



CARNIVAL  
OF  
SHADOWS

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The sun dips below the horizon, casting eerie shadows across my sketchpad as I fail yet another attempt to get the gruesome scene just right. Drawing severed limbs might not be typical behavior for a 15-year-old girl, but I can't escape the urge to try and make sense of what I saw. Whatever tore those two people apart, it wasn't lions—I'm sure of it. I crumple another drawing in frustration and start fresh once again.

My dad would believe me. *Kayla, lions are gentle creatures...until they're hungry*, he once told me. So did someone forget to feed them, or is something far more sinister afoot? I have the shading better this time, those looming too-humanoid shadows casting darkness at the edges of perception. Somehow I mastered their essence, but damn, hands are hard to draw.

"Hiya," Sophie says as she climbs into my bedroom window plopping onto my unmade bed. She's seen my room in worse shape, so I don't mind. It's funny Mom won't let boys in my room, but Sophie gets full reign.

"Got anything new?" She asks tossing her shiny black curls out of her starlight eyes.

"Nothing." I flip the paper over to hide my macabre drawing. "You?"

"Obviously." She smirks.

"Tell me! Did you talk to your mom?"

"I didn't have to. I can read the cards as well as she ever could. Probably better."

I roll my eyes. Sophie thinks being the daughter of a fortune teller gives her a natural gift, but her predictions rarely come true. I wouldn't humor her, but I love how she lights up when she tries.

"What did the cards tell you?" I ask.

"I thought you didn't believe in them?"

"I don't. But if you tell me what they said, I'll know to look the other way."

"Asshole."

"Are you gonna tell me or not?"

Sophie jolts upright, eager to fill me in. "The cards revealed the devil's grip may be slipping as we close in on him. The High Priestess card tells me we need to dig deeper into the collective knowledge of Harmony, but the best news is that the final card was The Page of Swords!"

I stare blankly at Sophie. She's gonna make me ask. I groan, "What's The Page of Swords?"

“That means it’s us! We’re gonna solve this thing. It represents our youthful vigor and as the final card, it means it’ll all come down to us.”

“Right. So...basically, the cards say, we need to collect more knowledge, and we’re on our own here. Two things we already knew.”

Sophie rolls her eyes. “The cards say we need to talk to the other circuses. If Celestial Mills knew anything, I would know. And I assume you’re up to date on all things Bennett Brothers, which means we need to talk to someone from Cirque de Feu and LunaLuxe. The collective knowledge will be the key we need. C’mon, let’s go!”

The defunct circuses don’t talk to each other, they barely tolerate one another, which is probably how so many Harmony High kids are missing without anyone tying the disappearances together. Too bad the arm I found doesn’t belong to any of the known missing kids, at least someone would have closure if it did.

We ride our bikes to the outskirts of Harmony where all the Oklahoma traveling circuses come to die. The Carnival houses a few remaining Okie Carnies in their makeshift homes cobbled together from old tents and abandoned rides while the rest of the once-thriving attractions now stand in ruin, decaying relics of each Circus’s storied past. We lock our bikes up in the woods where we enter from behind the trapeze tent. Sophie’s the one who discovered the weak spot in the fence, and she’ll never let me forget it.

“Okay, who’s up first?” I ask Sophie.

“Iggy Sterling,” she states.

“The old fire breather?” a voice from behind us asks. “Whaddya wanna talk to him for?”

I turn to find my annoying ten-year-old brother locking his bike to mine. “Jason, what are you doing here?”

Jason shrugs, “Following you. What are you doing here?”

“None of your business,” I retort. Mom says it’s sweet how Jason follows me everywhere, but I strongly disagree. He’ll only be in the way. I grab Sophie’s hand because I can get away with it under the guise of ushering her along and mutter, “C’mon, Iggy’ll be in the beer tent.”

We find Iggy belly up to the bar double-fisting beer steins the size of Jason’s head. When the Cirque de Feu settled in Harmony, Iggy became the oldest human I’ve ever seen, and *that* was before Jason was born. I notice his skin sagging away from his bony arms and wonder how he can lift the heavy mug of beer.

“Mr. Sterling?” Sophie touches his shoulder and he spins in our direction.

“Hi, I’m Sophie Carter of the Celestial Mills Carters. I believe you know my mom, Serenia?”

“Mmm.” Iggy nods. “The Psychic.”

“Yeah, that’s her. Anyway, we were wondering if maybe you saw anything the night Ava Mitchell went missing?”

Iggy’s face drops. Ava was from his circus, and this is why I brought Sophie. I wouldn’t have thought to start with Ava when she’s been missing for longer than three other kids, but *she’s* the one Iggy will care about.

