**Chapter 7**

A man strolled down the boardwalk. He was over six feet tall, wearing faded blue jeans that had come in and out of style a dozen times in the last half-century. His shoulder-length hair spilled over the collar of his white shirt and the lapel of the grey vest that was partially buttoned on his lower half.

He had a large brass belt buckle shaped like a Ravin and dark black boots with pointy toes in the shape of silver cobras. On his right hand, he wore a silver skull on his ring finger and a watch on a black band. Around his neck, a long chain held a single key with a sharp tip, and his left wrist was adorned with a chain-linked bracelet.

From far away, he appeared to be a distinguished older man with greying sideburns and a receding hairline. Up close, you could swim in his features, trying to determine his age. His skin glistened like it was almost pixelated.

His eyes had dark circles around them that looked like he was wearing mascara, and his face was covered in lines that depicted a long, hard life. He whistled a rendition of Misty as he strolled down the planks without a care in the world.

Life was everywhere around him. Young children played on the playground while teenagers took turns shooting basketballs for Cupie dolls or throwing darts at balloons. The line to Ripley’s Believe it or not wrapped around the building, and Kohrs Brothers Ice Cream was six people deep. The calliope played while the Merry-Go-Round swept happy faces and a few dizzy children in circles.

The man had gone by several names over the years. The one that he had gravitated toward recently was Rex.  It was simple and unassuming. Rex could be anybody from anywhere, and he was just that. Anybody from Anywhere. He smiled and looked at a small child running past him. The child looked at him and burst into tears. This brought Rex a strange kind of joy.

He had arrived back in Ocean City, Maryland, a little over a year ago. He wasn’t very keen on the winter months, but early fall was perfect. The life surrounding him made him feel young again, and he rejoiced in finding a place so full of activity and action with mild temperatures.

Rex stood next to a No Smoking sign. He flicked a silver zippo lighter and sparked the flint. The wind blowing off the ocean was strong. The wick lit and blew to the side but was not extinguished. This lighter had been once owned by a paratrooper in WWII. This model was made to light in the air while jumping out of an airplane. This ocean breeze was child’s play. He lit a cigarette. A woman made a disgusting glance toward him, and he hissed at her. She recoiled and grabbed her child, whisking her away from the awful man.

Rex took a long drag of his cigarette and exhaled the smoke through his nose. He pushed himself off the wall and continued his stroll. It was half past eleven, and the boardwalk showed no signs of closing anytime soon. Rex had a sense that he had been on this stretch before, many years ago. It was different then, with fewer vendors and only a Ferris wheel. People had been dressed differently, and bathing suits covered much more of both men and women than they did today.

“People don’t change; only the styles do,” Rex whispered to himself. Two girls in low-halter tops and tight jeans passed him.

“And I like their style.” He said out loud. They turned to check him out and smiled at them.

The girl on the right winked at him.  She wasn’t a day over 19 years old.  Rex turned and walked toward them.  They stopped and giggled.

“What are you ladies up to this evening?” Rex asked. His attire was peculiarly excessive, with the belt buckle and pointed boots.

“Just looking for a good time. Do you have any beer?” The girls asked, cementing that they could not procure it themselves.

“Beer? I believe I have some of those White Claws you ladies like these days. Would that be sufficient?” Rex asked, speaking directly to their generation.

“Yea, that would be bussing. Where are you staying?” The bleach blonde on the left asked.

Rex pointed to a hotel that sat above a pizzeria.

“Right there. Close enough for you? I even have a balcony.” He smiled.

It was a smile that he had used a thousand times in the past. The girls giggled and whispered to each other.

“Ready?” The brunette asked, putting her arm into a triangle for Rex to slide in.

“Ready.” He said, taking their arms and leading them through the crowd to the lobby of his hotel.

He passed the lobby attendant, who looked up at him puzzled. Rex passed his hand over his face, and the attendant looked befuddled before resuming the crossword puzzle he was struggling through. Rex escorted them to the elevator and up to the tenth floor. Within moments, they were sitting on Rex’s deck, toasting cans of watermelon white claws.

“To the end of summer.” Rex raised his can.

The girls giggled and took sips of their drinks. Before long, they had finished twelve. The girls were swaying back and forth and slurring their speech on the balcony. Rex helped them back into his room and sat them down on the bed. The girls were young and lacked the tolerance of an adult. They each had five cans in less than 90 minutes. Rex had only had two.

“We really should go, Mister.” The blonde girl said. She was slurring her words and fighting a spell of dizziness.

“So soon?” Rex asked.

“Why don’t we play a little game?” He said and smiled out of the corner of his mouth.

“What kind of game?” The brunette asked, swaying back and forth.

Before she could finish her sentence, she collapsed on the bed, unconscious.  Her friend screamed and tried to get up and run to the door. Her legs felt like they were encased in cement, and she could not lift them. They turned to rubber, and she collapsed on the floor, her vision slowly clouding. The last thing she saw was Rex removing his jacket and hanging it on the back of the desk chair.