

CARNIVAL LIGHTS

Written by

Dennis J Manning
12.24.25

FADE IN:

EXT. CARNIVAL MIDWAY - NIGHT

Out of focus.

Neon lights blur together. A Ferris wheel turns in the distance. Strings of bulbs glow and streak.

Carnival laughter overlaps - distorted, distant.

A CALLIOPE ORGAN plays slightly off-key.

MARCUS (V.O.)
The circus lets you be anyone you
want.
Strongman.
Mystic.
Hero.
Villain.

Blurred figures drift through the midway - masks, sequins, painted smiles.

A KNIFE FLASHES somewhere in the blur.

A LION ROARS.

MARCUS (V.O.)
Nobody asks where you came from.
Nobody asks what you did.

The calliope note stretches, warping.

MARCUS (V.O.)
That's the trick.

The sound thins into a high electronic tone.

Color drains.

MARCUS (V.O.)
You don't run away to join the
circus.

The tone sharpens.

MARCUS (V.O.)
You run away to disappear.

BEEP.

INT. HOSPITAL ROOM - NIGHT

A HEART MONITOR blinks steadily.

BEEP. BEEP. BEEP.

Fluorescent light. Clinical. Cold.

JASON DANIELS lies in a hospital bed, frail. Oxygen line in place.

Machines breathe for him.

At the bedside: CHARLOTTE - composed. MISS AVALON - watchful. MISS PETRE and MR. KRANKOWSKI - solemn.

The carnival feeling is gone.

Only the sound of a failing heart.

SMASH CUT TO
TITLE:

CARNIVAL LIGHTS

ON SCREEN: BOSTON

Jason opens his eyes.

JASON
The lights don't go out.

Stephanie grips his hand.

STEPHANIE
We'll figure it out.
We always do.

Jason exhales.

JASON
We're too far behind-

MR. KRANKOWSKI
Old friend, we'll pull through.

Charlotte steps forward, holding a document.

CHARLOTTE
Your father helped me years ago.
Let me return the favor.

Jason studies the paper.

JASON
What does this mean?

CHARLOTTE
The carnival is clear.
Your creditors answer to me now.

Miss Petre fights tears.

MISS PETRE
Oh Jason...

A beat.

STEPHANIE
Charlotte... would you open tonight's
show?

Charlotte nods.

Miss Avalon offers Jason a deck of cards. He turns one over:

THE FOUR OF PENTACLES.

MISS AVALON
Some fortunes are inherited when
someone falls.

Jason signs. His hand trembles.

Charlotte hands the document to Krankowski.

MR. KRANKOWSKI
I'll file this with the bank.

Charlotte turns to leave.

EXT. MASS GENERAL HOSPITAL - DUSK

Automatic doors slide open.

Charlotte exits.

A BLACK SEDAN idles at the curb. Rear door opens.

She gets in.

The door shuts.

The car pulls away.

INT. BLACK SEDAN - MOVING - DUSK

City lights pass across the windows.

Charlotte exhales.

CHARLOTTE
It's done. He signed.

We see only the DRIVER'S EYES in the rearview mirror.

Still. Controlled.

CHARLOTTE (CONT'D)
Take me to the grounds. They're
waiting.

The car turns.

Not toward the highway. Toward the city.

Charlotte notices.

CHARLOTTE (CONT'D)
That's not the way—

The driver's eyes lift to the mirror.

A faint smile.

XAVIER
You don't need to be there tonight.

City lights reveal his face now.

Composed.

XAVIER (CONT'D)
You did your part.

Charlotte grips the door, locked.

CHARLOTTE
Xavier... where are we going?

He doesn't answer.

Distant carnival music drifts under the engine noise.

In the mirror — his eyes.

XAVIER
They all owe me.

A beat.

XAVIER (CONT'D)
Tonight... I get to be someone else.

A soft mechanical cough.

Charlotte exhales, surprised.

Her head rests against the window.

Outside, faint carnival lights flicker.

Xavier keeps driving.

He checks the mirror again.

This time — looking at himself.

INT. MASS GENERAL HOSPITAL - ICU - LATER

Dim.

Jason sleeps.

Machines hum.

A SHADOW crosses the frosted glass.

The door opens.

We never see the face.

Hands move efficiently.

Plugs slip from the wall.

Monitors go dark.

Jason wakes, confused.

A pillow lowers into frame.

A brief struggle.

Stillness.

A KING OF DIAMONDS card rests on his chest.

The blanket is smoothed.

The figure exits.

The door shuts.

Silence.

INT. BOSTON FBI - NIGHT

MARCUS HAWTHORNE (48), FBI agent, studies a case file.

Photos. Maps. Clippings.

Title: THE FAMILY TREE KILLER

MARCUS

Six cities. Five years.

He circles a name: TEX MURDOCK

His phone BUZZES.

TEXT: Jason Daniels dead at Mass General.

Marcus grabs his jacket.

MARCUS (CONT'D)

Not a coincidence.

Lights out.

EXT. DANIELS CARNIVAL LIGHTS - BOSTON - NIGHT

Midway lights glow through light haze.

Crowds move between rides and game stalls.

Performers pass in fragments:

— CEDRIC, massive — MISS AVALON, unreadable — IGOR, watchful
— NATASHA, restless — CARSON, alert — MISS PETRE, polished —
MR. KRANKOWSKI, counting cash

STEPHANIE scans the grounds, searching.

She pulls BOBBY aside.

STEPHANIE

Do the opener with me.

BOBBY

Let's wake them up early.

They kiss — quick, performative.

XAVIER stands near a tent pole.

Still. Watching.

IGOR notices.

IGOR
I've seen this before. No chance in
Hell you'll break that up.

XAVIER
Hell only works if you believe in
it.

INT. CENTER RING

STEPHANIE
Ladies and gentlemen—

Lights SNAP OFF.

Gasps.

Lights return.

Above the entrance: DANIELS CARNIVAL LIGHTS flickers.

Only D I E remain lit.

Murmurs ripple.

Xavier doesn't react.

BOBBY
All part of the mystery! Happy
Halloween!

Music swells. The show begins.

EXT. BIG TOP - LATER

Xavier scans the crowd.

LUCAS, 30s, hustler, claps his shoulder.

LUCAS
Well I'll be damned.

Xavier studies him.

Turns away.

Lucas grabs his arm.

XAVIER
Wrong guy.

LUCAS
Baltimore. You remember me.

A faint smile from Xavier.

XAVIER
Lucas.

LUCAS
Cut me in. Now.

XAVIER
Let's talk somewhere quieter.

They slip behind canvas.

LUCAS
Pay up or I sing.

Xavier straightens Lucas's collar.

Then—

A soft wet sound. 4 quick, prison-like stabs.

Lucas freezes.

Xavier guides him toward the lion cage.

A whistle.

Lucas stumbles inside.

The door SLAMS.

A lion's paw pins him.

Bones crack.

Xavier watches.

Still.

Completion.

SMASH CUT TO:

Miss Petre's poodles dancing to applause.

INT. STEPHANIE'S TRAILER - NIGHT

11:30 PM. Circus noise fades outside.

Stephanie removes her Mistress of Ceremonies costume.

A RAP at the door. She opens it.

Xavier steps in. Closes the door without looking. His eyes sweep the room once.

STEPHANIE
You the new act?

He nods. No smile.

Bobby steps in.

STEPHANIE (CONT'D)
I know your kind.

XAVIER
Your kind?

STEPHANIE
Drifters.

XAVIER
I don't drift.
(beat)
I land.

Bobby studies him now.

BOBBY
So what do you do?

XAVIER
I swallow the sword.

A shift in the air.

STEPHANIE
That's old. What else?

Xavier unrolls a satchel of knives. Clean. Precise.

A KNIFE WHIPS past Bobby's foot - THUD.

Xavier doesn't look. He already knows where it landed.

He retrieves it.

XAVIER
Now we understand each other.

Bobby nods – unsettled.

STEPHANIE
So you swallow. You throw.

Xavier never breaks eye contact with Bobby.

XAVIER
I make other people look brave.

That lands.

BOBBY
You good with ropes?

XAVIER
Try me.

STEPHANIE
We all work here. No divas.

Xavier studies her. Measuring.

Bobby kisses Stephanie – territorial.

Xavier doesn't react.

XAVIER
Thirty days. Springfield. Then
Erie.
If it works, we continue.

He offers his hand. Stephanie shakes it.

Xavier turns to leave. Bobby grabs his arm.

In a blink, Xavier's hand is on Bobby's wrist – precise pressure. Not anger. Physics.

BOBBY
What about pay?

XAVIER
You'll afford me.

He releases him. Polishes the blade. Bobby's reflection warps in the steel.

Xavier exits.

EXT. STEPHANIE'S TRAILER - CONTINUOUS

Igor and Natasha wait.

NATASHA
I don't like you.

Xavier keeps walking. She grabs his arm.

NATASHA (CONT'D)
I said—

She's pinned in a blink. Blade at her throat.

No heat. No showmanship.

XAVIER
Don't confuse volume with strength.
(beat)
You don't want my attention.

Igor watches — respect, not fear.

IGOR
You have precision.

Xavier releases her.

XAVIER
Teach her control.

Bobby exits.

BOBBY
Xavier. I'll show you the grounds.

Xavier nods once. They walk toward the Lion Tent.

Natasha watches them go.

NATASHA (RUSSIAN, SUBTITLED)
He's trouble.

Dylan (MR. BALLOONS) approaches. Igor stiffens.

DYLAN
Careful, Tasha.

NATASHA (RUSSIAN, SUBTITLED)
Go blow up another balloon. That's
your talent.

DYLAN (RUSSIAN, SUBTITLED)
Would be a shame if you fell from
the trapeze.

Igor steps between them.

IGOR
I will always catch you, my love.
(beat)
But I cannot save you.

Natasha walks off.

DYLAN
There's always more happening
outside the big top. Drink?

IGOR
I'll pour.

Stephanie bursts from the trailer.

STEPHANIE
Bobby! Bobby!

IGOR
Miss Stephanie, what is it?

STEPHANIE
Papa is dead.

EXT. LION TENT

Bobby leans against the canvas. Xavier stands close – too close. Predator calm.

He whispers something in Bobby's ear. Bobby blushes.

STEPHANIE (O.S.)
Bobby!

Bobby doesn't look away from Xavier.

Xavier brushes his thumb across Bobby's lower lip. Studies the reaction.

Leans in.

STEPHANIE (O.S.) (CONT'D)
Bobby!

XAVIER
(low)
Come here.

CUT TO BLACK.

EXT. STEPHANIE'S TRAILER - MORNING

ON SCREEN: November 1

Morning dew coats the grounds. Daylight exposes the seams – dead balloons, scattered popcorn, playbills in the dirt.

Marcus Hawthorne (48), plain clothes, scans the space like a crime scene waiting to happen.

His eyes linger on a faded carousel horse beside a trailer. Paint chipped. One glass eye missing.

A flicker of softness. Then gone.

Coffee in hand –

COLLISION.

Miss Avalon barrels into him. Coffee splashes across his chest.

MARCUS
Jesus–

MISS AVALON
That's a sign.

MARCUS
That's my coffee.

She dabs his shirt.

MISS AVALON
The dew is too heavy. Something stayed.

She steps back. The stain resembles a grotesque face.

She pulls out a compact mirror, angles it.

Marcus doesn't see what she sees.

She grabs his arm.

MARCUS
No, lady–

MISS AVALON
Miss Avalon.

MARCUS
Right. Miss Avalon. I'm looking for
Daniels.

MISS AVALON
He's dead.

MARCUS
I know. The daughter. Sharon.

MISS AVALON
Stephanie. Clouds follow her.

She flips a tarot card.

THE DEVIL.

MARCUS
I don't buy that.

But he looks at the card a beat too long.

She flips another.

JUSTICE.

She drifts away.

Marcus looks at the stain again. Just coffee.

Business mode returns.

Mr. KRANKOWSKI (55) The accountant, an ulcer with two legs.

MR. KRANKOWSKI
Are you the help they sent for the
teardown?

MARCUS
What?

MR. KRANKOWSKI
Get going. Head to the Mess Hall.

We pack up and head to Springfield.

I don't pay you to stand around.

Krankowski heads off.

Miss Petre and her 7 poodles walk by. One stops and looks up at Marcus. They lock eyes. The dog raises his leg.

MARCUS
Don't you dare!

The dog still locked gaze, does a full 10-second pee on Marcus' boots.

MISS PETRE
Tres Bien, Mon chere. Pierre likes
you.

Miss Petre and the dogs head along. Marcus shakes his head.

MARCUS
(growls)
Mr. Pierre tosses his head in
arrogance. Marcus follows Miss
Petre.

INT. MESS TENT - MOMENTS LATER

Marcus steps inside.

Morning light cuts through canvas seams. Performers move around him, setting up coffee, tools, and costumes.

Marcus scans the space like a crime scene that hasn't happened yet.

His phone VIBRATES.

He checks the screen.

