

Prologue

I remember the first time I attended The Fools' Circus. I was ten years old, watching a teenage boy called the Blades Master juggle knives. A younger boy wore cat ears and did leaps and somersaults on trampolines. A little girl did tricks and jumped on a trapeze, while another around my age danced with flames.

Every time we went, my mom would ask me, "Wouldn't it be cool to perform like that?"

She likely said it as a fun thought, but watching those young performers made me believe I could do anything. Soon, joining them became a dream of mine, and she encouraged me to try.

I taught myself to juggle, hoping to join the other kids on stage. When I was thirteen, my mom died in a car accident. I was adopted months later by a successful business couple, and they hated the circus. I missed the show that year, and it tore me apart inside.

The year after, I went with a friend and his parents, and the next year, I went alone. I brought dates in my late teens, but their passion didn't match mine. The point is, I never missed a show again, and I never stopped juggling, hoping I could perform on stage with the others.

I have to join. My mother's spirit is pushing me. I can't stay in the audience forever.

Chapter 1

Appause roars from behind the temporary fences that keep the patrons in line. Three clubs fly into the air, two landing in tanned hands, the third standing on its handle on Blake's forehead. He wobbles around to balance it as more cheers and whistles rise from the crowd. A few drivers honk or cheer from the window as they drive by. The ends of his brown waves tickle his eyes, but he does his best to hold the pose for a bit longer.

He flops his head forward to toss the club into his hand and takes a bow. Even passersby on the sidewalk have stopped to watch him, and the

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resulting applause sends chills over his skin and plasters a grin on his face.

He takes a second to gaze at the convention center, where The Fools' Circus is about to perform. His eyes scan the windows for a sign, some hint that someone in there is watching him. He didn't get this sign on Friday or Saturday, but tonight—Sunday night—is their last show and his last chance until next year.

Stuffing his backpack with his clubs and tossing it over his shoulder, he makes his way toward the back of the line.

Along the way, he thanks many people for their various compliments and words of encouragement. A few of them even reach out to shake his hand.

"Hey!" shouts an old man from the line. His white hair hangs at his shoulders under a gray fedora that matches his suit. His voice is raspy, but has a soothing air to it. "You're not part of The Fools' Circus, are you?"

"No sir." Blake stops with a smile. "I can't find a way of contacting them, so I just juggle here and hope they see me."

"Ah. So you'd like to join?"

"Yeah, but it looks like juggling won't be enough. I'll have to try harder this time."

"Where are you going then? Not staying for the show?"

"I am, but I already have my ticket, so I don't mind going to the back of the line. It's not like my assigned seat is going anywhere."

The old man lets out a small grumble and takes a step back to gesture at a space in front of him

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with his wooden cane. “Just hop the fence and get in here. You’re only one guy. Fuck ’em if they get mad.”

Blake chuckles and stumbles over the fence to take his spot in front of the old man, grateful that no one protests. “Thanks, Gramps. Can I call you Gramps?”

“You can call me Shit Head—I like long walks on the beach, and I hate people who clean the grease off their pizza.”

Blake laughs as the line takes its first inch forward. “I like you, Shit Head. My name’s Blake. Are you here alone?”

“Yeah, I planned to bring my daughter, but she’s been in and out of the hospital for a long time now. And what about you? A handsome young man like you isn’t here with a girlfriend? Boyfriend, maybe?”

“Nope. Single life isn’t so bad. I like being able to focus on work and hobbies.”

“Smart kid. How old are you anyway?”

“Twenty-three.”

Shit Head purses his wrinkled old lips under his white stubble and nods. “Still young. No reason to rush it.”

The line takes its first step forward as Shit Head raves on about his years of gymnastics experience, and how marvelous it would be to perform at such a show.

While Blake is enjoying the conversation and good company, his heart is pounding against his ribs, begging for the line to hurry so he can see the show and take his chance.

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The light in the old man's eyes as he reminisces of his younger days only motivates Blake more and more.

Each step happens in slow motion until the entrance comes into view. A surge of energy pulses through Blake's veins as he reviews his plan. When the show ends, he'll find out if there is a place for him on stage.

It has to be today. I need to have an answer before I go home.



