

One

Zac thought freedom would be different, pictured it like the first Iron City brew on the tongue of an alcoholic rescued at sea. He thought time would be a weightless two-ton coaster, ninety-one degree drop. He thought Hullabaloo cotton candy would taste sweeter and the ocean waves would crash like a damn symphony.

And somewhere in his mind, he thought his family would reach out to him like a carousel's brass ring.

Turns out, freedom was a prison shank. Crafted in fear. If grabbed the wrong way, lethal.

A September gust blasted Prospect Park, New Jersey. Above the center joints with bleached awnings, threadbare and punished by the Atlantic, above the mini-bolts flashing, burning, glowing beneath the Bumper Palace roof like a greedy bug zapper, above the squeals and the day-old popcorn and his blue ride-jock hat, all snatched at that moment by the wind, Zac glanced up.

Forty Ferris wheel seats bucked and swayed.

His hat, gone.

Great.

He eased the clown-nose accelerator, stopped the ride.

“Hey carny, what’s the hold-up?”

Zac’s throat cinched. The deep voice could have been a C-block roll call. He twisted, had a good look behind him.

Not at all what he expected. The man was thin, a grape on a toothpick, with waxy skin and an escaping hairline.

Zac shrugged his shoulders, a territorial display so unlike him, so unlike prisoner two-three-oh-eight-one who had blended into the stains on his cell wall.

A saint, his parole officer warned. *Be a frickin’ saint.*

He turned back, focused again on the ride. Thirty-nine cars settled. The top car swung a good fifty-degrees. Above its safety gate, a white sneaker stabbed the night sky. He didn’t see a ponytail swat the brass number plate or a naked ass become the moon or a bikini top catch like a windsock, but he knew it was the boardwalk version of the Mile High Club.

Skate punks don’t know the real Mile High Club. For the last ten years, *his* Mile High Club: mile to death row, high on stench, club your neighbor first.

“Yo, carny. Twenty bucks for an all-ride pass, and I’ll see fucking snow fly before I get on.”

A busty woman tugged the man’s arm. “Let’s go, Carl.” Her sand-blasted voice was a note shy of mortified.

“Nah, nah. You want a ride, we’re gonna ride.”

Another fifty-knot wind threaded the wheel's spokes. Cars bobbed like mechanical claws descending for toys. The rusted joints squeaked and squawked. And the top car kept rocking, rocking, rocking.

"Carny's gonna get us on now, ain't you, Carny?"

Zac turned fully, boots wide, hands in front to protect his boys.

"Carl. That your name?—Carl?"

The man exposed his throat like an asshole Pez dispenser.

"Carl, we have a no profanity policy to ensure everyone here has a family experience. As much as you'd like to feel that stiff breeze through your—well," Zac paused to study the barren wasteland of Carl's scalp, "whatever, I can't let you on. Wouldn't be safe for the lady."

The woman's expression, parched from too much UVA, too much Carl, lifted to a half-smile. Diner waitress. He'd have bet a pack of smokes on it.

Carl scowled.

Zac stretched the mic to his mouth. "Ride's closed for the season."

A dozen or so in line mounted protests with the fanfare of a dud sparkler and scattered.

"Hell it is," said Carl. "Get us on the goddamned wheel."

Zac glanced at the walkie on the dog house. If he wasn't careful, an S.O.S. to management would be his first nick of freedom. He needed this job, this place, this winter. He needed solitude and buried truths and proximity and her.

He needed to find her.

Rae.

Or the human he had been with Rae.

Diner girl stumbled back on her heels, bouncing from the force of Carl's hand at the sharp, empty canyons above her tube top. Her gaze never stumbled, never bounced, never wavered from Zac, but had its own movement, its own riptide.

He knew riptide. He had lived riptide.

Zac unlatched the gate.

"'Bout damned time," said Carl.

"Mind your balance up there, Carl. Never know when the storm'll push back."

Carl's nostrils bloomed large as if deciding whether he had been threatened or properly cautioned. Diner girl skulked into car twelve behind Carl and swept an approving glance Zac's direction.

Zac gunned the accelerator.

Carl clenched the rail like a bitch.

A laugh *clinked* at Zac's ribs, itched to tunnel free. Instead, he wore his attendant face. A friggin saint.

Car fourteen swooped down. Preteen giggles showered his exposed neck like misfired hair pins. One girl, pale, taffy-thin, failed to laugh, watch, breathe.

"She thinks you're cute." A blond, too much makeup, pointed to the still girl, followed by a chorus of *Shhhs!* and *I-do-nots*.

The catatonic redhead hovered near fourteen's rail.

Zac reached for her. "You okay?"

"She's about to puke," the blond said.

Perfect.

No sooner had the thought materialized, she did. Stomach acid and a half-digested carnival foods steamed from his jumpsuit, the *Zac* stitched to the breast now *ac*. Above the gaggle of freaked out girls, he heard shouts.

Zac snagged Carl's glance. Carl pointed up.

Above fourteen's hard-shell canopy, more arms extended. More fingers pointed. More passengers screamed.

At the Ferris wheel's eleven o'clock spoke, darkness eclipsed fat halogen bulbs.

Three, five lights. Hell, was that a body part?

Zac juiced all twenty circuits last night at close. All ten thousand bulbs, winking, watching, waiting for summer's end.

He handed the sick girl to her friends, looked up, saw more lights dark—yeah, definitely a leg—trapped between the wheel's structural girders and the bucket. Mile High teenager, his date's scream erupting over the boardwalk like a hurricane siren. Kid had a good, solid grip. Be impossible scramble up though, lodged as he was. Forward could rip it clean off.

The solution rose up, inevitable, forbidden. Sal: *Never put her in reverse, boy. Tried it in forty-two. Bad things, boy.* Superstitious bastard.

