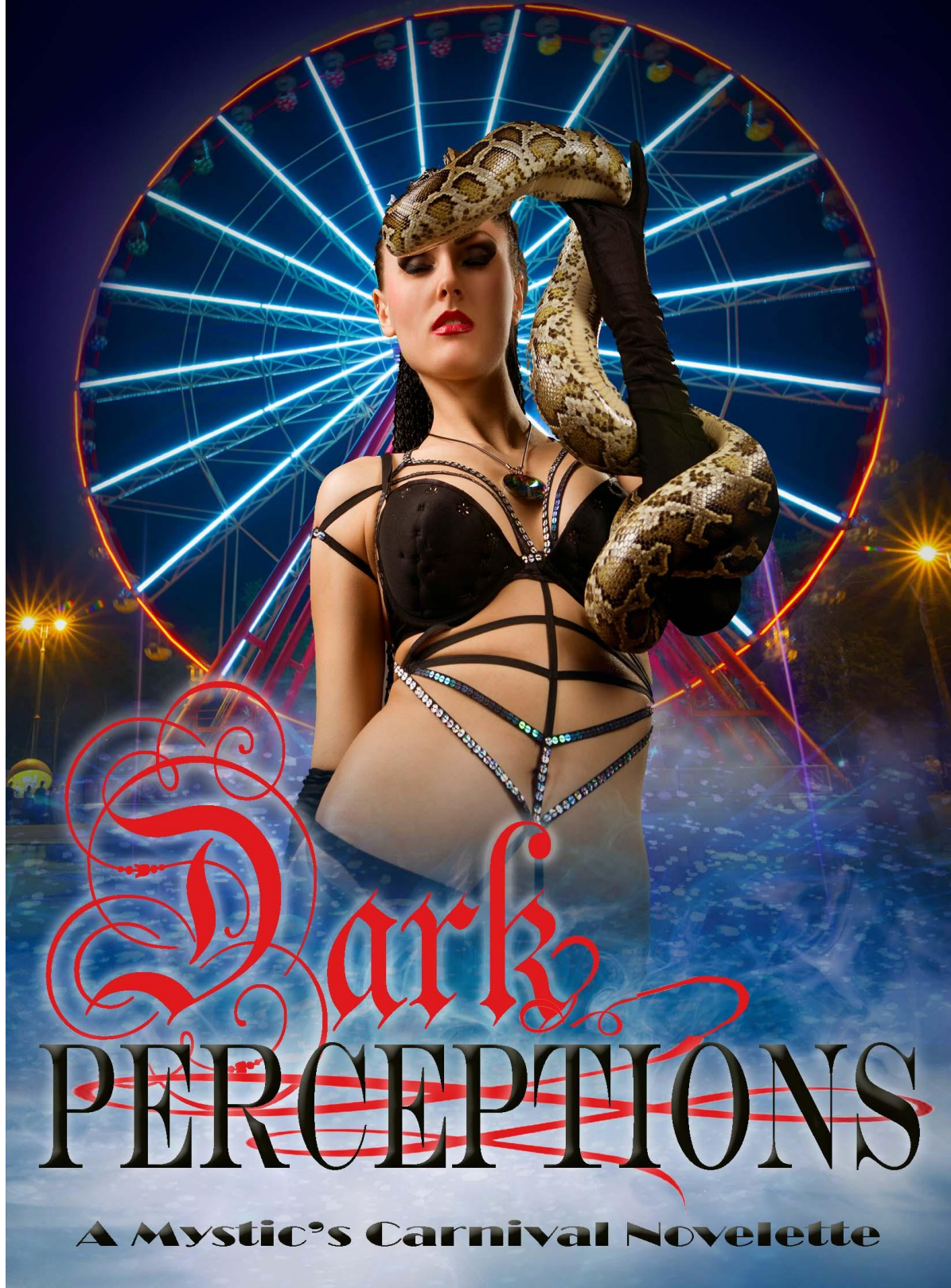


DEBRA KRISTI



Dark
PERCEPTIONS

A Mystic's Carnival Novelette

A Mystic's Carnival Story

Dark Perceptions

Debra Kristi



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Dedicated to my father.

The best role model any child could ever wish for. I would be a very different person today
without him.

Welcome

Mystic's Carnival, you may have heard of it—the name has been whispered in quiet conversation, mentioned in folktale. Many believe it does not exist. Let me assure you, it's as real as the air around you. If you are lucky or so in need, you may be among the few who come to know the wonder of this mysterious destination. It is not your average carnival, no, not at all. The show of twirling lights, motor rides, and funny sideshows never moves, never sleeps, and can never, ever be found unless so wished by the carnival herself. Is she a living, breathing entity? I'll let you be the judge.

Follow now, if you will, into the story, and let our characters introduce you to the splendor of their world and the mystery that can only be found at Mystic's Carnival.

Safe travels, weary reader~

Zeke

Chapter One

Emotion's Knot

The stars above exploded, expanding into a forever cascade of the Milky Way and encompassing every available space around us. I sucked back my breath and held up the small joint to examine it. Was the drug truly so strong or was my tolerance that low?

I handed the slim wrap of paper back to Matt, folded my hands behind my head, and gazed up at the night sky. "I feel like I'm in the middle of a sparkler on the Fourth of July."

Matt chuckled. "Pretty wild." His voice wheezed, holding in his last inhale. "Heaven help us if your parents find out what we're doing, I'll be toast. Let's not make this a habit."

I didn't respond. Instead I allowed a heavy sigh to escape. It burst with a whoosh, as if it had been held prisoner within the confines of my chest for ages.

This was an all-new high for me—or low, depending on how you wanted to look at things. In all my years of high school I had never tried any kind of drug, and here I was giving in to the demon of temptation in my first year of junior college. But tonight was an exception. I'd wanted something to dull my senses. Matt had been good enough to come through. My feet dangled off the edge of his car and we sprawled across the hood together. In our silence, I felt a lifetime of emotions.

Since we'd met, I'd come to crave Matt to an almost unbearable level. And yet, I now questioned everything I'd felt. I questioned love and wanting. I questioned the solidarity of relationships. Not that it was Matt's fault. The blame fell squarely on my parents. They had shown me how quickly perfection could be shattered. Or at least, the perception of perfection. In one short week they had destroyed everything. Our family, our happy home, their union.

Matt's foot rubbed against mine in one long, slow stroke, and he watched me with tenderness in his gaze.

My face flushed. "What are you looking at?"

His hand drifted toward me, his finger tracing the edge of my hair. "You. I could stare at you for hours. Tell me what's bothering you. Please talk to me." His knuckle brushed the curve of my neck.

I bit the inside of my lip and looked away, turning my watchful eyes back to the stars. "My parents are getting a divorce," I said. I couldn't have been more glum in my tone, but I hated the thought of a temporary separation, much less a permanent one. My parents had always been the ideal couple—or so it'd seemed. Forever finding comfort in their silence. Never needing constant reassurances of their love.

Matt turned toward me. The metal beneath us popped and groaned. "Damn, Sara. I'm so sorry. That's tough." He reached for my hand, pulling it free from beneath my head. "Is there anything I can do?"

"Has anyone in your family gotten a divorce?"

He shook his head. "Nah. But my dad's been having an affair for almost two years. So I'm no stranger to a messed up family life."

"An affair? How did you find—?" I twisted to face him and the blanket beneath us shifted, sliding against the metal of the car. Suddenly we were slipping in one quick glide off the hood, just like a kiddie ride. We landed in a dirty heap and a burst of laughter.

We rose in a mini dust cloud, our giggles still at full momentum. The desert landscape swung around me, confusing my equilibrium, and I stumbled a step to the side. Matt's hand shot out, steadying me and warming my heart. My feelings jumbled into a giant knot, slamming my glee to a halt. No longer did I know what I wanted, the prospects of true and pure lovenowconfused me. The pot in my system made it more difficult for me to figure out even the simplest of things.

My body slumped and I found stability sitting on the corner of the car. In a quick move that surprised both of us, I snatched the joint from Matt's hand and tossed it as far as I could. "I've had enough. Remind me of this the next time I have a brilliant idea."

Matt leaned into me, his hands caressing the sides of my face, his breath heating my skin. "If that's what you really want."

"You're not mad are you?"

"Why should I be?" His lips twitched, curving into a smile. "I still have you. You're the only fix I need."

"Lame," I whispered.

"Yeah, but you liked it." His forehead pressed against mine, bringing his lips excruciatingly close. I wanted to kiss him with every cell in my body, and yet—if relationships were doomed to end in destructionworthy of an apocalypse, why purposely put my heart through the pain?

My hands trembled as I traced his arms up to his hands. I didn't pull away, nor did I advance. I remained still on the point of indecision.

His lips grazed across the top of mine ever so lightly, inciting an eruption of chills all over my body. I ached for him. And I ached to pull away from him. Run away from him and every relationship that could ever hurt me.

A thump rang through the peaceful night, then a bump, and another bump. A car with its radio beating at a deafening volume pulled up and parked several car lengths away. The couple inside ignored us, but continued to serenade every living creature within a half mile.

Matt studied the new arrival with a squint to the eye. He looked back at me. "Time to go?" I nodded and pulled the blanket off the ground, wrapping it around myself. "Okay," he said, then held my hand and walked me to the passenger side of the car, opening the door for me.

After he slipped in behind the wheel and started the engine, he paused, shifting to look at me. "Don't let your parents' breakup define you, Sara. It's not like divorce is genetic."

I stared at my hands for a moment before responding. "Working on it," I said, and lowered my head.

The night was lit bright by nothing more than the full moon and the car headlights. The road was quiet, surrounded by endless acres of undeveloped land. A solo truck rambled by, kicking more dust into the air. Matt waited until the vehicle was a good distance past us, then pulled out onto the pavement, leaving the screech of metal music behind.

Chapter Two

Painted

I sat perfectly still with my eyes closed and hands laid out flat in my lap. The darkness was all consuming. Not a single ray of sunshine penetrated the barrier my eyelids provided. I expected to hear my teacher scold, "Pay attention, Ms. Fairchild!"

Except, I knew I wasn't in class. The smell of greasy popcorn and overcooked hotdogs was all wrong for a day at school. The whispers weren't right, either. No, I was having one of those stressed-out daydreams. Like when you envisioned yourself showing up late the first day of school with no books and no idea where to go. Or when you saw yourself walking into class naked. I hated that one in particular. Everyone always laughed and stared, making me feel more insecure in my skin than I already did.