THE RINGLEADER TAKES HIS place on stage, donning a black suit with purple embellishments along his pants and jacket sleeves. The tailcoats on his blazer whip about with every movement, and a purple button-up lines his neck. When he turns to address the audience behind him, a purple embroidered lion roars on his back. He lifts his gloved hands, one of them holding a cane, as his voice booms over the cheering audience.

“Fans, fiends, and comrades! We thank you for joining us this evening! Our story begins a long time ago, with a little girl who lives with a wicked stepmother and two evil stepsisters.”

The ringleader's voice trails off as his spotlight dims and others illuminate the rest of the stage.

A blonde woman dressed in rags dances on the stage floor while three other performers in pastel leap and bound on the surrounding trampolines in a violent display. Cinderella drops her broom to

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juggle a feather duster, a cleaning sponge, and a teapot.

Blake remembers her name from being announced in previous shows. She doesn't have a title like the Blades Master or Fire Goddess; her name is Axel. Her portrayal as Cinderella is sweet and elegant, with an air of innocence that makes the audience, including Blake, fall in love.

Everything falls around Cinderella, and one sister pulls her onto the trampoline. She's thrown around, each sister ripping parts of her dress and shoving her to the other, before they leave her on the stage floor and disappear.

The fairy godmother appears with a floating wand, each end engulfed in fire, as she dances around, her short, strawberry-red hair whipping in all directions.

Cinderella climbs up and twirls her body into a pink wall of silks. The fairy godmother uses her magic to seal her in a cocoon while she dances around the stage with a man wearing cat ears. At the music's cue, Cinderella bursts from the wall of silks in her ball attire, making the audience boom into applause, before disappearing from the stage.

The lights go out, and intermission is called. Blake leans forward in his seat, trying to navigate the distance between the stage and the back of the building in his mind. His leg bounces in its place as people around him make their way to the concession stands and restrooms. A group of clowns take the stage and amuse the dwindling crowd.

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Blake has never been so eager for the show to end before; he can't carry out his mission while the show is going on. Even if he could, he wouldn't dare miss it.

It feels like an eternity is going by; he's tempted to leave now but takes a deep breath to remind himself that the cast and crew won't be going anywhere in the middle of a show.

The clowns leave the stage, and the lights grow dim as the stadium seats fill themselves up again.

Finally.

The stage lights up in a tranquil blue hue. Couples perform on aerial hoops around the stage. The blond prince pulls Cinderella onto the trapeze to leap and hang in romantic poses as they whoosh through the air. The audience roars at their display, and Blake's heart stops.

The magic on stage is calling him again, begging him to join, but he stays put.

The performers land on the platform, and the prince holds out a fist. When he opens it, a bouquet of flowers grows from his palm. Cinderella is about to take them, when suddenly the lights turn purple and ominous music fills the stage as the bell tolls.

She leaps back onto the trapeze and swings to the next to get away from him. The prince tries to follow, but before he can reach the second swing, one stepsister snatches him from the air by his ankles. She pulls him onto her swing while he struggles; the dispute stays in tune with the music, and their poses make the audience go wild.

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Stage lights change to sunrise colors, and soldiers soar through the air on trampolines. When they find Cinderella, the prince pulls her into a pair of white silks, while they twist and bend and their chemistry heats up the stadium.

The hours take their time inching by, and Blake's anxiety, coupled with fascination, create a confusing whirl in his mind. He hasn't even thought of what he will say or do if he actually gets the chance to talk to someone. He probably should, but the show is demanding every bit of his attention.

It all ends too soon, but not soon enough. The performers gather in a circle around the stage. Each of them is holding hands with the next as the ringleader sends additional thanks to the crew members before thanking the audience.

Wait, something's changed. Blake leans in to examine the changes on stage. There are fewer aerial rigs now than there were before. *Is the crew putting them away already?*

He leaps from his seat as the audience bursts into a standing ovation. He rushes out of the stadium and into the cold night air. An icy breeze makes him shiver and zip his black jacket before he hurries around the building, keeping his eye out for guards, police, or (in the best-case scenario) a clown to point him in the right direction.

Around the back, he finds a group of people moving equipment into the back of a white truck. At first, he isn't sure if they're the right people, but one man is carrying aerial hoops, and that's all the evidence he needs.