CALLER ID: SAC DONNELLY

Marcus steps just outside the tent flap.

EXT. MESS TENT - CONTINUOUS

Muted circus sounds behind him. He answers.

MARCUS
Hawthorne.

DONNELLY (V.O.)
Tell me you're not already neckdeep
in circus politics.

Marcus watches a trapeze pole being raised.

MARCUS
Just getting a lay of the land.

DONNELLY (V.O.)
Last time you said that, Internal
Affairs got a lay of you.
Marcus doesn't react.

DONNELLY (V.O.)
You're there to observe and report.
That's it.
No freelance heroics. No emotional
attachments. You understand me?
Marcus watches a little girl run past with a stuffed tiger.

MARCUS
Crystal.
A beat.

DONNELLY (V.O.)
This one goes sideways, Hawthorne..
You're not getting another field
assignment.
A beat.

DONNELLY (V.O.)
Your old man was a hell of an
agent. Said you were always halflooking at the spotlight.
Silence hangs.

DONNELLY (V.O.) CONT'D)
Don't make me regret keeping you

out there.

Click.

Call ends.

Marcus lowers the phone.

Behind him, laughter erupts inside the tent. He looks at the circus.

Then back at the phone. A man already choosing not to listen. He steps back inside.

INT. MESS TENT MOMENTS LATER

Marcus enters.

He doesn't drift.

He clocks: who's nursing injuries; who's avoiding eye contact; who's talking too quietly

Natasha bumps him. Igor steadies her.

Marcus doesn't just let them pass.

He watches Igor's hands – scraped knuckles. Files it.

He moves deeper.

Carson and Cedric are arguing.

CARSON THE LION TAMER (36) is talking frantically with CEDRIC THE STRONG MAN (42). Marcus gauges the temperature of their conversation and walks over.

CARSON

There were shards of clothes and bones/

CEDRIC

Bones? Carson, you always lie.
Just like you make us believe your lion is dangerous. Fluffy could

kill a mouse.

CARSON
(Portuguese)
Cedric, seu cabeça-dura, eu estou
falando a verdade!

MARCUS
Morning.
They ignore him.
Cedric flexes. Marcus doesn't challenge. Doesn't flash a
badge. He watches Carson's eyes instead.

CEDRIC
Outsider? Move along. You're not
family.

MARCUS
(to Carson)
You look like you didn't sleep.
Cedric scoffs.

CEDRIC
We're busy.
Marcus nods like he agrees. Starts to walk away... Then
casually:

MARCUS
Bones don't just show up by
accident.
Carson looks up. He's hooked now. Marcus moves to Carson.

MARCUS (CONT'D)
FBI, Special Agent, Hawthorne,
Buffalo.

CARSON
(Portuguese)
Não gostamos de estranhos.

MARCUS
(Portuguese)
Eu não gosto de mentirosos. (I

don't like liars.) Let's go see
those bones.

Mr. KRANKOWSKI comes up, ulcers acting up.

MR. KRANKOWSKI
(to Marcus)
Look, I am not paying you/

Marcus places a firm hand on Mr. Krankowski's chest to stop him. Shows his badge.

Cedric gives KRANKOWSKI a knowing look. They head off to the
Lion's Tent.

The Mess Tent bustles.

MR. KRANKOWSKI (CONT'D)
(yells)
30 minutes till Teardown.

No one listens. He mutters and walks away.

MR. KRANKOWSKI (CONT'D)
Carnival Lights will be the death
of me.

On the ground, he spies a 2 OF CLUBS, muddled. He studies it.
Then pockets it.

LION TENT — CRIME SCENE POLISH

The smell hits first. Sawdust. Animal musk. Iron.

A body lies partially covered.

Marcus doesn't go to it first.

He studies:

- Cage doors
- Rigging overhead
- Service paths

CARSON
You look at the air, not the dead?

MARCUS
Show running when it happened?

Carson nods.

Marcus checks:

Front entrance – dry.

Service entrance – mud. Boot scuffs.

Looks up: catwalk shadows. Light rigs. Pulleys.

MARCUS (CONT'D)
Nobody sneaks through this during
applause.

A beat.

MARCUS (CONT'D)
Whoever did this didn't break in.

Another beat.

MARCUS (CONT'D)
They already belonged here.

Marcus glances toward the entrance.

Cedric stands there. Arms folded.

Further back – Xavier. Still. Watching.

Marcus clocks both. Says nothing.

TIME LAPSE – CARNIVAL LIGHTS TEARDOWN

The Big Top comes down.

Canvas folds. Poles drop. Cables coil.

The neon sign – DANIELS CARNIVAL LIGHTS – flares once.

Then goes dark.

Rides dismantle. Trailers lock. Light rain begins.

Mud swallows glitter.

A casket is loaded into a transport truck.

No ceremony. Just work.

EXT. JEEP - CONTINUOUS

Engine running.

Stephanie drives.

Mr. Krankowski sits stiff beside her.

Bobby climbs in -

Xavier's hand rests on the door frame.

Bobby hesitates.

A silent beat.

BOBBY

Mr. Krankowski, you ride shotgun.

Krankowski obeys instantly.

Xavier slides into the back seat. Directly behind Stephanie.

In the rearview mirror - his eyes.

Not warm. Not curious. Assessing.

Stephanie sees. Looks back to the road.

Bobby squeezes in beside Xavier.

Too close.

INT. JEEP - MOVING

Rain streaks the windshield. Wipers thump.

Xavier leans toward Bobby. Whispers something we don't hear.

Bobby blushes.

He reaches for Xavier's hand.

Xavier allows it - a beat - then removes it.

Bobby freezes.

Xavier's eyes stay on the rearview mirror.

Stephanie glances up. Their eyes meet.

He places his hand on Bobby's thigh.

Still watching Stephanie.

Stephanie grips the wheel tighter.

Looks away first.

No one speaks.

EXT. HIGHWAY - WIDE

The Jeep pulls away.

Where the Big Top stood is now an empty field of mud and glitter.

INT. COFFIN - MOVING

Jason Daniels' body shifts with the road.

A KING OF DIAMONDS card rests in his pocket.

A bump.

His head tilts.

One glass eye open.

INT. MARCUS'S SEDAN - MOVING

Headlights cut through rain.

Marcus follows at a distance.

Coffee stain faint on his shirt.

He keys his mic.

MARCUS

Tyler, I sent bones from the lion
cage. Rush DNA.
I'm on the convoy. Something's off.

Thunder cracks.

Rain intensifies.

Marcus adjusts his distance. Never loses them.

EXT. SPRINGFIELD FAIRGROUNDS - LATE AFTERNOON

Cold rain. Mud. Exhaust smoke.

The carnival convoy settles in.

Marcus steps out of his sedan. Alone. Watching.

Across the grounds, the Mess Tent goes up fast.

People gather. Eat. Pretend.

STEPHANIE

We roll in tomorrow at eight.
Tonight we rest.

NATASHA

(drunk)

He's dead and we just keep moving?

She grabs Xavier's shirt. Fabric tears.

Xavier looks at her hand.

Shifts his weight.

Natasha is suddenly on the ground.

She doesn't know how.

NATASHA (CONT'D)

It was you. I know it.

XAVIER

Igor. Last time.

Igor lifts Natasha.

Marcus approaches.

MARCUS

(hand out)

Marcus.

Xavier looks at the hand.

Doesn't take it.

Steps in close instead.

Too close.

XAVIER

People die.

A beat.

XAVIER (CONT'D)
You get used to it.

Marcus doesn't lower his hand.

MARCUS
I don't.

A long beat.

Wind in canvas. Engines ticking.

Xavier brushes Marcus's shoulder as he passes.

Marcus doesn't move.

MARCUS (CONT'D)
I usually find there's a reason.

Xavier keeps walking.

Dominance stalemate.

MESS TENT — CONTINUOUS

Miss Avalon approaches Marcus. Presses a tarot deck into his hand.

He sighs. Shuffles.

She flips the top card.

THE TOWER.

Marcus looks at Xavier.

Xavier is already looking at him.

MISS AVALON
You can't stop what's coming.

Xavier slowly polishes a knife on Bobby's shirt.

Never looking at the blade.

Looking at Marcus.

POP!

Too loud for a balloon.

Marcus is moving instantly – hand to weapon.

Across the tent: Dylan stands frozen, a shredded balloon at his feet.

Marcus lowers the gun.

Igor steps closer.

IGOR

Easy.

Things work different here.

A beat.

IGOR (CONT'D)

We handle our own.

Dylan sheepishly makes a balloon animal.

LATER – PERFORMANCE PREP MONTAGE

– Canvas rises – Poles driven into mud – Generators rumble

A LOCAL NEWS TRUCK waits. No one gives interviews.

They're not performers right now. They're labor.

INTERCUT:

• Miss Petre drills her dogs • Fluffy roars • Xavier swallows a blade – calm, exact • Bobby watches him – admiration turning into dependency • Marcus watches from a distance

Trapeze – Natasha hesitates midair. Igor catches her.

Cedric lifts a massive weight. Holds. Sets it down carefully.

Miss Avalon turns a card.

THE MAGICIAN – REVERSED

MISS AVALON

Power without substance.

She looks past the card – at Xavier. Then Marcus.

EXT. CARNIVAL SIGN - DUSK

The neon sign flickers on:

DANIELS CARNIVAL LIGHTS

The word DANIELS flickers.

D... I... E...

Then stabilizes.

Only Marcus notices.

STEPHANIE (O.S.)
 Krankowski! Fix that sign!

He's already on his phone.

NIGHT FALLS — CARNIVAL OPENS

Lights glow.

Crowds gather.

Xavier performs. Cedric lifts. Miss Avalon reads. Marcus watches.

A kid gets off a ride and vomits.

A mother pulls him away.

Fireworks BOOM.

Crowds rush into the Big Top.

INT. EMPTY BIG TOP - AFTER THE SHOW

Work lights only.

Dust hangs in the beams. Torn posters. Empty seats.

Xavier stands in the ring, throwing knives at a faded clown target.

THUD. Dead center.

Marcus watches from the shadows. Quiet. Studying rhythm.

Another knife hits.

THUD.

Xavier doesn't turn.

XAVIER
(without looking)
You're not part of the show.

Marcus steps into the light.

MARCUS
Neither are you.

A beat. Not hostile. Just a read.

Xavier flips a knife in his palm. Smooth.

THUD. Dead center.

MARCUS (CONT'D)
How long you been with them?

XAVIER
Long enough to know they don't
stay.

MARCUS
Nobody does.

Xavier throws again.

THUD.

He finally speaks like he's answering something else.

XAVIER
Best part of this life?

Marcus watches the blade quiver.

XAVIER (CONT'D)
Tomorrow... I'm someone else.

MARCUS
Sounds lonely.

Xavier pulls a knife from his belt and offers it.

Not friendly. A test.

Marcus takes it. Feels the balance.

He throws.

The knife lands— decent. Not perfect.

Xavier clocks it.

XAVIER

Only if you hang on to yesterday.

Marcus walks toward the target to pull the knife—

WHOOSH.

A blade buries into the wood beside his head.

Close. Exact.

Marcus doesn't flinch.

Looks at the blade.

Then at Xavier.

Xavier's hand drops. Calm.

XAVIER

You stepped left.

Not an apology. A note.

Marcus pulls both knives free. Hands one back.

MARCUS

Still feels like something... when
it's full.

Xavier studies him.

XAVIER

That's the trick.

A quiet moment.

XAVIER (CONT'D)

They clap. They leave.
Nobody belongs to anybody here.

MARCUS

You ever miss?

XAVIER

Not when it matters.

Marcus starts toward the exit.

MARCUS
Ever think about stepping off the
stage?

Xavier finally looks at him.

Long. Still.

XAVIER
Give all this up?

A beat.

XAVIER (CONT'D)
I'm hiding in plain sight.

Marcus nods once— unsettled. He exits.

His footsteps echo up the empty rows.

Behind him—

THUD.

Another knife hits dead center.

Xavier isn't practicing.

He's measuring.

INT. BIG TOP - NIGHT (SHOW)

Miss Petre finishes with the poodles. Applause.

Xavier speaks low with Cedric— fast friends.

Marcus stands with Miss Avalon. No words. A quiet alignment.

INT. TRAPEZE PERCH - CONTINUOUS

Igor and Natasha ready.

IGOR
Keep it clean first round.
We come back later and give them
the magic.

Natasha rolls her eyes, swings to the opposite platform.

INT. CENTER RING - CONTINUOUS

Bobby steps out. Top hat. Showman smile.

BOBBY
Ladies and gentlemen— do you want a
show?

Roars.

Bobby glances at Stephanie— then at Xavier. A wink.

Stephanie catches it.

BOBBY (CONT'D)
I said— DO YOU WANT A SHOW?

The crowd erupts.

Stagehands move in. Remove the safety net.

BOBBY (CONT'D)
Then a show you shall have.
No nets.

DRUMROLL. CYMBALS.

LIGHTS OUT.