God, school could be *sobrutal*. Thankfully I wasn't there now. I was...

I was...

I was where, exactly?

Light flickered across my lids, flittering through, turning them a burnt red. I bowed my head.

Where was I? I couldn't remember. Blinking the sleep away, I opened my eyes in search of the answer.

The hem of my dress was frayed. Damn. Rubbing the edge between my finger and thumb, I tried to place the cause. Mom wasn't going to be happy. I'd broken her down with a battle assault of *beggage* and this was my first time to wear the new dress. Her disappointed face already burned an imprint into my thoughts.

A sound rose all around me and I realized I wasn't alone. Not only was I not alone, but I could easily be lost in the crowd of God-knows-how-many-hundreds around me. Yet I recognized none of them. No family. No Matt. The people chuckled and whistled at something below. Something center stage. I peered down.

My breath leaped back into my throat and my heart paused.

Clowns.

My last meal churned.

Spotlights left, right, center, everywhere illuminated. And everywhere there were clowns.

My entire body turned to fortified lead. Weighted into my seat.

Clowns flipped on the trapeze. Clowns danced on the wire. Clowns played friendly in the mouth of monsters.

Or unusually large lions, in this case.

Ever since my dad took me to the circus when I was six, I'd avoided the too-happy comedians. A white-faced, red-nosed, pointy-haired buffoon had scared the pee out of me—literally—slamming his face in mine and asking to lick my candy. My rainbow-swirled lollipop. Not cool, crazy Ronald McDonald.

Shivers. My heart jumped like a jackrabbit off a burning skillet, my knees jerked, and my hands flinched. Popcorn flew over the bleachers. Something fluttered in my stomach and my chest tightened. I looked down at the empty bag in my hand. I hadn't realized I'd been holding anything. Not until I'd spilled crunchy treats all over the dark filth at my feet.

I hated clowns!

Hated them with a passion.

The thought absorbed me, soaked through me like water to a sponge. And yet, I couldn't tear my gaze from the multiple freak shows occurring in the ring. From the clowns—the disturbingly macabre clowns.

Why was I here, staring at clowns?

Drab red and white striped walls. Creepy, delirious music. Pungent kernel corn and sweet cake aroma. Twisted carnival acts. Where was *here*? I couldn't recall. And that, quite possibly, disturbed me most of all.

Think, dammit, think.

Everything, getting here, where here was, my memory, was a black swirly mess. A big *nothing*. At best, blots of recall were all I had from before the lights had come on in the Big Top. Smoke and cigarettes—a mist of escapism mingled with pot.

I sat beneath a colossal striped tent. It draped above and fell around an enormous oval space, trapping everything, everyone, me, within its clutches. It looked old, tattered, and stained. The light within, dim, with the exception of the various spotlights dancing on and around the ostentatious clown acts.

The air weighed upon my body, like someone was pressing on me, pushing the oxygen out of my lungs.

I coughed, struggled to breathe.

I was alone, the space beside me empty. I searched again for someone I knew but saw no one. Fear bubbled up inside of me and I fought to maintain control. My eyes narrowed in on the girl sitting in front of me. A blonde, the girl's hair brushed up into a pony high on her head, exposing her long neckline and an unexpected glow there.

"Is that a tattoo?" I mumbled and leaned forward. I'd never seen a tattoo glow before. Shaped like a symbol, it reminded me of a letter from the Islamic alphabet.

A shimmer ran over the odd shape and my breath caught in my throat, an awful sour taste lingering there, until I let it out in a long wind. Without thought my hand reached out, wanting to touch the marking, run my fingertip along the glossy lines. But I stopped, hesitated, my gaze darting to the side and the man sitting beside her. The couple had their hands intertwined in a hold resembling an infinity knot. The sign of affection shot a pang to my heart, and lit an image of my parents at the back of my mind.

If my parents couldn't make it work, what chance did Matt and I have? I blinked the thought away and averted my gaze from the couple's hands. Maybe what I should be

considering is what it meant that Matt wasn't here with me now. My stare settled on another glowing mark—this time at the back of the guy's neck.

He had one too!

I looked down the row, along the backs and necks of all the people crowding the long bench before me. So many people marked with symbols, glowing in various colors, shapes, and sizes. Not everyone, but enough. My insides stirred like a nest of hornets had been set loose to swarm wildly within my gut. My hand rubbed at the back of my neck, trying to determine if any symbol existed upon my own skin.

"Hey, Saraaaaa."

The voice wheezed frighteningly-frisky at my side. At my ear.

A scream catapulted from my throat. I lurched forward, out of my seat, away from the grimly-ghoulish circus clown leaning over my shoulder.

Where had he come from? Why had he come?

His face bled paint, his teeth yellowed, breath rank with rot and decay. The old silk costume he wore, now stained with perspiration and old food, hung off his body two sizes too large. Popcorn stuck between the tangles of his hair.

My feet shifted beneath me. Moving without thought or plan, bolting for the exit—my way out of *clownland*.

Too many people. Rows packed tight like the teeth of a zipper. Feet and legs created a tangled web designed to encumber or trip or trap. I charged my way through. Away from him. Toward my escape. I pushed, jumped, leaped over into the next row, heading for the main aisle.

Each step, each stride, clowns laughed at me. They sneered at me. And I feared exactly what they would do to me. I tripped and stumbled and fumbled for balance, my foot catching the wicked end of a wrenched board on the first step. Filth and grime, crushed popcorn, stale peanuts, chunks of sticky cotton candy raced up to meet me. My face kissed the plank.

I inhaled the too sweet, sugary eats, feeling the nausea curl in my gut. This was a twisted version of a high school, fear-fueled daydream. *It can't be real*, I reasoned.

Everything under the Big Top stilled, like the clock had taken a time-out. Dust bunnies danced in my face, my name sung in a soft melody beyond my mind's reach. People around me stared, but moved not a muscle to help.

Just a dream. It's just a dream. I repeated the words in my head.

The people looked away and, like hypnotized zombies, returned their gaze to the show in the center ring. Slowly I picked myself up off the ground, willing my body to keep moving. Needing to keep moving. One step, two steps, then a third. My pace increased, my energy returning. I wouldn't let one falter stop me. I moved down the path as fast as my feet could manage. Maneuvering directly toward the melting clown, waiting with arms open wide. The one in stained blue checkered pants and orange striped suspenders.

He stepped forward, blocked my path. The paint dripped off his face like blood or pus and his rotted, yellow teeth reeked of decay. "Where are you going? You'll miss the finale." His eyes widened, filled not with question, but with madness and craze.

My mind skipped all over, an acid war ensuing within. I didn't want to stop, yet I didn't want to turn back. I had to go forward, toward the way out. "Umm." A feeble sound leaked from my lips and I stepped to the side, but his hand leaped up, creating a barrier. "I don't

mean to be rude. I only want some fresh air,"I said. My eyes darted from side to side, searching. Forever searching.

There was nothing. No way out.

Looking back at him, at his egg yolk, messy hair, a croak escaped my throat. My heart skittered over beats, broken in its rhythm. A moment passed. Time was up. I moved fast, twisting beneath his arm, slipping from his cotton-gloved grip, and scampered down the remainder of the stairs with him calling my name at my back.

I didn't stop.

I didn't look back.

I shoved giant bouquets of shiny balloons out of my way and ran. Ran from the tent. Ran from the clowns. Ran for my life.

Chapter Three

Puppet Master

My heart pounded like my kid brother going wild on his drums, my breath heaved and throbbed, my feet stung with the pricks of the zillion invisible needles I envisioned crossing to make my escape.

I couldn't explain what was making me feel this way, but something slithered over my soul, caused my core to howl, to scream, *Wrong!*

And my gut didn't lie.

Everything about the circus tent, the acts within, the clowns, was all wrong. Seriously, terribly, horribly wrong. Starting with me and my sudden awareness in the middle of it all. Where were the people I knew, where was my sense of familiarity?

"Wake up, wake up, wake up!" I repeated in my head, willing myself out of the nightmare. But nothing changed and my bedroom walls failed to appear.

I escaped out the tent flap. Clinched it closed behind me, knuckles clutched so tight they drained white. "Holy clown crazy," I mumbled to the empty air, and finally let a drop of relief soothemy freaked soul, if only a tad.

Surely I was having some kind of mental breakdown. Or maybe this was all a side effect of the stupid joint I had smoked. I shook my head, wanted to drop to the ground and cry, but didn't. I still had no idea where I was or how I'd gotten there, I needed to figure it out. I clutched my arms around myself and looked for anything recognizable—a spark of memory. Surely I hadn't come alone. *There has to be someone I know around here somewhere.*

"Matt?" I whimpered.

The crisp night air bit at my skin, extracting a horde of goosebumps. Wind thrashed my hair with the sharp, snap skill of a whip. Quivering cold, I hugged myself tighter and let my location sink in. Now outside the Big Top, the tent at my back, I realized this was far more than a circus. An entire carnival unfolded before me.

Game booths, food stations, and rides piled high and tight. The air was perfumed thick with fatty foods and body odor. Carnie voices, a full regiment, singing and dealing, moving with the skilled tongues of auctioneers, bounced around and bombarded me.

Overhead, an intricate weave of grey, clouded gloom loomed, a sky lay burdened with weather waiting to drop. The announcing thrums of a roller derby quaked from its feathery flexes and folds, and for the briefest moment the night brightened. Its light show reflected in the small spattering of Mylar balloons flittering among the crowd. At least, I thought it did. Hard to discern when a trillion lights blazed and twirled around me. I felt jumpy, itchy.

“Hey.” A familiar, calming voice came from behind. Followed by a firm, yet gentle clasp on my arm, just above the wrist, pulling at me. My distress already breaking into dust, blowing away at his touch, I turned to face Matt.

I looked up into his beautifully tender, concerned face and my heart swelled at the sight of him. Then I remembered—love was fiction. My emotions warred and I tried to remember coming here with him. Even planning to come. Remember or not, in love or not, a notch of unease slipped away with his presence beside me and I wanted to throw myself into his arms.

“You alright?” His face pinched, and darkened lines dug into his forehead, casting his eyes in shadow. “You didn’t wait for me. I’d walked half the distance back from the restrooms when I saw you running out. You were so fast I couldn’t catch up.” He glanced over his shoulder, then turned his melting pools of chocolate on me. Damn those eyes, they made me want to do so many unspeakable things. Not that I felt like doing any of them now, after the frightening clown encounter. Instead, I let Matt fight off the cold, rubbing his hands up and down my arms and staring into my eyes for infinity. If infinity was merely seconds.