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“Excuse me!” Blake calls, running over without thinking. One of them, a dark-skinned man with short hair, stops to look at him with his eyebrows raised in attention.

“What’s up, man?”

“Are you guys with the circus?” Blake asks.

“Yeah, but we don’t perform.”

“That’s fine, I just have a question. How does someone get to be part of it? I looked everywhere online, and I couldn’t find anything.”

“We’re not hiring,” the man says as he turns around to get back to his work. “Sorry.”

“No, wait, please.” Blake gives the man’s arm a gentle tug to stop him. “Please, can you give me some way to contact your boss?”

“Our hiring process doesn’t work that way. There are plenty of other circuses you can try.”

“There’s nothing I can do? No one I can talk to?”

The man shrugs as he shakes his head. “I’m sorry. We just don’t work like that.”

“How *does* it work?”

“I can’t tell you. Word spreads, jobs open, and suddenly sacred ground becomes another capitalist hotspot. Go try somewhere else.”

The truck’s trailer closes, and the man’s coworkers gather behind him, frowning their brows at their conversation. One of them pats the man on the shoulder. “We’re ready when you are, Ronan.”

Ronan nods them off, signaling them to give him one more minute with the curious stranger. They go back to their work, but not without

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glancing back and whispering amongst themselves.

"Please?" Blake asks, his heart sinking in his chest.

"I can't," Ronan says. "Look, it's nothing personal, all right? Tell you what, I can talk to some of my guys and get you a free souvenir. Maybe a DVD of tonight's show, yeah?"

"No, that's okay. Thanks, though."

Ronan holds out his hand. "Like I said, it's nothing personal. No hard feelings?"

Blake gives Ronan's hand a reluctant shake, forcing a smile to disguise the lump in his throat.

Ronan climbs into the passenger seat of the truck with one of the men while the other two make their way back into the building. His eyes lock on to Blake's as the truck drives off.

With a heavy breath, Blake turns to make his way back to the street. His heart is so heavy that he slouches, eyes glazing over as he watches the ground beneath his feet.

So, there it is. I wanted an answer, and I got it.

Or did I?

He stops in his tracks and turns back around to face the building again. He runs back to the doors and knocks, doing his best not to sound too angry or violent.

No answer. They must be gathering the rest of the equipment. Blake drops onto the cold cement, his back to the wall, his mind already reminiscing about the show. He closes his eyes and quietly begs in his heart that Ronan is wrong, praying to

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whatever higher power is watching that there is room for him somewhere on that stage.

He'd been attending the circus every year since childhood, watching kids his age perform incredible talents. They gave him something to aim for, something he could achieve if he only tried hard enough. The smile his birth mother had when he learned a new juggling pattern flashes into his mind and lights a fire in his chest. He won't give up just because one member said no.

The door opens, prompting Blake to scuttle to the side as he stands up. Two men lug a large case and set it against the wall while a third person holds it open. None of them seem to notice Blake as they continue.

"Lance, sit with it until Ronan gets back, will ya?"

"Hell no, it's freezing and my sweater's inside! One of you can wait out here!"

"You freakin' wuss!" calls a third burly voice. "It's only September! What, are you going to hibernate all winter?"

"I'll do it," a fourth gentler voice says.

"Mishkin?" says the burly voice. "Why aren't you with the others?"

"I need some fresh air. I can watch your stuff."

The three voices all seem to agree as a thin man in a sleeveless shirt, black pants, and cat ears steps out, the door closing behind him. He turns to face Blake with hazel eyes and a caramel-colored face. Three dermal piercings sit on each cheek as he raises a thick brow.

"So," Mishkin says, "you're still here."

"What?" says Blake. "Do you know me?"

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“Kinda hard not to notice a guy who puts on his own show in front of a big name like ours.”

“I’m sorry,” says Blake. “I didn’t mean anything by it. Well, I guess I sort of did, but nothing bad. I just ...” Blake’s voice trails off as he stares at the ground, embarrassed to be confessing his hopes and dreams to a man who was just on stage living them.

“You want to join, right? I heard the guys talking about you. Ronan told you off.”

“Was he right? Is there really no way for me to join?”