A hush.

SPOTLIGHT: Bobby.

BOBBY
Cast your eyes high above—
the Russian Roulettes!

SPOTLIGHTS: Igor and Natasha. They wave.

Igor swings first, hangs inverted— ready.

Natasha swings. Releases. Flips—

Igor catches her clean.

Applause.

Natasha returns to her perch, easy.

Bobby steps forward again— hungry for bigger.

BOBBY (CONT'D)
No, no, no— we promised you
extraordinary.

Natasha ties on a blindfold.

DRUMROLL grows.

Two spotlights: Igor and Natasha.

IGOR
Сейчас!

Natasha swings.

Faces in the crowd— held breath.

Marcus scanning.

Cedric watching.

Xavier... not visible.

IGOR (CONT'D)
Сейчас!

LIGHTS OUT.

SCREAMS.

Silence.

SFX: a body hitting dirt— heavy and final.

LIGHTS UP.

Spotlight: Igor— panicked.

IGOR
Natasha! Natasha!

Spotlight: the trapeze bar— one rope severed.

Not frayed. Cut.

Natasha lies in a heap near Bobby's feet.

Blood spreads into the sawdust.

Chaos.

Marcus is moving— eyes up, then down, clocking exits, rigging, hands.

He brushes the cut rope.

Fine powder coats his fingertips.

He rubs it. Knows.

Something drifts down from above— slow, guided.

It lands in Marcus's hand.

A playing card.

POV: QUEEN OF SPADES.

A bloody thumbprint in the corner.

Miss Avalon inhales— and slips away into shadow before anyone tracks her.

Marcus looks to the performer row.

Cedric staring upward.

Xavier's seat— empty.

Stephanie steps in, controlled.

MARCUS
(to Stephanie)
Shut it down. Now.

Dylan works the crowd, trying to calm them.

Igor reaches Natasha— lifts her.

Marcus grabs Igor's arm.

IGOR
(broken)
Don't touch her.

Igor shoves Marcus hard. Marcus goes down.

IGOR (CONT'D)
Our rules. Our laws.

Time compresses: the crowd pours out.

Soon it's just Igor, Bobby, Stephanie, and Natasha's body in the ring.

An ambulance arrives. Lights wash the canvas.

Natasha is covered. Taken.

Cedric, Carson, and Miss Avalon watch from the side. No words.

Xavier reappears— cuff adjusted. Not winded. Not grieving. On time.

Marcus approaches him.

MARCUS
Where did you go?

Xavier doesn't turn.

XAVIER
I was right here.

Cedric backs him instantly.

CEDRIC
He was with me.

Marcus looks at Cedric. Then at the Queen of Spades in his hand.

MARCUS
Deal me in.

Silence.

FADE.

INT. MISS AVALON'S PSYCHIC TRAILER - LATER

A dusty bottle. Small glasses. No ceremony.

Miss Petre. Cedric. Carson. Xavier.

Miss Avalon pours green Chartreuse.

They lift the glasses— not a toast. A ritual.

The door opens.

Marcus steps in. No badge. No apology.

He takes the empty seat beside Carson.

The circle adjusts to make room.

Miss Avalon studies him.. then slides her untouched glass to him.

No one says Natasha's name.

They drink like medicine.

Miss Avalon shuffles. Slow.

Turns a card.

Marcus sees it first.

THE SEVEN OF SWORDS.

MISS AVALON
You say you don't believe...
yet you know what it means.

All eyes on Marcus.

He doesn't touch the card.

MARCUS
My mother had the gift.

A beat.

MARCUS (CONT'D)
So she ran off with the Swordsman.

He forces a smile that doesn't land.

MARCUS (CONT'D)
Guess she loved the flash. The
stardust.

Funny she couldn't predict leaving
her husband... and her eight-year-
old.

The room changes temperature.

Xavier watches him. Measuring.

XAVIER
People who chase stardust usually
get burned by dirt.

A beat.

XAVIER (CONT'D)
You want a hug?

Marcus holds Xavier's gaze.

Doesn't blink. Doesn't answer.

The door opens.

Igor steps in. Rain on his shoulders. Eyes wrecked.

He sees the card. Stops.

Pours himself a drink.

IGOR
(low)
Напиток.

They drink again.

IGOR (CONT'D)
We have our rules.

A beat.

IGOR (CONT'D)
You're in now.

Marcus nods.

Miss Avalon looks at him— direct.

MISS AVALON
You're here for a reason.

A beat.

MISS AVALON (CONT'D)
Find what's killing us.

Marcus looks around the table.

No one looks away.

MARCUS
(quiet)
Hiding in plain sight.

Xavier lifts his glass.

Not a toast.

Just acknowledgment.

He drinks.

CUT TO BLACK.

EXT. JASON'S COFFIN TENT - 1:00 A.M.

Jason's coffin rests under canvas.

Flowers. Trinkets. Balloon dogs. A life turned into props.

A ghost light burns beside the coffin.

Stephanie stands with a contract.

STEPHANIE
Papa... what is SPATA?

She scans the page.

STEPHANIE (CONT'D)
How can our debts just vanish?
What does that cost... and who pays
it?

A voice from the dark—

XAVIER (O.S.)
You hate not being the one holding
the strings.

Stephanie doesn't jump. Doesn't turn.

STEPHANIE
You're too new here to speak.

Xavier steps into the ghost light. Calm.

XAVIER
New doesn't mean blind.

A beat.

XAVIER (CONT'D)
You're not afraid of debt.
You're afraid of not knowing who
owns you now.

That hits.

STEPHANIE
I'd rather bargain with the Devil.

XAVIER
(smaller smile)
You already are.

Silence.

The ghost light hums.

STEPHANIE
What does SPATA mean?

Xavier looks at the coffin— not her.

XAVIER
It means someone planned your
future...
before you knew you were in the
game.

He steps back into shadow.

Stephanie turns—

He's gone.

The ghost light flickers.

She sits beside the coffin. Tries to say something to her
father. Nothing comes. She finally whispers:

STEPHANIE
You left me with wolves.

Then she wipes her face hard — back to boss mode.

Miss Avalon's hand settles on Stephanie's shoulder.

MISS AVALON
Your mother's strength lives in
you.

Stephanie leans into it.

One tear escapes. She doesn't wipe it.

STEPHANIE
I don't know what game we're in
anymore.

MISS AVALON
Then don't play all your cards yet.

A beat.

MISS AVALON (CONT'D)
A lady never makes a flourish.

The ghost light steadies.

FADE.

EXT. BOBBY'S TRAILER - 2:00 A.M.

Soft Latin music bleeds through thin trailer walls. Warm light behind drawn curtains.

Stephanie approaches. Hesitates.

She knocks once— then opens the door.

INT. BOBBY'S TRAILER - CONTINUOUS

Bobby turns— breathing a little high, like he's been pacing.

BOBBY
(startled)
Steph—

He snatches a shirt from a chair, pulls it on too fast.

Stephanie takes in the space. Nothing obvious— but something's been reset.

STEPHANIE
Did I interrupt something?

BOBBY
No. I just... couldn't sleep.

A beat.

STEPHANIE
We rethink the Roulette act tomorrow.

BOBBY
Yeah. Of course.

Stephanie watches him— searching for the thing she can't name.

She doesn't find it.

STEPHANIE
Get some rest.

She exits.

The door closes.

Bobby stands still in the quiet.

BOBBY
(under his breath)
What am I doing..

The showman's grin fades.

He looks at himself in the mirror – glitter still on his face.

For a moment, he doesn't recognize the man without the lights.

A soft knock.

Bobby freezes.

He opens the door a crack–

His face changes: recognition... heat... surrender.

BOBBY (CONT'D)
I knew you'd come back.

We never see who's outside.

The door shuts.

UNKNOWN VOICE (O.S.)
Shhhh...

Inside– the light clicks off.

Music continues.

EXT. BOBBY'S TRAILER – CONTINUOUS

Across the midway, in shadow–

Marcus watches.

Not judgment. Not surprise.

Just another piece sliding into place.

CUT TO BLACK.

EXT. THE BIG TOP - MORNING

ON SCREEN: 8:00 A.M.

The Big Top sits quiet after Natasha's death.

Stray dogs nose through trash. Generators cough.

Fluffy ROARS somewhere behind canvas.

Miss Petre passes with her poodles in a tight line.

Pierre pauses near Marcus' shoe— considers lifting a leg.

Marcus glares.

Pierre thinks better of it and trots off, insulted.

Stephanie crosses to Marcus.

STEPHANIE

Anything?

MARCUS

Connections. Not certainty.

STEPHANIE

The cards?

MARCUS

Sent to Langley.
Pattern's forming.

He shows her a photo— TEX MURDOCK.

She barely looks.

STEPHANIE

Not many circuses on the road.

MARCUS

Six cities. Five years.
Different victims. Same signature.

Stephanie absorbs that.

A sound rises as they near the canvas—

WHOOSH. THUD.

A man hits a mat too hard.

IGOR (O.S.)

Снова.

Another THUD.

IGOR (O.S.) (CONT'D)

Снова!

INT. BIG TOP - CONTINUOUS

Igor drills performers with brutal precision.

Bobby claps, trying to keep it sharp.

BOBBY

Tighter!

Xavier comes into view— sweat-soaked, controlled.

He lands a flip without bending his knees. Barely breathes.

His eyes go to the net.

Like it's an insult.

Stephanie clocks it.

STEPHANIE

Put up the net.

Xavier calls from above.

XAVIER

No net.

Stagehands freeze— look to Stephanie.

Then look to Xavier.

That's the problem.

Bobby glances to Cedric— cues an accordion track.

Up top: Igor and Xavier set positions. Lock eyes.

IGOR

СЕЙЧАС!

They launch.

Mid-air—

XAVIER

СЕЙЧАС!

They cross, flip, catch opposite bars in unison.

Stephanie's breath catches— a flash of Natasha falling.

Igor pulls out a blindfold.

So does Xavier.

Now it's not rehearsal.

It's appetite.

XAVIER (CONT'D)

ГОТОВЫЙ?

IGOR

(English)

You drop me, I kill you.

Xavier laughs— light, sharp.

XAVIER

Have a little faith, old man.

IGOR

Let me hear you breathe.

Xavier— steady breath. Controlled.

Silence.

Igor leaps.

Air— spin— reach—

CLASP.

They lock.

Applause breaks from the ground crew.

Blindfolds off.

They dismount.

Bobby swarms them in a bear hug.

Marcus watches that bond form in real time.

Bobby pulls Xavier aside – looks dead on – then kisses him.

Xavier freezes for half a beat.

Not shock.

Not anger.

Something like... recognition.

Bobby doesn't break away.

Xavier gently pulls Bobby's head into his chest.

His eyes lift – not to Bobby –

but past him.

Already leaving.

He clocks:

– Igor's grip on Xavier's shoulder (too hard)

– Bobby holding a second too long

– Xavier allowing it... but not leaning in.

A flicker crosses Xavier's face.

Regret?

Then it's gone.

He drops beside Stephanie and Marcus.

XAVIER

I go where I'm needed.

Stephanie catches Bobby watching Xavier.

.

Bobby looks away– too late.

STEPHANIE

Net stays for the act.

Xavier gives her what she wants to hear.

XAVIER

Yes, boss.

He walks off.

Marcus lifts Tex's photo behind Xavier— not the same man.

INT. SIDESHOW TENT - LATER

Cedric warms up behind the curtain. Focused.

Marcus tries for casual.

MARCUS
Those are hollow, right?

Cedric stares at him.

MARCUS (CONT'D)
C'mon. Wizard of Oz rules.
We're behind the curtain.

Cedric steps aside: go ahead.

Marcus grips the bar.

Strains.

Nothing.

Cedric gently nudges him away and lifts it clean.

CEDRIC
You were saying?

The crowd pours in. The show snaps alive.

Marcus scans the cramped space— then spots a deck of playing cards.

He thumbs through.

Queens... queens... queens...

He stops. Counts.

One queen missing.

He looks toward the Big Top.

Cedric ROARS for the crowd—

Marcus pockets the knowledge.

INT. MR. KRANKOWSKI'S TRAILER - DAY

Ledgers everywhere. Calculator tapping like a heartbeat.

Krankowski mutters numbers like prayers.

Stephanie enters.

STEPHANIE
Something wrong?

He turns the ledger to her.

MR. KRANKOWSKI
Yes.

A beat.

MR. KRANKOWSKI (CONT'D)
Too much money.

Stephanie doesn't blink.

STEPHANIE
Explain.

MR. KRANKOWSKI
Payroll covered. Fuel paid ahead.
Winter deposits cleared.

He looks up— shaken.

MR. KRANKOWSKI (CONT'D)
We don't have this kind of money.

STEPHANIE
We do now.

That lands.

MR. KRANKOWSKI
Advertising in Erie— prepaid.

Print, radio, digital... Someone's spending in our name.

Stephanie closes the ledger.

STEPHANIE
Then let them.

Krankowski freezes.

