina ..."

"You're scaring me," I whispered, the result barely a greeting, almost lost in the silence stretching between us.

He lifted his head and his dark gaze searched mine, unrelenting.

"What are you doing to me?" he said almost to himself, his voice frayed with something unspoken. One hand slid behind my back, pulling me closer to him, his gaze tracing every flicker of fear or something deeper in my face.

"Stop," I managed, my voice shaking. "Please."

A smile played at the edge of his mouth, a dangerous one—like he knew exactly what he was doing.

"Afraid to fall for a clown?" he whispered, his breath hot against my ear.

I hated that he did this—pulled me in close and left me on edge, teetering between fear and thrill. There was a strange excitement bubbling in me, one I should deny but couldn't. And he knew it; he read it in me as surely as I felt it.

"No," I was able to whisper. "I'm afraid I will regret it."

He laughed, the low, dark sound echoing through the woods.

"Regret? Bambolina, I'll make you forget what that even means."

I tensed beneath him, trying to catch a smile as my knee shot up and caught him hard. His face contorted in pain. He doubled over with a groan as he stumbled back. I had just time to push myself up and sprint deeper into the woods before he recovered. Laughter bubbled out of me. I heard a frustrated shout behind me, but I didn't risk looking back. The dark forest surrounded me, shadowed and twisting; the earth beneath was rough and unfamiliar. Branches scraped against my skin, and every sound was synchronized; the crunch of leaves beneath my feet, the pounding of my heart. A moment, and I was certain I'd lost him, finally alone in that darkness. Then, I was colliding with something solid, gasping as I looked up, finding myself pressed against Rio's chest.

" Von fan culo! " I yelled, and his hands in an instant wrapped around me and hauled me back against the wide, rough tree. The bark scratched against my skin, a jolt of sensation that sent my pulse racing.

"You can run all you want," he whispered, the timbre of his voice low, each word tinged with the dark, wry humor. "But you know I'll always find you."

His fingers trailed upward to find the little bow at the top of my corset. With one strong pull, he yanked it loose, and I drew in a hissing breath as the pressure on my ribs released.

I gasped as he slid the corset away, leaving me in that red dress that clung desperately to me while slipping lower with each second. He traced his palm over my hip and down to my thigh, lifting my leg around his waist and anchoring me against him.

"Is this what both of us need right now?" he asked, his face close enough that his breath mingled with mine, his eyes dark with seriousness.

I nodded, my lips biting, as what wasn't said was thick between us. His fingers brushed along my jaw, angling me to him, and the urge to close the distance

overwhelmed me.

And then my lips were pressed to his, imploding into the hunger and the intensity between us. I wrapped my arms around his neck, and he snatched my wrists, pinning them above my head to the tree. He always pulls back, with some lingering restraint whenever my hands brush his skin, but the tension only feeds my desire to touch him.

Our tongues met in an entwining push-pull of tangles, each of us claiming, his minty breath intoxicating me, flooding me with a desperate need for more. My skin tingled under his touch as his hands wandered down to hike my skirt in one smooth, unbroken motion. He was to fling it aside, leaving me standing in only my red lace bra on, and the coolness of the forest pricking at my bare skin.

His eyes poured over me; his lips arced into a wicked smile, his need and hunger stronger, and I let go of my depth, giving myself over to whatever this was, succumbing to the wildness of it all. Every inch of him was deadly and thrilling as he inclined his face closer to mine.

He looked at me, brow up, his eyes level. "Sure?"

I nodded, scarce above a whisper. "Yeah."

He spun me around gently, my chest pressing against the rough bark of the tree, grounding me. His fingers worked deftly at my bra clasp, and it slipped down to the ground. I clung onto the tree, feeling its surface beneath my skin as he slid his hands along my waist and caused what was left to shiver down.

"Spread your legs," he murmured, his voice low. I felt a shiver as I obeyed, aware of every movement. His hands traced a line down my spine.

A soft moan escaped my lips, a breathless invitation for him to explore further.

His teeth grazed my clit, sending jolts of electricity through me as his tongue delved deeper. I pressed my palms against the bark, anchoring myself as waves of pleasure crashed over me, leaving me gasping for air. He moved slowly, teasingly, before flicking his tongue, drawing it back with an agonizing slowness. Then, he began to swirl, each motion igniting a delicious tremor within me.

He paused, leaning back for a moment. The sound of his pants slipping down, accompanied by the soft clink of his belt against the ground, echoed in the quiet night.

With a firm grip, he lifted my leg, holding it aloft as he thrust into me. I gasped.

He stretched me, filling me, then began a steady rhythm, in and out, inch by inch, each movement meeting with the sharp slap of skin against skin.

Fuck, the clown is fucking me.

Each thrust sent waves of pleasure coursing through me, addictive as opium, igniting a desperate craving for more. But suddenly, he stopped.

He turned me around, his hand gripping my neck, pulling me toward him. His lips captured mine, a fierce kiss that woke a fire within me. He lifted me effortlessly, wrapping his arms around me before we sank to our knees on the soft earth.

"I can't hold on any longer," he growled, reaching for something at his side.

My heart raced, fear flickering in my chest as I saw a knife. He plunged it deep into the ground, its rounded back carved from a piece of wood, his initials carved into the smooth surface.

He left me hovering above the handle, its tip teasingly entering me, forcing me to

kneel against the earth.

A wicked smile spread across his face as I gasped in surprise.

“Ride it,” he growled in my ear, his voice low and commanding. “Just like you would for me.”

With a shiver, I settled onto the handle, arching my back, imagining him beneath me instead of the cold wood. I danced on the edge, entering it inch by inch.

“Good girl,” he whispered as he leaned in closer.

He gripped his cock in his hand, stepping closer, and I instinctively opened my mouth, eager for him. As he thrust forward, my tongue met him and I surrendered to the pleasure, feeling him fill my throat.

His head fell back, a low moan escaping his lips as he gazed up into the trees, lost in the moment. His palm pressed against the back of my head, urging me deeper, and deeper.

The sound of his pleasure only fueled my desire. I rocked against the knife’s handle, matching his rhythm as he drove into my mouth, each thrust pushing us closer to the brink. My fingers found their way down, tracing soft circles on myself, a soft tease that sent tingles through my body.

With each movement, I felt the pressure building within me, a sweet tension that begged for release. I yearned for us to reach the peak together, so I quickened my pace, my lips sliding against his cock.

But then, he shifted, lifting my chin to meet his gaze, a silent command in his eyes.

He kissed me fiercely, then turned me around and pushed me down onto the ground.

I knelt there, my ass in the air, anticipation thrumming through my veins as I heard him position himself behind me. He thrust deep inside, his hands gripping my hips, pulling me against him with an urgency that stole my breath away.

My body tightened around him instinctively, every thrust, every move- a wicked dance of pleasure. I cried out his name, the sound mingling with the night air as I collapsed against the earth, surrendering to the sensations that enveloped me.

But he didn't stop. I felt him widen, pushing me to the edge, as he shouted my name, "Fuck, Chiara."

With one final thrust, he pulled out, releasing himself on my back, his body collapsing against mine.

SEVENTEEN

ACE

The night wrapped around us, an ink-black canvas save for the thin slivers of moonlight that slipped through the tangled boughs above. My head rested upon his chest, and my finger traced lazy patterns on his skin, letters maybe, words that drifted beyond language but somehow felt like they belonged to us.

