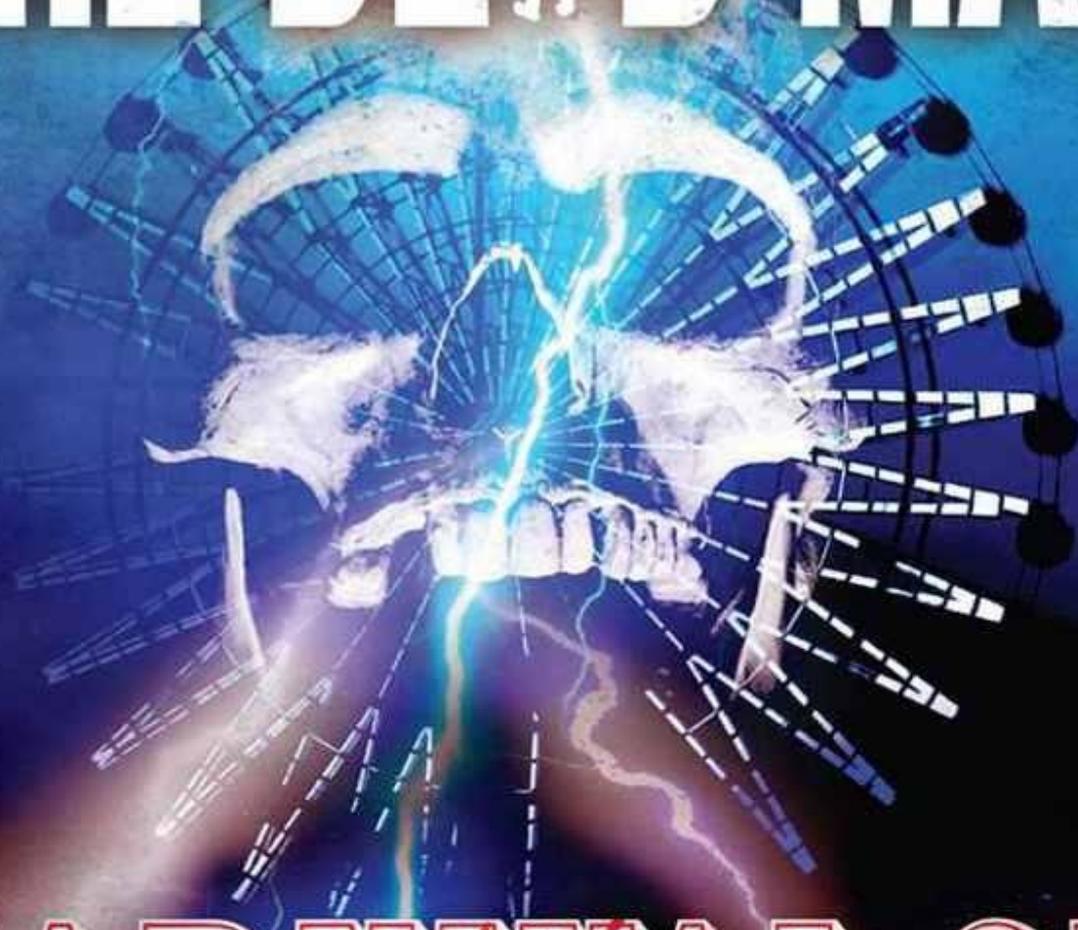


LEE GOLDBERG & WILLIAM RABKIN

THE DEAD MAN



CARNIVAL OF
DEATH

BILL CRIDER

The Dead Man:

Carnival of Death

The Dead Man

Carnival of Death
Bill Crider



The characters and events portrayed in this book are fictitious. Any similarity to real persons, living or dead, is coincidental and not intended by the author.

Text copyright © 2012 Adventures In Television, Inc.

All rights reserved.

No part of this book may be reproduced, or stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without express written permission of the publisher.