MR. KRANKOWSKI
Jason never liked debts he didn't
understand.

STEPHANIE
Jason isn't here.

Soft. Final.

She softens a fraction— hand on his shoulder.

STEPHANIE (CONT'D)
Miss Petre has croissants.
She said you'd better not be late.

Krankowski hesitates— dread vs. routine.

MR. KRANKOWSKI
There is... a great deal to
reconcile.

STEPHANIE
And it'll still be there in an
hour.

He exhales. Leaves.

Stephanie waits.

Opens the ledger again.

Her eyes find a line at the top—

INSERT - DEPOSIT

SPATA HOLDINGS

She closes the book.

Her face reveals nothing.

INT. BIG TOP - NIGHT (EVENING SHOW)

Full house. Heat. Noise.

Bobby is about to enter—

Stephanie stops him, takes the top hat.

She steps into the ring. Bedazzled. Commanding.

STEPHANIE
Ladies and gentlemen—

DRUMROLL.

STEPHANIE
Tonight— a world premiere.

Skill. Timing. Insanity.

A beat.

STEPHANIE (CONT'D)
The Blind Russian Roulettes.

Accordion hits.

House goes black.

CYMBALS.

Two spotlights: Igor and Xavier, high above.

Crowd goes wild.

A whip CRACKS.

Stephanie smiles like she's daring fate.

STEPHANIE
Remove the net!

Stagehands hesitate.

Igor's jaw tightens.

Bobby looks sick.

Marcus leans close— low.

MARCUS
Steady. She's in charge.

The net comes down.

Up top— Igor and Xavier launch.

IGOR / XAVIER

СЕЙЧАС!

They cross. Flip. Catch.

Xavier drops into catcher position, inverted.

Blindfolds on— both of them.

Stephanie watches like she's watching a cliff edge.

IGOR
Let me hear you breathe.

Xavier breathes. Steady.

Silence.

Igor leaps.

Hands search air—

MISS—
The crowd GASPS—

CLASP.

They connect.

The ground crew applauds— relieved, shaken.

They pull blindfolds off.

They dismount.

Back on the ground, Igor's face is fury under restraint.

IGOR
What the hell was that?

Stephanie doesn't blink.

STEPHANIE
If you trust him that much, who
needs a net?

Xavier steps in— controlled.

XAVIER
What are you playing?

STEPHANIE
Erie needs something they've never
seen.

She shoulder-bumps past him and keeps moving.

Xavier watches her go— then looks at Bobby.

XAVIER
You want to get out of here?

BOBBY
I'm up after the poodles.

Marcus steps in, dry.

MARCUS
I'll stand in for him.

Xavier studies Marcus.

XAVIER
Cop... you want to dance with me?

Marcus doesn't move.

MARCUS
One thing you should know.

A beat.

MARCUS (CONT'D)
I always lead.

Xavier smiles— not amused.

Interested.

Marcus exits.

Xavier follows.

Miss Petre steps toward the ring—

FADE OUT.

INT. MESS TENT - NIGHT

A few bare bulbs. The tent is half-struck— chairs stacked, tables crooked.

Marcus sits alone with a bottle of vodka. Doesn't drink.

Footsteps.

Xavier enters— calm, not hiding it.

Marcus rolls the bottle across the table.

MARCUS
Heard you've got a taste for
Russian lately.

Xavier catches it without looking down. Drinks. Slides it back.

XAVIER
You don't know my tastes.

Marcus takes a pull. Sets it down.

MARCUS
That's what I'm here for.

A beat.

MARCUS (CONT'D)
So what are you into?
Buffalo wings? Baltimore crabs?
Philly cheesesteak?

Xavier's eyes sharpen. Test recognized.

He moves—

In a blink, Marcus is on his back. Not slammed— placed.

Xavier kneels, forearm across Marcus' chest. Close.
Controlled.

XAVIER
You talk too much.

Marcus winces— smiles anyway.

MARCUS
Tex... ease up.

A flicker in Xavier's eyes.

Xavier stands. Releases him like it was nothing.

XAVIER
We're done.

He turns.

Marcus grabs his sleeve— not pleading. Marking.

MARCUS
This dance just started.

Xavier pulls free and exits. No look back.

EXT. OUTSIDE THE MESS TENT - CONTINUOUS

Miss Avalon stands in shadow, shuffling without thinking.

She flips a card.

THE TOWER.

Her breath catches.

MISS AVALON
The storm's here.

FADE OUT.

INT. BOBBY'S TRAILER - NIGHT

A knock.

Bobby opens the door— his face lights.

BOBBY
You're spoiling me.

Door shuts.

A beat.

BOBBY (O.S.) (CONT'D)
Oh... we're playing tonight?

A soft rustle.

A sharp movement— muffled, cut off.

UNKNOWN VOICE (O.S.)
Shhhh.

INT. STEPHANIE'S TRAILER - NIGHT

Stephanie sits on the bed, costume half-off. Glitter smeared.

She texts:

ON PHONE: BOBBY, YOU UP?

INT. BOBBY'S TRAILER - CONTINUOUS

Dark.

A phone screen glows on the floor.

ON PHONE: STEPHANIE: YOU UP?

A shadow crosses the light.

Breathing. Movement.

We never see enough to name it.

EXT. BOBBY'S TRAILER - CONTINUOUS

Marcus watches from a distance.

He hears a THUD.

He almost moves.

Doesn't.

Commits it.

FADE.

EXT. SPRINGFIELD FAIRGROUNDS - DAY

SUPER: 1:00 P.M.

Gray winter sky. The convoy is already half-packed.

The cast gathers.

STEPHANIE

Erie's a buffer day.

Advertising's paid. Thirty percent sold.

(beat) We don't stop unless we have to.

Relief murmurs through the group.

CEDRIC

What about the bodies?

Stephanie's eyes cut to him.

STEPHANIE

The people.

(then)

Our family.

The cast echoes— automatic, practiced:

CAST (MURMURING)

Our family.

Cedric drops his eyes.

Xavier steps close behind Cedric— a subtle claim.

BOBBY
Nine-hour drive. Caravan stays
tight.

IGOR
I ride with the cop.

Bobby arches a brow. Igor kills it with a look.

Xavier to Stephanie:

XAVIER
You want me driving?

STEPHANIE
No.
Keep your eye on Bobby.

Xavier smiles— small. Honest.

Miss Petre glides in.

MISS PETRE
Mr. Krankowski... would you escort
me?

Krankowski looks to Stephanie. She gives him a tiny wink.

He melts and goes.

Two caskets are loaded side by side.

The caravan pulls out.

INT. MISS PETRE'S CAR

MISS PETRE
Do you ever wonder if we should
have stopped this... earlier?

Krankowski keeps his eyes on the road.

MR. KRANKOWSKI
I stopped trying to judge the
weather a long time ago.

MISS PETRE
I'm not talking about weather.

A beat.

MR. KRANKOWSKI

I know.

Rain streaks across the windshield.

MISS PETRE

Do you think it's wrong?

Krankowski exhales through his nose. Not a sigh. Something older.

MR. KRANKOWSKI

I don't think we get to decide that anymore.

She watches the road ahead.

MISS PETRE

Will they judge us?

MR. KRANKOWSKI

Mon chéri...

(soft)

They already do.

A long silence.

MISS PETRE

We used to be the good part.

Krankowski almost smiles – almost breaks.

MR. KRANKOWSKI

Youth is wasted on the young.

EXT. I-90 WEST - DAY

Vehicles snake through cold landscape.

Inside cars: silence, cards, books, drinks.

Fluffy paces in the lion cage— low growl.

Pierre sits upright in a crate, staring forward.

Animals don't blink first.

INT. MARCUS' SEDAN - AFTERNOON

Dashboard clock jumps: 1:15 → 2:30

Igor rides shotgun. Marcus drives.

Long silence.

MARCUS
You don't talk much.

IGOR
You don't ask much.

A beat.

MARCUS
Natasha—

IGOR
We were finished long before she
fell.
(then)
Her drinking made her sloppy.

Marcus absorbs.

MARCUS
You took to Xavier quick.

Igor looks at him— calm, unreadable.

IGOR
Are you asking... or accusing?

Marcus exhales.

MARCUS
Two murders behind us.
(beat)
Something else catching up.

Igor turns his eyes back to the road.

IGOR
Then don't slow down.

A sign looms: REST AREA - 1 MILE

Igor texts.

ON PHONE: LET'S PULL OFF. STRETCH.

EXT. REST STOP - NEAR UTICA, NY - NIGHT

SUPER: 6:00 P.M.

Fluorescent lights buzz. Wind cuts.

The cast unloads. Sandwiches get handed out.

Marcus heads for the bathrooms.

INT. REST AREA BATHROOM - NIGHT

Marcus washes his hands. Looks up— catches his own eyes in the mirror.

Focused. Wired.

A stall door clicks behind him.

XAVIER (O.S.)
You following me... or just lonely?

Marcus dries his hands slowly.

In the mirror: Xavier, leaning on the sinks like he owns the place.

MARCUS
You always pick bathrooms for first dates?

XAVIER
Neutral ground.

A beat.

MARCUS
You left when Natasha fell.

XAVIER
So did you.

Water drips somewhere.

XAVIER (CONT'D)
You don't look like a man who believes in accidents.

MARCUS
You don't look like a man who believes in names.

Xavier steps closer.

XAVIER
Difference is—
(quiet)
You need proof.
(closer)
I need opportunity.

A sound outside— voices entering.

Xavier and Marcus break apart like nothing happened.

Four men line up at urinals:

IGOR. CEDRIC. XAVIER. MARCUS.

A beat of awkward normal.

A stall door opens.

COOPER (40s), thick-necked, mean, steps out.

Another opens.

RENE (late 30s), coiled, hungry.

They clock Igor. Smile.

COOPER
Well I'll be fucked.
(to Igor)
Still making circus money?

Rene taps Igor's head twice.

RENE
Opportunity knocks twice.

The four men turn together— slow.

IGOR
Wrong man.

COOPER
Sure. Sure.

Cooper steps in— CRACK— right hook to Igor.

Igor absorbs it. Doesn't fall. Barely reacts.

Everything tightens.

Xavier shifts between them— not heroic. Tactical.

XAVIER
Everybody breathe—

Rene moves.

Xavier drops him hard to tile.

XAVIER (CONT'D)
You want family—
you come through me.

Cooper swings a baton— CRACK— catches Xavier.

Xavier hits the floor, dazed.

Rene's up. Gun out.

Cooper draws too— covering Cedric, then Marcus.

COOPER
Thirty grand.
Plus interest.

Rene's gun inches from Igor's head.

Marcus' training snaps on.

BANG—
Marcus fires. Rene drops.

Cooper whips toward Marcus—

Cedric SHOVES Marcus aside—

Cooper's shot goes wild— grazes Cedric's arm.

Marcus fires again— reflex—

BANG.

Cooper drops.

Silence.

Blood on tile. Dripping too loud.

Marcus breathes— controlled, hollow.

Xavier pushes up— furious, stunned.

XAVIER
What the—

MARCUS
Who were they?

Igor wipes blood from his mouth like it's routine.

IGOR
Does it matter?

Marcus stares at him.

MARCUS
Yes.

Xavier is already moving— scooping phones, wallets.

Marcus holds out his hand.

MARCUS (CONT'D)
IDs.

Xavier drops them into Marcus' palm.

A beat.

Igor watches Marcus.

IGOR
Are you one of us... or not?

Marcus pulls his phone— starts to dial.

Stops.

Looks at Igor, Cedric, Xavier.

MARCUS
You've got ten minutes.

Everyone freezes.

MARCUS (CONT'D)
After that— I make the call.

EXT. REST STOP - LATER

State troopers. Flashing lights. EMTs.

Miss Petre intercepts a family heading toward the bathrooms.

MISS PETRE
Restrooms closed. Pipes burst.

Pierre lifts his leg and pees on the father's shoe.

INT. MARCUS' SEDAN - NIGHT

Igor drives now.

Marcus stares at his hands— blood in the creases.

Radio chatter fades.

Dried blood in the cuticles.

He rubs his thumb against his palm like he's trying to erase it.

Then he notices Igor watching him — not judging, not approving.

Marcus looks away first.

FBI radio SQUAWKS.

FBI AGENT (V.O.)
Hawthorne, respond.

Marcus reaches—

Igor places a hand over Marcus'— gentle, firm.

They lock eyes.

FBI AGENT (V.O.)
Langley wants you back. Twenty-four hours.

Marcus swallows.

MARCUS
Nothing to report.

Static.

He clicks the radio off.

Marcus catches his reflection in the side mirror.

He doesn't recognize himself.

Igor looks back to the road.

Marcus isn't law anymore.

Igor looks back to the road, drives on.

FADE OUT.

EXT. LAKE ERIE SPEEDWAY - NIGHT

SUPER: WELCOME TO ERIE, PA

The convoy rolls through the gates at 2:00 A.M. Headlights sweep empty grandstands.