“There are dozens of other circuses.” Mishkin crosses his arms. “Many have names bigger than ours. Tell me, what makes ours so special?”

Blake tenses, and his eyes drop to the ground. “I, uh...I guess I don’t know. It wasn’t something I thought about; it was just something I had to do. I always thought I had to become part of it. For Mom.”

“And when you join us and realize that we aren’t as glamorous as you think, then what?”

Blake’s lips form a tight line. “I guess I run screaming in the other direction and go to trauma counseling. Is that what you want to hear?”

Mishkin narrows his eyes and takes a step closer to Blake, whose heart is now racing in his chest. *Damn it, Blake. We’re supposed to be begging here. You’re going to get your ass kicked!*

Mishkin hunches over as laughter escapes his chest. His grinning lips reveal sharpened canines that make Blake’s heart jump. He shudders at the thought of teeth being sanded.

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“You’re ballsy! I like you! But look, even if I want you to join, there’s nothing I can do. It’s not up to me.”

“I don’t understand, why is this so difficult?”

“Hey, kitty cat!” calls a voice from around the corner. “I see you’ve met my new friend.”

Blake’s eyes widen as a familiar old face approaches them with a cane and a cigarette.

“Shit Head!” Blake calls.

“What?” Mishkin yelps.

“So, Blake here wants to join, right?”

“No one can join without Rex’s approval.”

“Rex will approve. He’s talented enough. Besides, a machine can’t function if it’s missing a piece, can it? Letting Blake join could move things along. Hell, you can even tell Rex that this was my suggestion.”

Mishkin puts a pensive hand over his chin as he stares back at Blake. Shit Head takes another puff of his cigarette, and Blake is frozen in his spot.

Mishkin runs his fingers through his black hair, his cheeks puffing as he huffs out his thoughts. “You still haven’t told me what you’re planning, old man. Care to explain?”

A grin slithers onto Shit Head’s wrinkled face as cigarette smoke wafts into the air.

“Fine, useless schemer.” Mishkin holds out a hand. “Who has a pen?”

Blake grabs his backpack from his shoulders and pulls one from the front pocket. Mishkin grabs the pen in one hand and Blake’s wrist in the other, pulling him in so quickly that Blake’s face

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almost collides with the back of his head. The cat ears block the view of his arm.

Blake's sleeve is shoved roughly up his arm, and the cold tip of the pen stabs his skin in rapid lines and curves. He clenches his teeth to avoid grunting in pain.

The back door opens again, and the crew members step out, each holding rigs and ropes in their arms. Mishkin turns around and leans his forehead against Blake's with a grin, putting the pen back in his hand.

"Don't say another word. I'll see you tomorrow."

"But—"

Mishkin shoves Blake toward Shit Head, who quickly grabs Blake's arm, and walks away from the two men before they can notice what's happening.

"You pesky boy!" Shit Head chuckles at an obnoxious volume, paying no mind to Blake's stumbling. "You got your autograph, now get out of here!"

"Autograph?" Blake mutters as Shit Head leads him around the building. "Gramps, what is going on?"

"I told you, call me Shit Head. The look on Mishkin's face was priceless!" He laughs, loosening his grip on Blake now that they're at the front of the building. "I should pay you for it!"

"Okay but, did he actually..." Blake stops to process the writing on his arm. An autograph? No, an address.

It's an appointment.

Chapter 2

Blake stares at the mansion with a slack jaw as he opens the front gate, surprised to find it unlocked.

He imagined The Fools' Circus must have an office space *somewhere*, but he never imagined it'd be in his own state. Newport isn't the shortest bus ride, but it's nice that he didn't need a plane ticket.

The gravel path cuts through a luscious green lawn, decorated with evergreen trees and bushes trimmed down to perfect raindrops and cubes. The mansion towers over the property with white

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paneling, black rooftops, and large windows everywhere, almost as big as a private school.

Is this where the circus owner lives? Or maybe it's where they come to practice?

He reaches the large, roofed porch, grateful to be out of the sun. A small jester hangs from enormous doors, smiling at him with bells on his colorful hat. Ribbons of gold and purple create a wreath with small white pom poms scattered around it. He's seen this jester all over the circus merch and has a T-shirt of it from that one time he was able to splurge on a souvenir.