I would have been perfectly pleased to stay that way forever, barring the scary clown tent. I loved Matt. Okay, maybe love was a wee premature. We’d only been dating a month. But I had crushed on him from the first moment I’d seen him. All California tan, sandy blond surfer hair, and ethereal brown eyes capable of instantly turning my heart to goo when he looked at me like he did now. He was the perfect made-for-Sara package, with his gentle manners and witty humor. And like my father was doing to my mom, Matt would break my heart someday. Someday—but not today.

Right now I didn’t want to think about what may come. But I couldn’t help thinking about what he’d just said. Did I remember Matt had gone to the restroom? I think maybe I did, vaguely. For some reason that made me feel safer, more secure. It gave me a tangible memory here. I pushed up on my tiptoes, hopeful Matt would chase away all the insecurities this place created within me with one of his kisses.

I couldn’t deny the truth. I was head-over-tippy-toes smitten.

“It’s brisk.” Matt stepped back, shrugged off his thick, leather jacket, and wrapped it around me, proving chivalry wasn’t eaten by scary things lurking in ratty old circus tents.

I dropped flat on my feet, a tiny frown worming its way across my heart. I knew feeling sad was the wrong reaction. He was a prince, wrapping his cloak around me was magical. Still—I had wanted the kiss.

Matt tugged the jacket closed across the front of me, then stepped closer. So close his breath thawed the tip of my nose. “Maybe this will help fight the chill attacking you,” he said, a seductive lure dancing in the tone of his words. It set a battalion of goosebumps into red alert. They stood at full attention across my arms.

Matt’s tone made me hope. Hope for warmth, and so much more. Turning my face to the sky, I made a wish upon a hurtling star. Any sane person would pray for a quick exit out of this lunatic operation, and I did. But I also tacked on a small request, keeping something more interesting than a warm jacket in mind. Running the cusp of my tongue along the round of my lips, I envisioned his mouth pressed against mine.

“Saraaaa.”

And just like that, my little dream imploded, attention snapped from Matt with a cold shiver slinking down my spine.

“Mmmaaatttt.”

Our names hissed from the Big Top. My muscles tightened, I flinched, spun around, and faced the exit from which I’d found freedom mere moments before. The safety of Matt’s arms shattered, fear charged in at a full frontal attack.

Why had we stayed? Why hadn’t we kept moving?

Shock rocked me backwards. Three hideous, heavily painted, overdone comedians pushed through the doorway. The clowns. The terrible, horrible clowns were coming...after me!

No. After *us*!

The painted horrors pushed their way out through the jaws of a gruesome two-story clown face plastered across the front of the tent. A humongous three-dimensional frame I’d failed to notice upon my leave. So ironic, and symbolic. Anyone walking in was swallowed by a monster clown. When I’d walked out, I’d been spit out.

Matt’s arm tightened around my waist, pulling me against him. Together we stepped back, away from the horror accosting us. I envisioned the clown tunnel retreating, growing ever smaller and smaller and smaller. We took one step, two steps, then froze.

Colorful arms and legs of terror spewed from the clown’s mouth, looking like the tentacles of a demon-spawned sea creature. Laughing, lyrical voices sang around my head. “Why did you go? Don’t you know? Don’t they all know?” Their ludicrous made-up faces danced up and down, swung round and round the curves of my mind, making permanent marks in my memory. Fear clutched my heart just like I clutched at Matt’s arm, attempting to drag him away, to flee.

But his feet were rooted, he wouldn’t budge. What did he see that I did not? What held him captivated? I maneuvered, found his face open and inquisitive like a child’s, almost glowing. Under different circumstance it would be beautiful. But this wasn’t the time or the place for beauty, and his action—or reaction—made no sense.

“Know?” he whispered, the word nothing more than a breath lingering on his lips. He took a tentative step forward.

Panic stirred to a frenzy. A witch’s brew in the pit of my stomach. Thank God the clowns weren’t advancing. Why were they so still?

I moved behind Matt, gripped his shirt, and tugged, all the while my blood raced through my body, urged me to be quick and run. The arch of my forehead found refuge in the bow of his back, where I leaned into him, pressed my eyes tight, and whispered a prayer. A prayer for deliverance and escape from this hell. Escape to the safety of Matt’s scar.

“Get! Get back. Stop scaring them!” A voice thick with power entered our standoff. With it came a sense of order. A feeling that everything would be all right. “All of you now, get movin’!” There was hesitation in the clowns’ movements, a wince, a flinch, but it was clear who pulled their puppeteer strings. My shoulders eased, my fingers unfurling, guiding my arms around Matt’s waist, pulling him to me, my shield against foe. I had to look around his shoulder to see the short, husky man taking command. The glow of the marks etched on the back of Matt’s neck shown bright before me. A brilliant aquamarine.

“Go!” the man boomed.

At his word, of the three zombified, would-be-funny-men attackers, two turned back into the tent and disappeared. No questions. No fight. No hesitation. The third stayed. His eyes

fixed, glaring past the mandating man to us, to me. "But, Higgins," he complained. "They belo—"

The short, stout man straightened his back, firmed his shoulders, and punched the air with his index finger. It waved between them like a metronome. "Nah, ah, ah." No other words left his lips. Only three small vowels. The clown's face dropped, darkened like a storm cloud, then he vanished, leaving the front of the tent barren.

I pressed the heels of my hands to my eyes and rubbed. Cleared my vision, the fog from my mind, and swung my head around absorbing everything. Everything about where I was and the kind of stuff located around me—again. Not only was it unusual, it was damn strange. Yes, there were games and rides like the average carnival. Lots of lights, color, laughter, and yummy flavors to set your tummy to rumble. But things lurked in the shadows. Or at the corner of your eye. Unspeakable things.

No. They didn't even bother to lurk. They moved freely amongst the crowd, reflected in exterior Fun House mirrors, or bobbing balloons.

"Come on." I pulled at Matt's shirt, the belt loop on his jeans, urging, willing him to move with me. "Let's get to the parking lot, find the car, and get out of here." My nerves cranked up, pushed a tear over the threshold of my eye. I held it at bay, refusing to cry, no matter how scared I felt. And I felt pretty buried in fear.

Matt turned into me, his arms linking with mine. Such a simple move, but a bold move, an encouraging move, and it fed me the strength I needed to hold all the pieces of myself together. "Let's," he said, a tad breathless.

"Always the strong one, Sara," the man behind Matt said.

My body stiffened and my hand slipped down, found Matt's. Tightening around his, intertwining our fingers.

"Don't," Matt whispered at my ear.

I couldn't help it. Couldn't take his warning. I turned to the small man standing before the Big Top. I believed the clowns had called him Higgins. He was short in stature, but made up for it in power of presence. He didn't scare me, not exactly. Everything about this place made my skin itch. Everything except for him, and I couldn't explain why. I looked him over, studied him.

From his side pocket he produced a handkerchief, dabbed at his balding head. His overcoat was wrinkled and collar damp with sweat. "I apologize for my boys' behavior. They sometimes lack finesse. It doesn't mean their hearts aren't in the right place."

Matt pulled me deeper into his side. "Who are you and why are you talking to us?" His voice rumbled through his ribcage, causing my senses to tingle with its protectiveness.

The little man stuffed his hands into his pockets. "The name is Higgins. Let's just say I'm a friend. Here to help you."

"Is that so?"

"Of course. Sent away those fellows bothering you, didn't I?"

"That you did. But it doesn't explain any of this. Why were they following us? Where are we? And what are we doing here?" Matt leaned forward, putting weight into his questions. "Better yet, how did we get here?"

"My, you're full of questions, aren't you? Don't you remember?"

"No. No, I..." Matt shook his head. "It's all a bit fuzzy. I only want to get us to the car and out of here."

Matt's memory was as bad as mine. I should have questioned him immediately, instead of basking in his presence. I didn't think we'd smoked that much. I pushed my thoughts away and pressed forward, into the conversation. "We want to go home."

The strange man calling himself Higgins chuckled and small cracks formed at the edges of his eyes. His cheeks rose and turned soft pink, brightening his grey peepers. "I expected that coming from you, my dear."

"You did?" I squeezed behind Matt, seeking his body as a shield. But why? I was strong. I could be tough and stand up for myself. "Then could you direct us toward the parking lot?"

"Parking lot?" Higgins said the words like they were a question to be pondered more than a request. "I don't know if you'll find a parking lot. Unless, of course, she wants you to find one."

"What are you talkin' about?" Matt straightened, stood tall. "She who?"

"The carnival, of course."

"Dude. You're crazy." Matt spun around, grabbed my hand firm in his, and started moving us down the dark aisle, away from *him* and the Big Top. Matt's unusual neck marking bounced like a firefly showing me the way. Games and sideshow tents pushed in at our sides. Like space was compressing, getting smaller by the minute. Trying to trap us in Freak Man's Alley. Wolfman, human pincushion, woman with two faces, all images jumping off posters and swimming around me mockingly, scratching and nipping at me. Maybe it was my imagination; my overwhelming desire to rid us of this place churned every horror movie scenario around in my mind, like a vacillating jar of maggots.

"If you won't let me help you, please listen to Sebastian. He'll get you to Big Eli." Higgins's voice shrank behind us as we made our way past canvas tents shrouded in purple and white. Black pennants hung across the tent fronts, flapping in the night breeze. A breeze that brought the stink of midway sawdust and animal manure.

"Sebastian. Eli," Matt grumbled. "More people we don't need to deal with."

"We're going to be okay." The words stumbled out loud and clear, with me needing to hear them to believe them. I looked to Matt, wanting him to believe in them, too. I saw him, really saw him, all of him, for the first time since the crazy ordeal had begun, and my mind clouded. "What happened?" My voice pitched, rose an octave, before I lurched over and pulled at his shirt to get a closer look. Suspicious red stains littered what should have been crisp white cotton. I stretched the fabric for a better inspection.

He didn't react. Didn't glance down. Instead, he kept his gaze steady on me. "Don't worry about it, Sara. Probably just a spilled drink. That's why I went to the restroom, to clean up." With a gentleman's touch he removed my grip and eased my hands into his own, turning us back on our mission, moving down the path, urgency fueling our pace. "I want to get out, before something else gives us trouble. Like that guy the little dude mentioned."