Published by 47North

P.O. Box 400818

Las Vegas, NV 89140

ISBN: 978-1-61218-872-0

CONTENTS

[CHAPTER ONE](#)

[CHAPTER TWO](#)

[CHAPTER THREE](#)

[CHAPTER FOUR](#)

[CHAPTER FIVE](#)

[CHAPTER SIX](#)

[CHAPTER SEVEN](#)

[CHAPTER EIGHT](#)

[CHAPTER NINE](#)

[CHAPTER TEN](#)

[CHAPTER ELEVEN](#)

[CHAPTER TWELVE](#)

[CHAPTER THIRTEEN](#)

[ABOUT THE AUTHOR](#)

CHAPTER ONE

Sue Jean Eckerd moped down the midway of Cap'n Bob's Stardust Carnival. The flashing red, green, and blue lights didn't cheer her up, nor did the smells of cotton candy, corn dogs, caramel apples, and deep-fried Snickers bars delight her. The music of the carousel and the other rides might as well have been white noise as far as Sue Jean was concerned. She was too pissed off at Madison Carroll to care about any of those things.

She'd come to the carnival with her BFF, but Madison had dumped her within ten minutes for the dubious charms of that pimple-faced dickwad Freddie Pierce, who had nothing going for him at all other than the fact that his father was a zillionaire. But then, Madison had always been shallow. Horse faced too, though Sue Jean would never tell her that.

Besides Madison's deeply hurtful betrayal, there was that goofy fortune-teller. Sue Jean knew better than to have some old hag read her palm, but when Madison dumped her, it seemed somehow like the thing to do.

The inside of the tent smelled funny, and the old biddy at the table with the crystal ball did too. Or maybe the smell came from the incense that glowed in a bowl on a little stand nearby. Sue Jean didn't like incense. There wasn't much light in the tent either, and the whole thing was totally creepy. Sue Jean started to leave, but she'd already handed over her five dollars, so she thought she'd make the best of it.

The woman, Madame Zora it said on the sign outside the tent, looked into Sue Jean's eyes, and Sue Jean saw that she wasn't entirely ancient, but she must have been over thirty for sure. The robes and the shawl she wore over her head hid a lot of her features, but Sue Jean knew an old person when she saw one.

Madame Zora took Sue Jean's hand and studied her palm. She hadn't looked for more than two seconds before she jerked her head back as if somebody had hit her on her pointy chin. She dropped Sue Jean's hand and let her arms fall away from the table.

Sue Jean thought Madame Zora might have had a stroke or a heart attack, since that was the kind of thing that happened to old people, but there wasn't anything Sue Jean could do about it. She'd heard about what to do on some TV show, or maybe it was in some class at school, but it didn't matter. She hadn't listened. She remembered that if somebody was having a seizure, you were supposed to keep them from swallowing their tongue, but there was no way she was going to touch that old woman's mouth.

Luckily, however, Madame Zora wasn't having a stroke or a seizure. The fortune-teller's head snapped back up and she stared at Sue Jean like she had two heads or a gigantic zit.

"Go home!" was what Madame Zora had said. "You should leave the carnival grounds right now! Don't stay here any longer. It's too dangerous for you tonight."

She looked as scary as Sue Jean's Algebra II teacher on test day, and Sue Jean didn't stick around to hear any more. Even if it meant losing her five dollars, she was getting out of that tent.

She left in a big hurry and thought she'd better have a snow cone, one of the red ones, to calm herself down. Then she might leave the carnival, but she didn't think

there was any real rush. The old woman was just some kind of crazy crank who liked to scare kids—that was all. She was probably jealous of anybody who wasn't some old crone like she was.

So Sue Jean ignored the warning and bought her snow cone and thought about Madison and Freddie the Puke Pierce and hoped somebody was barfing corny dogs on them from on top of the Ferris wheel. Maybe she'd walk down that way and see.

The Ferris wheel was at the end of the midway, down near the carousel, and Sue Jean didn't quite get there. Earl Compton stepped out from between a couple of the tents and said, "Hey, Sue Jean."

If there was anybody creepier than Freddie the Zit Pierce, it was Earl Compton, and his old man wasn't even rich. Earl had bulging eyes, big ears, a big nose, and big hands. Sue Jean knew what they said about guys with big noses and long fingers, but she didn't want to find out the truth of it from some goober like Earl Compton.

So she ignored him.