And suddenly the forest could hold its breath, steady, insistent beats of our hearts came louder with each one a muted drum in the quiet. I closed my eyes and let a hazy picture of us drift through my head, wondering what we'd be like ten years from now. The answer felt as elusive, impossible to grasp, as the faint light filtering through the trees. But he was the only one I had been able to see with me in that nebulous image of the future, and my voice came out low, barely audible above the night.

"Do you ever think of leaving the circus?"

He exhaled, and the sound seemed to settle between us, an unspoken confession. "I did," he whispered, "a couple of times. But...." His voice died away, words hanging unspoken, like dust in the moonlight. "I just never knew where else I'd go."

He shifted, lifting himself so that my head slid from his chest into his lap. His fingers swept a few strands of hair from my face, tracing gentle lines along my cheek as if I were something fragile, precious. "The world," he whispered, a crooked smile tugging at his lips, "isn't ready for another clown."

"What if you left with me?" I asked, my eyes searching his; the question landed somewhere deeper than words.

He smiled—the tragic sadness swirled in his eyes behind the expression. "If you ever wanted to go, I'd let you leave... but you'd go alone."

My chest tightened the words like a cold breath against my skin. "Why?" I asked, the syllable nearly catching in my throat. "I wouldn't go without you."

"You would," he whispered, his voice heavy with a quiet acceptance that pained to hear. "The world would welcome beauty like yours with open arms. But me..." He looked away, the shadows catching on the edges of his face. "My ugliness belongs here. In the House of Clowns."

I sat up, cradling his face with my hand, my thumb stroking against his skin's roughness. "Your so-called ugliness," I whispered, "belongs with me. It's beautiful to me."

I leaned and pressed my lips to the side of his cheek, feeling the warmth seep from his skin. "The world's ugly," I whispered, "and most people are too."

He chuckled, a rumbling deep in his chest. "You're weird, you know that?"

"See?" I teased, nudging him. "We fit right in."

He was slow in his rise, and his hand dived into the damp earth before it extended to me. I slid my hand into his, and together we rose, our shadows melting together in the thin moonlight. Then it was that I saw the fresh, white bandage on his arm, rimmed with a slow trickle of blood.

"Does it hurt?" I asked, reaching a hand instinctively toward it, but he caught my

wrist before I could touch the wound.

"Like hell," he laughed, though there was a wince to his eyes. "But Vitto gave me something he uses on the horses, so I barely felt a thing... until now."

"Sorry," I whispered, fighting a grin as I turned and began gathering up the clothes, sliding each item on against the cool night air on my skin.

"It's just another scar," he shrugged, a thread of amusement lacing through his words. "Nothing to get worked up over."

"Good to know," I replied and leaned in to press a quick, featherlight kiss against his cheek.

For a moment, he watched me, his eyes softer, pensive.

"Can I ask you something?"

"Yeah," I said, taking his hand again, letting his warmth fill those spaces between us.

"Were you in the main tent tonight, in the audience?" His eyes probed mine, keen and almost hopeful.

"No," I said, feeling his eyes linger on me. "I was with Dhalia."

"Ha," a soft hum left his lips as he took my hand, pulling me behind him into the woods, fingers warm and familiar in mine.

As we approached the house, a folded slip of paper fell from his jacket and fluttered to the ground. He stopped, bending to retrieve it, pausing just a moment with it open in his hand. His face went remote, his eyes unfocused as he took in whatever was on

the paper. Then, he looked up at me, his face closed and unreadable.

"What is it?" I asked, trying to decipher his expression, the lines that formed around his mouth.

For someone who read people so easily, I could never fully read him. It was part of what made him so intriguingly irresistible.

"Nothing," he said, folding the paper and drawing closer, his voice dismissing whatever question there had been, his eyes holding something unsaid.

I just smiled, not wanting to push this any further. Inside, all I wanted was to throw my arms around him, feel the warmth against me, and let the night stretch on and on before us.

We stopped before the house, and I started up the stairs. At the third step, I felt an urgent desire to wheel abruptly and look back at him. He was standing down there with the paper crushed again in his hand, looking at it in such a way as if whatever was on it mattered much more than this or us.

"You coming?" I asked, hovering on the step.

"You go in," he said in a hushed tone, never taking his eyes off the paper. "I'll be a while."

I stepped down until I was close enough to look up into his eyes and catch his attention. He lifted his gaze, his lips softening into a smile.

"What are you doing?" he laughed, mirth dancing in his eyes.

"Remembering," I breathed, my hand rising to his cheek. "I want to remember your

eyes...for a lifetime."

He returned my gaze, his eyes surging into mine with that depth of emotion that was always lying just below the surface.

"Don't you ever forget me," he whispered, his voice low, almost a beg.

"Promise," I replied, pressing a soft kiss to his lips. "Goodnight."

I turned and ran up the stairs, his eyes on me until I reached the door.

"Goodnight, my Ace of Hearts," he called, lighting a bow with a sparkle in his eye.

I looked back once more, my eyes caught him as he watched me, then turned and walked back toward the woods, disappearing. A pang in my chest—I knew tonight his arms wouldn't be wrapped around me. My fingers brushed my lips, holding onto the warmth of his kiss.

I tiptoed through the quiet house and up to the shared room, my heart still fluttering from the look he'd left me with.

As I opened the bedroom door, a hush greeted me, the room empty and quiet. I lingered for a moment, savoring the peace, but a twinge of reluctance held me back as I walked toward the shower. I could still trace the faint warmth from his touch, and I almost hated the thought of washing it away. I stripped off my clothes and stepped into the stream of cold water; its chill bit right into my skin, bringing both a feeling of relief and an ache to my bruises.

The cold numbed the bruises, a raw pain from the blows I'd taken and hadn't yet healed. I remained under the water, my mind drifting, slackening my body against the numbing stream.

I finally wrapped myself in a towel and walked back into the dark room, the chill still clinging to me. I sat on the edge of my bed and let out a soft sigh, my lips softening into a smile as memories of the night danced around me. I wanted to hold onto it, make it stay with me just a little longer. But I knew how ethereal good moments could get.

My eyes had finally fallen upon the small nightstand, and notebook that I left inside. It was one of those indecisive moments when curiosity was mingled with silent dread churning at the bottom of my stomach. I wanted to know more about Rocco, my real father.

I clung desperately to the hope that he was different from this man I knew as "Dad" now, that somewhere out there was a man who would have treated me like a daughter, and not a tool or a slave. I felt at that particular moment a pang of envy for Thalia, whose family was perfect in my eyes, full of love and understanding that always eluded me.

Finally, I reached out, lifting the notebook into my lap, the leather cool against my hands. There was a strange symbol etched onto the cover—a star entwined with horns—something I'd never really noticed before. Taking a deep breath, I opened it, letting the pages fall to a random entry. A dated page stared back at me.

Date: 23rd May, 1993

Yesterday they initiated me down in the basement of the House of Clowns. I was only twenty-four, looking for a place to belong, a family. But this family came with a debt to be paid, one I hadn't counted on—in blood.

They called themselves "the Crows," their heads springing from the highest order of the city, the sort of people one would expect to find at charity galas, not veiled rituals.

When they took off their masks, I got a cold shock. There was the city's mayor, the local priest, and heads of two of the wealthiest families. The Crows weren't just a group; it was a cult draped as a secret society. Membership was extended with a single black rose left at your door, marked only with the word: "Circle."

I thought that was some sort of sick joke. Then they came for me. They peppered me with questions until my head spun, and I had to make the choice: sacrifice myself or join them. So I did, hardly comprehending the gravity of what I was getting myself into. They hadn't selected me for ambition or skill; they chose me because my father was dying, and they needed someone to watch over the House of Clowns.

