



Luke  
CHAPTER 1: THE LOCKED DOOR

Dusk died with slow, color-saturated grace above me, draping all the gargantuan shapes of the abandoned fairgrounds in swaths of stark, formless funeral black. I could just make out the silhouette of the Ferris wheel over the treetops, its thin spokes stamped against the blushing sky: fractured and gaunt, an unmoving charcoal giant. The groan and creak of its eventual collapse grew bolder as I stepped from the surrounding forest, the sound crisper as the temperature dropped several tangible degrees. My breath began to cloud the brittle air of the otherwise silent, ramshackle carnival. I tugged my coat closed.

Truer night swaddled where the amusement park proper lay nestled in the star-soaked heart of the woods. What little remained of its attractions was tangled with creeping age: a gnarled bank of rust-blackened rides; faded, slumped booths with forgotten names, whose plywood supports creaked under my shoes; resilient chain-link fences sprawling out across the overgrowth like metallic tree roots. Ancient, rotten rollercoasters loomed against the stars. Oak trees wrapped greedy limbs around the razor-barbed rubble, their dense crowns sprouting from apertures carved with neglect. I loitered along the sparse path, tipping my head back to scan the slowly rustling tops, and spotted the flock of fishermen perched within the shadowed foliage again.

My heart thumped and cracked at the sight of them. There were more this time: half a dozen more anglers, and not a single crow posted in what was originally their roost. All that endured of the crows were a few delicate black feathers scattered amid the autumn leaf litter at my feet, like hastily scribbled notes of farewell. But the anglers took up the birds' midnight posts with faultless mimicry: some dozed with their shoulders braced against the enormous tree trunks and their hats pulled down over their faces; others were settled at full attention, their gleaming hooks dangling toward the ground in search of fallen stars and their focus turned away from me. A few seemed to be muttering to one another. More swept hungry, searching gazes across the ruined fairgrounds, black eyes shining in the dark.

Had the crows lost their territory to the fishermen, or become them? There was something unsettling, something unmistakably *warped* about

their facile presence speckled across the overgrown canopy. Something that stirred like floorboards creaking under careful feet, shifting and cracking beneath the cover of dead, fallen autumn on the ground. The scents of gasoline and war bloomed in the cold air around me, whispering through the dark.

Surer sound scuffled in the trees; I glanced up. One of the fishermen paused, adjusting his posture like a crow flapping with irritation, and then resettled against his sturdy tree branch. His blackened, hungry gaze swiveled to grasp mine. His right ear was missing.

I slammed awake, heart punching my ribcage.

*Real. Real.* Sparks skittered over my skin, little echoes of the fleeing dream pinching reality back into place. Immediately I stretched out a taut fist, searching for proof. A cold concrete floor greeted my knuckles, rough and scored, stretching out beyond the bounds of what I could dream in a single step. Relief and heated disappointment wrestled through me. The world, in the wake of the amusement park, was always darker and sharper than any carnival forgery from my head—and though it never made the bleeding of fantastic wonder from my head any more pleasant, the difference could be relied upon just after waking, most of the time.

I sucked in a deep breath to absorb that, letting the dulled adrenaline uncurl from my fists. *Real. Real, real.*

A glossy wooden surface shone back at me through the dark. I extended a few fingers to inspect it; sound scuttled up into the vast ceiling above me, then faded into the stillness. The wood was cool and sticky under my fingertips, unfamiliar; marked with ridges and valleys of wear, memories of mishaps and excitement. The shape of its form reminded me of a mixing engineer's booth in a performance venue: blockish, secluded, and stout; utilitarian enough to house hectic creative finishing. But I didn't own anything like this. A thick black cord lay draped over the edge of the booth, hook-shaped like fishing bait. That wasn't mine, either.

This wasn't my bedroom.

That struck flint inside my head for a long while. Muddled, I rolled onto my back and took quick stock of myself: wiggling my toes inside my shoes, shifting to feel the weight of my jeans and my jacket compressed against me; all of them rumpled and tight and wrong. I could feel a crushed pack of cigarettes in my pocket, mashed up against my keys and wallet. That was even worse. My bedroom floor was all chaos and discarded clothes

already—why hadn't I taken the time to at least, at the *very least*, take off my jeans and preserve my cigarettes?

But this wasn't my bedroom. Why wasn't this my bedroom?

Where the hell was I?

I twisted up to sit, rubbing the back of my neck and glancing around. I recognized the place, in an approximate sort of way: it was spacious as a club venue, decadent and historic, muted and dusty and carved with elegant wooden ornamentations. Two twin sets of monstrous curved speakers dangled from the soaring exposed ceiling on either side of the venue, pointed at the empty, railing-wrapped upper mezzanine. Odd, toothy lamps hovered dormant in the darkness above me. I tossed a glance over my shoulder, pulse surging in my throat. A black-framed stage stood, monstrous and inert as a ruin, in the center of the unpainted far wall.

That stage—I knew that stage. It was a four-foot-tall rise, the perfect size for our feverish band of six, soaked with stale anticipation and humming with memories of creative magic, even without a crowd. I swiveled another look at the engineer's booth, pushing up to my feet and walking backwards toward the stage for a more familiar perspective.