He clears his throat and stands tall—as if the jester were able to smell his fear—and rings the doorbell. He takes a few deep breaths, willing his heartbeat to slow down and his nerves to relax.

He glances down at himself and wonders if his blue polo shirt and black pants are appropriate for a meeting with a circus. *Would they call this overdressed or underdressed?*

Images of the night before flash through Blake's mind: the old man, the Cat, and some secret reason for giving him a chance. He grabs at his backpack to make sure it's still there, trying to ignore the doubts in his mind.

The door opens, and his heart jumps, but he's relieved to see a familiar face.

“Oh good, you made it!”

“Yeah. Hi, Mishkin,” says Blake.

“Follow me. I've already made you an appointment with the Keeper.”

Blake steps in and eases the front door closed, as if it could break with the wrong amount of pressure. He looks around at the cream-colored

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walls as he and Mishkin make their way down the main hall. A few scattered paintings hang just above reach, and below them are benches and end tables. Beanbag chairs and sofas with worn spots and tears in the fabric line the walls.

Their footsteps echo through the empty halls, and Blake swallows hard, doing his best to focus on Mishkin instead of the haunting silence.

“What do you mean by *Keeper*?” he asks.

“The Fools' Keeper handles the paperwork,” says Mishkin. “He'll get a feel for your personality, and then Rex will make the final decision.”

“So Rex is the boss, then?”

“To put it in Fools' terms, he's our King, but you've got the right idea. The naming just makes it feel like we're part of our own little world, and it's kind of nice after all we've been through.”

“*We*? So you live here with the King?”

“We all do. All forty-seven of us.”

“Forty-seven!” Blake shoots his gaze around the mansion again. “But where is everyone? It's like a ghost town in here. It's freakin' creepy!”

“We just finished touring; We're exhausted. Breakfast is being delayed too, so no one is leaving their rooms anytime soon. You're lucky the old man showed up. I could be in bed, cuddling with my love right now, but nooo...”

“Sorry. Who is that old guy, anyway? And what did he mean by ‘getting things moving?’”

The two reach a door with a frosted glass window. Mishkin opens it without knocking and steps aside to usher Blake in. “He's here.”

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A plump man in gray flannel lifts his head from his papers. A brown moustache with a few silver streaks blocks his upper lip, and his brown eyes peer through his glasses at the stranger in front of him.

Beside him stands a tall, slender man with long blond hair falling past his shoulders to his torso, covered by a white button-up tucked into black pants and a purple blazer hanging off his shoulders. He gestures at the chair on the other side of the office desk, rings glistening in the sunlight from the large window behind him. "Sit."

Blake does as he's told, his heartbeat speeding up again. Mishkin shuts the office door and stands behind the chair, giving Blake's shoulder a comforting pat. Blake looks up at him, and Mishkin winks back, which doesn't help Blake feel any better.

"My name is Victor," says the plump man. "I'm the Keeper of Fools."

"And I am Rex," says the tall blond. "The King of Fools."

"Tell us," says Victor, crossing his arms, "what makes you think you belong in our circus?"

"Well—" Blake clears his throat, making every attempt to hide his frazzled nerves. "I've been watching you guys since I was a kid, and you all inspired me to juggle. In fact, circus days with my mom are some of the happiest memories I have. She never pushed me to perform, but she planted the idea in my mind, and it flourished after that. Then she died, and I never found

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anything that felt as fulfilling as performing does.”

Victor and Rex shoot a glance at each other before Victor shakes his head. “Sorry, kid. You don’t belong here.”

“What?” Blake exclaims, straightening in his seat. “But you haven’t seen what I can do yet!”

“Every child you saw on that stage was homeless when they joined. *Homeless*. No family. No hope. As children. We helped them because they couldn’t help themselves. You are a grown man. I did my checking up on you, and I know you were adopted by a successful business couple. You also have a full-time job and managed to move out, right? You aren’t homeless. You aren’t helpless. You can stand on your own. Hartman asked me to give you a chance. I gave it to you, now I’m saying no.”

Blake leans forward in his seat. “Is that how this works? You scout out homeless kids for a circus? Is that even legal?”