"Pray, obey, and, when called upon, provide." These were the rules, the commands etched upon the fabric of our existence.

My best friends, Alessandro and Lotta, were also a part of them. They were two of those few people who, unlike me, thought the rituals were something to be enjoyed. They'd feed on the innocent, suck them dry in some twisted ritual, and in return, they'd take baths of money and power. They claimed it was an offering to their God. I didn't believe any of this, but that makes me good for them—a scapegoat.

A legend has come to haunt their history: of a woman, Mary of the Crows, who married the high priest and, for the salvation of her people, gave herself as a sacrifice. They burned her alive. Her story was to become their guiding dark star, their devotion, and their bloodlust, search for their chosen one.

Oddly enough, I hated them in the beginning; with time, I was pulled deeper until I became one of them. I brought in new members with me and initiated the unsuspecting into our House of Clowns. Then the police began asking questions, and we needed fresh bodies to keep the Circle shrouded. Like a virus, we spread across La Maddalena, infecting it with secrets.

Then Ariane started to dream—terrible dreams of every soul brought to the House of Clowns, of every life stolen by our rituals. She wrote down each name, each sacrifice, as if an epitaph. And when she told Lotta Romanov, it was as if she had signed her fate. They were both targets, watched by the ever-reaching eyes of the Circle.

I did all in my power to protect her, even if it meant losing her forever.

I slammed the notebook shut, my hand clamping tight over my mouth, the sting of my fingernails digging into my cheeks as I muttered, "Fuck, fuck, fuck."

The words barely escaped, but they pulsed in my mind, a frantic rhythm echoing through me. I hadn't realized just how twisted this story could get, how it might contort all I thought I knew about my life.

The creaky footsteps echoed down the corridor and I made myself move, pushing the notebook under the mattress just as the door opened. I closed my eyes, willing my thumping heart to let go, but this whirlwind of questions and shadows would not let me alone. Flashes swam in the darkness: my mother falling, water closing over her head, the sensation of drowning seeping into my dreams. This is the end. Was her life, her end, a part of this secret, too? What part of all this was real?

"Psst, she's sleeping," Dhalia whispered to Ruby, soft in a way I hadn't heard before. "Come."

It creaked as they settled together, and in the silence, I caught the muffled sound of Ruby's sigh against her, a low hum that made the room feel smaller still.

The closeness—the quiet urgency in the way they touched each other—filled the space with something warm yet not mine to see. That kind of love doesn't need explaining. Some things about people can catch you off guard: surprises in who they are or what they're capable of. But then there were those rare, undeniable

connections—two souls drawn together, a kind of love that didn't have to be spoken to be understood. It was the kind of love—a sane one, maybe someday I could even hope for.

EIGHTEEN

ACE

S haking hands awoke me, and Dhalia's face was written all over with worry combined with urgency. "Did you see where Ruby went?"

"No," I mumbled, struggling to pull myself from the brink of sleep.

"I can't find her anywhere," she whispered, her throat tight. "I have to speak with her.

"Shouldn't we just go see the manager?" I suggested, rubbing my eyes.

"Will you come with me?" She pulled me from the bed, her fingers wrapping around my wrist like releasing it would break the spell of whatever gave her the courage.

I got up reluctantly, feeling like a dead weight dragging across the floor. She handed me one of her oversized shirts and a pair of slippers, into which I slipped my half-open eyes. The shirt was loose, more of a dress than anything else, but I didn't care; all I wanted was to have everything over with so I could crawl again into bed.

"Come on, hurry." She dragged me down the stairs, our quiet footsteps echoing in the silence. As we landed in the hallway, the dark, heavy door at the end loomed larger with each step. Dhalia knocked frantically, and a low, disgruntled growl echoed from inside, supplemented by a rough shout, "It's fucking open."

Inside, a man slumped over a table, an almost empty bottle of rum beside him.

"Rocco," Dhalia called out, strains of desperation in her voice. "Ruby's gone missing!"

His name cut like a sharp prick, slicing through my sleep. Could this Rocco be my father? I stared at him, noting the lines on his face, the shadow of familiarity, even into his eyes, a mirror of my own.

"What?" He shot up, slamming his fist onto the table, his eyes blazing.

"I have looked for her everywhere and she is nowhere to be found," Dhalia choked out, her voice quivering with her tears. "And if I tried to pull cards... only Devil and Death came out."

"Calm the fuck down," he growled, flipping her a crushed tissue. "Go to your room. The new girl here will fill you in on what you need to know."

Dhalia nodded, the sound of her sobs echoing down the empty hall as she turned and hurried away.

My chest clenched. I just wanted Ruby to be okay.

Rocco closed the door behind him and then turned to me, his eyes piercing as he motioned to a chair. "Sit."

I let myself fall into the seat, my body tensing up. He crossed to the table, yanked out the notebook, and slammed it onto the surface between us.

"You read it all?" he asked, seeming for all the world to have expected me to find it, to dig into secrets I wasn't meant to know.

"I..." The words choked in my throat.

"I gave it to Carlo, to give to you," he said. His eyes weighed in condemnation. "But I never thought you'd come here back with it. Extremely stupid of you."

He flipped through the pages and stopped near the end. "Their last victim," he read, his voice gruff, "would be Rocco Salvatore in 2023."

I swallowed as my pulse raced loudly in my ears. "Did... did Ariane write that?"

He shook his head, his eyes piercing. "No. You did."

The words hit me like a wave, and I was speechless with the chill.

"I... wrote it?" My mouth went dry. "How?"

"You have a gift, same as your mother," he said quietly. "When you visited the circus at the age of six, you scrawled it in here. You predicted all of it."

My eyes widened, disbelief mingling with shock. "How? How could I have...?"

"It's in your blood," he said, a shadow of something raw in his eyes.

I stared at the notebook, hands shaking.

"By now, you know I'm your biological father," he said, upon hearing each word land with the weight of a blow. "And don't even ask me for anything, 'cause I ain't gonna give you a damn thing."

"I didn't want anything from you," I spat, his apathy raking over my nerves like fingernails on a chalkboard.

"I just want to prevent this Circle from inflicting further harm. Nothing else." His

eyes didn't waver.

"How did you get the notebook?" I asked, my angry eyes narrowing into slits, searching his for something that made sense.

"Ruby," he replied, his voice icy casual. "She brought it to me. Read a few pages, and wanted in."

My fists clenched. "Is she... gone now?"

"Yeah," he said, cold and unfaltering.

"You monster," I exclaimed, starting up with such rapidity that my chair scraped away upon the floor; but his voice cut through the room, keen and clear as a blade.

"Sit down." The command seemed to go through me like an electric shock, and I dropped back into the chair, my body rigid from feet to crown.

"She knew too much," he growled low. "And now, so do you. But you have something she didn't—a gift."

"What do you want?" I demanded, my lip curling in disgust as I held his gaze with a defiant glare.

A twisted smile oozed across his face. "You're going to make them dream." He hitched forward with the glint in his eye darker. "I'll introduce you at their carnival as a special guest, and you'll trap them in a dream within a dream."

"So they'll be stuck forever?" I returned, the horror settling deep into my chest.

"Only those who matter to them," he returned, his voice cold as steel. "It will keep

them occupied, while I kill every last one of them."

"No," I said, my voice rising.

He stood, slamming his fist upon the desk, making the room shudder. "They took your mother! They tortured her, drowned her, and buried her in the basement of Lotta's house. Don't you want them to pay?!"

I heard my pulse hammering in my ears, my breath was thin and the walls seemed to close in. I felt a scream in my throat. But only tears came, tracing hot lines down my face. His words burrowed into me, settling with a finality that couldn't be denied.