As she walked past, she heard laughter, which meant that Harry Thomas and George Simpson were with Earl. No surprise. Those two were always around where Earl was, and if Sue Jean didn't know better, she'd have thought they were all gaywads out for a circle jerk except there wasn't any way they could make a circle with just the three of them. Maybe they'd have a triangle jerk.

"I guess you didn't hear me," Earl said. He came out after her and grabbed her arm.

Sue Jean dropped her snow cone, and it made a red splash on the hard-packed ground at her feet. A little of it even got on her shoe. She jerked her arm away. "Look what you made me do, you asshole. What's the matter with you?"

"Nothing you can't fix," Earl said, and he grabbed her arm again.

Sue Jean tried to get away, but this time he held on. His long fingers crushed her upper arm, and he dragged her backward. He got a hand over her mouth before she could cry out and dragged her away from the tents and the lights.

Harry and George followed along and giggled like maniacs. When Earl dropped her on the ground, they fell on her. Harry slapped a grubby hand over her lips, and he and George started tearing at her clothes.

Sue Jean kicked and clawed and scratched, but it didn't bother them. They ripped off her shirt and shucked her out of her jeans.

"Thong!" George yelled, sticking his grubby fingers under the stretchy band and trying to pull it off.

Earl, who had stood by watching, said, "That's enough."

George and Harry turned to look at him. A little drool from the corner of Harry's mouth dripped on Sue Jean's stomach as she twisted away and made a grab for her shirt. Earl kicked her hand away before she could reach it.

"My turn now," Earl said, and he unzipped his pants and pulled out his dick.

Sue Jean saw that what people had said was sure enough true, at least in Earl's case.

"Get out of the way," Earl told Harry and George, and they did.

As soon as Harry's hand came away from her mouth, Sue Jean screamed.

Earl laughed. "Yell all you want to. It won't help a bit."

"Not a damn bit!" George said, just before Earl hit her.

CHAPTER TWO

Matthew Cahill walked down the midway. It was a little after ten o'clock, and the carnival was still going strong, though black clouds were gathering and lightning threaded the sky to the occasional rumble of thunder off to the north.

If it began to rain, the crowds would be gone soon enough, but for now, everyone seemed happy to stick around. The carnies hawked their wares and their games in hoarse voices. The lights flashed red, green, and blue. The music played clunky melodies over old speakers that had all the fidelity of a tin can. The rides at the end of the midway turned and clanked and whined.

Matt walked by the ringtoss booth, where Jerry Talley tried to lure two marks with promises of an easy win; past the high striker, where a high school jock was about to try one more time to prove to his girlfriend how strong he was; past the milk-bottle toss, where a teenager was arguing that there was no way he hadn't knocked that last bottle down.

Matt grinned. He knew the mark couldn't win that argument. Tony Allen wasn't about to part with one of his big teddy bears or even one of the smaller ones this late in the evening. He might let the kid have a cricket clicker or some other five-cent prize, but the big prizes went early in the evening to a shill who'd carry them around so they could be seen by a lot of marks who couldn't win one if they threw the softballs at the bottles a million times.

Walking on toward the rides at the end of the midway, Matt passed Madame Zora's tent. It was dark and the flap was closed. Matt wondered what had happened. Madame Zora never closed early. As long as there was a dollar to make, she'd be there, waiting for someone to cross her palm with the long green.

Matt had heard some disturbing rumors from a couple of the other carnies about Madame Zora lately, and he'd been planning to have a talk with her. He wondered if what he'd heard about her visions had any part in making her close before all the suckers had been cleaned out.

Well, it wasn't Matt's problem. He was part of the security force for Cap'n Bob's Stardust Carnival, and his job was to prevent trouble. He'd been working for a while now, and so far, the biggest problem he'd had was breaking up a fight between two of the carnies who'd been slugging it out over who had the right to the charms of Madame Zora. Maybe one of them had gotten lucky and was with her right now in one of the trailers behind the rides at the end of the midway.

If that was the worst he had to deal with, Matt thought, life would be good. He remembered all the other things he'd seen and done in the time since he'd come back to something resembling life after being buried for months under an avalanche of snow and ice. Blood and death and suffering enough for a lifetime. For several lifetimes.