MARCUS (V.O.)
 You cross a line... and the ground
 doesn't move.
 You tell yourself it was clean.
 Necessary.

Quick flashes:

- Cooper drops in the restroom.
- Igor's hand covers Marcus' phone.
- Blood in Marcus' palm.

MARCUS (V.O.)
 But lines don't disappear.
 They just move... until you don't
 know which side you're on.

MONTAGE - ERIE SETUP (TIME LAPSE INTO MORNING)

- Canvas spreads. Poles rise. Stakes driven.
- Marcus throws his shoulder into a hoist line- earning looks.
- Carson feeds FLUFFY. The lion is calm. Too calm.
- Igor and Xavier rehearse a new sequence- Bobby watches, hungry.
- Stephanie and Krankowski argue over open ledgers.
- Miss Avalon flips a tarot card: DEATH. She covers it fast.
- Cedric and Carson snap at each other near rigging.
- Miss Avalon does a private "reading" with Xavier. He shoves the cards off the table and storms out. She barely reacts.
- Rides go up. Lights test.

— The DANIELS CARNIVAL LIGHTS sign lifts into place— the D flickers... dies.

— Miss Petre walks the grounds with Pierre. The poodle passes Marcus, considers... then keeps moving, nose high.

INT. COFFINS - MOVING - DAY (INTERCUT)

Inside the first coffin: JASON. One eye slightly open. Unseeing.

Inside the second: NATASHA. Neck bent wrong. Final.

No performance left.

INT. MISS PETRE'S TRAILER - MORNING

Tea service. Old photos on the walls: Miss Petre, a younger Krankowski, Jason— mud-and-tent days.

Miss Petre and Krankowski sit like royalty in a tight room.

A knock.

MISS PETRE

Come in.

Marcus enters. Miss Petre gestures to a chair.

MARCUS

Thank you for the invite.

Krankowski's eyes go to Marcus' bruised hand.

MR. KRANKOWSKI

After last night...

Nothing else needs saying.

Miss Petre pours.

MISS PETRE

Cream and sugar?

MARCUS

Plain's fine.

Pierre pads over, lifts his leg.

MR. KRANKOWSKI

Mr. Pierre—

Pierre ignores him and pees on Krankowski's heel instead.

Krankowski sighs and scratches the dog's ear. Pierre accepts it like a king.

Marcus clocks the photos.

MARCUS
You all go way back.

MISS PETRE
From the mud-and-tent days.
Before the lights. Before the
money.
When all you had was the person
next to you.

Marcus lets that sit.

MARCUS
You always did numbers?

Krankowski's jaw tightens.

MR. KRANKOWSKI
You learn to do many things in the
circus.
You adjust.

Miss Petre smiles.

MISS PETRE
I've stitched costumes, ridden
elephants... told fortunes.
The circus doesn't waste a body.

Marcus' attention catches on a framed photo: a handsome man with pistols— SAMUEL THE SHARPSHOOTER.

MARCUS
That you?

Krankowski almost laughs.

MR. KRANKOWSKI
I was never that good.
Jason called my act boring.
Then Cedric came along— people
wanted a strongman.

MISS PETRE
Mr. K found his true talent.
Numbers. Investments. I must say,
he is an excellent marksman.

Marcus rises.

MARCUS
Appreciate the tea.

He opens the door— Miss Petre stops him.

MISS PETRE
Marcus.
(beat)
You're family now. Rules are
different.
What will your act be?

Marcus considers.

MARCUS
Maybe I juggle.

He exits.

Miss Petre sips her tea.

MISS PETRE
(to herself)
Careful, darling.
Some things don't like to be
dropped.

FADE.

EXT. BIG TOP - MORNING

SUPER: 10:00 A.M.

Marcus walks toward the Big Top.

CARSON (O.S.)
Marcus.

Carson hustles up— pale, shaky.

MARCUS
You okay?

Carson can't commit to the answer.

CARSON
We should talk.
You're FBI... right?

Marcus guides him a few steps off the path— away from foot
traffic.

MARCUS

Talk to me.

Carson scans the grounds like prey.

Cedric passes with rigging.

Xavier crosses behind— doesn't look at them.. but slows half a beat.

Krankowski exits Miss Petre's trailer— "not watching" while watching.

Carson swallows.

CARSON

I know what—

He stops.

His eyes flick past Marcus.

Marcus doesn't turn.

MARCUS (LOW)

Carson. Now.

Carson meets his eyes— terror. Real.

CARSON

It's—

A SHOUT inside the Big Top—

IGOR (O.S.)

CHOBa!

WHOOSH. CLASP. A hard landing.

Carson jolts like he's been caught.

He backs away.

MARCUS

Carson—

CARSON

Not here.

Carson disappears into canvas and ropes.

Marcus pulls out his notebook.

Writes one word:

AFRAID.

Then heads into the Big Top.

INT. BIG TOP - "BLIND RUSSIAN ROULETTE" REHERSAL

Backstage is tight, sweating, alive.

Igor and Xavier stand ten yards apart. Springboards ready.

Both wear performance suits. Right forearms sleeved—
industrial Velcro hidden underneath.

They breathe together. Locked in.

BOBBY
This is it.

IGOR
Xavi... focus.

Three steps— spring— front flip—

They FLY.

Right forearms SLAM together— VELCRO LOCKS.

They swing down and land in perfect unison.

Bobby grins like a kid holding a match.

BOBBY
Steph wanted new.
(beat)
This is *dangerous* new.

Marcus watches from backstage— uneasy.

INT. BIG TOP - LATER - SHOW IN FULL SWING

Bobby takes the ring like it's a throne— white jumpsuit, red
tails, swagger.

BOBBY
Ladies and gentlemen...
Believers... and those who pretend
not to believe—

Boos and cheers.

BOBBY (CONT'D)
You want something you'll tell
people about...
and they won't believe you?

The crowd ROARS.

BOBBY (LOWER) (CONT'D)
Then look...
to the heavens.

SPOTLIGHTS SNAP UP.

Igor in red. Xavier in black. Matching sleeves. Gladiators.

Accordion. Drumroll.

They leap- flip- catch- transfer.

Once. Twice.

Then-

Xavier's hand SLIPS.

He MISSES the bar.

The tent EXPLODES in screams.

He slams into the net.

From the ring, Bobby cracks the whip- sharp, controlled.

He circles like a predator. Steps in close.

The crowd thinks it's show.

It isn't.

BOBBY (LOW, TO XAVIER)
That mistake... costs you.

Xavier doesn't blink.

XAVIER
(low to Bobby only)
Easy, Boy, remember who I am

He leans closer- the whip tip brushes his chest.

XAVIER (CONT'D)
You like it when I fall.

Bobby's jaw tightens— desire and rage fighting for the same space.

Stephanie watches from the wings— clocking everything.

Marcus watches— understanding this isn't about the act anymore.

Bobby turns back to the crowd— performer mask on.

BOBBY
REMOVE THE NET!

The crowd goes feral. He snaps the ship inches from Xavier.

Stagehands hesitate. Xavier climbs like Navy Seal on mission back to the perch.

Stephanie's whisper, only for herself—

STEPHANIE
What are you doing...

The net is pulled.

Silence drops under the tent.

ROUND TWO.

Igor and Xavier fly again— perfect transfers.

Once. Twice. Three.

Igor hangs upside down. Blindfold on.

Xavier blindfolds too.

IGOR
Дышать.

Xavier breathes with him.

IGOR (CONT'D)
Сейчас.

SLOW MOTION—
Xavier releases. Twists. Flies—

CLASP.

VELCRO LOCKS.

They hang by one arm. MUScles pumped. Brut force.

The entire tent exhales— then detonates into applause.

They rip blindfolds off.

Land on opposite perches like kings.

Below, Bobby owns the center.

BOBBY
THE BLIND RUSSIAN ROULETTE!

They descend on cables— adrenaline vibrating off them.

They pass Marcus.

A three-way collision of bodies— sweat, laughter, too-close celebration.

Stephanie watches.

Not jealous.

Threatened.

She pulls Xavier aside.

STEPHANIE
That fall—

XAVIER
Never play your winning hand first.

He walks off.

Stephanie stands alone under the lights.

For the first time—

She didn't run the show.

FADE OUT

EXT. BIG TOP MIDWAY - NIGHT - AFTER THE SHOW

IGOR (V.O.)
*The circus is what real life should
be like.
Sincerity. Feeling. Emotions. No
lies.*

(MORE)

IGOR (V.O.) (CONT'D)
*Artists working together to give a
 smile. — Princess Stephanie of
 Monaco.*

Marcus moves through the midway.

Boys win teddy bears for girls. Rides flash and spin. The
 calliope wobbles in the distance.

Miss Avalon weaves through patrons, reading hands, collecting
 secrets.

Marcus heads toward the lion cages— lost in thought, fingers
 unconsciously miming a three-ball juggle.

He COLLIDES— dead stop.

Igor stands in front of him.

IGOR
 Brother. Pay attention.

A misstep gets you killed.

MARCUS
 I'll remember.

IGOR
 Where are you going with no reason
 in your feet?

MARCUS
 Carson. He started something
 earlier.
 I want to finish it.

Marcus walks. Igor falls in beside him.

They pass Miss Petre and Krankowski— moving fast, eyes
 forward. Marcus nods. No reply.

IGOR
 The French.

At the mess tent, Cedric stands outside— head lowered, not
 welcoming.

CEDRIC (RUSSIAN)
 Не путайте действия с честью.
 (Don't confuse action with
 honor.)
 Marcus answers without showing off.

MARCUS (RUSSIAN)

Я вас понимаю.

(I understand you.)

Cedric doesn't move. Marcus and Igor route around him.

Xavier jogs up, coming from the Lion cage, slightly winded, distracted.

XAVIER

You see Bobby?

Marcus clocks the distraction.

MARCUS

Evening stroll. No Bobby.

Xavier peels off, scanning.

Ahead: Carson's trailer. Bobby slips out, spots Marcus and Igor, shuts the door behind him— and walks the other way fast.

IGOR

Bobby.

Bobby doesn't stop.

Marcus knocks.

MARCUS

Carson?

No answer.

He opens the door — quick look — empty.

Igor nods toward the lion cage.

They turn the corner. The midway noise drops away.

Generators. Metal. A chain clink.

Marcus freezes.

Inside the lion cage — Carson sits upright.

Too upright.

Head tilted wrong. Eyes open. Empty.

Neck snapped.

Fluffy lies over him – not feeding. Guarding.

Marcus reaches toward Carson to check –

Fluffy SNAPS and growls.

Marcus pulls back.

Something white near Carson's hand.

Marcus kneels at the cage edge, flips it over–

JACK OF SPADES.

IGOR

Neck broken.

Marcus pulls out his phone and dials.

STEPHANIE (V.O.)

Marcus?

MARCUS

Lion cage.

(beat)

It wasn't the lion.

Igor steps closer to the bars.

Fluffy's growl softens to a low rumble.

Igor rests his forehead against the cold metal.

His hand slides between the bars, careful.

Fluffy presses his head into Igor's knuckles.

Igor closes his eyes.

Just for a second.

He exhales – slow, controlled.

Then he straightens.

Armor back on.

EXT. LION CAGE – MOMENTS LATER

Stephanie arrives, tears spilling– trying not to show weakness.

Igor stands close but doesn't touch her. His hand clenches instead.

Stephanie signals. Three workers move in with a stretcher.

Igor steps into the cage.

Fluffy stands over Carson, rumbling low— grief in an animal chest.

Igor speaks softly.

IGOR (RUSSIAN)

Приходи.

(Come.)

Fluffy moves to him. Igor steadies the lion with a hand at the shoulder— a quiet consolation.

INT. MEMORIAL TENT - NIGHT

Three coffins in a row:

JASON.

NATASHA.

CARSON.

Rain pounds the canvas.

No music.

Only the distant sound of a carousel still turning.

INT. MESS TENT - MORNING

The whole cast gathered. Tension thick.

Marcus scans.

Xavier: busted lip. Bobby: black eye. Cedric: bandaged right hand, dried blood. Igor rubbing his knuckles. Miss Petre speaks low to Krankowski, who looks ill. Miss Avalon sits in a black veil.

Krankowski stands to address the room— shaky authority.

MR. KRANKOWSKI
We can't shut down. We're booked
all week.
We lose the dates, we're done.

Miss Petre's voice cuts in— calm, practical.

MISS PETRE
Who replaces Carson?

Eyes dart around the tent: murderer... witness... next victim.

Igor nods once.

IGOR
Two acts. Two paychecks.

Stephanie gives a small nod: approved.

Cedric finally aims at Marcus.

CEDRIC
So what's the badge say?
Or you still guessing?

A few nervous laughs.

Marcus doesn't rise to it.

MARCUS
Somebody here just made a mistake.
(beat)
Killers don't get sloppy.
People do.

Bobby bristles.

BOBBY
You don't get to call this family
and point fingers.

Xavier speaks— measured.

XAVIER
He's not pointing fingers.
He's counting bodies.