“Our process is top secret. I’m not explaining anything further, and I’m not letting you join.”

“Hold on,” says Rex. All eyes dart over to him as he rubs a pensive finger along his chin, eyeing Blake with a smirk. “Victor, please elaborate on your thoughts. How would you describe his desire to join our circus?”

“I’d say it’s stupid,” Victor scoffs.

“Would you say it’s...foolish?” Rex grins at Victor, who throws his head to the side, huffing to himself.

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“My dear boy,” says Rex, sending a soft smile toward Blake, “do you know why we call ourselves The Fools' Circus?”

Blake hesitates, shifting his eyes to the ground, before shaking his head.

“All throughout history, we've had creators, explorers, remarkable individuals who changed the world. The world called these people fools. They faced their adversities and grew from them. They believed in their visions and led the world's greatest changes. Shakespeare himself acknowledged the fool as someone who sees the truth and dares to speak it, even to royalty.

“Even now, the Fool card in a tarot deck is the card of opportunity—a chance to fly for those foolish enough to take the leap.”

“Wow.” Blake drops his gaze to the patterned carpet beneath him. When he'd thought of fools before, he'd always pictured clowns and jesters.

If what Victor says about the kids is true, it would add new meaning to the name he'd dreamt about for so long.

“Look,” he says. “I don't want to sound selfish, or anything. But the kids you adopted are adults, now. Would it really be so weird to hire someone their own age? It's not like I'm asking to join a fourth-grade art club, here. Hiring me won't take any opportunities away from the others.”

“Perhaps not” Rex responds. “But you still haven't given us a good reason to hire you. I've seen you juggle, but what else can you offer?”

Blake sinks in his seat. “I guess I don't have much else. Juggling has always been my favorite.

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But I'm willing to learn other things, too. I can learn to swing on a trapeze or flip on a trampoline. I don't even care if I never get a lead role. I just want to perform alongside my childhood heroes."

"Is that so?" A tiny smirk curls the side of Rex's lips. "Then tell me, is the title of 'Fool' one you can wear with pride?"

"Of course." Blake responds. "I'd be even prouder to wear it now that I know what it really means."

"Then I suppose you deserve one chance," Rex smiles as he steps out from behind the desk. "Victor, get his paperwork started. I have an appointment to get to. Don't let your guard down, boy. The fool will always suffer before he rises."

Rex pats Blake's head as he leaves the office. Blake doesn't breathe until he closes the door behind him.

Is that it? I'm accepted just like that?

"Victor," says Mishkin, "there's something else. I didn't mention this part to Rex, but Hartman said letting him join would get things moving. Whatever that means."

Victor groans and leans his elbow on his desk. He takes off his glasses with one hand and rubs the bridge of his nose with the other. Blake's mind flashes back to Shit Head, unsure of whether to thank him or curse him.

"That crooked geezer is going to be the death of me," Victor sighs, picking up his pen and shifting through some files in one of his desk drawers.

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“Um, please, sir,” Blake says, leaning forward in his seat. “Who is Hartman, exactly? I met him yesterday, but he didn’t tell me his name.”

“He’s our biggest investor. Rex hates taking orders, but we need Hartman’s money, so we’re stuck under his thumb. He’s the only reason we’re saying yes. In fact, *I* said no because I thought Rex would follow along and decide the money wasn’t worth it. I guess I was wrong. But make no mistake, you won’t be accepted by the others so easily. I suggest you choose your words and actions *very* carefully.”

He places a sheet of paper on the desk. “Fill out this form at home and bring it back with your ID and social security card. I’ll expect you back on the second of October, and you’ll be with us for one year. We’ll decide later to renew or terminate. You can tell your parents you’re taking a trip or that you started school, or whatever you want, but you can’t tell them you’re here.”

“What? Why not?”

“We keep our information under wraps for the safety of the cast and crew. It’s a big part of why we don’t allow people to audition. We don’t need word spreading that The Fools’ Circus is taking in a lost pup. The rules will explain everything. Just read them very closely before you sign.”

Blake furrows his brow at Mishkin, then turns back to Victor. “Wait, but two weeks—I can’t just quit my job.”