While working with the carnival, he didn't stay in one place for more than three or four days and got to travel around the country in the company of people he liked, people who enjoyed their privacy and respected his. It was a way for Matt to look for Mr. Dark without always being the only stranger in town.

He wasn't sure who or what Mr. Dark was...only that he had shown up shortly after

Matt's death and that he took great delight in spreading evil with his touch. Matt knew that he had to stop him.

Matt hadn't seen Mr. Dark for a while, but he had a feeling that trouble was already on the way. It was nothing definite, nothing more than a tingling between his shoulder blades, as if someone might be watching him, or the way some people knew that there was a storm coming by the smell of rain in the air.

Matt thought about his duffel bag and the ax it held, his grandfather's ax, the only thing that remained to him of his other life, the one in the clean, cold forests of the Pacific Northwest. He remembered the things he'd done with the ax since leaving that part of the world. He tried to put those thoughts out of his head. He hoped he'd never have to use the ax again except for its intended purpose.

As a member of the carnival's security team, Matt couldn't carry an ax or any other weapon. He had to blend in with the crowd. So like the others, he wore a sap cap. It looked like an ordinary baseball cap, but it had a weight sewn in the back. Grab it by the bill, and it made an effective sap, or so Matt had been told. He hadn't had to use it yet.

He reached up to touch the bill of the cap, and that was when he heard the scream.

CHAPTER THREE

Sue Jean knew it was all her own fault that she was in this mess. Madame Zora had told her plain as day to go home, and that's what she should've done. But she'd had to have that snow cone, and now these three goobers were going to rape her.

She screamed again.

This time Earl didn't hit her. He stood up and twitched his head at Harry and George, and they fell on her like a load of lard. Harry put his mouth over hers while George slobbered all over her tits. Earl zipped up and looked toward the carnival.

The moon was hidden behind the thickening clouds, and with the carnival lights at his back, Matt Cahill couldn't see anything other than the dark silhouette of a man standing in the field near the trailers where the carnies stayed during the day.

While Matt wasn't expecting trouble, he knew that the man hadn't been the one who'd screamed. Someone else had to be close by.

A damp breeze moved across the field and bent the tops of the few weeds that grew there. The man didn't move, so Matt headed in his direction.

When Matt got within twenty yards, the man still hadn't moved. Matt wondered if there was something wrong with him.

"Hey," Matt said. "Is there a problem here?"

The man moved then, walking in Matt's direction. Matt could see that he was holding something in his hand. A knife. Now that the man was closer, Matt saw that he wasn't really a man at all, just a kid. A big kid, to be sure, but still a kid.

"Problem?" the kid said, giving Matt a little grin. "What makes you think there's a problem?"

Matt wished the light were better, but as far as he could tell, there were no maggots squirming around in the kid's eyes, no lesions opening in his skin. No smell of death rolled off him.

"Someone screamed," Matt said, looking beyond the kid. He saw a heap of something twisting around on the ground. "Let's go see what's over there."

The kid lost the grin, and he didn't look around to see what Matt was talking about. "Nothing's over there."

He was cocky and seemed unafraid, but Matt didn't find that strange. After all, he had a knife and Matt didn't.

"I'll just check it out for myself if you don't mind," Matt said, moving to the side so he could go around the kid without getting too close to the knife. "Just doing my job."

The kid wasn't going to let Matt get away with that. He moved fast, but Matt was faster. He whipped off the cap and slapped it against the kid's wrist as the knife sliced upward. The kid yelled and the knife went spinning away.

Matt didn't see where it landed, but the kid must have, because he took four running steps and reached down for something. By the time he reached it, Matt had caught up. Matt planted a foot on the kid's ass and shoved. The kid did a somersault, came to his feet, and turned around so fast that Matt had trouble believing it. That was one agile kid. He came at Matt, holding the knife low, angling it upward.

Matt swung the cap again, but this time the kid was ready for him. Instead of trying

to avoid the cap, the kid went for it with the knife. He stuck the blade into the cloth and snatched the cap out of Matt's hand. With a flick of his wrist, he sent the cap spinning away. It landed twenty yards beyond the kid, near the squirming mass that Matt had seen earlier. Except that it wasn't just a squirming mass.

