

# CARNEEVIL



STEP RIGHT UP... THEN RUN LIKE HELL

**DOUGLAS WENTWORTH**

# CARNEVIL

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Douglas Wentworth

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*To my parents, who planted the seed of imagination in a young mind, and nurtured its growth.*

# CARNEVIL

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## CONTENTS

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1. Head Choppers . . . . .	1
2. Victim Or Culprit . . . . .	14
3. Setup . . . . .	27
4. Heartline . . . . .	38
5. Turnaround . . . . .	49
6. Night Ride . . . . .	58
7. Choose Your Fate . . . . .	70
8. Step Right Up . . . . .	77
9. Station Brake . . . . .	83
10. First Drop . . . . .	91
11. Ascend . . . . .	102
12. Run Like Hell . . . . .	110
13. Spin The Bottle . . . . .	118
14. Catapult Launch . . . . .	125
15. Knockabout Act . . . . .	134
16. Headrest . . . . .	143
17. Restraint . . . . .	151
18. Acceleration . . . . .	160
19. Barrel Roll . . . . .	171
20. The Big Bang . . . . .	178
21. Inversion . . . . .	186
22. Point Of View . . . . .	194
23. A Fateful Meeting . . . . .	201
24. Cutback . . . . .	208

25. Prep Work . . . . . 216  
26. A Blast From The Past . . . . . 225  
27. What Comes Around . . . . . 232  
STRANDED Excerpt . . . . . 243  
About the Author . . . . . 245

# 1

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## HEAD CHOPPERS

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*Sunday, September 24, 1950*

Vernon Thomas drained the last sip of coffee from the tin cup, then spit a few bits of bean on the dirt-packed floor. He ground them in with the toe of his boot, then hung the cup back on the bent nail that protruded from the eastern white pine log, one of seventy-eight that Vernon's ancestor, Bernard Thomas, had used to build the cabin.

Vernon was thankful for his plot of land, and its location on the western bank of Snow Shoe Lake in Maine, for it teemed with an abundance of salmon, yellow perch, and chain pickerel. But he was especially proud of the cabin's construction, for in the mid eighteenth century, the majority of eastern white pine trees were reserved for the masts of His Majesty's fleet, and it was very hard, nigh

impossible, for the average colonist to obtain enough to construct a homestead.

But Bernard Thomas had thought of himself as American royalty, and he had felled the marked logs while thumbing his nose at His Majesty, King George III. And after he killed the third Redcoat that was sent to investigate, there was never a fourth. So Bernard believed he had scared the bejesus out of the British Army (even though this coincided with King George III proclaiming the cessation of hostilities). Thus, he appointed himself as leader of the three families that lived, toiled, and, eventually, died, around him.

Yup, thought Vernon, as he belched, tightened his suspenders, and headed for the door, you're from royalty and don't ever forget it. Forget it. Vernon stopped in his tracks. He had promised Leola two scoops of ice cream today, instead of the sole one she had enjoyed last week, so he turned back to grab the extra ten cent piece he had placed on the table the previous night. He rubbed it on his shirt, deposited it in his chest pocket, and then stepped out to the brisk, morning air.

As soon as Vernon took his first deep breath, there on the smooth planked porch, he knew something was wrong. There was a strong smell of burned wood in the air, much more than normal. But there was also another smell riding the wind of this September morning, a smell that wrenched the gut; a smell that meant death and destruction, for this was the smell of burnt flesh; human flesh.

Vernon scanned the skyline and saw a wisp of smoke coming from the northwestern part of the forest, in the

direction of the *Wasseck County Carnival*. That old fool, thought Vernon as he took off in a fast trot, conserving energy, as the carnival was a good two miles away. Because of his penny pinching ways, Jeremiah Wasseck, the owner of the carnival, had placed it at risk of fire. The carnival was surrounded by acres of forest, yet many entrepreneurs, drawn like moths to a flame by the carnival's success, had offered to raze the woods so they could build restaurants and shops nearby. This would have, eventually, lead to a fire station being built. But Jeremiah had refused all proposals. "If people want to eat, they'll buy something from my food booths," he declared forcibly. "If they want to shop, they can purchase souvenirs from my vendors and no one else. I won't have leeches bleeding me dry or making one penny profit on the back of my hard labor."