“Why not?” Victor asks. “Two weeks is the standard notice for most jobs. Just give yourself time to pack up whatever you want to bring with

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you. We'll get a room ready with a new bed and empty dresser.”

More objections, questions, and anxieties whirl through Blake's mind, but Victor puts his glasses back on and returns his attention to the work on his desk. Mishkin taps his shoulder and nods his head toward the door.

He follows the prompt, plucking the application from the desk and staring at it as Mishkin walks him out in silence.

Blake's dream of joining The Fools' Circus is about to come true.

So why does his heart feel heavy?

Chapter 3

“**Y**ou’re wasting valuable time.”

The familiar voice can send chills even through the phone. He hoped putting her on speaker and keeping it a foot away would be easier on his ears. Nope, they’re still burning with her disdain. “Time that can be spent on better things.”

“Sure, Ma,” Blake groans as he takes another bite of the shepherd’s pie she brought him yesterday. He turns up his nose at the lack of flavor and quietly sprinkles salt and pepper over the top. Not that its blandness is anything new.

He takes another bite as her disapproving rant continues. His eyes wander around the pantry, passively

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scanning the floral wallpaper stained with oil spots and lifting at the edges. The nutty smell of pests fills the air, and he catches one of them crawling along the wall before its slick, brown body darts into a small crack in the cupboard.

With a silent scowl, he holds out his plate and lets the rest of his food drop into the trash. He forgot to wash the already clean dishes before he ate. Microwaved roach shit is probably the only seasoning he won't eat. Right along with the rat piss in the stew pots under the counter.

"We didn't adopt you so that you could quit college and goof off," his father chimes in, voice as forceful as ever. "What do you hope to achieve by driving around with your friends for an entire year?"

He shrugs to himself. "Experiences, maybe?"

It was the wrong response, and Blake deflates over the counter as they yell, assaulting his ears with the usual arguments. "Experiences don't pay bills," and "think ahead," and *blah blah blah*. He's grateful they can't see him rolling his eyes and grabbing a small bag of chips to replace his dinner.

Their lectures don't end soon enough. They finish the call with reminders of how much they love him and want the best for him. He promises to never become a delinquent and that he'll find a way to make ends meet, minding his words to avoid any mention of the circus. He spoke to them about wanting to join before, but they mocked the performers' very existence; patronized them as if performing were a low-intelligence career.

Finally, he can hang up, and he lets out a heavy breath, head falling back. The peeling paint on the ceiling reminds him to keep his mouth closed, in case of falling paint chips. He trudges to his room and closes the door behind him.

The Fools' Circus: Lost Pup

A fire lights in his chest when his eyes land on his backpack. The application—his ticket to freedom—is right inside, waiting to be filled out.

But first, juggling!

Blake pulls the clubs from his backpack, setting the application on his desk to wait for him.

He tosses the clubs from one hand to another, controlling the patterns and shapes with a simple flick of his wrist. Images of Shit Head—no, Hartman—flood his mind, along with the faces of Victor and Mishkin, as he replays the most confusing interview of his life.

And Rex.

The last club falls past his hands, and Blake sets out his foot to catch it and balance it on his ankle until he kicks it up to his hand. He drops his hands to the side and lets out a heavy breath as he stares at the popcorn texture of his ceiling.

So that's the ringleader. Rex's piercing blue eyes have etched themselves into his memory. He dresses like a modern-day king. He speaks like a king. He walks with his head held high and moves with confidence, as if no one can touch him. What did he mean when he said, "the mercy of the stage"?

The fool must always suffer before he rises. The fool must always suffer. Rex's voice rings in his ears, and a chill runs down his spine. He'd read stories and watched movies about circus performers being rude or self-centered. Maybe there's some truth to it, but he swallows down the anxiety and continues to toss his clubs around, allowing the swirling patterns to hypnotize his thoughts and calm his heart.

Rex makes it sound like he expects Blake to slay a dragon or something. Of course, joining a circus won't be easy. The rest of the cast is likely to brush him off until

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they see what he can do. Pranks and harsh words wouldn't be much different from middle school. None of that could be worse than roaches, junk-food dinners, and minimum wage.