“Poor girl,” Iggy shakes his head. “One minute, she’s in the revolving barrel, and the next, she’s just…” Iggy makes a poof sound and flicks his fingers. “Like the barrel just picked her right up and never put her down.”

“Ava was in the barrel?” Sophie asks him. “I thought she was with her brother at the Crag?”

“Nope.” Iggy takes a long swig of beer. “Saw the whole thing. In the barrel, then in the dark.”

“In the dark? What does that mean?” I ask Iggy even though I think I know exactly what he means. I can picture the unnatural movement of the shadows, the way they fill a room so fast you think the light switch flipped.

Iggy lifts his beer, chugs the remainder, and slams it on the counter, but he doesn’t answer my question. “Iggy…er…Mr. Sterling, what do you mean ‘in the dark’?” I need him to say it so I’m not the crazy one, but Iggy just lays his face on the bar. We aren’t getting any more answers out of him today. “Who’s next, Sophie?” I sigh.

“This is dumb,” Jason interrupts. “Let’s find some cotton candy.”

“Not now.” I roll my eyes and push Jason away as I turn to Sophie. “Who’s next?”

“If Ava was in the barrel, that means Ava, Harper, and Mason all went missing from The Funhouse. Where did you say Logan was last seen?”

“Hall of mirrors.”

“Also The Funhouse, then.” Sophie’s face lights up. “Guess we know where we need to go.”

I trail behind Sophie through the maze of trapeze tents, but I stop when we reach a bloody patch of grass. She notices my hesitation and stands beside me. “This is where you found that girl’s arm?”

“Yeah,” I nod. “And a leg was over there. From a guy, not the girl.” I point to a second patch of blood. Someone did a shit job cleaning up the crime scene.

“I mean, the lions are *right* there.” Sophie spins around landing her sights on the lion cages. I expect the general public to shit on the lions’ reputation, but it hurts when Sophie does it. Redeeming their tarnished reputation always falls to me, daughter of the famed lion-tamer, Clyde Bennett.

“It wasn’t the lions,” I insist. Sophie studies the grass, then the cages, and turns back to me, but she says nothing until I elaborate.

“I watched a lion take my dad’s arm when I was just a kid. Dad worked with Mocha since he was just a cub...I think the betrayal hurt him more than anything.”

Sophie moves closer, placing a gentle hand on my shoulder. A bolt of excitement crackles through me with her touch and I have to recover from the distraction before continuing.

“But when he ripped off my dad’s arm, he played with it. Mocha was totally enamored with his new toy and not at all interested in the rest of my dad. That’s how he walked away without any additional injuries. It wasn’t chaotic with limbs flying everywhere. Lions don’t attack like that.” I shake my head and repeat, “It wasn’t the lions.”

“Okay,” Sophie shrugs. “I believe you. But what else could have done something like that?”

“Shadow people,” I risk the words. It’s not like Sophie will throw me in the looney bin.

“You think they’re real?”

“I’ve seen them.”

“Bullshit. If you saw a shadow person, the first thing you would’ve done is tell me.”

“I didn’t know what it was at first. I was just a kid the first time I saw them. But they were here when I found the arm yesterday.” Saying it out loud makes it real, but I know what I saw. “When they’re here, it’s like watching an eclipse. Everything dims like it’s dusk in the middle of the day.”

“Did you also see the Nolan County Necromancer dancing with Madame Zephyra in the Mirrorworld?” She’s making fun of me. Those stories are all bullshit, but the shadow people are real. I stare at the grass until she guides me away. “Come on, let’s go,” she says.

I turn to grab Jason, but he isn’t behind me. “Jason?” I spin around, but he’s nowhere in sight. *How long were we standing here?* “Did you see where he went?” I ask Sophie.

"I didn't." She runs around a torn tent. "Jason?" I hear her call out.

"Do you think he went to the Crag?" I ask her.

"Maybe," she shrugs and we run toward Cotton Candy Crag.

It got its name because kids like to climb on the defunct cotton candy machines, but the sticky, sharp corners are a hard pass for me, thank you. There are still dozens of working machines, so you can usually find some leftovers or make a new batch if you're ever craving cotton candy, which Jason usually is.

"Jason?" I call as we approach the Crag. *Shit*, I don't see him. Mom will feed me to the lions if I lose him.

"Looking for someone?" A weathered voice calls through the wisps of sticky candy in the air.

"Dahlia!" Sophie sounds surprised.

"That's Ms. Cooper to you, witch!" I cringe on Sophie's behalf at the slur.

Dahlia Cooper used to be a bearded lady, but either she started shaving or it was always a fake beard. "Have you seen my brother?" I ask her, frantic. "He looks just like me, but with wild hair and maybe a foot shorter?"