Jeremiah's rantings had no effect on attendance, though, as the carnival remained as popular as ever. People from all around filled the place each season, which lasted from April to September. But they wouldn't anymore, guessed Vernon, when he finally entered the clearing.

The blackened, twisted steel skeleton of the *Fair-Ground Ferris Wheel* was the first thing Vernon noticed. The heat of the blaze must have been intense, he thought, for the frame was buckled almost in half. And those newfangled, colored plastic seats that adorned the ride, now looked like melted globs of his favorite treat, Bazooka Bubble Gum, which had just recently been introduced by Topps Chewing Gum, Inc. For some reason, Vernon remembered hearing that the gum was not

named after the weapon, but in honor of the musical instrument made famous by Bob Burns. Burns. My God, what has happened to the Bailey family, to Leola? Were they burned alive?

The chain links of the carnival's boundary fence were cool to the touch and Vernon pressed his face against them; his eyes scanning for any sign of life. Nothing. Nothing but the wisps of smoke that rose like the tendrils of some runaway vine, climbing from the burning embers of the food and game booths. Vernon ran to the front gate and tried to pull it open. He knew it was kept locked overnight and, as he suspected, his effort proved futile. Wait a minute. Something's wrong.

Vernon examined the mortise lock that prevented the gate from opening. Someone, or something, had mangled it, smashed it in, so that even if one had the key, it would be impossible to unlock the gate. Did someone do this on purpose? Was the carnival set on fire, then the arsonist left through the front gate, and smashed the lock in hope that no one would be able to enter and douse the flames? Or worse, was it done to ensure that no one would escape? Vernon bit his lip. Who would want to hurt the Baileys?

Thoughts filled Vernon's head as he turned and started toward the police station, a good four miles away. Now let's see. The Baileys had been caretakers of the carnival for the past twelve years. The carnival closed for the season just two weeks ago. Who could they have come across in that length of time that would do this to them? Now don't jump ahead, Vern, you don't even know

if they're in there. But reasoning that they were, maybe the arsonist only had it in for one of them, not the entire family. Vernon bit his lip. No, the entire family was a bit off, something wasn't quite right with them. The head of the household, Ben Bailey, was a very stern and strict man, never smiled, and his hatchet-faced wife, Edna, was a pompous ass, thought Vernon. That teen son, Amos, the spittin' image of his father, was just as glum and serious, but the sixteen year old daughter, Leola, now she was different. Or was she?

The first time Vernon saw Leola, exactly one week ago, it was from behind. How many men have fallen in love with women based on that view alone? How many men stayed in love after seeing them from the front? Vernon recalled that he had been walking towards town to pick up some supplies when he spotted Leola a few steps in front of him. He studied the tight little backside in the hand-me-down jeans that were a bit too small, and burned that image into his head forever. The perfect hourglass shape and the silken black hair cascading down her back were mesmerizing. The resulting stir in his groin gave new strength to his legs and he jogged to catch up with her. And once he saw the pure, milky white skin of the face, with the cutest little button nose set between blue eyes that sparkled like diamonds...well, he was ready for marriage. He then looked down at the budding breasts that were straining at the wool of the knitted sweater and swallowed hard. He was lucky he remembered his name. He knew he'd never forget hers.



As they strolled along, Vern learned that Leola was sixteen and was now allowed to walk alone into town. In previous years, her older brother, Amos, did it. That's why he had never seen her before. Vern decided right then and there to take more interest in the caretakers and visit the carnival every few days.

So on that first day, when he entered the general store with Leola, he thought he'd be a gentleman and buy her an ice cream. Leola's eyes went wide in anticipation but then a wave of disappointment extinguished them. No, she explained, she was permitted to have ice cream only once per year, on Easter. And though she loved it dearly, she had to decline. Vern feigned understanding, but something he saw in her eyes, a glint of conspiracy, perhaps, made him pull her aside, away from the proprietor, where he spoke to her in a low whisper. He asked if he were to bring the ice cream outside, away from prying eyes, if she'd partake. She readily agreed. So once the shopping was completed, Vern asked for scoops of vanilla in cups, and brought them outdoors to a waiting Leola, who had exited the store moments earlier. Vern motioned to the blacksmith's shed, which he knew would be empty until noon, and suggested they sit on bales of hay and relax while they ate their ice cream.