It was a pile of bodies. The one on the bottom was a girl, and as Matt glanced that way, she got an arm and a hand free. She took hold of the ear of one of the boys on top of her and gave it a hard yank. She must have tried to pull it right off his head, and she came close to succeeding. He squealed like a hog being castrated with a rusty knife and rolled away from her. She beat her fist on the other one's face.

Matt had no time to see any more. He had the kid with the knife to worry about, and the kid was coming right at him.

Matt wished for his ax, and he felt something cold and hard touch his hand. A tent stake. It wasn't his ax, but it would do. He didn't stop to think who might be behind him to help out. It didn't matter.

Matt's fingers closed around the stake just as the kid slashed with the knife. Matt slipped to the side and brought the stake down on the kid's wrist. The stake worked a lot better than the sap cap.

The kid's wrist cracked like pond ice, and he howled as he sank to his knees. Matt kicked him in the face, not too hard, and the kid flipped over backward.

Matt looked around to see who'd handed him the tent stake. No one was there. He'd thought it might have been one of the other security guys, Ken, maybe, or Fred. It wouldn't have been like them to run away, however.

Matt didn't let it bother him. He could figure it out later. He stuck the stake in his back pocket and ran to help the girl.

She didn't need him. The boy whose ear she'd almost removed was lying on his side in the fetal position, whimpering. The sap cap had landed near the girl, and she'd somehow gotten hold of it. She swung it back and forth, whacking the other boy across the face. Blood flew from his nose and smashed lips as Matt watched.

Matt took hold of the boy's shirt and pulled him away from her before she brain-damaged him. The boy was as limp as boiled pasta. Matt tossed him aside.

"I'll take my cap," he said, putting out his hand.

The girl dropped it and covered her breasts with her arm. "I need to get dressed."

Matt nodded and picked up his cap. There were splotches of blood on it, so he stuck it in the pocket with the tent stake and turned his back so the girl could cover up while he thought about what he was going to do. One thing Cap'n Bob had insisted when he hired Matt was that the cops should never be called.

"We handle our own problems," the cap'n had said.

He was a portly man with a seemingly sincere smile that invited trust. For some reason, Matt didn't find it effective. There was something about the cap'n that bothered him, but not enough to keep him from taking the job.

"The cops are not our friends," Cap'n Bob had continued. "We take care of our troubles on our own and in our own way. We don't want anybody meddling in our business. Especially cops."

That was fine by Matt. The carnies were a little strange, most of them, but certainly no more strange than Matt himself. Like Matt, a lot of them had secrets, and they knew how to keep them. In fact, Matt hadn't even told Cap'n Bob his real name. He'd

said he was Matt Axton and that he'd like to be paid in cash. Cap'n Bob had no problem with that.

Some secrets were easier to keep than others, however. Attempted rape was serious business, and Matt didn't like the idea of letting the three kids off the hook.

"You can turn around now."

Matt turned and saw that the girl had put on her pants and shirt. She looked about fifteen, but she was probably older, seventeen or eighteen maybe. Matt had trouble judging the age of anybody under thirty.

"What's your name?" he asked.

"Sue Jean. I want to get out of here."

Matt looked at the three young men who'd attacked her. The one whose ear she'd almost removed was still lying curled up on his side, but he'd stopped whining. The one who'd been whacked across the face with the sap cap was making snuffling sounds as he tried to crawl away. The one with the cracked wrist sat cradling his arm and glaring at Matt.

Three teenage punks who'd thought they could get away with something, Matt thought. He still didn't see any signs of corruption on them. He also didn't see any sign of whoever had handed him the tent stake. Where the hell had he gone? There wasn't anyplace to go. No time to worry about it. Right now Matt had other problems.

"You think we should call an ambulance?" Matt asked. "Or the cops?"

"I don't care who you call, but I'm not staying here," Sue Jean told him. "I need to get away from this place. That old woman told me to. I should've listened to her. Then this wouldn't have happened."

"What old woman?"

"That fortune-teller, whatever her name is. She told me to leave, but I had to have a snow cone."