Mom was really gone.

He had said, "Hypno will help you," and his voice was lighter, mocking almost. "You can find him in the main tent."

I stood, my legs unsteady, trying to pull together, but every step seemed a weight dragging me down. Everything around me faded as I climbed the stairs and my breathing came in short gasps. I was hollow, my heart cracking under the weight of what I'd just learned. I wanted to disappear, to slip into some dark corner where no one would find me, where I could pretend that none of this was real. But reality had sunk its teeth in, and there was no getting away from it anymore.

I dragged myself upstairs to the bedroom somehow. Half an hour had slid behind my back, and with every push of my hand, the door creaked, swinging open to meet the silence like an old, heavy shadow. Dhalia deserved to know it all—the truth and all its horrifying details—but I couldn't bring myself to involve her in that. Keeping her out was the only assurance I knew to keep her safe.

I approached the bed, and there was a single red rose lying, waiting upon the pillow,

its red petals stark against the sheets, and a note tucked beside it. My breath hitched as I whispered, "Rio," reaching for it with trembling fingers.

I unfolded the paper, and his words hit me like a wound.

"Don't wait for me, my Bambolina . I won't be here for quite some time."

What do you mean? I wanted to scream, to beg for some explanation that would somehow ease the weight, yet there was only an empty room and the rose's sweet scent entwined with my tears. I fell onto the bed, and laid the rose on the pillow beside me, curling up beside it as if somehow it might fill the spot he had left.

There is a love that makes you cry, a love that makes you smile, but the love that makes you wait—that's the most dangerous of all. For you never know whether it's worth waiting for, whether that person shall ever come back, or whether time will take them further and further away. It was cruel, paying with a heart.

Even finding someone else, his ghost will always be there, a question never to be answered, a memory interwoven in every step forward. And telling me not to wait only broke me more because now I would always wonder: What could have been? What would we have been if I hadn't let him go? I did not know whether this love was a blessing or a curse; either way, it would tear me apart.

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### 6 Months After

It's been six months—six long months without seeing him. By that time, the leaves changed from yellow to green, and the grass outside was no longer dry but tall and lush. Flowers are in full bloom, and winter has given way to spring, yet my heart still wonders where he is and if he will come back.

I thought of him every single night as I fell asleep, I thought of him when I saw couples kissing, and I thought of him each time I stepped into the house of clowns. It's the worst feeling ever, buried deep within my skin, feeling unwanted by the only person I desire.

Call it love, call it a crush, call it possession; it's all the same when your heart dictates how you exist. And I chose to pretend.

I smiled at people, pretending to be happy every time I stepped outside. I feigned listening while my mind drifted away. I acted as if I cared while slowly dying inside, and I pretended he was still around, by my side.

I call this the curse of a broken heart .

I had found new friends here, friends who showed me the way to dance in the sky, to live in ways I never had imagined. I had learned to dream while awake, to slip quietly into other minds—a skill which fascinated Hypno more, very probably, than he cared to admit to. I knew he was nursing a quiet crush—not on me, precisely, but on the way my mind worked, how I could slip in and out of people's thoughts. But I also knew that no matter how close I became with anyone, even another clown, my heart

wasn't something I could give anymore.

"Hey, beautiful," Hypno said, breaking my thoughts because he handed me a cup of coffee.

I breathed in the warmth, the smell grounding me. "Ready for the show tonight?" I said, sipping.

"Yeah," he said with a sly grin. "Planning to hypnotize a lion this time." His laughter was a flash of teeth, winking and even charming.

"And I plan to fly," I said, my eyes blinking twice as the warmth of the coffee seeped into me.

Hypno's hand found mine, his touch steady and warm. "I know it's hard for you," he said, the softness of his tone surprising. "To take her place. But she'll be with you the whole time.

"I know," I replied, a sad smile curving my lips. "Her and Dhalia, welcomed me like I was family. I'll never forget that.

Rocco's voice boomed outside the tent to introduce the next act.

I turned to the mirror, my gaze drinking in my reflection. Tonight, I was wearing a burgundy satin jumpsuit with panels of see-through across my chest and arms, Ace of Hearts playing cards stitched onto the fabric.

My makeup was soft—my lips painted into that heart shape Ruby always did with perfection, her trademark. Black hearts stretched from my brow to my cheekbone, and a pale pink blush softened my features. Well, tonight I was the Ace of Hearts—for Rio, and for her. It was all for them in that one dance.

"Break a leg," Hypno whispered, and gave my hand a squeeze.

"Hope not," I said, and pressed a quick kiss to his cheek as I dodged toward the back of the tent.

As I approached the platform, Soap here, nothing or no one could get to me. In ugliness, I had found this shining, bright bit of beauty, a space I could flee to. As my act came to an end, I let my body unwind, spiraling down, closer and closer to the floor, until I hovered just above the ground. I was breathless, and just as I prepared for my final move, one single rose of red color floated down, landing into the sand before me.

All have been silent, thinking it is part of the show. But as I looked up, there he was, Rio, watching from the shadows. His gaze was steady, but I could almost feel the distance between us, the ache in places that had not been resolved—the words that had not been said. My heart clenched as I reached out for the rose, my fingers brushing over its petals. Then, ready not to forget him yet, I threw it onto the ground, turned back to the silk, and let it carry me into another final spin.

The audience erupted into applause, their clapping like waves crashing up against me, but I barely heard it. They thought I was performing, that I was okay, dazzling, and whole.

Still, inside I was piecing myself together, pretending all was well. Because, after all, that's what we do under the circus lights; we pretend, we perform, and we make beautiful.

NINETEEN

JOKER

I watched her fly tonight, no bigger than an angel, hovering over the crowd, yet not quite anchored. She'd been a vision, flying in direct defiance of gravity and everything I thought I knew about reality. In a heartbeat, she'd gotten me to believe in magic. And knowing I was going to have to let her go again broke something deep in me. But I had no option. Not yet.

Her brother, Christian, was my "friend" since school but we never really liked each other, but in times of need we turned to each other, bartering for information or favors. I'd asked him once to dig into my past at this orphanage, and he did. He found that on November 13th, 1990 , I wasn't the only one born. I came first, then Oscar, Silvio, and Enzo. Enzo, they said, was stillborn. So that left just three of us, triplets, each flung into a different destiny.

I was sent to Orphanage Santa Vittoria , a part of the monastery. My white hair and poor health made me an oddity, the child no one wanted. So I stayed, under the care of the sisters. Perfect, they said, was Oscar, a "golden child" with a tiny beauty mark beside his lips. That same night, he joined the Russi family, known as the son of Rome's mayor.

Then there was Silvio, a case of oversight by mistake or perhaps because it was meant to be so. The driver, who was to carry him to Santa Vittoria , forgot him and took him home. Rather than owning up to his mistake, he turned Silvio over to his brother, a locksmith.

Three lives, bound together by blood, yet separated because of, some may say cursed by chance. Our family line, Romanov, ran like a stain through our veins, binding us to a woman named Rose Romanov and to her father, Alessandro. We were bastards in every sense, carrying the mark of her sins.

If I ever met her, I'd spit in her face for what she'd done to us. She deserved a place in the deepest, darkest pit of hell, and even then, I think she'd make the devil run. But no one knew the truth, not even the woman I cared most about in this world.

Only three of us knew what had happened, and it gnawed in my gut, this living a life unworthy, weighted by my mother's sins.

All my life, I wanted to know why. Why she did do what she did, threw us away like nothing. I knew now, though, that her reasons were probably that she couldn't stand the reminders of her transgressions. Even thinking about it made me ill.