A shiver shot up Vern's spine when he thought back to what had transpired in the darkened blacksmith shop once the last spoonful of the cold, creamy delicacy had been devoured. Good Lordy, that was probably the best morning of his life. Leola's body would've brought the Pope himself to his knees. The skin was flawless, her

muscles toned and taut. And when he entered her she made the cutest little sound-

Vern stopped and looked up at the wooden sign that indicated he had reached the police station. The next half hour was a whirlwind of confusion. Vern telling Chief Wisehunt about the smoldering ruins; the Chief putting a call out to his deputy, and the deputy rounding up concerned citizens willing to travel to the scene. Someone grabbed a pair of bolt cutters and off they went; bouncing and jostling over the dirt road; all while standing on the police wagon's running board and holding on for dear life.

When the wagon pulled up to the carnival's front gate, everyone jumped off and rushed it, Chief Wisehunt brandishing the bolt cutter over his head like it was some magical talisman. And once enough chain links had been disjointed, the gate pulled free, allowing the men from town to swarm over the carnival's grounds like a bull stampede. But Vern didn't enter the carnival. He held onto the gate, and gazed through it with unseeing eyes, as his mind transported him back one week's time. Back to the last conversation he had with old man Bailey. It had been on Sunday, the day after his tryst with Leola.

Vern had been walking by the gate on that clear crisp morning and saw Ben Bailey oiling the gate's lock. Ben eyed Vern and his facial expression projected that he was in a particularly foul mood. Vern wished he hadn't been noticed, that he could have slithered away. But no, Vern had walked too close to the gate, hoping to catch a glimpse of Leola, when the hawk-nosed face of Ben Bailey reared

its head. Vern didn't scare easily but he remembered how he had unconsciously taken a step backward. Then he swallowed hard and asked Ben how he was doing. It was a weak opening but he couldn't think of anything better. He had even forgotten to mention the weather, which is second nature to a New Englander, proving just how discombobulated he was. And he became even more befuddled, when he realized that Ben Bailey was opening up to him; telling him what was perturbing him.

The more Ben spoke and warmed up to Vern, the colder Vern's blood ran, for Ben described how he had ordered his son, eighteen year old Amos, to run some electrical cable in the ticket booth, and how that had evolved into a nightmare...for Amos, that is.

Apparently, Ben Bailey was making his rounds and when he walked up to the ticket booth, he found Amos with his pants down around his ankles, his male member in one hand and a magazine cover of the swimsuit clad actress, Lana Lake, in the other. Ben was red-faced and furious as he explained how Amos had almost 'released his seed' which would have doomed his soul to hell for eternity. After hearing what Ben Bailey did to his son's testicles with the hammer and steel staples he was supposed to be using for the cabling, Vern guessed that Amos would've rather burned in hell than faced that punishment. And as Ben Bailey went into excruciating detail regarding the torture to his son's manhood, Vern felt like he was going to faint. That feeling almost became reality in the next minute.

Ben pulled his hanky from his back pocket and wiped the glistening sweat from his forehead, which had

perspired profusely as he relived the improvised penance he had inflicted. He then calmed down and stated flatly that he would have to keep a better eye on Leola, as she was now a young lady and she might be tempted to touch herself 'down there'. Ben didn't seem too concerned, for he stated that he had already had a long talk with Doc Baker, who had assured him that once Leola was done with her chores this season, he'd be able to perform something called a clitoridectomy on her, which would miraculously chase any demon thoughts of self pleasure away from the young woman's head. It was being used in Africa to great success, said Doc Baker, and he would gladly inspect and reconfigure Leola's genitals for free.

Ben had thanked the good doctor profusely and asked him to remove whatever he had to so that, in addition to Leola's mind staying free and clear of temptation, the area below her waist would be unattractive to men. Ben went on to explain that Leola would be working for them until she was an old maid and would have no need to marry or bear a child.

Vern's blood now turned hot with fear. He could feel his face becoming flush. Had he not bedded Leola just a week ago in the blacksmith's shop? Didn't she promise him that if he gave her two scoops of ice cream this week she'd let him defile her young, nubile body in whatever way his heart desired? If Ben Bailey believed in mutilating his own children to prevent sexual thoughts from entering their heads, my God, what would he do to me for deflowering his only daughter? Vern mumbled something to Ben about his being a good father with great

intentions and all, then quickly bade goodbye, using the excuse that he had planned to spend the day fishing and wanted to get out on the lake as quickly as possible.