Maybe those rumors Matt had heard were true, but he couldn't keep from grinning. Madame Zora wouldn't appreciate being called an old woman.

Sue Jean started walking.

"Hold on," Matt said. "Don't you want to press charges against these three?"

Sue Jean didn't slow down. "I don't care about them. They didn't hurt me."

Matt started after her. If she didn't care, maybe he shouldn't care. Cap'n Bob almost certainly wouldn't, not as long as the culprits had suffered some damage. Which they had. Matt still thought he should try.

When he caught up with Sue Jean, he said, "Do you know who those guys are?"

"Assholes."

"Yeah, I figured that out for myself. But I meant aside from that."

"I know who they are. Just some guys from school. What difference does it make?"

Matt thought it over. OK, maybe it didn't matter. The kids weren't hurt badly except for the one with the knife, who probably had a broken wrist. Well, it would heal. They'd get over what had happened, and they could find their own way home. He was sure they could come up with some clever way to explain their injuries rather than telling anybody they'd been trying to rape one of their classmates. And Cap'n Bob didn't want the cops coming around. Matt didn't want them any more than the cap'n did.

But the whole thing bothered him. So he tried again. "They wanted to hurt you.

They might try to hurt someone else.”

Sue Jean gave a short laugh. “Them? They’re drunk or they wouldn’t have bothered me. I think they learned an important lesson.”

Matt hadn’t smelled any liquor, but maybe the girl was right about the lesson. They’d sure gotten their asses kicked.

As he and Sue Jean got back to the midway, Matt turned back to look for them. He didn’t see them anywhere.

He also didn’t see the lollipop wrapper that the breeze blew across the bent tops of some weeds. It caught for a moment on the jagged edge of a leaf and then slipped away to move on.

CHAPTER FOUR

Madame Zora's real name was Gloria Farley, and she was scared witless. She'd been scared before, but never like this, not even when she'd been arrested that time in a little northern Mississippi town for shoplifting. She'd been eighteen years old and two days away from the home she'd fled the day after her stepfather had come into her bedroom for the first time.

She wouldn't have tried shoplifting if she'd known of any other way to get free food at the supermarket, but she didn't think they'd give it to her. She was trying to slip out with a couple of cans of tuna and five candy bars when they grabbed her. The candy bars had probably been a bad idea. Not much nutrition in a candy bar.

She'd thought that if she cried enough and acted younger than her age, she wouldn't go to jail, but Mississippi was tough on shoplifters, at least in that part of the state, and she went to the pokey all right. It turned out that the chief of police wasn't a whole lot different from her stepfather when it came to methods of interrupting sleep, and after she got out of jail a couple of days later because the supermarket manager decided not to press charges, she promised herself she'd never go back in.

Not long after that she met a woman named Frances Devore, a woman who was old and getting frail but who still had an active and inquiring mind. She and Gloria had both been in a public library in another little town in Mississippi, which, in spite of what some people thought, did indeed have a literate population.

Gloria was there because it was warm and had comfortable chairs. Frances was there to read the magazines and be around people for a change instead of being cooped up in her house. She'd struck up a conversation with Gloria that had begun with her asking why Gloria wasn't in school. Gloria had told her the truth, more or less, glad to have a sympathetic listener, and Frances got interested.

She was looking for somebody who'd help her out a little bit, keep house for her, do her shopping, drive her to the doctor, and fix a few meals.

"I could give you a roof over your head and your own room," she said, "and I'll keep you out of trouble."

It sounded like a good deal to Gloria, who went home with Frances and stayed for six years, until the old lady died. Frances had an eclectic library of her own and didn't mind if Gloria read the books that were there. In fact, she encouraged it. Frances didn't have TV, so when Gloria wasn't doing her chores, she read. She read novels and biographies and self-help books, books about Greek and Norse mythology, Shakespeare. She'd discovered that she loved to read. Whenever a book interested her, she picked it up and read it, and she was interested in a lot of things.

One day Frances saw Gloria with a book on palmistry and said, "You could learn to read palms in about five minutes."

"It's all a fraud," Gloria said.

Frances sniffed. "Of course it is, or at least the kind in that book is. But palmistry's real enough, if you have the gift. Some people really can see a person's future in those lines."