"I haven't seen anyone come by here. Cotton Candy?" She swipes a cone through the machine wrapping a tall tower of sticky strings and shoves it into our faces.

"No thanks." I push it away and wipe my hands on my pants to free them of the sugar webs.

"Jason?" I shout.

"Maybe he went to The Funhouse ahead of us?" Sophie suggests.

"It's worth a try." We take off at a run toward the one attraction I've always avoided. Once was more than enough embarrassment for me.

The Funhouse consists of five challenges, each more daunting than the last. If you can cross through the spinning barrel without falling on your ass, onlookers are disappointed. Then the spinning surface is immediately swapped for a tilting one as you enter an unsteady room rocking back and forth sometimes rhythmically and sometimes sporadic.

Fearless, Sophie disappears immediately into the not-so-funhouse, but I stop at the barrel lost in a childhood nightmare. It spins around, once, twice. I imagine Ava standing in it, walking to stay

in the same place as the barrel rotates around her. Walking, and then swallowed by the darkness, by the shadows. I shake my head clear and jump through to the tilting floor ahead.  
“Sophie?”

No answer. I widen my stance to trek across the precarious room, focused on each step when something in the corner catches my eye. I glance up just in time to see a shadow slide across the room.

“Sophie?”

Nothing.

“Jason?”

The floor tilts left as the shadow moves right. My gaze follows the movement, and I lose my balance. My hand touches the floor just as it shifts in the opposite direction and I've never been drunk, but it must feel something like this. I surf-walk my way to the door and leap to solid ground. I call for Sophie and Jason again before moving to the next funhouse terror, but still get no reply.

Three steps worth of solid ground is all I get before a cackling laugh erupts from my left. I spin, coming face to face with an ancient animatronic clown rocking back and forth in a wooden chair. Grateful I didn't piss my pants, I charge ahead to the ramp of rollers at the end of the hall. I need to go up, but every step turns the rollers sending me back to the bottom.

The ramp is the only way to the ball pit, so I try again, this time remembering to use the wall as leverage and turn my feet at an angle. I'm halfway to victory when darkness slams into my shoulder knocking me flat on my face. I thump my way to the bottom and by the time my eyes can focus, the shadow is gone. *Back up, then.*

When I finally summit, there's no time to celebrate. Ahead lies the ball pit of despair, the bane of my existence. Empty, the ball pit might not be so bad, but it's a great place for bullies to hide and yank you into the suffocating darkness of putrid plastic balls. Forcing that memory from my head, I test the depth of the pit with one foot, and then the other. Shadows tease me as they bounce from wall to wall and I duck below their folly.

I take each step with caution because who knows what's in this pit? Needles, piss, dead kids...all of the above, probably. As I focus on crossing, a shadow propels itself from the wall colliding with my chest. Knocked backward, I'm fully submerged in the pit for the second time in my life and the smell is worse than I remembered.

With a gasping breath, I burst from the ball pit flailing around for footing when a shadow dives in beside me. I try to run, but running through waist-deep plastic balls is a slow process. The

shadow grabs my ankle, but I'm clinging to a support beam. It pulls, and I tighten my grip. Thrashing my left foot, I shake the shadow loose and jump from the pit.

Dusty carpet meets my cheek. It's probably unsafe to inhale too deeply, but I need to catch my breath, so I risk the asbestos. The shadows dancing on the ceiling seem to be enjoying my distress. Are they laughing at me? *Bastards*.

"Sophie?" I hope she made it through okay. "Jason?" Is he in here?

The fifth and final challenge of the unfunhouse is a maze of mirrors reflecting the terror on your face throughout a labyrinth you'll be lucky to escape. I'm not exaggerating when I say the hall of mirrors will fuck you up. Children lost for hours often emerge crying, and those are the ones who make it out. There's even a side entrance allowing parents to intervene and rescue their hysterical children. I have to remind myself I'm not a kid anymore, and my mom isn't here to save me.

Laser lights bounce around the room further disorienting me within the reflections of confetti speckled carpet. I feel along the wall, taking one step at a time. My hands meet one mirror to the left, another straight ahead, but to my right, I find open space. I take each step just like that - check left, check straight, check right.

My progress is slow, but it's still progress, and I can't help but feel accomplished with each step forward. Just as my eyes adjust to the dim room, lulling me into a false sense of comfort, the blue laser disappears. My eyes snap to the ceiling and the light's not out, it's just covered by a shadow. I better pick up the pace.