Silence.

Xavier stands. Not rage— command.

He circles the table as he talks. Slow.

XAVIER (CONT'D)
Three dead.
Jason. Natasha. Carson.

He stops behind different shoulders as he speaks— weight without accusation.

XAVIER (CONT'D)
Books. Rigging. Animals.
That means whoever did this... has
been eating with us.
(beat) Working beside us. Smiling
at us. Every day.

Miss Petre tightens around her cup. Cedric shifts. Bobby stops performing.

Xavier leans in— soft now.

XAVIER (CONT'D)
And when I find out who—
(beat)
I'll break them.

He pulls a knife out of nowhere to Igor's throat.

XAVIER (CONT'D)
Or maybe...the killer is sitting next
to you?

In a flash he has Bobby in a headlock, choking the air out of him.

XAVIER (CONT'D)
Maybe it's me?
(eyes moving)
Either way... I'm going to enjoy it.

He sits. No one exhales.

Krankowski tries to retake control. Marcus see all of these actions.

MR. KRANKOWSKI
We can't afford to shut down.

Miss Avalon's voice— quiet, lethal.

MISS AVALON
Soon there'll be no one left to
perform.

She turns a card:

ACE OF SWORDS.

Marcus looks up— and finds Xavier already watching him.

EXT. SIDESHOW TENT - BETWEEN ACTS - DAY

Crowd noise hums. Performers reset props.

Marcus stands off to the side, cataloging.

Igor and Cedric speak low with a young couple. Cedric cracks an easy joke— the couple laughs, nervous and thrilled.

Across the way—

Xavier stands with a handsome young Hispanic man (mid-20s). Close conversation. Private in public.

The man presses folded bills into Xavier's hand.

Xavier pockets it without looking.

They slip behind a hanging curtain.

Marcus clocks it. Looks away. Then back. Files it.

Minutes later: Xavier steps out alone, lights a cigarette.

The young man emerges— flushed, trying to look casual.

He lingers near Xavier, hoping.

MAN
You gonna call?

Xavier doesn't answer at first.

Then his eyes go past the man— straight to Marcus. Xavier pulls the man in and brushes his lips and then, tosses him away, never breaking his focus on Marcus.

Not caught. Not defensive. Measured.

He holds Marcus's gaze a beat too long.

Then— back to the man.

XAVIER
No.

The man nods, hides disappointment, walks off.

Xavier drops the cigarette, crushes it.

Still watching Marcus.

Not a challenge.

A warning.

INT. BIG TOP - 2:00 P.M. SHOW

Sold-out. Bright. Perfect from the audience side.

A quick run of acts— laughter, applause, the BLIND RUSSIAN ROULETTE lands clean.

Inside the machine: tension mounting.

EXT./INT. MESS TENT - AFTERNOON

Marcus approaches— hears voices.

BOBBY (O.S.)
I want what's mine.

STEPHANIE (O.S.)
Daddy never promised that.

BOBBY (O.S.)
He told me. Partner.

STEPHANIE (O.S.)
He was dying. He didn't say that.

A SLAP.

Marcus steps in fast— catches Bobby's wrist mid-swing.

MARCUS
Stop.

Bobby's eyes are wild.

Stephanie is ice.

STEPHANIE
Do that again... I'll kill you.

Bobby jerks free, spits venom.

BOBBY
Maybe that's how you run things.
One problem at a time. One body at
a time.

Stephanie exits— not running, not shaking.

Bobby heads out too.

Marcus calls after him.

MARCUS

Hold up.

Bobby turns, smiling like a bruise.

BOBBY

Gonna shoot me too? Like at the
rest stop?

Fuck you.

I think you're the cause of all of
it.

Marcus doesn't bite.

MARCUS

Who gave you the black eye?

BOBBY

Rough sex.

Piss off.

Bobby storms away.

Marcus stands alone in the mess tent.

From the Big Top: laughter, music— life still running.

Marcus pulls out his notepad.

Starts to write.

Stops.

Tears the page out. Pockets it.

He watches a young performer practicing a bow in a puddle
reflections wrong, then again, then better.

Marcus closes the notepad.

No notes. No report.

He turns, not toward Bobby.

Toward the sound of the show.

And walks.

INT. BIG TOP - BETWEEN SHOWS

Work lights. Crew resets. The distant crowd noise leaks through canvas.

Igor, Cedric, and Xavier talk low- tense. When Marcus enters, Cedric gives a look. Conversation dies.

MARCUS
Time we talked.

Cedric starts to move off.

MARCUS (CONT'D)
Carson didn't trust you. Why?

Cedric turns back- Igor blocks him, calm.

MARCUS (CONT'D)
Miss Avalon said-

CEDRIC
That witch should stick to her cards.

Marcus holds on Cedric.

MARCUS
I noticed something about your deck.

Cedric doesn't move.

MARCUS (CONT'D)
You're missing the Queen of Spades.

A beat.

MARCUS (CONT'D)
Same card that floated down after Natasha fell.

Silence tightens like rope.

IGOR
What are you saying?

MARCUS
You tell me.
(beat)
I "talk too much," right?

Igor's eyes flash to Cedric.

IGOR (RUSSIAN)

Седрик, что ты наделал?
(Cedric, what did you do?)

Cedric's jaw works. No answer.

Marcus shifts— not accusing, pressing.

MARCUS

You knew about the affair. Да?
Cedric and Tasha.

Xavier steps into Marcus's path.

Marcus doesn't slow— shoulders past him like he's air.

Igor snaps fingers at Cedric— they move out, quick.

Xavier stays. Close.

He presses a finger into Marcus's chest.

XAVIER

You'd better know what secrets cost
in the dark.

He leans in.

XAVIER (CONT'D)

Answers come with a price.

(beat)

Sometimes it's not yours to pay.

Xavier turns away.

MARCUS

You slid in fast.

WHOOOSH— THUD.

A knife buries in the dirt at Marcus's foot.

Marcus doesn't flinch.

MARCUS

You missed.

Xavier steps back in, pulls the knife free, lifts it under
Marcus's chin— not cutting. Measuring.

XAVIER

No.

(beat)

You live. For now.

MARCUS

You and me?

Same fire.

Different direction.

He wipes the blade on Marcus's sleeve and walks off.

Marcus exhales— controlled.

Stephanie hurries in— frustrated. A bruise on her face from Bobby's slap.

STEPHANIE

So where are we with all of this?

Marcus clocks the bruise.

MARCUS

You okay?

STEPHANIE

Bobby? Please. Nothing a little stardust can't fix. He always wants something. Thinks he's owed.

Marcus listens— files it.

STEPHANIE (CONT'D)

We had rough years. Bobby's uncle floated us.

He got paid back.

(beat) Bobby only remembers the part where he thinks he owns me.

MARCUS

Resentment.

STEPHANIE

You saw his black eye?

Wish I did it. I wouldn't have stopped there.

She leans in, sharp.

STEPHANIE (CONT'D)

Solve it.

I can't lose anyone else.

She exits.

Marcus stands alone, hearing the show swell.

Applause. Laughter. Life.

Something clicks in his head.

Not who.

How.

INT. XAVIER'S TRAILER - NIGHT

A knock.

Xavier exhales - irritated by the intrusion.

He opens the door.

Bobby stands there. Trying to look casual. Failing.

XAVIER
What's up?

BOBBY
Can I come in?

Xavier turns away. Doesn't answer.

Bobby takes that as permission and steps inside.

The door shuts.

Silence.

The small space hums with generator noise outside.

Xavier gestures vaguely - Well?

Bobby takes a breath.

BOBBY (CONT'D)
So what am I?

Xavier doesn't look at him.

XAVIER
You're the one who knocked.

That stings. Bobby pushes past it.

BOBBY
That's not what I mean.

Xavier finally looks at him. Measuring.

XAVIER
You're here.

A beat.

BOBBY
That's not an answer.

Xavier steps closer – not romantic, not threatening. Just present.

XAVIER
It's the only one I give.

Bobby swallows. Hurt flickers – he hides it fast.

BOBBY
Right.

A long silence.

Bobby nods once like he understands something he wishes he didn't.

He turns to leave.

Xavier watches him go. Face unreadable.

Door opens. Closes.

Xavier stands there alone.

Still.

Xavier steps outside.

Then he locks the door.

EXT. BIG TOP – CONTINUOUS

Marcus walks, thinking. He texts.

ON SCREEN –
TEXT:

Leads converging. This show is almost over.

He pockets the phone. Moves through the grounds.

Not looking for suspects.

Just moving through a world that suddenly feels... off

He passes Cedric – Cedric swings a sledgehammer, driving a stake into the mud. Hard. Rhythmic. Too hard.

Cedric doesn't look up.

Further ahead – Igor Low conversation with a thick-necked Russian man in a heavy coat. Not circus. Not local.

Igor's posture is controlled. Closed.

The man glances at Marcus – just once.

They stop talking.

Marcus keeps walking.

Near the trailers – Miss Petre and Krankowski Standing close. Quiet. Intense.

Miss Petre's hand rests on Krankowski's arm.

They see Marcus.

Conversation ends mid-sentence.

Miss Petre smiles. Warm. Too warm.

Krankowski looks away first.

Marcus walks on.

Something in the air now.

The carnival feels... aligned.

He rubs his jaw where Xavier held the knife earlier.

Then remembers Stephanie's bruise.

His focus shifts inward for half a second.

A shadow passes behind him.

THUD– Marcus goes down.

A hood drops over his head.

His breath catches– then everything fades.

INT. UNKNOWN TRAILER - LATER

Marcus is tied to a chair.

Hood yanked off.

Marcus twists his wrist against the rope. His sleeve rides up.

A faded tattoo on his forearm.

Old ink. Not decorative.

A symbol.

Scales.

A blade.

Half worn away.

Cook notices. Says nothing.

Marcus pulls the sleeve back down.

A NOTE is pinned to his chest: STOP ASKING.

A JOKER card sits in his lap.

Marcus tests the bindings. Pain in his left hand— still there.

The trailer door opens.

COOK (48), burly, no-nonsense, steps in.

COOK
What did you do?

MARCUS
How did I get here?

COOK
I didn't bring you.
(beat)
I keep the stove hot and the mouths
shut.

MARCUS
Who brought me?

Cook unties him.

COOK
This isn't punishment.
It's a courtesy.

He opens the door.

COOK (CONT'D)
Go.

Marcus steps out. Door closes.

EXT. COOK'S TRAILER - CONTINUOUS

Marcus runs straight into Miss Petre and Krankowski.

The JOKER drops.

Miss Petre's purse spills— a small bottle rolls.

Krankowski drops a stack of brochures.

They all crouch to gather the mess.

Miss Petre picks up the JOKER, studies it like it means something.

Marcus picks up the bottle— label visible: CHLOROFORM.

He hands it back.

MARCUS
Chloroform?

MISS PETRE
For the mice.

Mr. Pierre will not rest.

Marcus grabs a brochure by mistake: PARIS IN THE FALL.

He hands it to Krankowski— but holds on a beat.

MARCUS
Paris?

Krankowski smiles like it's a sin.

MR. KRANKOWSKI
Dream planning.

Miss Petre smiles sweetly.

MISS PETRE
See your dreams. Live your dreams.

Marcus lets go.

Miss Petre touches the JOKER.

MISS PETRE (CONT'D)
The Fool.

Marcus waits— lets her talk.

MISS PETRE (CONT'D)
The trickster within.
Playful... and not.

Krankowski clears his throat, anxious.

MR. KRANKOWSKI
Son, you should get that bump
checked.
(to Miss Petre)
Come. Matinee books.

They go.

On the ground near Marcus's boot— a BUSINESS CARD:

ERIE BANK & TRUST

Account: 3489256

Marcus picks it up, reads it once.

He texts.

ON SCREEN -
TEXT:

Run this. Erie Bank & Trust. 3489256. Who owns it?

Marcus pockets the card.

MARCUS
(under his breath)
Money doesn't travel alone.

A kid (12) runs up.

KID
Hey mister— where's the sideshow?
Is the knife thrower gonna be
there?

Marcus points.

MARCUS
Hurry. Show's about to start.

MISS AVALON (O.S.)
Marcus.

He turns. Miss Avalon stands there, veiled.

MARCUS
More readings?

MISS AVALON
We should talk.

She heads to her trailer. Marcus follows.

INT. MISS AVALON'S PSYCHIC TRAILER - NIGHT

Candles. Incense. A small table. The air feels heavy.

Miss Avalon sits, veiled, still.

She gestures: sit.

MISS AVALON
Give me your left hand.

Marcus hesitates - then gives it.

She turns his wrist slightly.

Her thumb brushes the faded tattoo.

She stills.

A flicker crosses her face.

Recognition. Weight.

MISS AVALON (CONT'D)
(quietly)
Ah.

MARCUS
What?

MISS AVALON
Nothing you don't already carry.

MARCUS
You know I don't-

MISS AVALON

Shhh.