So here I was back again, within the House of Clowns, trying to atone for sins not even of my doing. Rocco had called me back and told me he wanted to break away from the Family, from the Circle. He had this sort of plan, though he refused to say what precisely. I had to come. I had to see her again.

There had not been a single day when I had not thought of her, of that night that we shared. She was the only thing that made me whole, the thing that made me more than a clown. To her, I was hers, the broken pieces and all.

I eased inside the tent, keeping myself well out of sight, and watched her from behind the shadows. She was dressed in red; an Ace of Hearts was stitched on it. I knew it was a message from and for me. She'd sewn it for me.

She was talking to him, his hand resting on her shoulder. Anger flared through me as his fingers brushed her skin, a touch so familiar that it clenched my fists. Every bone

in my body screamed to hurt him, rip his hands off her, but I knew that would only end up hurting her too.

Hypno's face leaned in, his voice slick with suggestion. "You were great tonight. We should celebrate.

She shrugged but her smile was soft. "Actually, that doesn't sound like a bad idea."

"Pick you up at eight?" he asked, and she nodded, looking around as if she somehow knew I was watching her.

A shudder rolled through me, a hot wildness that shook my hands. I wanted to break him and make him pay for the way he touched her. But instead, I turned and walked away, leaving her in his orbit. She whirled quickly, sensing my movement as the fabric of the tent billowed in the wind, and I heard her sharp intake of breath. It was better this way, I told myself now, making myself continue walking.

I walked up to the House of Clowns, and saw her in the window; she was getting ready for the date. She put on her makeup, looking at herself in the mirror. I wished she did the same to me. I put the hood on my head and leaned against the house wall, waiting. Did not know who—her or Hypno—but I just wanted to see her tonight.

I actually heard Victor and Hypno laughing as they walked down the stairs when I fired the cigarette up. I took a deep smoke, hiding behind the stairs, and when I saw Victor leave, I came closer to Hypno.

He took the path beside the house leading to the woods, and I waited for a few minutes just before I walked behind him. He didn't notice; I guess he was happy, smiling, preparing for his date.

Clown.

Indeed, even when I wore the face of a clown, he was the true clown. As we walked further into the woods, I walked faster towards the woods, closing up on him when I saw him stop. I grabbed him from behind, his neck against my knife, slowly touching his skin.

"Hypno," I whispered, "hello, my friend."

His voice shook with a stuttering "R-R-Rio."

TSK TSK TSK

"It's Joker for you," I said, pushing him to the ground.

Ever since he had hypnotized me that day, Hypno had been controlling my every move, making me do terrible things—that I only now started to recall through my dreams. He was part of the Circle, masterminding it all along—the disappearances of the clowns—using me to carry out his wish and pushing me to take the blame in its wake. But he had underestimated me. And as his words uttered a demand not to think of any person associated with the circus, my mind was right there with her—my Ace of Hearts . She was the one who kept me grounded, anchored here but turned me loose in ways he would never understand. And thinking of her, clarity was what I got even when things in my world flickered at their darkest.

"No," he stammered, his voice quivering with disbelief, "it can't be."

I pulled a rope from my jacket and headed to him with cold precision, securing him tightly against a tree.

"You know," I said, wrapping rope around his body, "for a long time, I thought it was me who was the fool." I laughed bitterly. "But you—ho, ho, ho—you're the real idiot here."

He swallowed hard, his voice trembling. "Wh-what are you going to do? You can't—I'm your master!"

My voice was hard, cold, steady. "I'm no one's slave," I breathed, my knife gliding down his cheek, close enough for him to feel the edge of its blade. "All those souls you had me flay down in that basement..."

TSK TSK TSK

"They didn't suffer half of what's comin' for you." I pressed a thumb over his eyelid, prying his eye wide open. He thrashed, but the knife was steady as I dug in, and his scream pierced the night, sending startled birds into flight from the treetops.

"You will not be needing this anymore, will you?" I snarled, continuing to the other eye as he screamed, raw, as his voice broke, slumping as he passed out due to the pain.

"Pathetically overly sweet," I said loud, letting his purple eyes fall into a small pouch, that grotesque present I would deliver to her. My Ace of Hearts would understand I had kept him away from her.

I stepped back, calling to him mockingly. "Hellooo?" His head hung limp, his mouth slack.

I rolled my eyes, striding over and slapping his cheek a few times. His body was slack, lifeless.

"Dead already," I muttered to myself. "Perfect."

I turned my back on him and, keeping his body bound to the tree, made my way along that meandering path in the direction of the House of Clowns . My hands

plunged into my pockets; my fingers brushed against the small, heavy pouch hanging from my belt, heavy with all those sins weighing, their darkness settling in my chest. No, I didn't deserve her. But even if I was damned, even if I couldn't have her, I'd make sure that nobody else would, either.

Every step up to the House of Clowns was heavier than the last like the weight of everything I'd done was pressing down on me. But it was something that needed to be done, had to be said, even if it meant she'd never forgive me. My hand grasped the door handle, slowly pushing it open. I went up the stairs, creaking at almost every step. It felt like my breathing was burning inside of me as I neared her room. The door was open, a crack, enough to tell she wasn't inside.

I could hear the soft cadence of water hitting the tile—she was in the shower. The sound brought back a torrent of memories, especially that first night she spent with me in this room.

I saw that a pen and paper had been left on the bedside table, and something just seized inside of me—a pulse of impulse I couldn't resist. I scrawled a message in handwriting that looked foreign to me: I am watching you. Then I pulled the small bag from my pocket and watched as Hypno's purple eyes rolled onto the bed sheets beside the note.

A door clicked, and instantly I felt panic race through my veins. I looked frantically around for somewhere to hide and then slid down onto the floor and under the bed like some monster lurking in the shadows.

I heard the soft patter of her bare feet on the floor as she dried herself with a towel, and then the pad toward the bed. A shrill scream came forth as the towel fell to the floor, and I heard the dull thud of a body falling in shock.

"Pussy," I whispered to myself—the word was phony, even as I was uttering it—and

wriggled out from beneath the bed. She lay very still, her face waxen, the shock frozen in her face. I just took the eyeballs and tucked them in her drawer along with the note so that they weren't visible. Then I gathered her up and back onto the bed, yanking the blanket up and tucking it in around her.

Her eyes fluttered open and took in my form. They screwed up in horror and another scream ripped free of her mouth. Her hand shot up, and before I could react, her palm cracked across my cheek with all the force she could muster.

"What the fuck is wrong with you?" she shouted, her voice thick with incredulity. "Was that Hypno?"

"What's left of him," I said, my tone even.

A tear had escaped down her cheek, catching the shine from off her skin. "What have you become?" she whispered. "A monster?"

I climbed over her, my hands pinning her wrists above her head. "I was always a monster," I said, my voice dark. "You were the one who saw me as human."

The pull was just too strong, the urge that had haunted me for six long months. My lips pressed against hers—hard, rough. She didn't resist; her lips parted, allowing me deeper, but then her teeth bit down, the metallic taste of blood flooding my mouth.

I leaned back, wiping my lip with a smile. "It's still me, Chiara," I whispered, my voice low. "Just this time, you're seeing all of me."

"By showing me you can kill people?" she snapped, her voice cracking with emotion. "Congratulations, Rio. You did it."

"I only took his eyes," I growled. "He stole years of my life, my humanity when he

controlled my mind."

"What are you talking about?" Her eyes searched mine, confusion and anger swirling.  
"You killed him. That was your choice, not his."