Zac snagged a flashlight from the attendant's stand, popped off the electrical pane. The weak light cut through the ride's bowels. A crank—what the hell was that for? It wouldn't budge. Wouldn't make sense, anyway. He looked for a lever near the gear shaft.

A woman screamed.

The kid had moved. Ten bulbs, maybe twelve, black.

Zac's stomach vibrated like the strike plate on the Mighty Man Anvil Challenge. He shifted a gray lever, corroded to hell, reached up, inched the accelerator.

The engine rioted: chains, bearings, dry track, all sampling a wrong direction. Planks shuttered through his boot soles. More screams. *Bad things, boy.*

Had it moved? Christ, he couldn't tell. The wind was too strong.

The wheel surged. Reverse.

Lights dimmed. Music lifted, distanced itself. The wind died.

His mind slowed, a stop-frame animation to his surroundings. He couldn't cuff his mind around the changes, didn't know why he chose that moment to notice except for the balloon. Not the colon-highway kind. The kind that expanded the lungs, made it possible for humans to breathe, take in something other than rust particles and discipline meatloaf fumes. The balloon rose past his shoulders, all warm. Potent. Free.

Red. Definitely red.

And then he saw the passengers. Not diner waitresses or jerk offs or bubbly girls or the hundreds he'd loaded before them, but riders he'd never seen before. In costume. Men in ascots and Hindenburg mustaches. Women in wide-brimmed hats and dresses. Children in stockings and knee-length breeches.

A jazzy tune, *Oh, ma honey, oh, ma honey*, sprang up the midway.

Zac's hand slipped from the accelerator.

The antique images blipped, faded. He saw Diner Girl, her mouth as cavernous as a plywood clown in a baseball toss. She screamed *fell* or *hell*, or some damned thing. The balloon, gone.

Christ, what just happened?

The soundtrack scratched from Charlie Chaplin to B-movie horror. Cries erupted with the g-force of a rollercoaster slamming his chest.

An object fell, bounced off a steel spoke with a *hrumm* and launched onto the boardwalk like a rifle discharge.

Kid's sneaker.

Bulbs exploded, rained glass.

Zac stormed the wheel's base, gripped the right support tower, hoisted himself up past-level with the five and seven o'clock cars. Where the iron-holds grew sparse, angling to the wheel's center, he calculated footholds, measured each move against the thickness of his steel-toe boots.

He looked down.

The midway clocked him on the chin, sprang away. His stomach spun around tired, beaten carousel notes that cranked out a sick tune.

He had forgotten his fear of heights.

The highest thing at Mid-State Correctional had been the yard stairs.

A few passengers had crawled from their buckets and perched on the railing like seagulls reluctant to take flight.

Level with the wheel's horizon, he scrambled past the Ferris wheel's axis and up the eleven o'clock arm. No thought. No calculation. Pure muscle instinct. A brawl against the elements, against the burden of another life, taken, on his watch.

The midway hushed in distance, in anticipation, overpowered by his breath's even cadence. Shouts seemed miles down shore. Bulbs that had blazed for the better part of four hours scorched his hands, his cheek. Every part of him burned alive where it had once sunk into the lethargy of a September chill, a life adrift.

Jesus, Mary and Joseph, don't look down again.

Shoelaces. Focus on the kid's shoelaces.

"Hang on, man," called Zac. "I'm coming to get you."

"I can't."

"Yeah, you can." Zac's fingers slid around a frigid joint. He locked his grip. "What's your name?"

"Cody."

"Cody, what's your girlfriend's name?"

"Girlfriend?"

"Girl. What's your girl's name?"

"Emily."

"We can't let this be the only thing Emily remembers about you, can we?" Evan said, his feet scaling. Pushing. Finding new ground. "I can think of a thousand other ways you'd like to end the night with a pretty girl. Yeah?"

Zac's heart broke free of the carousel ride, nothing to do with physical exertion.

Everything to do with Rae.

"Okay, Cody. At your right foot, six inches, maybe seven, is a cross beam. Hold tight and swing your leg out to reach it. I'm coming up beneath."

"I can't."

"You can."

"I can't. My hands are sweaty."

"Ten seconds, Cody, and I'm there."

"Th-hey-rre ss-sslip-ing." The boy's syllables crashed together like breakers caught in a hurricane.

Zac's insides pooled, drained through his toenails.

"Forget the beam. Hang on."

And Zac was there. He saw everything. Every dingy stitch in the kid's only shoe, every hand-scrawled symbol of belonging the kid etched in its rubber sole, every hole ripped in the kid's sock. He saw everything.

Everything except the boy's hands slip free.

Zac heard the squeak, as quiet as a skateboard roller in need of grease, as deafening as a gull's last call before being swallowed by the sea.

Shoelaces slipped past his vision.

Zac dove toward the boy. Shit. Shit. Shit. He snagged the kid's sleeve, a t-shirt too thin to hold the boy's weight. Shit. Shit. Shit. The cotton tore, wriggled free.

The boy dropped.

He never screamed. Never swam in some invisible ocean. Never looked down. Never looked anywhere but at Zac. Pupils frosted white.

His body hit a spoke, spun, his face too far away to see.

Zac's stomach vanished like a damn anatomical wonder sideshow, gut sucked to spine. He shut his eyes. He clenched his incisors. He tucked his tongue in his throat. What he imagined many times death row inmates must do, feel, be the moment before the switch. Queasy. Numb.

Human.

Shit. Shit. Shit.

His chin sizzled against a bulb, the blistering heat against his shell nowhere near punishing enough.

Zac had him. Zac lost him. Another life, taken, on his watch. Another loss he'd be pressed to explain, like his brother's. Another time he'd calculate his worth against his failures.

Nowhere near punishing enough by a lifetime.