Marcus's eyes drift to a photo wall –

Jason... performers... and one photo of Avalon with a younger man.

Something in Marcus reacts. Electric current ran through his body.

A jolt he can't place.

He pulls his hand back.

MARCUS

Jesus... what was that?

Miss Avalon gently takes his hand again.

FLASH – REST STOP.

The gunshot.

Marcus's hand slamming the sink.

BACK TO SCENE.

Marcus yanks his arm away.

MARCUS

Enough riddles. Please.

Miss Avalon lays cards– one by one. No theatrics. Just a diagnosis.

MISS AVALON

The Devil.

The Tower. The Magician– reversed. Seven of Swords. Ace of Swords.

A SHADOW crosses the window.

Both look.

Marcus rises, opens the door–

EXT. MISS AVALON'S TRAILER – CONTINUOUS

Nothing.

Then— Cedric stands a few feet away. Still. Watching.

MARCUS
Cedric. You see anyone?

No response.

MARCUS (CONT'D)
Still don't like me?

Cedric's stare doesn't change.

Marcus shuts the door.

INT. MISS AVALON'S TRAILER - CONTINUOUS

Miss Avalon has already blown out the candles.

Nervous, controlled.

MARCUS
What was the last card?

Miss Avalon hesitates— then:

MISS AVALON
Three of Swords.

Marcus tries to translate.

MARCUS
English.

Miss Avalon stands, ushering him.

MISS AVALON
I've said too much.
Trust your heart.
(beat) You have the gift.

Marcus looks again at the photo of Avalon with the younger man.

He taps the frame.

MISS AVALON (CONT'D)
Blood always finds blood.

She opens the door, ushers him out.

MISS AVALON (CONT'D)
And it never forgets.

EXT. MISS AVALON'S TRAILER - CONTINUOUS

Cedric is gone.

Marcus exhales.

Mr. Pierre trots up - tail high - leg already starting to rise.

MARCUS
(warning the dog)
Oh no.

Marcus scoops him up just in time.

Pierre immediately bites down on Marcus's injured left hand.

Marcus winces - but doesn't drop him.

MARCUS (CONT'D)
We're gonna be friends... You little
fire hose.

Pierre growls softly. Keeps chewing.

Miss Petre rushes in, retrieves the dog.

MISS PETRE
There you are, mon ami.

Pierre finally releases.

MARCUS
The French. So polite.

Miss Petre disappears into the crowd.

Marcus's phone BUZZES.

He checks it- pockets the phone- starts to write something down.

A little girl (8) brushes by with cotton candy- smears sticky pink across Marcus's left hand.

Her mother yanks her back.

MOTHER
Honey- keep away from strangers.
Don't trust these carnival people.
It's all an act.

They walk off.

Marcus watches, smile fading a fraction.

From the Big Top: ROARING APPLAUSE.

Then—

A SCREAM.

Not onstage.

Backstage.

Music swallows it.

Marcus turns.

INT. BACKSTAGE - CONTINUOUS

Dim. Wrong.

A makeup mirror still lit. A costume half-draped on a chair.

A small WHIMPER.

Marcus rounds stacked rigging—

The little girl is there.

Alive— shaking.

A knife is pinned in the wood inches from her shoulder.

Cotton candy clings to the blade, melting into the metal.

Marcus studies the angle— exact. Controlled.

He crouches.

MARCUS

Easy. Don't move.

He scans the rigging shadows— sees nothing.

He eases the knife free, careful.

The girl exhales a breath she didn't know she was holding.

From the Big Top: thunderous applause.

The show goes on.

Marcus holds the knife.

Because whoever threw it—
is still here.

MONTAGE - 24 HOURS IN ERIE

- Sideshow acts in motion.
- XAVIER throws knives. Perfect. Unblinking.
- CEDRIC lifts impossible weight.
- IGOR handles FLUFFY with quiet authority.
- MISS PETRE'S POODLES leap through hoops.
- STEPHANIE and KRANKOWSKI argue over the books.
- BOBBY'S trailer door opens — someone slips inside.
- The BLIND RUSSIAN ROULETTE earns a standing ovation.
- The neon sign: DANIELS CARNIVAL LIGHTS blazing.
- A drone glides over ERIE — empty storefronts, rusted factories, faded promises.
- ERIE BANK & TRUST.

END MONTAGE

INT. ERIE BANK & TRUST - DAY

Bright fluorescents. Clean carpet. Dead air.

Marcus enters with the faint pink smear of cotton candy on his sleeve like a stain from another world.

He sits at a desk.

JANE CONWAY (48), polished, ethnic, banker-chic with blood-red lipstick, clocks him instantly.

JANE CONWAY
And you are...?

Marcus slides his badge across. No charm. No small talk.

Jane studies it. Fingers trace the seal like she's handling something expensive.

MARCUS
I'm looking for an account.
(beat)
Erie Bank & Trust. Four digits.
Three-eight-four-nine-two-five-six.

Jane's eyebrows lift—impressed he knows how to speak her language.

JANE CONWAY
We don't get many men of your...
caliber in Erie.

Marcus doesn't react.

MARCUS
Who owns it.
(beat)
And who owned Daniels Carnival
Lights before it was Daniels.

Jane taps keys, calm as church. Prints a sheet.

She slides it across.

Marcus reads— a flicker behind his eyes.

Two words land like a gut punch: SPATA HOLDINGS.

He flips his notepad open.

Jane— instinct— tries to pull the paper back.

Marcus places two fingers on the page.

Not forceful. Final.

Jane freezes... then releases it.

Marcus folds the paper in thirds. Slides it into his inside pocket.

He stands.

JANE CONWAY
Mr. Marcus—

He turns, polite.

MARCUS
Yes?

Jane smiles. Predator-soft.

JANE CONWAY
 Oh, you do talk.
 I was about to try sign language.

Marcus nods once.

MARCUS
 Thank you.

He turns to go.

Jane calls after him, like she can't help it:

JANE CONWAY
 If you ever want the Erie Canal... a
 museum... dinner—
 (then, honest)
 That old-school detachment.
 It suits you.

Marcus exits.

Jane watches him go, smiling like she just met trouble.

FADE.

EXT. CARNIVAL LIGHTS BIG TOP - NIGHT

ON SCREEN: FINAL SHOW OF ERIE, PA

The midway is alive. Sideshow barking. Lights and screams.

Miss Avalon's reading stand sits empty. Unattended. Wrong.

Marcus watches the crowd like a sentinel.

INTERCUT - XAVIER

Behind a side entrance curtain, Xavier stands alone,
 listening to applause like a conductor hearing an orchestra
 tune.

Adjusts his cuff. Measures time. Smiles once toward the empty
 space where Avalon should be.

Gone.

Stephanie appears at Marcus's shoulder.

STEPHANIE

Have you seen Miss Avalon?
Not like her to be late.

MARCUS

When did she last check in?

Miss Petre is just off to the left.

STEPHANIE

Miss Petre, could you step in for
Miss Avalon and do the cards?

MISS PETRE

(quiet smile)

Of course. It's been a while, I
shall ask the Universe to channel
me.

MARCUS

She reads?

Stephanie scoffs— no answer— turns away.

Marcus's eyes catch a small cloth pouch near the rigging— a
beanbag-looking thing.

He taps it.

A faint cloud of pale dust blooms.

He rubs a pinch between finger and thumb.

Fine. Slightly tacky.

Igor steps up behind him.

IGOR

Grip bag.
So you don't drop someone from the
sky.

Marcus nods, mind racing.

STEPHANIE

Igor— where is Miss A?

Igor moves fast. Marcus follows.

EXT. CARNIVAL LIGHTS GROUNDS

Igor moves through the crowd with decision and stealth.
Marcus is right behind him.

IGOR
I don't need you.

MARCUS
Hold up.

Igor doesn't slow.

EXT. MISS AVALON'S PSYCHIC TRAILER - CONTINUOUS

Igor grabs the handle—

Marcus catches his arm.

Igor swings— fast.

Marcus blocks with his left hand. Winces. Still tender.

They lock eyes.

Truce.

Marcus knocks.

MARCUS
Miss Avalon?

No answer.

He opens the door.

INT. MISS AVALON'S TRAILER - CONTINUOUS

Incense still burns.

Miss Avalon sits at the table.

Head bowed.

Still.

Too still.

Igor steps in, gentle— lifts her chin.

A knife is buried in her chest.

Marcus's eyes drop to the handle— a faint pale dust clinging to it.

He rubs it with his thumb.

Same tacky dust.

His eyes flash back to the grip bag.

Under the blade— pinned like a calling card—

THE THREE OF SWORDS.

Blood pools into the velvet cloth.

Outside— LAUGHTER. APPLAUSE.

The circus is roaring.

Igor closes her eyes.

Marcus doesn't move.

MARCUS
(low, controlled)
Not a word.

Igor looks at him.

Marcus's stare says: We keep the killer in the dark.

FADE.

INT. BIG TOP

The audience is Electric.

Stephanie on the side lines with Marcus.

STEPHANIE
So where are we?

MARCUS
Right where we need to be.

STEPHANIE
We take a two week break after
tonight. Pick up in Fort
Lauderdale, FL. At least it will
be warmer.

MARCUS
What about the bodies.

STEPHANIE
3 services, we will deal them all
tomorrow.

MARCUS

Four.

Stephanie looks. Does a "WTF" look.

MARCUS (CONT'D)

Eyes up.

Bobby comes from behind, steals the top hat and mic. He is dressed in a form fitting White jumpsuit and red tales. He nods to the band. Drumrolls and music starts.

Bobby enters the center ring, the MASTER OF CEREMONIES.

The house goes dark. SPOTLIGHT ON BOBBY.

BOBBY

Ladies and Gentlemen. Believers and
Non-Believers

CROWD

Boos.

BOBBY

You want to be entertained?

CROWD

CHEERS!!!

BOBBY

I said do you want to be
entertained?

CROWD

ROARS!

BOBBY

How about I give you...MORE than you
expected!

The crowd is now insane with anticipation

Bobby calms them

BOBBY (CONT'D)

SShhhh....SHHHH

POV on Marcus as the SSHHH sounds familiar.

BOBBY (CONT'D)

I pray you, turn your gaze to the
heavens!

SPOT LIGHTS go to opposite Perches when Igor and Xavier stand.

SFX: Hands slips. WHOOSH

POV: Xavier miss the Bar and falls.

The crowd screams.

Xavier Hits the net.

Bobby Cracks the whip. Circles. Anger rising.

BOBBY (CONT'D)

Сейчас

Xavier pops out of the net and ascends the pole to the perch.

Bobby Cracks the whip inches from Xavier.

BOBBY (CONT'D)

That mistake, Xavi will cost you.

Bobby looks to Stephannie.

SILENCE.

BOBBY (CONT'D)

(deadly)

REMOVE THE NET.

Igor on the bar. Pulls a blind fold out (BLACK) and ties it and assumes the CATCHER position, upside down. His breath is steady. His muscles ripple through the suit.

Xavier pulls out a red blind fold. His breath matches Igor's.

IGOR

(steady and controlled)

Дышать (Breathe)

Xavier breaths. Igor rubs his hands. He swings.

POV on the crowd faces.

IGOR (CONT'D)

сейчас (now)

SLOW MOTION

Xavier leaps and flies. He releases and flips.

POV on the crowd faces - Horror. Wonder - Amazement.

FREEZE FRAME

SFX: Slow motion sound of Xavier flying

CLASP. LOCK ARMS

SLOW MOTION

No facial expression. Then the crowd roars. Thunderous applause.

PLAYBACK in REAL TIME - Xavier leaps and flies. He releases and flips. CLASP. LOCK ARMS.

Xavier is hanging by his right arm with Igor.

In synch, they pull the other man's blindfold off.

Igor Swings hard and with no effort Xavier flies to the other bar.

Igor sits back up. In unison they land on Opposite perches. They waive to the crowd like the GLADIATORS that they are.

From Below.

BOBBY

The World Famous: BLIND RUSSIAN
ROULETTE! We will see you in Fort
Lauderdale, FL starting January 15!

The two men fly down on cables and take a bow.

Marcus looks around. Faces looking for answers.

Stephanie.

Cedric flex to a teenage girl.

Igor makes FLUFFY Roar.

Xavier throws his knives with precision.

Bobby is signing autographs.

Mr. Krankowski happily counting money.

Mr. Pierre comes over to Marcus. Lifts his leg.

MARCUS

Don't you dare.

He does.

MISS PETRE
He must like you, Marcus.

She picks up the poodle he hurries off.

STEPHANIE
So?

Marcus turns and leave the big top and heads into the crowd.
The Carnival rides run for another hour.

EXT. CARNIVAL GROUNDS - LATER

The crowd thins. The rides run out their final hour.

Marcus and Stephanie walk. No words.

They stop at the memorial tent.

Three coffins.

Jason. Natasha. Carson.

Stephanie studies them— then Marcus.

STEPHANIE
You said there were four.

Marcus doesn't look away from the boxes.