"He made me kill others," I spat, my anger rising; "made me do things I never wanted to do. I did the world a favor."

"You disgust me." She turned her face away. Her voice was cold and brittle. "Just let go."

"No, you want me," I whispered, holding her gaze, my face very near. "Pretty good memories of the big cat, woods, first night?"

"I want to forget." Her voice was a whisper; her tears slid down her face.

I let her loose, straightening up, something acrid settling in my chest. "I never thought you'd care more for him than me."

She sat up and started hitting my back with her fists. "No, you idiot, I want to forget the eyeballs you left on my bed."

A low, dark laugh escaped me. "Didn't like the gift?" I said, raising one eyebrow in a smirk.

She shook her head, but something in her eyes, when they met mine, shifted it. There was a reciprocal tension to our face-to-face proximity that seemed almost palpable—a pull neither of us could explain or resist. Slowly, the anger softened in her eyes, and as I moved in—close breaths mingling—the chaos between us faded away into nothing else but the silence holding us together.

TWENTY

JOKER

I looked at her, the weight of unspoken words hanging between us. I wasn't ready to leave her again.

We lay side by side on the bed, the soft sheets cradling our bodies. Her presence was a lifeline, and I wanted to imprint the sight of her into my memory, the way her hair fell softly across her face. With each passing minute, I felt the tension between us easing, as if she were slowly forgiving me for the pain I had caused.

"I missed you," I murmured, my lips brushing against her ear as she nestled against my chest, her breath warm against my skin.

"And I missed all your toxic traits and red flags," she replied, a playful edge in her voice, her eyes sparkling with a mix of affection and mischief.

I leaned back into the pillow, a smile tugging at my lips. "Do you ever see yourself far away from here?"

"Yes," she nodded. "I dream about it often, actually."

"I missed this place. I've missed you." I pulled her closer, savoring the warmth of her body, but she shifted away, rising from the bed.

She walked toward the door, locking it with a soft click. When she turned back, a

spark danced in her eyes as she returned to the bed.

She perched above me, her hands deftly removing my shirt, tracing her palm over my chest, igniting a fire within me. I spun her around, her back pressed against the sheets, and as I unbuttoned my pants, I gently spread her legs with my knees.

Desire coursed through me, but I craved the tease of playing with her first. Lowering my face to her, my tongue glided along her clit. She held her legs high, fingers splayed, inviting me deeper as I slowly entered her with my tongue.

"More," she breathed with a plea that sent a thrill through me.

But I paused, my gaze drifted to the few balloons resting on the nightstand, their vibrant red color catching my eye. Leaning over her, I reached for one, the soft texture of the balloon contrasting against the rough wood of the surface.

"Spread your legs for me," I said, my voice low and commanding. I gently pushed her legs back, exposing her even further.

I wrapped the balloon around my finger, feeling the smooth surface against my skin as I entered her. She was still tight, her warmth enveloping me, and a primal urge surged within me to stretch her, to claim her fully tonight. I left the tip of the balloon exposed, then leaned closer, my lips brushing against it. I gently blew air into the balloon nestled inside her, feeling the soft resistance as it expanded.

She gasped, her breath hitching as I felt her inner flesh yielding to the pressure. I tightened my grip, thrusting in and out of her, the sensation sending ripples of pleasure through her. I could feel her nails digging into her skin.

"Fuck," she shouted, her eyes rolling.

As I pushed deeper, I leaned down again, blowing into the balloon just a little more. This time, her scream pierced the air, her fingers digging into my shoulders, leaving their mark. I pressed deeper, feeling the intensity build, until her voice rose once more in a mixture of pleasure and surprise.

"Shhh," I whispered, pressing my palm gently over her mouth, quieting her as I moved in and out.

The balloon slipped free, round and taut, filled with air, its surface slick with her cream. I tied it off, the playful tension of the moment teasing her clit as I nudged it close to us. Then, with a swift motion, I pulled her body onto mine, entering her in one smooth thrust.

This time, she was open for me, allowing me to enter her with a fervor that quickened my pulse. I gripped her hips, driving in and out of her with such an urge, feeling her body respond as she held onto me, arching her back.

Our rhythm became a wild symphony, the bed frame pounding against the wall, sending a cascade of paint chips fluttering down around.

"Take it," I urged, my voice thick with desire as I drove deeper, "just like that."

Her thighs began to tremble, her palm slapping against the sheets, fingers curling tightly as she screamed my name, the sound echoing in the air.

As she tightened, pulling me deeper, I felt the heat building within me. I maintained my pace, pushing until I felt myself widen inside her, the release crashing over us as I collapsed onto her, spent.

She chuckled softly, breathless. "Balloon?"

"You took it with grace," I replied, a smile spreading across my lips as I remained inside her, savoring the moment.

I lay beside her, both of us gazing up at the ceiling. She chuckled, then giggled, her palm covering her lips. "Sorry, Mom, I've fallen in love with a clown."

A smile spread across my face as I pulled her closer, my breath warm against her ear. "I've been falling for you since day one."

Just when my lips had almost brushed against hers, the sudden, sharp knock sent the spell flying, running jarring shocks through us.

"Chiara, get the hell up!" Rocco boomed through the door—an argumentative seriousness to it that did not leave room for any sort of delay. "It's time."

Chiara sighed softly; her eyes, fixed on mine, flickered brown, and then she hollered back, "Coming!" She waited for the sound of his steps to fade down the hall before turning back to me, her hand cupping my cheek, unnatural determination sparking in her steady regard.

"Listen... I do not know if you have grasped everything that has been going on here," she said, her voice low. "But I told Rocco that I would change things. The whole rotten game."

I frowned, searching her face, trying to piece together the half-hidden meaning of her words. "What are you talking about?"

"I don't know that I can tell you everything—not yet." She pulled on her shirt and slid into her jeans, her hands deftly gathering her hair back. Then she turned, leaning down to kiss me, soft but lingering, her promise grazing my skin.

"I'll be back," she whispered. "And when I am, I want us to run away, somewhere no one knows our names." She smiled, and a glimmer of hope lit through her eyes.

I sat there and watched her as she moved to the door, her presence leaving the room quieter, and emptier. "Okay," I said, the word carrying everything I couldn't say aloud.

She left then, shutting the door firmly behind her. The room was silent until my phone suddenly buzzed in jarring interruption of the quiet. I answered.

"Yeah?"

It was Rocco, his voice carrying that unmistakable tone of command. He wanted me in the basement, and from the sound of it, it wasn't a request.

### TWENTY ONE

#### JOKER

I'd promised Rocco this was how it would finally end with the Circle, but in reality, I'd never really known his plan or my involvement in it. I left Chiara's room, padding silently down the stairs, with each descent, a painful jerk formed in my stomach, that little warning inside me that something was amiss. I didn't trust Rocco, not fully—never when I knew he used to be one of them. But he'd promised me freedom, a clean break from all this. Yet in killing Hypno, something inside me felt crack open—as if the act had set me free already.

Before I stretched the hall of the ground floor, the shadows long and spreading, while at its far end, the staircase led down to the basement.

I'd been down here before, through those tunnels that were concealed, but it had always been amid a haze of sleepwalking, the herding of the others down while they were half-conscious. They'd controlled every step I'd taken, choreographed every detail. Still, Rocco had told me he'd managed to close off the tunnels and trap them all in one place tonight, ready to bring an end to the Circle.

Candles flickered from thick pillars placed along the steps, black roses resting in glass vases beside them. Each step deeper down into the basement was darker and twisted than the previous. The murmurs guided me toward the larger chamber where prayers and sacrifices were held. I took a step back and took a moment, staring at the unsettling quiet.