My feet raced to keep up and I stretched my neck, hoping he'd hear when I spoke. "Do you think that's what the old guy meant when he told us to look for Big Eli, or...or, um..." I searched my memory for the other name. "Sebastian?"

Matt pushed his way past a large group gawking at the two-headed, four-breasted woman in the tent to our left. "Hell if I know." His words forced their way between clenched teeth.

"Eli isn't a person, honey."

The voice wrapped around us, sweeter than sugar and smooth as lotion sliding over freshly shaved skin. Slick and slippery.

Matt stopped so fast I thought he might trip over his own feet. I practically stumbled into him. Looking at the woman standing next to him, I could understand why. She was a mantrap, for sure. Exotic and sensual, sex oozed from every fiber of her being. Even the way she flicked her finger across her shoulder made *me* want to succumb to her every desire. Heat stirred an unsatisfied hunger below my belt and I shifted uncomfortably. It wasn't right. She wasn't right. Like the rest of this place.

Chapter Four

Freak Show

I took a step back and held Matt's arm tight. The woman's eyes shone bright on mine. Yellow eyes, cold and calculating like a serpent's. As much as she made me want her, I also hated her. Hated her with every ounce of moral fiber flowing within me. Hated her for making me desire her and fear her all at once. But mostly for making me want her.

A snake, dark as the darkest night, slithered around her midsection. Its long body wound around her torso and up to her shoulders, wrapping until its beady red eyes rested in the nape of her neck, the flicker of its tongue in constant motion. Had to be some kind of crazy trick of the eye—the snake appeared to be slipping straight out of her belly button. I shook my head. A gargantuan serpent, built to crush large dogs or small horses, and the ease in which the woman caressed the reptile was a show of power.

Matt moved closer, his eyes fixed on her. "I'm sorry, did you say something?"

Her lips widened, curving up to the starry night, showing a fine set of pearly, sharp choppers. "Eli, honey. You were talking about Big Eli."

Matt said nothing. Drool would have dripped from his lip if he were any less civil. Completely captivated by the flashes of red she twirled teasingly in her hand, he stared at the glossy apple as if he hadn't eaten in days. She held it just above her breast. I pulled on his arm, yet he didn't budge. My frustration ratcheted up several notches.

It was the apple. The damn red apple. Like Eve tempted Adam, so was this serpent woman attempting to lure Matt. I didn't like it. Pushing between them, I snatched away the wretched apple and tossed it out into the crowd of the darkened midway.

With a hiss and a rattle of its tail, the snake snapped at me. I tripped backwards into Matt's arms, avoiding the strike.

The woman before us, covered in glimmering snake scales in all the right places, snickered and praised her slithering beast with long, slow strokes. "Now Nahash, that wasn't nice. That's not how we treat our guests." Her gaze turned on me, and an undistinguishable look glinted across her features. "Any guest at all." Her hand lifted to her lips, a new apple caged between her fingers, and she took a bite, then offered it to Matt.

Yanking with all my strength, I attempted to pull him back to me, away from her. "Come on, let's go!"

Matt's eyes were vacant. His arm swung across my chest, knocking me away. I tumbled sideways and slammed into a body in the crowd. "So sorry," I stammered, picking myself up, before stumbling again.

The man I'd fallen into reached out to steady me, but I pulled away. His thick, dark cloak and hood frightened me. Even with all the shadow the hood cast upon his features, I could tell his face was covered in skeletal paint, partially worn or rubbed away, and that made it all the more disturbing. His mere presence sent an unequivocal chill up my spine.

He grabbed my wrist and his touch was neither warm nor cold. It was almost nonexistent. "I didn't mean to scare you. You bumped into me. Remember?" He lifted two fingers to his left temple and closed his eyes. "Besides, something tells me you're in need of a fortune."

I yanked my hand away. That was the lamest salespitch I had ever heard. I wouldn't get my fortune read by a skeleton-painted come-on artist. "Later!!" I spit out, then spun around and hightailed it toward Matt to save him from the lady-snake-bitch.

"Was it the cloak? It's too much for you, isn't it?" The painted fortuneteller appeared at my side, swinging the cloak off his shoulders and over his arm. Now he was a skeleton boy in mere jeans and a much-loved hoodie. Strange.

I glanced at him, then to Matt and the serpent woman. I didn't remember them being so far away. Seemed almost impossible. Had he kept moving without me? I spoke to the pursuer at my side. "It isn't the cloak. It's you. This place. It's everything. I just want to get out and go back home."

"I understand."

Everything suddenly became immensely calm. The sounds of the rides softened, the screams subsided, and the sound of my beating heart filled my ears, soothing me, slowing my breath. The image of a fedora floated across my thoughts. The fortuneteller's finger slid down the side of my face, or had it been there already? I couldn't remember. I flinched. Realized my eyes were closed. When had I allowed that to happen? Was I losing time?

"I'll do my best," he said in a soft whisper. "Understand?"

Um, no. I really didn't.

Slow, deliberate steps backed me away. Locked legs kept me from moving quick, kept me from matching my desire. Though the fortuneteller made no attempt to stop me. Instead, he whipped around and darted for Matt. I had to warn him. Blood boiled, straining up through my body, exploding in a livid screech. Only Matt and reptile woman turned and stared in my direction. The crowd around bounced off me and kept moving, ignoring me like my action was an everyday occurrence. Maybe it was. People screaming and yelling at a carnival, probably happened all the time.

My legs pumped faster, closing the distance between us. Even as I saw Matt's eyes widen, his lips part, I knew. Knew I wasn't going to make it.

Skeleton man was already there.

My heart dropped into the pit of my stomach, my arms went limp, like lead weights, and my entire body dragged the next two steps. I heard the fortuneteller's words upon my approach; they echoed through my head like a sick, twisted joke.

"You look like a man in need of a fortune."

Matt turned to the black and white painted man, a clouded look in his eyes. Tarot cards flashed from the man's hands quick as lightning. Colors zipping by so fast no

pictures were decipherable. Not until one flipped from the deck into Matt's face, then slipped down the front of him.

The guy leaned forward and swiped at the card. "Sorry. Seems to be stuck. I'll get it back from you later."

Matt stared at the foreign object stuck to the front of his shirt. Every attempt to pull or pluck the thing free resulted in a horrible fail.

Finally at his side, I grabbed at the would-be-fortune, but it wouldn't budge. It was as if it had been Super Glued. "What are you doing?" I demanded of the stranger.

"Just taking care of business." He winked and spun toward the snake vixen, turning his back on us. In a show of fanfare, he flared his cloak out and wrapped it around the strategically scaled woman. "Do behave, Viola. You see what you're doing to the poor boy?" He motioned to Matt with a tilt of his head.

"Oh Sebastian, you can be such a kill-joy. I was only having a spot of fun." She stroked her pet and playfully bit at the air between them. The snake poked its head out from beneath the cloak.

"I'm all too familiar with the type of fun you and Nahash like to have."

Matt grabbed me, drowning the conversation between the strangers into the chatter of the crowd. "What just happened?" he asked, pulling me off to the side, away from the moving traffic along the midway. We nestled against the corner of an obnoxious game. I stood frozen, watching as children tossed small beanbags of various colors at a row of hideous, fake clowns. The idea—shove a "pie" in a clown's mouth.

More goddamn clowns.

I shivered uncontrollably and tried to melt into Matt's chest. My body thawed with his embrace. The idea that I might have lost him gripped me, froze me, and I realized it didn't matter what disaster was befalling my parents—I loved Matt and I wasn't going to throw that away over fear.

"Are you alright?" Ever so slightly, his finger moved along the side of my face, brushing the hair from my cheek. "Did I do something stupid?" He paused, and I could feel the tension along his back tighten, then relax, then tighten again. I knew he was tossing thoughts, maybe even memories around, trying to make sense of it all. I sure was.

"You ogled the half-naked snake whisperer, but I forgive you." I mumbled the words, sinking into his shirt. "I don't think you were in complete control. Maybe she's a Matt whisperer, too." I stepped back, wiped my eye, and met absolute horror. I'd gotten tears and slobber, and possibly snot, on his white shirt. His white-with-red-blotchy-stains shirt.

"Jesus, Sara. Really?" He cranked his neck and straightened his shoulders. A posture that hinted to the strong, confident guy who'd nabbed my heart the first day we'd met. But the look he now wore, the one that had him glancing down and dragging a not-so-smooth hand through his hair, *that* told me more than he didn't say. He was feeling it too—uneasy. He stood for some time, taking a step, pausing, making motion to go, then not. I twisted my fingers, wringing my hands together, fighting off the anxious beat drumming through my blood.

Move. Motivate. Make haste.

"I should get you home." Matt's gaze was now on mine, suddenly alert and with me, his hand stilling mine with his touch.

I nodded. It was a good idea. Home was ideal.

Matt tapped the first person to walk by, asked them which way to the exit, or the parking lot, but they kept moving straight past as if Matt were an annoyance or distraction. He looked at me, mouthed the word *rude*, and moved toward the next group coming our way. He didn't have the chance to ask the question again.

A hand dropped on his shoulder. The painted fortuneteller, Sebastian, stood beside us. "There you are. Thought I'd lost you." He glanced between us and a funny look took root on his face. I wasn't sure what it meant. "We need to get you two moving toward Big Eli." He gestured behind him to the array of blinking and thrumming rides.

There it was again, the mention of Big Eli. Not a person, but a thing. I looked to where he was pointing. The Zipper? Hell no. Framed by the lights of the Ferris wheel, it looked extra demented. I didn't want to go, especially with someone I'd never met before, who looked like a sociopath and made me uncomfortable. Faces and places around us meshed into a meld of noise and visual pollution. Instead of stepping into a funhouse, it had come to us and dosed us with magic mushrooms.

Am I losing my mind? I don't like this druggy aftereffect.

I looked down at my hand and the hand clasped to mine. It wasn't Matt's.

It was *his*.

That Sebastian man. The strange one fancying himself a dead prophet. He held me firm, something solid between our flesh. Uncomfortable and unyielding, it bit into my skin like a long, unwanted paper cut. Yanking away hard, I found a tarot card staring up at me, and not just any tarot card. One that looked like him—a skeleton.

I shook it free, watched it flutter to the sawdust ground of the midway.