All this came back to Vern as he looked through the chain links of the fence and watched Chief Wisehunt head toward the Baileys' cabin with the rest of the boys. Guess they couldn't find any sign of them among the rides or booths. Vern stepped back from the fence and looked up where the large, hand carved, gold leafed letters spelled out the name, *Wasseck County Carnival*. Now that's odd, he thought. Why are some letters missing? Vern counted aloud as he used his index finger to point to the remaining letters: W, C, K, O, U, N, and T. No doubt about it, fourteen letters were missing, including the ones that made up the word 'carnival'. Vern looked around him. No letters on the ground. And he was sure that they hadn't perished in the fire, for the remaining letters weren't even scorched.

The yells and screams from Chief Wisehunt and his men caught Vern's attention. He looked up and saw some of the younger men from town run out of the Bailey cabin and immediately vomit all over the neat rows of annuals that Mrs. Bailey had tended to these past twelve years. And when Vern saw Chief Wisehunt walk out of the cabin, holding Leola's severed head by its hair, he felt the kick in the gut, and within a second, his breakfast was covering his shoes.



By the time Chief Wisehunt sat down to write his report, this is what he knew: All four members of the Bailey

family had been hacked to death with, what appeared to be, an ax or a large hatchet. The bodies had been dismembered with parts strewn about the cabin's floor. For some reason, a page from the Bible was found stuffed in Mrs. Bailey's mouth. The Chief figured it was meant to be a statement left by the killer, but neither he, nor the detectives assigned to the case, could ever figure it out. They were thankful that, though the killer set the walls of the cabin ablaze, the bodies on the ground hadn't burned, thus leaving some evidence behind. Not that it was useful. For the only iron clad evidence that was ever found, evidence that pointed to a killer's thirst for revenge, was found outside the carnival grounds a few days later.

An insurance assessor, surveying the carnival's property line, found something that the police had missed. A piece of paper, on which someone had written a crude poem in Ben Bailey's blood, had been attached to a tree with a couple of large, steel staples; the type one would use to hold cabling or small diameter pipe against a wall. The staples had been pounded so forcefully, that indentations around them gave clue as to what instrument was used to create them. And it was decided that the blunt end of an ax had been used; probably the same one that killed the Baileys.

And though the poem was published in local papers and read over the evening newscasts, no one was ever able to identify its author. Without any clues, the police were stymied, and no arrest was ever made. Jeremiah Wasseck was never able to raise the funds needed to rebuild, so,

emotionally devastated, he took the small settlement from his insurance company and moved to Poland, to be near an ailing sister. A year later, while accompanying her on the German cruise ship, *MV Wilhelm Gustloff*, Jeremiah was killed along with nine thousand others, when a Soviet submarine sunk the ship in the Baltic Sea.

Jeremiah's bloated, floating body was recovered a few days later. A small, leather-bound diary was attached to his waistcoat by a stout, gold chain. Those that read the diary, hoping to find names of relatives, found instead that Jeremiah kept lists of the names of every amateur poet he came across in his travels, in some twisted hope that the police would track down all of these 'suspects' and match their handwriting to the killer's note attached to the tree.

When the parcel containing the diary finally arrived at police headquarters, Chief Wisehunt opened it, looked at the accompanying letter from the ever-efficient German police, then opened the diary. There, on the very first page, was the killer's 'poem', which had been copied from the original, letter by letter, by Jeremiah Wasseck.

Chief Wisehunt remembered how Jeremiah had stormed into the station after the note was found and had demanded to see it. Two deputies, donned with rubber gloves, held it down on a desktop, while Jeremiah's arthritic fingers painstakingly transcribed the note into his diary. The Chief remembered that Jeremiah's fountain pen kept blotting the page with globs of ink; his hand was shaking so much. And once Jeremiah finished, he double checked his spelling, then exited the building, putting his faith in Chief Wisehunt, who he respected.

And now the Chief felt terribly about not being able to solve the crime.

Before placing the diary into the near-empty 'Wasseck County Carnival Murders' evidence box, the Chief stared at the poem, then read its contents aloud to no one in particular.