MARCUS
Miss Avalon.

Stephanie inhales— sharp, involuntary.

The ghost light flickers.

And steadies.

CUT.

EXT. UNKNOWN TRAILER - NIGHT

Marcus and Stephanie stop at a trailer tucked slightly away
from the midway glow.

No music here. Just generator hum.

Marcus knocks.

A beat.

The door opens.

INT. TRAILER - CONTINUOUS

MARCUS
(easy)
There he is.

Packed suitcases. Trunks. Garment bags. A life mid-escape.

MISS PETRE stands composed, tea service already arranged like she expected company.

MR. KRANKOWSKI is beside her—warm smile, accountant calm.

Stephanie steps in, curious—clocking the bags, the order, the readiness.

MISS PETRE
Tea?
Then you can return to your badge.

STEPHANIE
(apologetic)
Miss Petre... we're sorry to disturb
you at this hour.

MR. KRANKOWSKI
Warmly.
Do sit down.

MR. PIERRE trots over to Marcus—leg lifting.

MR. KRANKOWSKI (CONT'D)
Mr. Pierre—be a gentleman.

The poodle pauses... considers Marcus... then returns to Krankowski with offended dignity.

Marcus watches the bags.

Then looks to Krankowski.

MARCUS
Mr. Krankowski... may I have your
gun, please.

A beat.

Stephanie's eyes flash: What are you doing?

Krankowski calmly reaches into his breast pocket and hands over a small pistol like this is perfectly reasonable.

Marcus pockets it.

STEPHANIE
(quiet)
Marcus—

Marcus's eyes stay on the luggage.

MARCUS
"See your dreams. Live your
dreams.."
Paris?

Miss Petre smiles—polite, almost proud.

Stephanie rises instinctively.

STEPHANIE
We are both so sorry for this
inconvenience—

His eyes locked with Miss Petre and Mr. Krankowski.

Krankowski pours tea for Stephanie and Marcus.

None for himself.

None for Miss Petre.

A subtle detail—almost missed.

Marcus eases Stephanie back into her chair with a gentle hand.

A smile like manners.

Stephanie lifts the cup.

Marcus covers her hand—stops her.

Lowers it.

Miss Petre doesn't blink.

MISS PETRE
Perhaps too hot, dear.
Let it cool.

Silence.

Stephanie looks at Marcus—alarmed.

Marcus smiles back—calm.

MARCUS

Miss Petre... up for a reading?

Miss Petre brightens, almost delighted.

She reaches for the tarot deck.

MISS PETRE

Oh yes. I sat at a table today for
the first time in years.

Too bad about Avalon... I will miss
her.

Marcus watches Krankowski.

No reaction.

No grief.

Just still.

MISS PETRE (CONT'D)

Oh, I shouldn't have said that.

STEPHANIE

(whispers to Marcus)

What are you doing?

MR. KRANKOWSKI

Miss Petre... we do have a flight to
catch.

Marcus's smile fades.

MARCUS

Not tonight.

Maybe never.

Stephanie's fingers twitch toward her tea again—nerves.

Marcus taps her hand once.

She sets the cup down.

STEPHANIE

(whisper)

Marcus... you're being rude.

Miss Petre's eyes lock on Marcus. Not offended.

Measuring.

MISS PETRE
What shall we read for?

A long beat.

MARCUS
You.

Miss Petre's left hand trembles—slight.
She keeps shuffling anyway. Smooth. Ritual.

MISS PETRE
And what question shall we answer?

Marcus leans in—quiet.

MARCUS
Why.

Miss Petre exhales like she's been holding that breath for years.

STEPHANIE
(urgent whisper)
Marcus!

She stops shuffling.

Turns over four cards—

FOUR OF PENTACLES.

KNIGHT OF PENTACLES.

FIVE OF CUPS.

THE CHARIOT.

Stephanie's eyes widen—she recognizes the language.

One tear slips from Miss Petre's eye.

She doesn't wipe it.

Marcus looks to Stephanie.

MARCUS
Stephanie... you've got the gift.
Tell me what it says.

Stephanie inhales—focus clicks on. She becomes sharp.

STEPHANIE
Four of Pentacles.
Control.
Holding. Greed.
A fist around the circus.

Marcus pulls the bank sheet from his pocket.

Slides it—face down—toward Miss Petre.

Miss Petre flips it. Reads. A micro-flinch.

Marcus looks at Krankowski.

Mr. Pierre stands at attention like he knows the room changed.

MARCUS
Three names on the holding account.
Jason Daniels. Miss Avalon. And...
you.

Stephanie stares at Krankowski.

STEPHANIE
Then the only one left is—

MARCUS
—and the heirs.

Stephanie stiffens.

STEPHANIE
Heir.
I'm the heir.

Krankowski finally speaks—flat, honest.

MR. KRANKOWSKI
Jason was bleeding the business
dry.

Marcus places the KING OF DIAMONDS on the table.

A quiet accusation.

MARCUS
Fibers in Jason's lungs from his
hospital pillow.
(beat)
And he fought back.

Marcus nods toward Krankowski's right forearm.

MARCUS (CONT'D)
Turn it over.

Krankowski does.

A deep scratch—half healed.

Stephanie's breath catches.

MARCUS (CONT'D)
Skin under his fingernails.

Miss Petre doesn't look away.

MISS PETRE
I did love Jason.
(soft)
He just wouldn't let go of the old
ways.

Stephanie looks between them—confused, betrayed.

STEPHANIE
What is this?

Marcus sets down the SPATA contract.

Krankowski's smile returns—faint, private.

MARCUS
SPATA.
Simon Paul Albright.
(beat) Or—if you wanted the
romance—O'Grady in a French
costume.

Krankowski doesn't deny it.

Miss Petre's mouth tightens—one fraction of a second.

STEPHANIE
Married?

Miss Petre answers without shame.

MISS PETRE
Thirty-one years. "Tilda ALbright."
SPATA.

Krankowski gives a small nod.

MR. KRANKOWSKI
Albright didn't sound theatrical.

Stephanie swallows.

She looks back to the cards—clinging to structure.

STEPHANIE
Knight of Pentacles...
Loyalty. Duty.
Someone who stays... while everyone
else performs.

Marcus places the QUEEN OF HEARTS on the table.

MARCUS
Charlotte in Boston.
October thirty-first.
A bullet. Misdirected but a gift
nonetheless.
Her money kept showing up—regular—
to an account marked "H. Daniels."

Stephanie's eyes flash.

STEPHANIE
H...?

Marcus doesn't answer yet.

He slides the QUEEN OF SPADES onto the table.

STEPHANIE (CONT'D)
Five of Cups...
Grief. Spite. Punishment.

Miss Petre's face goes still—then she speaks like she's
reading her own autopsy.

MISS PETRE
Natasha talked.
(beat)
She thought the sky made her
untouchable.

A tiny smile—cold.

MISS PETRE (CONT'D)
One rope.
One cut. One sound.

She closes her eyes.

MISS PETRE (CONT'D)
And then... silence.

Stephanie trembles—rage and horror.

Marcus sets down the JACK OF SPADES.

STEPHANIE
And the Chariot...
escape.

She looks at the suitcases.

Krankowski nods calmly.

MR. KRANKOWSKI
Taking charge of destiny.

Marcus's eyes harden.

MARCUS
Carson knew.

Krankowski's voice doesn't change.

MR. KRANKOWSKI
He listened too much.
(beat)
I paid him for silence.
Then I got tired of paying.

Marcus lifts the small bottle from Miss Petre's side table.

A label. A smell.

MARCUS
Chloroform.
Sleep first. Then you snapped his
neck.
(beat) And you kept Fluffy calm...
long enough to stage it.

Stephanie turns—shaking.

STEPHANIE
So SPATA... it's real?

Marcus nods once.

MARCUS
Real.
And invalid.
(beat) Which means the circus goes
to the heirs.

Stephanie exhales—relief tries to arrive.

A knock at the door.

Marcus stands.

MARCUS (CONT'D)
I'll get it.

He opens—

XAVIER stands there.

Calm. Certain.

He steps inside like he belongs.

Stephanie goes rigid.

STEPHANIE
What—

Marcus turns to Miss Petre.

MARCUS
Turn the last card.

Miss Petre's hand trembles as she flips it—

SIX OF CUPS.

Xavier's voice is quiet.

XAVIER
The past always finds its way home.

He doesn't look at Marcus.

His eyes settle on the bank sheet. On the name.

On the photo on the table.

A flicker—gone.

Marcus takes the worn photograph from his pocket.

He places it down.

A younger Miss Avalon. Jason Daniels. And a small boy half-turned from the camera.

Stephanie leans in.

STEPHANIE
That's Jason.

Marcus studies Xavier.

Same eyes. Same stillness.

MARCUS
When I walked into Avalon's
trailer...
that photo was the only thing that
felt... protected.
(beat) I tracked "H. Daniels."

Marcus looks at Xavier.

MARCUS (CONT'D)
You didn't come here for money.

Another beat.

MARCUS (CONT'D)
You came home.

Silence.

Stephanie whispers—shattered.

STEPHANIE
Heirs to Carnival Lights...
Stephanie Daniels... and Xavier
Daniels.

Miss Petre lowers her gaze.

Krankowski removes his glasses.

No one breathes.

Marcus looks to Miss Petre.

MARCUS
Miss Petre... may I have Xavier's
knife?

A long beat.

Miss Petre produces the knife—handles it like a sacrament.

Marcus holds it—then returns it, hilt-first, to Xavier.

Not surrender.

Not trust.

A transfer of truth.

Krankowski swallows.

MR. KRANKOWSKI
Mr. Pierre... you go with Marcus.

Mr. Pierre looks at Miss Petre.

A tear slides down her cheek.

Krankowski nods—final permission.

Mr. Pierre pads to Marcus and sits at his feet.

The room feels emptied.

A knock on the door.

MARCUS
That would be the Erie Police.

Two officers come in.

CUT TO:

EXT. TRAILER - NIGHT

Xavier steps out into the midway glow, already moving on.

MARCUS (O.S.)
Xavi. A word.

Xavier stops. Turns. No nerves. No curiosity.

XAVIER
You want pointers on swallowing the sword?

Marcus steps closer—quiet, surgical.

MARCUS
Charlotte's payments.
(beat)
They weren't charity.

Xavier's face doesn't move.

Stillness.

MARCUS (CONT'D)
Your middle name?

Xavier smiles—small, private.

XAVIER
Houdini.

He turns.

Disappears into the crowd.

Marcus watches—no victory, no defeat.

Understanding.

EPILOGUE MOTION

EXT. CARNIVAL GROUNDS - LATE NIGHT

Rides still run. Half-empty seats.

Marcus carries Mr. Pierre comfortably.

Stephanie walks beside him toward her trailer.

She glances at Marcus—almost fond.

STEPHANIE
Nice work, cop.
If you ever want to join the
circus... let me know.

Marcus texts.

TEXT: Carnival Lights. Solved.

He hits send.

He looks at the Big Top—empty, lit.

INT. BIG TOP - LATER

Marcus steps into the ring alone.

Work lights. Dust.

He starts juggling.

Easy.

Unforced.

Like he's been practicing longer than he admits.

In the shadows:

Igor watches—half-smile.

Cedric watches—unmoved.

IGOR
Quick study.

CEDRIC
Still not family.

Marcus keeps juggling.

MARCUS (V.O.)
Ta-da.

He bows.

Mr. Pierre pads into the ring, raises a paw—almost like a handshake.

Marcus lifts him.

They exit into the hum of the carnival.

INT. BOBBY'S TRAILER - SAME NIGHT

A knock.

Bobby opens the door—smug.

BOBBY
Took you long enough. Where were you?

VOICE (O.S.)
Shhhh.
(beat)
Family business.

Xavier steps in.

From deeper inside—

IGOR (O.S.)
Разденься.
(Get undressed.)
Bobby's grin spreads.

Xavier removes his shirt. Igor, shirtless in bed. Taps beside him. Smiles like a hungry tiger.

FLUFFY (O.S.)

ROAR!

The trailer light clicks off.

Glasses clink.

A low laugh.

EXT. CARNIVAL GROUNDS - NIGHT

Marcus walks alone past games and food stalls.

He passes a warped mirror booth.

Three reflections.

One: the man he was. One: the man he could be. One: someone he doesn't recognize.

He keeps walking.

XAVIER (V.O.)

Tomorrow... I'm someone else.

MARCUS (V.O.)

Sounds lonely.

Carousel turns behind him. Empty horses rising and falling.

XAVIER (V.O.)

Only if you hang on to yesterday.

Marcus reaches the edge of the grounds.

Turns back once.

One ride still turns in the distance.

Alone.

MARCUS (V.O.)

That's the thing about carnivals...

(beat)

They don't wait for you to be ready.

(beat)

They keep going...

(beat)

until somebody cuts the power.

The DANIELS CARNIVAL LIGHTS sign flickers.

One letter dies.

Then another.

The last bulb pops.

BLACK OUT.

THE END.