Faster now, I check left, it's open, step. Check left, check straight, step. Deep laughter echoes through the room breaking my concentration. And then I look at the illusion of infinite gaudy carpet and there is Jason. "Jason!" I reach out, but he's only a reflection.

"Jason, where are you?" He doesn't respond. I can only see the top of his head, but I'd recognize that hair anywhere: his unruly sandy brown mop and that cowlick he can never tame.

"Jason!" I shout. Silence. He doesn't even move.

I break into a jog which results in a lot of near face-plants with mirrors. Jason's head reflects all around me urging me to push onward, deeper into the maze, insisting I hurry. My hands graze the walls - mirror, mirror, mirror...not mirror, but not air either. My hands meet something solid that I can't process, can't see. A shadow. And if they can knock me over and I can feel a solid presence, that means I can hit him.

My arm swings back, and with everything I have, I thrust it forward. Just as it should meet the shadow, the darkness dissolves and my hand slams into a mirror. *Fuck*. Fractured reflections appear around the room as I pull a dinner plate size piece of glass from my knuckles. *Fuuuck*.



I can't be far from the end, but the only remaining light is the red laser, and it's faint. With my injured right hand cradled into my shoulder, I feel along the walls with my left, and just as I reach out to touch Jason's hair, the last light goes out. Darkness swallows the eternal reflections behind me, but my fingers find Jason's face. "Jason, can you hear me?"

He isn't moving and this isn't good. I reach out for his body, but my hands meet the floor. *Is he lying in the other direction?* I fumble around and find another head, but still no body. This can't be good. I start again. My fingers move slowly down Jason's head, past his ears, to his neck, but wait...where his neck should be, I feel a string.

A gentle tug releases the string from its hold and Jason's head drifts out of my reach, up, up, and it taps the ceiling bouncing a few times before settling. The string hangs down tickling my face and I turn to vomit. Reaching to brace myself on the already-rancid floor, my hands meet another head instead. Curious, I feel along the face, past the ears, and sure enough, another string. I pull. Tap...tap...tap against the ceiling, then silence.

Frantic, I grope around the floor finding more. I pull string after string...tap...tap...tap...they each float to the ceiling and there are dozens of them. I'm crawling toward the exit, or where the exit should be when something grabs my arm. I yank free and stand to run. I half expect my face to meet a mirror as I lunge across the room, but I feel...velvet?

The curtain gives way and I'm falling.

Six feet later, I'm flat on my back looking up at the stars. The night is nearly as dark as The Funhouse, but movement catches my eye. I turn, expecting the shadows, but it isn't them. It's Sophie. "Sophie!" I call out.

She's running, and I don't see what's chasing her, but I'm not stupid enough to wait and find out, so I follow. She's not just running though, she's sprinting, and she's heading straight for Ferris Cove where a barely operational Ferris wheel sits nestled between the towering bluffs. I say operational, but what I don't say is rideable or safe. The Beast rots in a grave of vines eating away at the once-legendary attraction.

Only after Sophie begins to climb do I understand what she's doing. My gaze drifts up to where the moonlight reflects off the top car - the light. She's heading into the light. I don't hesitate when I reach The Beast, I climb. Up...up...up we go, and I can't look down or I'll pass out. Heights aren't my friend, but Sophie is and she is gliding up with ease.

She reaches the top car and tries the door, but it doesn't budge. Sitting on the roof, she calls back, "Kayla, hurry!" I can't glance behind me - not because I *assume* the shadows are there, but because I *know* the ground is there, way too far below me. One step at a time, one spoke at a time, I force myself up. I'm almost at the car when the wheel starts to move. I white-knuckle a cable and wait to topple over, but it holds steady, for now.

Refusing to look back, I continue my ascent, but as soon as I reach for the car, we move again. This time, The Beast is coming down. Sophie grabs my hand pulling me onto the roof with her and we embrace as we ride the wheel in it's final descent. It falls slowly at first, then faster. About twenty feet from the ground, I let go of Sophie and scream, "Jump!"

We make it to the grass and my shoulder is probably dislocated, but at least we're alive. The Beast crashes to the ground, obliterating The Funhouse roof and shards of shattered mirrors explode into the air. I shield Sophie's face and for just a moment, all is still.

The dust settles. And then...from under the rubble, I spot something moving, not just moving...bouncing. The first head floats out of The Funhouse and drifts into the night sky. Another head follows and one by one, then all at once, the balloons drift away. Sophie pukes, but I watch until the last head floats out of sight. *Goodbye, Jason.*

With nowhere to hide, shadows ooze from the rubble, their tendrils stretching for the woods beyond. Dread gnaws at my insides wondering what this will mean for the forest, but at least the kids are finally free from the clutches of The Carnival.