A woman's moan rings through his bedroom wall, muffled, and his roommate breathes some vulgar sweet talk he didn't need to hear. Cringing, he rustles through his backpack, exchanging the clubs for a pair of earbuds. He sits at his desk, pretending he doesn't see the wall moving from the corner of his eye, and grabs a pen from the drawer with music on full blast.

No amount of childish bullying can be worse than that.

Before he begins writing, his eyes scan the first page. It looks pretty standard. Name, birthdate, address, nothing out of the ordinary. He flips to the second.

Rule #1 - Never stop improving. The fool gets nowhere by sitting comfortably.

Rule #2 - Never reveal your location. This is a precaution for everyone, including yourself.

Rule #3 - Never protest the Fools' King. And never lose his favor.

These are your rules for joining The Fools' Circus. Failure to abide by these rules will lead to contract termination or worse. By signing, you agree to live under Rex's command, at the mercy of the stage.

Blake puffs out his cheeks as he fidgets with the pen in his hand, glaring at the page. Victor told him the rules would explain everything, but it doesn't explain anything. *Tell no one where you are?* It sounds suspicious, but if everyone had been adopted as children, it might be safer that way after all.

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The song in his headphones ends abruptly just in time for Blake to hear the woman's climax against the wall, and he growls to himself, scribbling his signature as quickly as possible. He flips back to the first page and proceeds with the boring part of any application.

It's a circus, after all. What could happen?



HOW HAS IT ONLY BEEN TWO DAYS? I want to live at the mansion now!

"I hate to see you go, Blake," says his boss, a hefty man with a brown mustache and short matching hair. "But I think a road trip will be good for you. Call me when you get home, and I'll see if I can squeeze you back in somehow."

"Great. Thanks, Terry."

Blake leaves the office and lets out a sigh of relief. It's not that Terry is an intimidating boss, but this is Blake's first time giving two weeks' notice. That was much easier than he expected. The department store has kept him for a solid five years and was happy to switch him to full time when he dropped out of college.

He slides his gaze around the store, at the clothes on the racks and signs that label the activewear, dresses, and other clothing categories. Memories of interesting customers and mocking the rude ones with his coworkers flood his mind. Leaving retail is a dream come true, but he never imagined he'd miss it so much, especially not at the very beginning of his last two weeks.

"Hey, stranger!" calls a sweet voice as Blake takes his place at the register. "How was your weekend off?"

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“It was great,” Blake responds with a smile. Judy is a longtime friend and coworker, and it makes him feel a little guilty that he can’t tell her the good news. “I went to see the circus.”

“You mean The Fools’ Circus?”

“Yeah, and it inspired me to take a road trip with some friends of mine. I’d like to perform one day, so I should travel the country and see what I’m up against, don’t you think? I already put in my two weeks’ notice.”

Judy’s eyes grow wide, and her lips frown. “Why would you go to see *that* circus?”

Blake furrows his brow at her.

“I’m guessing you didn’t know,” says Judy, glancing around for anyone within earshot. “There are rumors about that circus—terrible ones. They say the children were kidnapped and forced to perform for profit. Some say they service pedophiles, and that the owner works with politicians to keep it all quiet. I mean, why else would they hide so much information about themselves?”

Blake shifts his lower jaw to process her words. “It’d be pretty stupid to put missing children on display like that, don’t you think?”

“You don’t know what a person in power is capable of.”

“Oh, I know. I was there for the 2016 election. Besides, you make it sound like I’m joining them. I’m just going on a road trip to check out other plays, circuses, and street performers. I just want to enjoy life for a little bit and see if I have a shot. You can relax. The circus is leaving town anyway.”

Judy looks a little relieved, but an elderly customer interrupts before she can speak, looking for a dress. Judy leaps to her aid with her best customer-service smile, leaving Blake to clean out the fitting room.

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He knew of those rumors, of course, having been a longtime patron, but hearing them from Judy makes his mind race.

Tell no one where you are.

What if those rumors are based in truth, and that's why Blake can't tell anyone where *he* is? He shakes his head. No, that can't be true, Victor said they were all adopted from nothing. *He could've been lying. It could be a trap.*

Blake takes in a deep breath, trying to push out these terrifying thoughts to no avail. Those rumors came from somewhere. What exactly is he getting himself into?

Maybe some dreams are better left un-lived.