"How did you...?" He looked at me, a dark cloud dropping over his brow, then something else moving across it—understanding? "Never mind," he said, looking perplexed, then shook the expression from his face. He pulled Matt forward by the elbow and reached for me. I wasn't going to let him play tricks on me again. I backed away. "Come on, Sara. I want to get you guys to the safety of Big Eli." Again he pointed, only this time it was clear he meant the immense circle of lights towering over the carnival tents. Not the Zipper.

The Ferris wheel? My mind reeled and my body jerked. *It's so high! Especially this one. Although, I do relish the idea of a kiss at the top. Carnival magic below, starlight above, and bliss at my lips.*

"Whatcha doing, lover boy?" Viola, the snake whisper, suddenly stood amongst us. Like her reptile, she was clearly practiced in stealthy approach. She flaunted her sexual charms in front of Sebastian. Most men would fall at her feet. Even I wanted to, but Sebastian looked bored, and that appeared to irritate her tremendously. Her voice rose and her gestures grew increasingly sharp. "These kids don't want your silly, light-and-fancy flight ride. They only want the parking lot." She made eye contact with me, then slowly glanced over to Matt. "Which is that way." Her hand extended, pointing down the tight pocket of space between the booths next to us. Barely visible at the end of the long, deep, expanding squeeze we could see it—a gloomy view of the parking lot. Row after row of parked cars on packed dirt.

That's all it took. Hunger and need filled Matt's eyes and he tore himself free from Sebastian's grip. It was a moment of chaos and confusion, but it was all we needed. Matt grabbed me and pulled us free. I didn't question anything, I simply moved. With Matt

pushing from behind, we ran between the tented booths, jumping over anchor lines and questionable bundles of litter.

“What did you do that for?” Sebastian demanded. I heard him so clearly, even with the distance we were putting between him and us. I knew who he was talking to, and it wasn’t us.

I could almost picture Viola slithering all over him, all over the surrounding tents, making her way after us. She had managed to make such an impression. “Come on, honey. It was fun,” she chortled. “Admit it.”

My heart accelerated and my legs cranked faster. Were they toying with us?

I almost didn’t see the man. Almost plowed into him, or tripped over his outstretched feet. I screamed, leaped up and to the side, but kept moving forward. My heart hammered an unsteady beat.

“Okay?” I heard Matt asking from behind. Breathlessly, I assured him I was.

There had been a man, tall in his stretched posture, and so formal dressed in a suit and tie. He’d been tucked between the adjoining corners of the tents, almost invisible, and when I’d screamed he’d tipped his hat. My entire gut turned ice cold. I wanted to be home.

Only a few more feet.

“We’re almost there,” Matt said at my back.

The opening widened with each elongated step. I couldn’t pop free of this bottleneck fast enough.

Eight more strides.

Seven more.

I began to count. Maybe it made the time move slower, I don’t know, but the counting was a subconscious choice, not something to be helped. Then it happened. I was free. Free of the cramped space and finally standing out in the open before a sea of parked cars. An endless choice of possibilities.

No clue where to find the one we wanted.

Chapter Five

Move!

With hands linked and scanning side to side, we took to the task, overwhelming as it seemed. Something beeped, chirped two times off to our left. Far to our left.

Matt's hands clenched and pulled into a victory hurrah. Within his clamped fist he held the remote key alarm. The silver keys dangled over the top of his hand. "Come on," he said and took off between the rows of dusty cars, making for the one chirping like a homing beacon.

We slipped around the front edge of an old Ford, layers upon layers of grime wiping across the side of my skirt. Something wasn't right. The parking lot was too quiet, too desolate, too abandoned in feel for a working carnival. And worse yet, no one followed us. It was all too easy. My glance danced from vehicle to vehicle. They were all the same. Filth-covered metal cans lining our paths. Orphans waiting to be found. How long had they been sitting here? It looked like years, not hours.

Chirp went Matt's alarm one last time and he threw himself against the door, yanked on the handle, and pulled it open. I scrambled quick as I could, not wanting to spend another minute in the hell zone.

I plopped in the passenger's seat, buckled my seatbelt, and chucked my fear over my shoulder. We were out of here!

Matt shoved the key in the ignition, firing the motor to life, and looked at me with a success-achieved grin on his lips.

Should have known better. Had we paid attention to the storyline of any horror movie we'd ever watched, we would have realized this was the calm before the kill. We jinxed ourselves by letting our guard down, thinking we were cool with the getaway. How could we be so dumb?

There he was, standing right in front of the car in his blue checkered pants and orange suspenders. Scary as any Bozo or Blinky after a zombie apocalypse. He had followed us from the big show, and now I was freaked—but why? It's not like he held a weapon of any sort. No. It was the oversized red shoes, the too-fluffy hair sticking out in peaks, the ridiculous bouquet of balloons he held in his left hand. It was everything clown, draped in the morose manner he held himself. That and the fact he'd followed us all the way from the Big Top, the damn *clownville* I thought we'd escaped.

The paint on his face cracked as his lips widened, spreading a wickedly suspicious smile from ear to ear, the gesture enlarged by the crazed theatrical makeup. He didn't say a word, simply stood there staring and holding those ridiculous balloons. All of them a shiny Mylar black. They bounced off one another as the breeze continuously rearranged them. My mind was trapped by the motion. A hypnotic weapon. That's what the balloons were. A weapon. Taunting me with reflected imagery. A glowing symbol, a melting clown face, a shadowy man tipping a fedora.

Matt threw the car in reverse and—*thud!* We hit the vehicle parked behind us. That left only one option. Try to go around the clown standing at our front. A shift and slam into gear, a thrust of Matt's foot, and the car lurched. My fingers tightened around the door handle and buckle. And I squinted my eyes, not wanting to see, but afraid to look away. The car catapulted forward, then swung right, narrowly missing the striped suspenders and oversized bowtie.

Balloons bounced everywhere, off every window, blocking our view and leaving only the smallest squares of sight. Images flickered across their surfaces—a wink, a glow, a come-hither flip of a finger. Horrid screeches of metal tore down the driver's side and Matt twisted the wheel to the right. The balloons started to lift and float away, as they should have from the start. Where they had been, bumping against the window, remained faint smudge lines. Lines that appeared to spell a word: *stay*. My heart hopped into my throat.

We'd hit the cars on the left line and Matt adjusted, not stopping or looking back. He kept driving down the dirt path, frantically looking in his rearview mirror, sweat dripping from his temple.

Flipping in the seat, I peered out the back window and watched the clown recede from sight. It gave me no ease of mind to watch him disappear behind us, my gut in constant agitation.

The engine revved, sounding like laughter. Not any laughter. Her laughter—Viola the snake lady's.

Matt drove faster. The faster the car moved, the more the aisle appeared to extend, go on for infinity. Dirt kicked up from the tires, hit the underside of the frame. It made a hell of a racket. Not louder than her laughter, though. The cackle grew more intense with each drawn-out moment. I pulled my knees into my chest and clutched my hands over my ears. I wanted to be strong for Matt, wanted to be strong for me, but needed this nightmare to stop!

It wasn't just her laughter anymore. I saw her face. She was at the side of the car, time and time again, her face right up in mine. She was staring at me through the front window, laughing uncontrollably. She was everywhere.

My fingernails dug into my scalp, pulled at my hair. I turned to Matt. "Get us out of here!"

Ashen face aglow, Matt's eyes were glued to the road in front of us. "That's what I'm trying to do!" The car torqued to the right and we swung around the corner. "Finally. That's got to be the exit up ahead." His voice wrenched into a high pitch at the end.

Alarm bells went off through my entire body. Muscles locked up and my feet slammed against the floorboards, preparing for impact. What I saw instead was the black, slithery beastie with his eyes glistening like wet bloodstones. No longer was he a serpent to wrap around the vixen's neck, smothering her, strangling her. Now he could crush her, swallow her whole. He was as large as a small house. And he was blocking our path.

The car swerved left, just missing the curve beneath the snake's head. The snake stretched its head high and looked down on us. I yelled, and the car maneuvered again. This time to the right, avoiding the parked cars to the side of us. The long tail laid out before us moved, swayed, forcing us into an abrupt, sharp left down a new aisle, accelerating in our escape.

The ground shook and rumbled, and in the rearview mirror I saw the body of the snake loop and spin. The tail slapped down behind us and the car bounced. I screamed. Matt made a hard right, seeking passage in an open gap between parked vehicles. The ground dropped out from beneath us. The car hopped and skittered to the lower parking level, right into the mouth of the waiting snake—and utter darkness.

Fear-frozen, unable to move, my insides screamed in sheer panic. This was not how I'd pictured my death. I was supposed to grow old. Maybe stay with Matt—maybe forever. Have kids. Grandkids.

I reached over and squeezed Matt's shoulder.

Everything shifted and my body was thrown to the left. Then we were falling. Diving. A hard bar dug into my waist, wind whipped through my hair, and people screamed, a mingled terror and delight. Then we hurtled out of a tunnel.

Clickity clack.

Clickity clack.

—came the sound of a track beneath us. The car swerved, spun, and dipped. Only it wasn't our car, it was the front car of a roller coaster. How had that happened? Enormous blades of grass shot up around us and something long and sleek moved through the green. Snakes, lots of them. The coaster was even painted like one long, jointed, mechanical version. We dropped over a new peak and fell at incredible speed. People in the cars behind us hooted or screeched.

More twists, turns, drops, and loops, then we darted for a channel made of metal, within it only shadows.

My hand, death-gripped on the pressure bar, peeled free, found Matt's. Whatever came next, I would have him at my side. He gave me strength and a sense of calm. The feel of his hand in mine soothed me and the look in his eyes, brief as his gaze was, made me believe in the improbable.

We sped through the shadows once again, and I decided I no longer wanted to be afraid. For Matt, and mostly for myself, I would be strong. I would face the insanity surrounding us with courage. Fear was only an emotion. *One I can work to overcome*, I told myself.

The car slowed, came to a stop in a regular ride exit. The bar lifted and we were ushered out along with the rest of the riders. No ghosts or goblins waited, no Grim Reaper. Only that strange fortuneteller, Sebastian. He leaned against the nearest metal support, watching us. Instant tension caused rigor mortis throughout my back. Walking past him was the only way to the exit, giving me no other option.

I gritted my teeth, steeled my gaze, and locked my resolve in place. Hands handsomely secured, Matt and I marched right up to Sebastian, steered left, and kept moving. Sebastian followed.

"Not your ideal experience, was it?" he said, striding up beside us. Sebastian again wore his cloak and it draped out behind him, reminding me of a lunatic magician.