"Ha," Gloria said, but she read the book, studied the charts, learned about the shapes of hands, and memorized all the lines and what they meant. After a while she tried out

her new skills on Frances.

“Not bad,” Frances said when Gloria had finished. “You almost had me believing you a time or two. You have a way of sounding convincing.”

“I don’t have the gift, though,” Gloria said.

“No, you don’t, and that’s a good thing. People shouldn’t know the future. It never holds anything good, not even for a pretty young girl like you, and especially not for an old woman like me.”

“That’s not very encouraging.”

“Wasn’t meant to be. You should know by now that life gives everybody a hard row to hoe. And then you die.”

Gloria thought about her stepfather and about that police chief. Life hadn’t been so hard for them, as far as she knew, but maybe they were dead. It was pleasant to think so. She hoped they’d been run over by a bus or a train or some other form of heavy transportation and flattened out like roadkill. Serve the bastards right.

Gloria was with Frances for another year or so after that conversation, and although she read many other books during that time, she kept coming back to the one about palmistry. She had it pretty much memorized by the time Frances died.

In her last illness, Frances told Gloria the future, and as she’d promised, it wasn’t pretty.

“My cousins never gave a damn about me before, but they’ll show up because they think I have money. I don’t, but they don’t know that and wouldn’t believe it if I told them so. They’ll run you off first thing, no doubt about it. I have a will, but all I really have is this house, so I’ve left that to them. Maybe they’ll be satisfied. I wish I could do something to help you, but all I can do is give you the money that’s in the metal box under the sink. It’s not much. I wish it were. You’ve been a big help to me, Gloria, so you take it and don’t tell anybody.”

Sure enough, Frances’s prophecy came true. The relatives who’d never had anything to do with Frances while she was alive appeared and started squabbling right away. They kicked Gloria out of the house and told her that if she made trouble, they’d call the cops. They told her it would be a really good idea if she left town.

Gloria had already had enough of cops, so she left town, but she left knowing a lot more than she had when she’d moved in with Frances.

Gloria found a little over three hundred dollars in the box, and she put it in her purse. Tell anybody? Fat chance. It was all she had when the cousins kicked her out. They didn’t even let her stay for the funeral.

The three hundred dollars lasted Gloria for a month, and just as she thought she might have to resort to stealing again, she happened upon Cap’n Bob’s Stardust Carnival. She saw the ads taped to telephone poles in a little town she was passing through and realized that a carnival might be just what she was looking for. What better setting for a skilled palm reader? OK, maybe not skilled, exactly, but good enough. Even Frances had said so.

Gloria wandered around a bit, enjoying the crowds, the music, and the atmosphere. Not bad at all. She asked a barker how to find the boss, and he told her to look for a portly man wearing a ringmaster’s outfit. He wouldn’t be easy to miss.

Gloria found him in about five minutes near the tent of the Seven Dwarfs. He had a big smile that looked only a little fake, and she told him she was looking for a place to

ply her trade.

“And what might that be?” he asked, never losing the smile.

“I’m a palm reader.”

“You any good?”

Gloria was tempted to pad her résumé but thought it might not be wise. She said, “Pretty good.”

“Follow me,” Cap’n Bob said. He led her to a big trailer in the back of the lot, opened the door, and motioned her inside.

Gloria had a momentary flashback to her experience with the cop, but she could handle herself better now. If the cap’n gave her any trouble, he’d be sorry.

Cap’n Bob didn’t try anything funny, however. When they were inside, he put out a hand and said, “Show me.”

Gloria took his hand, pretended to study it, and gave him some of the usual baloney about his life line and his heart line, explaining what each one meant and elaborating on the shape and length of his.

“You’ll do,” the cap’n said, taking back his hand. “Do you have a costume?”

“I can come up with something.”

The cap’n seemed satisfied with that answer, and he explained the percentage of the take he’d get for allowing her to work the carnival.

“That’s to pay for your booth space and my traveling expenses,” he said. “You can rent a spot in one of my trailers or buy your own.”

“I’ll rent a spot for now.”

“I’ll put you in a trailer with one of the other performers. When do you want to start?”