Inside, Chiara sat cross-legged on the floor of the room, her body slouched in a chair, eyes closed, while her face was calm, yet unnaturally still. Around her, six people lay on mattresses, completely still, as if captured in some sort of deep, collective sleep. Dhalia and Rocco were standing next to the wall, faces strained, beads of sweat on their foreheads.

"What in the name of—?" I whispered, hurrying swiftly to Rocco's side.

He leaned in close, his voice barely above a murmur. "They're connected through their dreams. Chiara's in their minds, binding them together, tying up a forbidden knot so that they can't break free until she lets them out herself."

And in a split second, my chest was filled with cold dread, my mind snapping to old memories. "The last time someone tried that... they died, Rocco. This is insane!" I hurriedly went to Chiara, shaking her shoulders, with desperate hands against her stillness. "Chiara, baby, please... wake up."

Warm under my touch, yet she was stillness, like death. A part of her was here, yet somewhere else entirely. "You're fucking crazy," I snarled at Rocco, rage searing through me. "How could you do this to her?"

"She has a gift, all right," he said. His voice was hard; my anger didn't matter to him. "She trained for six months. If you hadn't killed Hypno, she'd be even safer."

I grabbed him, pushing him against the wall. "And who are those people? Do you at all know what kind of nightmares they are feeding her, what horrors they had buried in their minds?"

"They are within the Circle," Dhalia whispered in a white, thin voice. "She is driving them mad. When she's done with them, they'll be locked up in the madhouse."

A cold lump congested my throat, the weight of what was happening pressing down on me. Growing, gnawing fear screamed that this was wrong, that Chiara could be pulled in too deeply, trapped in their nightmares when there was no way back. I looked at her face—peaceful, breathing soft and steady—and yet the terror was unmistakable. This wasn't what I'd signed up for, not for her.

Suddenly, one of them began to have convulsions: his body started jerking ominously, and white foam began to flow from his mouth as his head jerked back as though in a trance gone horribly wrong.

"He's fighting it!" Dhalia yelled, fear lacing her tone. She fell on her knees beside him, putting her hands against his chest in a frantic bid to steady him. Then, her face hardened, and she pulled out a knife from her pocket.

And she leaned forward without another phrase, plunging it deep into his chest as the blade sank in. A spray of blood splattered on her face, staining the floor in thick, dark drops of the vital liquid.

His eyes closed, his body relaxed, and his breathing threw a puffy silence.

She reached up to his neck, feeling for a pulse. She looked up at us. "He's gone."

I turned to Rocco, anger flaring through me. "Who are these guys?"

Rocco's face screwed up in distaste, a flicker of fear reflected in his eyes. "The dead one is the mayor's son," he whispered, his voice taut with emotion. "Beside him is Thalia, Lotta's granddaughter. The redhead next to her? She's the daughter of the local priest. And they're all bound to the Circle, every bloody one of them."

"And how does Chiara get out of this dream?" My fists were clenched, ready to drive some sense into him if I had to.

Rocco's eyes darted around the area nervously. "We... we don't know. Last time it took a few minutes, but this is six people. It could take longer."

"Or we're losing her!" I snarled. "I'm going in."

"No!" He stepped in front of me, his hands up, desperation coloring his tone. "We need you for the end—to take them to Santa Maria."

"I don't care," I replied as I headed toward Chiara. "She needs me."

"No!" he yelled, reaching to stop me, but Dhalia was already working. She nudged the dead body off the mattress; his lifeless body slumped to the floor.

She looked down at me with this bizarre determination. "Lie down."

I didn't have to hear anymore. I lay down on the blood-red carpet, shut my eyes, and let the thick odor of metallic blood flood into my nostrils.

"Count to three," she said. Her voice was flat. "And focus on where she'd be. When you find her, give her the code—something only she'd know. That'll anchor you both, help you enter her dream."

"Fine," I growled, settling myself. I took a deep breath, then counted.

I counted each number like it was a step through the dark: one, two, three. My mind wandered back to the maze, to that first night when I saw her—all that innocence and defiance, such a bright spark against the dim world we lived in. I'd regretted not going to her sooner; if I had, maybe I would have claimed her that very first night.

A door materialized, and I reached for the handle and shoved it open. The world abruptly shifted around me. I stepped into a tent, its walls flexing with an eerie glow

of red neon, tinging everything with long and distorting shadows. In the center, a great maze flowed down, curving and turning with mirrors at every turn. Faint, haunting circus music murmured back, each note hanging in the air like a ghost of memories past.

And there she was, a flash of white as she darted through the maze, her reflection flickering in the mirrors like a ghost slipping between worlds. I walked toward her and entered the maze, the red glow above me sputtering unsteadily. The first mirror caught my reflection and there I was—a clown, even here, even in my own dream.

She ran ahead, a flash of white receding deeper into the labyrinth, her reflection rippling from one mirror to another. I started after her, running down the twisting corridors. Yet just when I could almost reach her, the maze would shift, the mirrors gliding as though they were partitions, blocking my way.

Finally, she turned around the corner just in front of me, and I caught her wrist and drew her near, her back pressed against a mirror. She looked up at me, her eyes searching, as though something familiar but forgotten shone somewhere deep in my gaze. The words swelled in my chest, words so long held in, words that I had never dared to utter.

I leaned in, pressing my lips against hers, whispering against them, "I will always come back."

Her fingers brushed my face, soft and cold, her skin sallow as though she was drifting off, pale, her form blurring, becoming translucent. And in desperate clawing up my throat, I yelled as she began to fade, "I fucking love you."

A soft smile touched her lips, and she reached out, her hand intertwining with mine. She pulled me after her, straight into the mirror, and I felt a lurch, some sensation of falling through endless space. I tumbled through the darkness until, suddenly, my feet

hit solid ground—golden leaves crunching beneath me. I looked up, and there it was. The tall, haunting building before me could be mistaken for no other.

"Santa Maria Asylum," I said in a whisper to myself, and a shiver ran over me as the meaning registered.

I was in.

### TWENTY TWO

#### JOKER

Before me lay the asylum hallway, dim and decaying; the walls chipped, shadowed with years of neglect and torment. The old wheelchair sat in the center, creaking as if moved by an invisible hand. I glanced sideways to see a man banging his head against the wall, the blood of each impact making the wet sound resound in the silence. His head twisted as I passed; his vacant eyes locked onto me with a hollow accusation.

Farther down the street, a woman stood stock-still, her eyes black as ink, staring at me with a heavy darkness that kept my feet in place. Her lips curled upward, into what was unmistakably a smile—or a warning. I started to move down the sidewalk once more, my pulse concussive in my ears with every step, and that is when I saw him.

A man was dressed as a doctor—a mask shaped like a rabbit's head, but the mask was stitched from human skin, the sutures crossing in a rough pattern on it like some kind of gruesome patchwork covering his features. He held an axe for chopping, tilted his head, and watched me, a predator's gaze raising every hair on my body. I whirled and ran in the opposite direction, toward a door that was at the far end of the hall. The sound of drums and a haunting lullaby filled the air, mocking me, while pushing my feet toward speed.

But it would not move. Panic flooded me as I threw my weight against it, hearing footsteps draw closer, heavier. A soft whisper slipped through the door, barely

audible but unmistakable.

"Save me." Her voice.

I slammed my foot against the door, feeling it give in with a splintering crack. I plunged inside and slammed it shut just as the doctor reached me, his masked face pressing into the small window, watching me with that grotesque smile beneath his mask.