Matt skidded to a halt, turned, and glared at him. "Who are you people and what the hell do you want?"

Sebastian punched two fingers to the air. "Excellent question. An even better one is, will you trust me now?" My jaw dropped open. I quickly snapped it shut. As if sensing my thoughts, he looked directly at me. "You followed Viola's direction against my better judgment. See how well that worked out?" He motioned to Matt and me, then to the ride, and then beyond—probably toward the car, wherever it was.

"Okay, you've made your point." Matt sounded irritated, and he pulled me behind his back, shielding me from Sebastian's view and putting me close to his strange neck marking. "Now explain to me why we should trust you any more than that poisonous woman."

"Every answer you seek will be yours at Big Eli."

"You mean the Ferris wheel, right?"

Sebastian nodded. A tiny tilt of the head, a flick of the finger. He had the mannerisms down for the showman he pretended to be. "Precisely." There was an air of egotism in the way he said the word. Like we should know and simply accept his word, trust the strange things unfolding around us.

"Why would we want to go on *that* thing?" Matt said.

"Why wouldn't you?" Sebastian countered. "It has the best view, and..." He directed his gaze at me. "...every girl wants to be kissed at the top of the Ferris wheel. Don't they, Sara?"

I could have been standing there naked, I was so mortified. "How did you...?" Anger rose up my belly, exploded like hot lava. "That was private!"

"Every girl harbors that desire," Sebastian said, a soft smile smoothing the lines of his face.

I wasn't buying the creep show he was selling. Maybe Matt wasn't either, because he dragged me out the exit of the slithering roller coaster, back onto the midway, and into the waft of dank sawdust and sweet cotton candy without another word to Sebastian. Once again, we stood in view of the towering Ferris wheel. The circle of lights flashed and changed like a mood swing. A most brilliant one, worthy of a thousand gazing hours. Alluring, it called to me, drew me in. I took a step, then another, and stopped. Found it hard to still my legs from taking the next stride toward the humongous ride.

Damn. I'd been infected by the place. I actually wanted to participate.

Panic rose up through my chest. I'd promised myself to remain strong, yet fear occupied my every thought. I tried to understand it, understand what was happening to me, and I analyzed my inexplicable desire to go to the Ferris wheel. I looked to Matt and saw a complicated mix of emotions playing on his face.

Something jolted in my gut. It was a flutter, really. Not a punch or a smack, but a gentle, barely-there brush. Not an emotion or a feeling, but a thing. An inexplicable thing.

A card fluttered to the ground, where it landed face down. I didn't need to see it to know what it was. Another skull tarot card.

Sebastian stared at the card, his brow creased and eyes darkening. He then stepped back, as if releasing us. "Perceptions can be misleading. Trust your gut."

It was the ready-set-go Matt had been waiting for. Pulling me at his side, he took off, a man on a must-quench mission. We were two minuscule mice in a zealous horde, weaving our way in and out of people toward the tall circle of lights now humming our names.

For all I knew we could be walking straight toward the Eye of Sauron, and I didn't care. I wanted to be there, now, at the Wheel. I held Matt's hand and kept pace with his every move. The bewitching circle of lights got closer and closer and closer. So close, the air around us vibrated with its energy. Snapped and sparked with electrified excitement. So big and bright, it stood only a ride's walk away. It was right in front of us. And then it was not.

We were staring at another blur of light. Blue, red, and white. A horizontal spinning ride, of sorts. Definitely not the Ferris wheel.

I rubbed the back of my neck and squeezed my eyes shut. Maybe the wheel would reappear if I just blinked hard enough. Exhaustion must be to blame—or maybe the joint. Although that seemed ages ago now. It was the only explanation. But nothing changed when I opened my eyes.

Matt scanned the skyline and jabbed the air with his pointer finger. "There."

The Ferris wheel now sat off to our right, several ride lengths away. How had that happened?

We were off and moving again, only this time not quite as fast.

We were almost there—again. So close I could practically taste the victory on my tongue. The sweet flavor a kiss at the top would bring. A sensation I knew better than to trust. Then everything changed or shifted or moved. The horizontal spinner once again positioned itself in front of us. The Ferris wheel was now off to our left, with the parking lot clown standing in-between us and our goal.

Matt, not to be deterred, scooted us around the painted madman, away from the spinner, and broke into a run. I was beginning to feel stuck in a twisted version of *Groundhog Day*, because sure enough, we didn't reach the Ferris wheel. We got sidelined to the spinner—again. Now two clowns stood in our path.

I wanted to scream. Fall on the ground and curl into a ball. This game was wearing and my arms and legs already pulled on me like dead flesh.

Matt turned to me. "Do we want to do this all day, or shall we see what happens if we get on this spinning ride, since it keeps popping up in front of us?"

I gulped, letting every ounce of fear and anxiety slide into my stomach. The answer I wanted to give was something more along the lines of fade into the sawdust, disappear, cease to exist. Not that those were options.

Hand shaking, I looked at our interlocked hold and squeezed. The warmth of him, all of him, washed over me and his breath caressed my cheek. "It will all work out okay. I promise," he said gently.

I wanted to believe him. Needed so desperately to believe. But he didn't know a truth from a lie. Not in this place.

Chapter Six

Unmasked

I hadn't chosen to ride the roller coaster. Wasn't sure what I would do when and if we ever got to the Ferris wheel. I questioned my decision to now follow Matt onto the spinning ride. I turned and looked up toward the magical circle of lights rising above everything in the carnival. Two clowns were now five, standing between us and Big Eli. I shivered and hastened to skitter into the line behind Matt.

The line moved at a quick pace and I watched the ride twirl and tilt and spit the riders out, my anxiety churning with each step I took closer.

Breathe.

Just breathe.

More victims filed in, a red baseball cap sitting on the head of a lofty dark-haired man, the glint and glimmer of a silver jacket wrapped around a blonde. Shivers swept through me, the night's brisk breeze not to blame. I laid that squarely upon the ride standing before us—and the clowns hovering at our back. Another deeply rooted prejudice festered in my belly. One seeded a lifetime ago, and since, reinforced tenfold. I didn't like carnival rides. Hated them, actually. Especially fast ones, flipping ones, twirling ones, spinning ones, tumbling ones. Anything tempting the laws of physics. That disdain made my desire to get on the Ferris wheel all the more perplexing. I straightened my shoulders, dug my heels in, and shoved my courage to the forefront.

This was different. The tragic events of the Claytonville disaster would not be relived tonight. The past was behind me. I wouldn't think about sixth grade, all the people I had known, or the Zipper taking a flying leap into the crowd. There were no repeats, and a silly spinner wasn't going to get the best of me.

Breathe, breathe, breathe.

I wasn't going to let the past affect the now. No more ride phobias or clown obsessions. *Overcome the fear*, I reminded myself.

The mental pep talk went nowhere. Did nothing for my fortitude. I gritted my teeth and pushed forward, an insatiable chill swirling around my ankles. My first step wobbled, unstable on the makeshift floor. Instinct bubbled up, willing me to back away, skitter the opposite direction. Only that would paint me yellow, a bright and shining coward in Matt's eyes. The last thing I wanted.

What am I really afraid of? I speculated, staring at the whirling lights awaiting.

None of the answers that came to mind made any sense. It was nothing more than a carnival ride. An overhyped, light-up-the-park, spin-till-you-yak thrill.

We pushed forward and I watched its latest victims spill out, nothing other than happiness filling their expressions. Joy and enthusiasm in their jaunt. Twenty-three, twenty-four, twenty-five, I counted. Where was Mr. Tall-dark-and-red-cap? Or the gal with the flashy silver jacket? I couldn't find them. My lips slipped into a sour frown and I drew closer to Matt, trying to hide, protect myself from disappearing, as well. Why was nothing about this carnival normal?

"Where did the guy with the red baseball cap go?" I squeaked, layering the worry on thick.

Matt looked at me like I was mad in the head. "You're not looking to replace me already, are you?"

"No!" The word flew from my mouth with the force of a wrecking ball. I took a deep, calming breath. Surely he teased. If he knew how I felt, he would never... "I've just been watching and counting. I don't see the same number getting off as going on. And I can't find the guy with the red cap I saw earlier, or the girl in the silver jacket."

I sought Matt's deep brown eyes for reassurance, for comfort, for strength. They mitigated my inner turmoil. His hand found the curve of my back, the spot guaranteed to send tingles of security rocketing through my system.

Matt looked to the crowd exiting the ride. "I don't see them, but I'm sure they're there," he reassured. "The guy probably took off or lost his hat in the spin, and the girl is hidden by all the people coming out at once." He shifted his weight, pulling us closer, and brushed his hand along my spine. "No one went missing." He tossed me an encouraging grin, one that said I knew better and was above silly panics. "Now come on, we're going to see where this takes us. Remember?" He grabbed my hand tight, dropped his brows, and tossed me a daring smile. Step by step, up he pulled, guiding me toward the spinning cyclone filled with screams of anticipation and excitement and fear.

Which scream would be mine? Excitement, anticipation, fear?

The metal grates creaked and groaned beneath each foot fall I braved. I feigned a front I barely held onto, kept wrapped around me like a false mask, a makeshift armor. The massive machine's motor, wailing like a yowling cat, scratched at my self-control, and I clutched the railing beside me till my fingers drained white to steady my tremble.

Steam billowed around us, kicked up from the motor below. Sweat trickled down my neck, my blouse clung to my damp skin, and my heart hammered an overwrought jig in my chest. People pushed, shoved, herded us through the entrance. I searched the faces around me, looking for something besides anticipation. I sought foreboding, the emotion tacking my feet to the ground like tar, slowing my approach. Everyone rushed. Everyone except me.

Wait! I don't want to go.

I planted a determined scowl on my face and forced my legs to keep moving stiffly forward. Let Matt lead the way.

Inside the beastly contraption, a ghastly adapted Roulette Wheel spinner, the atmosphere dropped upon us, heavy and oppressive. I shuddered, feeling the presence of death. Anything but welcoming. Mirrors lined the interior walls, casting an unnerving peep show in the dim, strobing light.

Smoke and mirrors, all part of the trick. I knew that.

The illusion.

The game.

The terror.

It had me quaking on my feet.

My reflection gazed at me and the girl I saw, the girl looking back, was unrecognizable. No spark of life lit her features. Something dark and diseased resided behind her eyes—oblivion? A shudder moved through me, an icy chill squeezing the heat from my limbs. Even Matt's leather jacket did little to provide comfort.