“Tonight would be fine.”

“I’ll set it up,” the cap’n said, and Gloria had been with the carnival ever since. It was a good enough life, better than a lot she could think of, and she’d grown to feel as if the carnival was her home and the carnies her family. She didn’t mind the traveling, and she felt safe and happy most of the time.

Not anymore. Not since things had started happening to her, things she didn’t understand at all.

She’d developed a good line as Madame Zora. She could string most people along for ten or fifteen minutes with no trouble at all, feeding them a line of bull that they seemed eager to hear and believe. If it made them happy, what was the harm? She didn’t believe any of it herself, and there was no harm in that either.

No harm in any of it, until a few weeks ago. Just about the time when that new security man had started to work. Matt Axton, he called himself, but Gloria knew better.

He’d arrived, and that was when things had started to happen. Gloria had started to see things, real things, not just lines in hands but things that were going to happen. She *knew* they were going to happen.

At first it was nothing much, like she knew a man was going to stumble when he left her tent, or she knew a woman was going to forget her purse. Little things that wouldn’t seem to mean much, maybe, but they gave Gloria a little bit of a hollow feeling inside.

After that, a man came in and after looking at his hand she knew that he’d lost his

grandfather's pocket watch. More than that, she knew exactly where it was. When she told him, he couldn't believe it, but he rushed out of the tent to go home to look. Gloria knew he'd find it. She should've felt good about that, excited that she seemed to have the gift after all. But she wasn't excited. She was scared. Something had happened. She'd changed, and she didn't know why.

She remembered one particular day when a tall man walked into her tent. A woman was with him, and they were both smiling, happy to be together, having a fine time at the carnival.

"Hey," the man said. "You must be Madame Zora."

"Yes, I am she," Gloria said. Among the other things she'd learned from Frances, she'd picked up a few rules of good grammar. "Please be seated."

The man looked at the woman, and they both laughed. "Can you do us both at once?" the man asked.

Gloria didn't smile. The hollow feeling was back, and it was worse. "Not for the single price."

The couple laughed again, and the man said, "Didn't expect you to." He pulled a ten-dollar bill from his wallet and handed it to her.

Gloria tucked the money away inside her robes. The hollowness had been replaced with something like despair. She wished the man and woman would go away, but she knew they wouldn't.

"Tell his fortune first," the woman said, and the man held out his hand.

Gloria was reluctant to take it, but she didn't see any way to avoid it. When she touched it, her stomach twisted. Her pain must have showed on her face, because the woman said, quite concerned, "Is something wrong?"

Gloria tried a smile that she knew must be ghastly. *No, not with me. It's him. He has cancer. He doesn't know it yet, but he does. A tumor of the brain. No cure. He'll be dead in six months.*

"Please," the woman said. "Can we help?"

Gloria straightened her face, put on what she hoped was a genuine smile, and said, "I am fine. And so are you two. I see nothing but happiness ahead. Look here at these lines..."

She traced the lines in the man's hand, then those in the woman's, giving them a cheerful lie about their lives. They were laughing again when they left her tent. They'd be happy for a while longer. It was all she could do for them.

When they were gone, Gloria slumped in her chair. Tonight had been the worst so far. She knew the girl—what had her name been?—Sue Jean was going to be attacked. Raped. She could see the faces of her attackers.

So she'd warned the girl, told her to go away from the carnival, knowing all the time that she wouldn't go, knowing that something bad was going to happen.

And knowing that Matt Axton would be involved.

Knowing that Matt Axton wasn't even his real name.

Knowing that, whoever he was, he was surrounded by darkness and that someone surrounded by an even deeper darkness was near the carnival too.

Knowing that things were going to happen, terrible things.

Even worse, not knowing what they were but certain there was nothing at all she could do about them.

So she shut the tent, went to her trailer, located the bottle of Ezra Brooks that she kept in a cabinet for special occasions, and opened it up.

She'd hardly finished her first drink when she heard a crash of thunder. Seconds later rain started to patter down on the roof of the trailer.

Then all hell broke loose outside, and to her horror, as soon as she heard the commotion, Gloria was sure she knew exactly what the trouble was.