This had to be Union Transfer. The emptiness deformed it, hacked it into a haunted husk, but the view from Union Transfer's stage was unforgettable. It was one of my favorite places in Philadelphia.

Panic seared out across my nerves. What the hell was I doing here?

Napping, I supposed. Or possibly breaking and entering—though that seemed far less like my style. Maybe I'd been here earlier in the evening? I thought I had. With Austin. And some others of our crew. While the place was open—while there was a crowd and an indie band and two women who convinced me and Austin into the trenches to dance with them until the rest of their friends arrived. I remembered trying to smile at Austin. I might remember adoring the band. It might have involved an expertly-handled cello tossed without apology into an otherwise synthetic alt-rock ensemble. I definitely remembered, now, dragging Austin, Dylan, and Mike out of the apartment with the collective intent to get blisteringly shifaced. And I might have been successful. Successful enough to trespass, anyway.

Christ, *how drunk* did a person have to be to break into their favorite club and take a nap?

I pressed the heels of my hands into my eyes. The spacious room whispered with empty dust on the side of my neck, soft and baleful. I made

myself take a breath, and then another, and another, until the creeping cold on my skin began to calm.

*Think, Kakiro, come on. Come on.*

The noise. The band, the crowd, the area around the main bar had sounded suddenly like broken glass. Usually I loved the tumult, the humid, cluttered mob of revel, but something about the sound had felt too keen and uneven. Shattering. Popping. Deafening. I left my drink for Austin to finish, retreated to navigate the crowd until I found the men's room, hoping it would be quieter for just a moment. Bumped into someone, and something inside my right ear had started to whine. Hand clapped over it, I tripped toward the back of the venue, and—

And then nothing. Just the fairgrounds. Ruin and fishermen-infested trees.

The night churned inside my stomach. Home. I needed to get home. I needed to get out of here before the police showed and assumed that I had strode into Union Transfer with any sort of intent, or consciousness, or sense.

I could call Austin. He wouldn't have just left me here. Mike and Dylan might have found better mischief somewhere else, but Austin always preferred to remain close. He would have seen, known, what I didn't remember. And if nothing else—even if he had withdrawn from the bar after deciding that I'd met someone in the back hallway and gone home with them—our apartment wasn't that far. He could pick me up. Get me home. I could call him for help.

No, it was Thanksgiving. Wasn't it? Austin should be halfway to New Hampshire by now.

I fished my cellphone out of my jeans pocket to check. The screen had a new, clean crack: a deep, clear lightning strike sliced across its face, dimming the electronic glow. I swore into the spacious silence. It wasn't getting signal, either.

But my cellphone still knew, at least, that it was half past four on Thursday morning. I had lost only a few hours. It could have been worse; I didn't need to have experienced *worse* before to know I didn't want to peek at what lay beyond the precipice. Dreaming was an increasingly erratic, volatile thing as of late, and I felt certain that whatever dark matter stretched its cursed fingers over the stirring carnival ruins and twisted crows into anglers could have done me much more harm, had it wanted to. I knew mercy when it

snapped me awake.

And at least, with everyone gone for the holiday, the apartment would be empty. Quiet. I could take a few days and sort myself out, assemble an excuse. Sleep it off. Maybe I could leave no trace of whatever had happened tonight, and keep everyone's attitude towards me even and normal.

Pocketing my phone, I swept a quick glance at the locked entrance, then headed backstage in search of the window or door through which I'd broken in. The blackened back corridor coursed before me, limitless and gripped with vague forgotten thrill in the dark. A possibly stolen metal sign was posted near the steps up to the stage, demanding once again: *Is it hot? Does it look good? Are you proud to serve it?* I fumbled along the wall beside it for a light switch, feeling nothing but textured paint and crushing hope and uncertainty chewing on my nerves. The whole hallway was choked with the scent of stale suspense, dreams concocted in battered apartments and fused with emotion waiting to be wailed; not far behind me was the spot where the band and I always huddled before shows, arms thrown over each other's shoulders and heads ducked in, to rally one another until it was hot, looked good, and we were proud to serve it to the screaming packed crowd. Restless with the lingering electric drive, I abandoned the project and pushed on into the shadows.

An inelegant, illicit search with my cellphone light revealed both backstage doors, each locked with keys I didn't possess. I crossed back into the main hall and pursued the shuttered concessions gate, but it was no different: bolted to the ground with an unbroken clasp and padlock. Union Transfer was mute and vast around me, the dusty brick darkness gnawing on the back of my neck. I relented, and made for the lovely half-glass front door in hopes that it didn't have an armed alarm.

The deadbolt's latch was closed, the golden metal frozen and electric between my fingers; I grabbed the slick handle, but then paused. A breeze of jasmine murmured under my nose, the scent of winter so close beyond the doors.

Why had I locked the doors behind me?

Sound cracked somewhere in the emptiness of the club, sending a single crow-caw rocketing out of the shadows; the resonance shivered through all my synapses, clattering against all the bones of my spine. I snapped my eyes shut. *Not now. Not now. Come on.* Hunger crawled, slow and loving like a spider's legs, along the sides of my ribs. My heart contracted.

I couldn't stand still anymore. I swore once, a single prayer in hopes Union Transfer didn't have an armed alarm, ripped open the lock, and dove out into the cold midnight air.