I turned, and there she was. The room was bleached white, devoid of anything but Chiara, who huddled in her far corner. Kneeling, her hair falling in front of her face, quivering shoulders. Her eyes went wide as she looked up—her lips quivering in a whisper: "Save me... I killed them all."

I knelt beside her, wrapping my jacket around her shoulders. "It's all a dream," I murmured—my voice as level as I could maintain it, hoping that would draw her from whatever nightmare had her in its grip.

And then, in the blink of an eye—as if I'd only blinked—the asylum disappeared.

We lay on soft grass beneath an open sky, warm sunlight spilling over us. Chiara looked over at me, her white dress billowing softly in the breeze, her eyes meeting mine with a calm she hadn't possessed in a long time.

"I don't want to wake up," she whispered, turning closer to me.

I looked down to find I was dressed in white too, the scars on my face and hands gone, somehow miraculously so, as if this world—this place—must be some version of us in which all the brokenness, all the dark of what had been, wasn't.

"But you have to," I said, brushing a lock of hair behind her ear. "There's a whole

world out there for you."

"What's a world without you in it?" she whispered, her hand falling softly against my chest, her fingers resting where my heartbeat steadied. I took her hand in mine, anchoring her here, grounding her.

"I'm never going to leave your side," I vowed, and with every word, I felt the truth of it resonate in that quiet between us.

Tears brimmed over in her eyes, and the sky seemed to join in—raindrops falling, soaking into our white clothes. She held me tightly, her voice a whisper that cut through the downpour. "You're my anchor, Rio... but I never got to be yours." Her tears streaked down her cheeks, mingling with the rain while she looked at me with a raw, painful honesty.

"If I wake up, all of this... it'll just be a dream," she whispered, her voice fragile as barely there. "You'll be just a memory, and I don't want to live in a present without you."

I gently brushed my thumb against her cheek, catching the trail of her tears. "Even if you live a thousand years without me," I whispered, hearing my voice catch, "I'd still be the happiest man alive knowing you were a part of my life."

"I don't want to say goodbye," she whispered, her voice shaking, the words breaking as she burrowed her face against me, sobs muffled but quaking through both of us. A tear slid down my cheek, and I knew this was the moment—the one neither of us wanted, yet both had to face. I pulled her close, talking softly, words I'd thought I would never have to say.

"It will be hard, at first," I said softly, my voice thick with the pain of it.

"You'll weep, and a piece of you will die a little each day whenever you remember me. But then... you'll move on. You'll find someone who can love you even more than I did." I brushed away her tears, though more seemed to fall, both hers and mine. "And one day, you'll tell your kids a story about a clown who will always hold a part of your heart."

"I'll never love anyone again," she said, her arms wrapping around me as if that would keep me here.

"Maybe," I replied, tipping up her chin to look into her eyes. "But maybe you will."

One final, aching kiss and the world seemed to blur around us. Her form was fading until I was left with only the ghostly warmth of her touch hanging in the air, and I stood alone once more. I had promised myself that, somehow someday, I'd find my way back to her—a real goodbye, one she'd remember.

### QUIET HOUR

A thick silence enveloped the room, and Rocco was making blind attempts to muffle his sobs, which had hung in the air around Rio's dead body. With his trembling hand, Rocco grasped the knife tightly, his eyes filled with sorrow. He must have kept the body of Rio in a state of serenity; he plunged the blade deep into Rio's heart once more, as into the abyss of his torment. He sobbed, his face bending forward, and his voice at a whisper.

"He was like a son to me," he muttered, his voice cracking with the weight of it.

Dhalia stooped closer, kneeling beside him as her composure was about to break. She placed a gentle hand on his shoulder. "He loved you like a father," she whispered, her voice soft but steady. Though her heart was breaking, she held her face firm, needing to be the strong one for them both.

Rocco's body went taut as he fought to pull himself together. Dhalia squeezed his shoulder. "What do we tell her?" she asked, her voice little more than a whisper.

"That he left," Rocco said, an edge creeping into his voice. "That he saw what she'd done, and he walked away."

Dhalia's hand fell from his shoulder as her face contorted in sorrow. "It will break her heart," she said, her voice breaking with a slight quaver.

"But she'll survive," he replied, clenching his jaw. "And we need her. If she learns he died for her... she'll follow him."

Dhalia nodded as a tear escaped down her cheek. She watched Rocco carefully lift Chiara in his arms; her form stirred as she drifted back into consciousness. He carried her back to her room, preparing himself to weave the story that would tear her heart apart but keep her alive.

Left in the dim light, Dhalia looked down at Rio's lifeless body—the silent witness to all that had been taken from him. She thought of Chiara, of the hollow life that would now be hers, of Rocco's words—a twisted, noble lie to save them all. Ruby was next in her mind—pained by longing as she stood there, alone with the shadows of the past. She whirled around and up the stairs two at a time, her feet pounding against each step in a rhythmic crescendo, her chest heaving by the time she reached the attic. She hauled herself up the ladder, opened the window wide, and climbed out onto the rooftop; the cool night air nipped at her face. The silence of the world stretched around her, broken only by the faint, haunting melody of circus music from somewhere far away.

She reached the edge of the roof, turned her back, and looked to the sky as if for one final glance. "Ashes to ashes, flame to flame," she whispered, closing her eyes. "I am with you." Then, the sound of music still ringing in her ears, she launched herself into the darkness below.

WHAT IF?

ACE- ONE MONTH AFTER

I went home to lighter air as if the walls themselves let out a sigh of relief the moment the police carried away my father. And for the first time, it felt more like a home—a place where memories could be remade. They say if your heart hurts, surround it with people you love, and for me, that person was Carlo.

Outside, he was laughing, racing through the garden with Christian, their carefree joy washing over me, bringing a smile even as I leaned heavily on the kitchen island, jaw propped on my fists, watching them. Yet Rocco's words swirled in my head, his voice a whisper in the quiet.

"The end does not matter so long as the beginning is right."

In life, we never know the what-ifs, never see the path ahead, or who will heal and hurt us. Human nature stumbles along, hoping the heart can keep up. And mine, well, mine would never forget Rio—or those days at the House of Clowns. I knew that he would not have let me go willingly, knew there was a choice taken away.

Every day, I would write another chapter, grasping for a new beginning, yet sliding back to the pages that I had bookmarked, where he still lived in my heart. On those pages was his laughter, his presence, something more than just the mask he wore. Yet life has a way of snatching them back, making me continue to write, to turn the pages. But every line seemed to be haunted by memories of another.

A tear escaped onto my cheek, then the ringing phone snapped me back. I rubbed the tear off and steeled myself to answer.

"Hello?" My voice came steady, but upon hearing him—his voice at the other end—I froze.

"If, ten years from now, you need someone to love, would you think about loving me?" His voice was barely more than a whisper; the signal crackled.

My eyes welled up with tears, and I finally found words that came rushing up my throat as I clutched onto the phone. "You were always my first choice... and my favorite ending, too."

"I'll meet you at the maze," he said. His voice cracked softly.

My heart was racing, and I swallowed hard, laughing through my tears. "I'll be in white."

"And I'd be the clown looking back."

And just like that, the line was dead.

The phone fell from my hand as I slid down the wall, my body hitting the floor, sobs racking my chest as I clung fast to those memories. I wanted to tear through time right now, close the distance between us, and get him back.

We had come so close, almost made it.

"This is the story, Mom," I whispered through my tears, looking up as if somehow she could hear me. "The story of how your daughter fell in love with a clown."

I smiled bittersweet, sending those words out like a prayer. "Keep an eye on him."

He has my heart .