Perceptions can be misleading, I reminded myself.

The crowd shifted around the circle, finding their ideal spot. The engineer moved with them, making sure each and every one was locked in securely.

I leaned forward into Matt's body, brushed against his back, and whispered, "Why did I let you talk me into this? Fly-by-night rides are *insanely* dangerous."

"All part of the allure." He cast a beautifully wicked grin and yanked me around the circle to two empty spots. Two spots with our names dripping across the back wall.

I gulped, then blinked. Squeezed my lids tightly closed, wishing the nightmare over. *Not our names. Not possible*, I reassured myself. *Only my imagination. Has to be*. Our names couldn't possibly be written inside the ride. And in what? Blood? No. I couldn't believe that either. It was too ridiculous.

When I opened my eyes again, my breath escaped in a whoosh of relief.

Blank.

The back wall was blank. Nothing but grey metal. Of course there was no writing. Never had been. That would be inconceivable.

As if to escape my proposed ride imprisonment, I leaned into Matt and the safety his presence provided. "Let's skip this and go to the Ferris wheel, like we wanted. This one freaks me out."

A silent laugh rumbled through his chest, the kind that would have turned me on if I weren't so uneasy. With strong arms clasped around me, he leered over me and pretended to gnaw at my neck. His attempt at playfulness felt forced and I laughed sharply, then swatted him away. Normally I loved the attention, but now was not the time.

Even though I was pushing him away, my hands enjoyed the chiseled lines he'd worked so hard to maintain. My blood heated, percolated like coffee, and possibilities for our future, for what lay in store, thrilled me. "Doesn't it bother you that every direction we took to get to the Ferris wheel led us here?" Fear had me whispering, forcing him to edge closer to hear.

Matt's lazy eyes suggested he didn't harbor the same concerns, or masked them well. He confirmed with a shrug, suggesting the detour didn't matter. "I don't know what to make of this night, Sara. Any of it. But let's make the best of our time together, while we can." He edged up against me. His breath tantalizing my ear. His cold nose slipping in a curve along my cheek. I shivered involuntarily, the night air or oppressive atmosphere or the ride's squirm factor having nothing to do with my reaction.

Overhead the light flickered, then blew out. A theatrical display of sparks showered upon us. Sweltering droplets landed on my arm. Burned my skin, if only mildly, and knocked me out of my slow-mo state of mind. The one that had me dragging my feet to our spots on the ride.

“Get moving, you two,” the ride engineer called from several feet away.

I ignored him, nudged Matt and jabbed my finger straight toward the light. “If that’s an omen, maybe we should leave. Leave now.”

He laughed, brushed my hair behind my ear, then adapted a dead-serious frown. “Don’t be scared. I’ll protect you.” He squeezed my hand, then stepped into the bay beside me and latched his harness.

He was brave. I could be brave, too. I latched my harness, pulled down the safety bar, and swallowed my cowardice. I tried not to think about the inconsistencies. Matt was right, I had nothing to fear. It had been silly of me to count the people getting on and off the ride while we’d waited our turn. *I clearly miscounted. It’s the only thing that makes sense. How else can a ride end with fewer occupants than it started? Yeah, that’s it, I counted wrong. Nothing to fear.*

Scarred and ugly, the ride operator shoved into my personal space. Each waft of his rotting breath sent creepy crawlies skittering across my skin. My stomach churned a thick, clammy spin and twisted into a thorn-riddled knot.

He pulled and jiggled my harness, and all I wanted to do was shove him and his B.O.-drenched body away. His clumped-mop hair and tobacco-beer cologne induced an automatic hurl response in my esophagus.

“All good,” he said. I wasn’t sure if it was a question or a statement.

I just wanted him gone. Away from me. Out of my face. As far as he could possibly go. I turned away, averted my gaze. Maybe avoidance would move the process along quicker.

“Yep,” I mumbled, trying to keep my voice steady, nonchalant. “All normal.” My eyes volleyed, settling on the rusty metal at my feet.

“Ya think?” he retorted with the hint of a cackle.

My muscles, tendons, all went rigid. There was something about the way he moved, the tone of his voice. So Stephen King-ish. Even as he helped the person on my left, he baited me, teased me. I couldn’t help myself. I looked up.

“Carnival wouldn’t ‘ave gotten its rep if it were normal.” His face contorted, took on an all-knowingsmirk. “She likes to show you things.” He leaned closer, whispered in my ear. My insides churned and I shivered, jerked away. Ignoring me, he jiggled my harness, then continued moving around the ride’s ring like a spinning tornado ride. Within seconds he was gone.

Panic burrowed deep within my belly. Nausea bubbled, burned up my throat. My eyes darted, searched the riders in the other bays, then sought the exit. Things weren’t right. People were missing and there had been monsters present. I wanted off. Had to get out. Had to move before it was too late.

The ride lurched, began to spin, and my heart sank, froze me with fear.

Already too late.

In a circle we swung. Slowly at first, then faster and faster with each rotation. Riders, lights, machinery, all blurred into a haze.

I reached for Matt’s hand and flailed in the dark. What I found was cold and clammy. It made my skin squirm. Fighting the force of the gravitational pull, I twisted my head. Turned toward him. He wasn’t there. The face of a rotting corpse stared back at me. His eyes brown, like Matt’s. The hair falling from his scalp, the same dirty blond. But it couldn’t be. It just couldn’t be Matt—right?

I couldn't drop his hand fast enough, my scream erupting, ripping up my throat and out of my mouth.

"Don't worry, Sara. I'll protect you," it said. Words almost lost in the sounds of a bizarre musical track and an insane combination of screams and savage laughter. Words I would have sworn were meant to soothe me, yet did anything but.

My head snapped forward and I screamed again. Screamed with every ounce of blood-curdling might I could muster. I wanted to escape, run, get away, but the ride moved at astronomical speed and my body merged with the wall from the force of it all.

The back wall seeped in around me. Held me with a dry ice grip and werewolf claws. Frost encased me, molded around me, torment splintering through my chest at the speed of my rapid, *thump-thumpidy* heart.

I'm going to die.

The thought dropped in my gut like a boulder to the bottom of the sea, leaving a bitter taste in my mouth.

I wasn't ready to die. Not yet.

I grasped at the handles. Held out for hope. For a chance I'd make it through the ride alive.

The Matt-corpse shouted, its voice pitching like a little girl's. *Is it scared, too?* The message was garbled, words gobbled by the grind of the motor, the gale of the wind, and the *gorrific* screams within. That thing was a monster, an ugly symbol of death. And I refused to look.

Instead, I focused on tobacco and beer. The eerie ride engineer. *He knew. He said as much. He said the carnival wasn't normal. This is a Krypton's throw from normal.* My heart accelerated like God had slammed his foot down on the gas pedal of my life.

Then my ticker froze. Stopped. Suspended mid-beat.

Breath rose, hitched in my chest, time and time again. Splotches danced, made tracks across my vision, fading in and out and in and out. I was hyperventilating.

It was too much. Too much panic and fear and anxiety and unknowing.

Something rough—gnarly, knotted skin—clamped around my ankle. My shriek trapped within my throat. The tiniest of yelps escaped.

What this side of Hell's Gates could move contrary to the centrifugal force flattening me like a pancake? I didn't want to look, yet I tried. It was like my head had been strapped. I couldn't move.

Fire flared across my neck muscles as I pressed forward, determined to see my feet. My arms, my shoulders, they ached from the strain. And that something, that *thing* clamped around my ankle, continued to scratch and paw as it climbed up my legs. Fear froze my responses. My mind colliding, tripping and falling over all my thoughts like a pile of dirty laundry.

Then I saw it. Saw her.

She was me—only dead.

Like the Matt-thing in the bay beside me. She dragged her torn and bloodied body up mine, climbing until our eyes met. Then I squeezed mine shut and refused to look. Trying to press and hold the positive and beautiful moments behind my eyelids.

No use.

Her voice slithered through the recesses of my mind. Detached, slow, scary, and weary. “There’s no evading—”

Siren song swooped in all around me, signaling the ride’s end. The spinner lurched, slowed. A pop—my body ungluing from the back wall. All motion shifted to a crawl. With hesitation, I opened my eyes and watched us slowly spin to a stop. She, the dead version of me, was gone, and Matt was normal again.

A tremble shuddered through me, my psyche crumbling into wreckage.

Internally I was still screaming, kicking and ripping at my restraints.

The engineer flashed around the circle, releasing the riders with a gunman’s quick draw. His mangled, wicked grin focused on me. “Did you see it? See what you refuse?”

A nervous giggle bubbled up to camouflage my anxiety and fear. I didn’t answer, not in words.

I stepped away from the harness, away from the ride. I slipped, skipped, skittered as quick as I could, pulling Matt at my side. An empty bay on our left and one far off to the right. Riders gone missing, but where had they gone? Glimpses of things stared out from the mirrored walls, passed too quickly to truly be seen.

When the spinner’s metal cage fell behind us and the crisp night air kissed my skin, I yanked Matt closer, wanting nothing more than to melt into him. “Hated that,” I said, my voice low and hoarse, refusing to cry. No matter how frazzled the experience had been, I would not give in. I was stronger than tears.

We stood, two wrapped lovers, among the carnival crowd. Whispering couples, laughing families, kids of all ages, even kids with balloons, all passing around us. I laid my head against Matt’s chest and stared at the festive, magical lights splaying ahead. No longer the impossible find, the Ferris wheel loomed before us, twinkling high into the midnight sky. In the damp night air the glowing, glittering lights blurred, casting a come-hither aura.

I wanted to go. Now I knew we soon would.

Matt squeezed me. His arms fitting firm and secure around me. It wasn’t the kind of hug you gave on a first date, or even a second. It was a sincere melding of bodies. The kind you felt all the way to your core. My fingers clenched at the fabric of his shirt, wanting to pull him around me, into me. Gone were my fears about love and relationships. I was ready to cement my commitment to Matt.

He gently kissed the top of my head. “It wasn’t all that bad. A lot better than our last date,” he murmured. He stared at me in silence for several beats and I felt the weight of his words press upon me. Push the breath of truth into me. “You remember now, don’t you?” he said, and I looked up at him, unblinking. “Damn big rig ruined everything.” His lips fell into a somber frown.

Every ounce of every bit of me went infinitesimally rigid. I stared at the rides, at the game booths, at all the kids with their Mylar balloons. In every single reflective surface—every one—dead versions of Matt and me stared back.

Shows you the truths you refuse. That’s what he’d said. The eerie engineer.

My skin chilled like an arctic wind had rolled over me. My heart stopped with a *ka-thump*. My eyes hardened, steeled with purpose. Now focused on the tall man in the grey suit with a fedora, standing in the mist by the Ferris wheel. I’d seen him in the crowd, alongside the tents and in reflections, all night long. Now I understood.

He waited for us. He was our Reaper.

I remembered now.
We died that night. Our last date. Time I accepted it.
Time to face the Reaper.

Epilogue

Mr. Grey-suit moved through the crowd like brutal royalty. People looked away, yet moved aside. Matt and I followed him in a rather sheepish manner. No one stood in his path or tried to slow him down. Even the people in line waiting for the Ferris wheel let us pass. Straight to the front we walked. Right up to the car waiting for the next passenger. The carnie working the ride held the bar back, allowing us to step inside.

“This is where we part ways,” our Reaper said and bowed slightly, without removing his hat.

Matt stepped in, not bothering to question the man. He took a seat and shifted uncomfortably when the car rocked. I imagined he, like me, knew the situation. Knew it was pointless to argue Death. Plus, Grey-suit was somewhat intimidating.

I stepped forward to follow Matt into the Ferris wheel carriage, but Mr. Grey-suit’s arm sprang up across my chest, bringing me to a halt. “Not you, my dear.”

The bar dropped across Matt’s lap and the carriage leapt into action, taking him up toward the top of the Ferris wheel.

“Matt!” I screamed, and struggled against the Reaper’s hold. “I belong with him!” I yelled at Mr. Grey-suit.

“You are not marked the same,” he said.

My hand flew to the back of my neck, feeling for the glowing tattoo. “What do the marks mean?”

“They are your destination designation—post life.”

“So all those people inside the Big Top...?”

“Dead,” he responded matter-of-factly.

I looked to Matt, gliding away from me on the Ferris wheel. If we were both dead I wanted to go with him, not transverse the unknown alone.

“Sara!” Matt leaned out across the seat, yelling my name as the ride continued to carry him upward. It swung in a mad manner, him hanging out the side, attempting to keep me in view. I worried he would fall out. It was a silly thought to have. Ludicrous, actually.

But then magic happened. Brilliant, light-up-the-sky, supernatural power. Power to rival the finest stardust showers Merlin could ever muster. And it wasn’t trickery or illusion. It was Matt’s soul shifting into a zillion light particles and dancing up to the heavens. Swinging on stars and flirting with the bewitchment of the carnival below. It was everything, and it was nothing, because I was left below, not allowed to go.

Only moments ago I had decided Matt was the *one*. Now he was gone. A hole tore through the center of my being. Death had scooped out my emotions and replaced them with a vacuum of despair.

Mr. Grey-suit moved his arm. "Grieve not his loss. He may be no more real than you or I."

I balked at the absurdity his words conveyed. None of us real? What did that mean? I knew when he caught the look on my face because the corner of his lip twitched, if only for a moment. Then he spoke.

"Who is to say anything we touch, taste, or experience is truly real? It could all be one large creation of the mind. Merely a fragment of our individual perception. What one person sees may not be real for the next individual." His right brow hitched and he studied me, as if anticipating my reaction.

I shot up ramrod straight, eyes widening like a full moon. *It can't be true, can it?* I wanted to ask but felt my tongue tacked in place by shock, confusion, and a wee bit of anger.

He laughed and his entire demeanor lightened, making him appear more approachable. "My dear, I got your wheels turning with that one, didn't I? You'll be thinking about it for the rest of the walk in, I gather. Maybe longer." He chuckled, though I failed to see the joke. "Don't you worry your pretty head. You are real enough. And your friend, well..." He swirled his finger up into the air, as if acting out Matt's ascension in a game of charades. "All well and good, but you are meant for other things." He straightened his shoulders, fixed his lapel, and began walking off the exit platform. He looked back when I did not follow. "Come along."

Scurrying to catch up, I gathered my courage and stepped up next to him. "Why didn't I get to go with Matt?"

He rolled his eyes. "And Higgins spoke so highly of you. Thought you would have figured it out by now." He looked at me and let out a single, silent laugh. "You have a different future lying in wait. It's as simple as that. Nothing more. Nothing less."

We moved down the ramp onto the midway and into the crowd. Tall as he was, he was easy to follow, his hat always sticking up above everyone else. But as we moved my skin started to prick. The air around me felt electrified and smelled strange, like it had when we'd approached the Ferris wheel and lost it, time and time again. The crowd was suddenly gone, and we stood in a different area of the carnival. I spun around to find the Ferris wheel no longer at my back.

"What...? How...?" I stammered.

"It's all part of the carnival's charm. Intriguing, isn't it?" He laid out his hand, as if expecting me to take it. I held mine in a fist at my chest.

"I still don't understand why I don't get to go with Matt."

He let out a large gale of wind, as if annoyed by my question. He dropped his hand and with it, his shoulders relaxed. "Transcending is for humans. You get to come with me."

"I'm not human?"

"Score one for the young lady."

"But—I don't understand."

"You will, soon enough. Now come with me."

I studied him, his tall, imposing stature, unreadable facial features, and the stiff nature in which he held himself. "Wherever I'm going, and whatever I am, will I be able to look for and find Matt?"

“Anything is possible,” he said with a snort.

“Okay, then.” I stepped up beside him, intending to do everything in my power to reunite with Matt—somehow.

“It’s a start.” Satisfaction grew across his face, warmth spreading in the form close to a smile. Once again he extended his hand, and this time I took it. Together we walked to the outskirts of the carnival, where a thick layer of fog stood flat and tall like a wall. It surrounded, possibly caged, the gala of shows, rides, and festival fun. “This, Sara, is where your new life begins. You haven’t yet scratched the surface of living.” Crow’s feet appeared at the edges of his eyes and his cheeks lifted and darkened. “Wondrous things are in store. Wondrous.”

The fog opened like a door when we stepped up to it, a vast hallway extending on to forever. All I could hear bouncing off every corner of my mind—*you haven’t yet scratched the surface of living.*

If I wasn’t human, then what was I? I wanted to know, looked forward to finding out. I was anxious to discover the real me.

And then get Matt back.

I stepped into the fog excited and without regret.

The End

Keep reading for excerpts from the Age of the Hybrid series, set in the same world.

Moorigad Glimpse

The Complete Age of the Hybrid series

A grumble worthy of the grumpiest of dragons rumbled through Kyra's stomach. In a futile attempt to silence the beast, Kyra pressed the heel of her palm into her gut and peeked through the fall of her hair at the convenience store clerk. Standing at the first rack inside the door, nothing blocked her from the clerk's view, and the last thing she needed was something as insignificantly stupid as a tummy growl to draw his attention. If he came over, well...

"Finding everything okay over there?" the clerk asked from his station.

She regarded the counter surrounding him. At least he had a protection barrier, even though he didn't know he needed one. "Yep," Kyra grunted, staring back to the selection of beef sticks and jerky on the top row of the rack. Within her pockets, her fingers searched, turning up nothing more than lint. The hunger tore at her stomach like werewolf claws making human flesh all too appealing. Her eyes darted to the side, back to the clerk. A magazine was open on the counter, but he was no longer reading. The gum-smacking teen was now peering down the aisle at her.

Again, her stomach grumbled. Kyra bit her nails and returned her attention to the display. Terrible, nasty habit, nail biting. She'd have to stop. But not today. Not if it kept her from delighting in charbroiled teen for lunch.

Kyra had never slipped, never harmed a human in her life. Today was not going to be the first. But damn, hunger rolled through her like an ever-destructive tidal wave. *Food, must have food now.* From left to right, then left again, she shifted, awkwardly, in her moment of indecision. Then she grabbed a handful of jerky and ran for the door.

"Hey!" the clerk yelled.

A clamor followed her escape out of the store.

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Reap not the Dragon Glimpse

Book two in the Age of the Hybrid series

Death was always the same. Not the people or the place or the circumstance. That changed from one stop to the next. Each one unique in its own special way. But Sebastian had come to understand his calling in the past few weeks and now recognized the signs for what they were. Always present. Always pulling. And always overwhelming with the constant stench of death. His own personal calling card.

A mere few assisted prior to helping his best friend, Kyra, escape purgatory, Sebastian had lost count of the number of souls he'd crossed over since embracing his Reaper half. He'd fought his destiny. Feared being an icon of death. A messenger of doom. For her, he'd do it again in a fluttered heartbeat. She was more than a friend. He'd come to crave everything she brought to their relationship. Even the rage of her dragon.

Things were different now, though.

He understood a Reaper's value.

And Kyra...well, she didn't remember him. Not at all. Of course, he was going to change that. Yes. Definitely change that. Very soon. First, he had to get past Marcus's damn barrier spell. Sebastian clenched his fist and imagined it slamming into Marcus's jawline.

Damn Marcus for taking Kyra.

Damn him for keeping her from Sebastian.

And damn him for escaping the Reaper.

Sebastian stood beside his second stop of the day. If he had a choice he'd be at Marcus's door right now, but the opportunity to get away from prying eyes or the constant watch of his father and his men had yet to present itself. The asphalt spread before him, a dark and crumbled highway to the unknown—at least, unknown to most who found themselves in need of Sebastian's services. He knew exactly where it led.

An empty aluminum can lay at his feet. With slow and deliberate intention, he knelt and retrieved the evidence. Beer. Sunlight reflected off its sliver surface as he spun it with his fingers, then shoved it at the boy standing before him. Right into his hands. Hands covered with blood.

Collect the second and third book now!

Book Two: <http://amzn.to/2mpAxkj> **Book Three:** <http://amzn.to/2mNMLGb>

MEET THE AUTHOR

Debra Kristi was born and raised a Southern California girl, where she still resides with her husband, two kids, and three schizophrenic cats. A lover of fanciful stories at an early age, she hadn't realized the writer bug infected her until much later in life. As a result, her stories pull from a rich history of experiences.

When not busy drumming away at the keyboard or chatting it up on social media, Debra is hanging out creating priceless memories with her family, geeking out to science fiction and fantasy television, and tossing around movie quotes.

Join the insider's club! Register for Debra's monthly letter and stay in the loop regarding the supernatural carnival and other projects: [Click here to join the inner circle.](#)

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