*I asked for a job to help feed my kin.*

*They beat me so hard, they flayed off my skin.*

*They hadn't a clue with who they were messin',*

*So I taught one and all, a hell of a lesson.*

Chief Wisehunt slowly closed the diary, placed it in the evidence box, and then closed the lid for the very last time. He had a gut feeling that the perpetrator would never be caught. But that didn't bother him as much as the depressing thought that he would never know exactly what happened. He didn't have enough evidence to establish a timeline, and that would bother him like an itch he could never reach. It killed him to know that somewhere, right now, there was someone out there that knew exactly what happened on that fateful day.

## 2

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VICTIM OR CULPRIT

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*Saturday, September 23, 1950*

Casey Leester shifted the duffel bag from his left to right shoulder. He took a moment to check his watch, which he had shoved deep in his pocket before heading out from home earlier that morning. Well, it wasn't really Casey's home; it was his in-laws'. Casey had married the former Virginia Collins in August, and her parents had offered them the use of an empty stable on their farm as temporary shelter until Casey found another job.

The hot, humid air that had settled over Maine's farmlands the previous few months had sapped the life out of Casey, like a wet blanket thrown on a roaring fire. He had been laboring in the fields over fifteen hours a day, with nothing to show for it but some emaciated livestock.

And the August harvest of broad beans, beetroot, and shelling peas, was as slim as the withered cucumbers he'd gnaw on during the day to soothe his parched throat. No, Casey Leester needed to find a new job; a way to generate income for, what he hoped, was the start of a new family for himself and his missus. So he packed up a few belongings and headed south, leaving Aroostok, Maine, around 6:30am.

The sun, which had risen to greet him when he started out, now hung low in the western sky, casting long shadows among the trees. But it was still unseasonably warm; Indian Summer would last a little longer this year.

Casey took the pocket watch out again. Was it really almost 4:00pm? It's funny how a man walking through the forest, with just his own thoughts to keep him company, could lose track of time. In a way, it seemed like he had only been walking a few hours. But on the other hand, the good-bye kiss he had shared with his new bride that morning was a distant memory. Oh well. If he didn't come across anyone soon, anyone that would let him put his head down for the night, he'd make a bed of pine needles and hunker down until sunrise next morning. He had two oranges left in his kit and, though he was thirsty, he'd wait for bedtime to eat the first one and breakfast for the other.

Not a soul in sight. Casey stopped and cocked his head. Now that's strange. Why's it so quiet here? Where are the sounds of the birds, or the squirrels, or the chipmunks? A shiver shot up Casey's spine, as if someone walked over his grave. Casey was no coward and he didn't

scare easily. But something about this place just didn't feel right. He decided to walk another few miles, hoping the terrain, and the accompanying mood of the place, would change for the better.

Less than a half mile later, as he entered a small clearing, Casey stumbled, and not because his legs were weak from walking or he had tripped over a partially concealed root. No, Casey's left foot had hit an unusually soft patch of ground. His foot sank into the earth a good four inches. Once he steadied himself he surveyed the area and made a disturbing discovery.

The soft patch was part of a larger plot of land, about three feet wide by six feet long. The dirt was dotted with weeds and grass but not enough to conceal it among its surroundings. At the far end of the plot, Casey eyed two thin slats of wood, lying on the ground. He picked them up and hefted them in his hands. They were constructed of light wood, probably pine, that had been painted white. The pieces were only half an inch thick and two inches wide. One was three feet long, and the end of it was pointed, stake-like. The point was dark and rotted, as if it had once been planted in the soil.

Casey's curiosity was piqued when he realized that the slats were joined at their centers. Someone had driven a single nail through them so the boards could be rotated, like the hands of a clock. By looking closely at the peeling paint, Casey could see that the boards had been, at one time, positioned perpendicular to one another. So he rotated the slats until they were in, what he was sure to be, their original positions.

The slats formed a crucifix.

Casey dropped it back on the grave and continued walking, due south. If he had walked just thirty feet further east, he would've found two other similar graves, which perhaps would have caused him to reconsider the wisdom of continuing his journey in the same general direction. But the discovery of the one grave resulted in Casey believing (or trying to believe) that he had found the reason for the dark mood that hung over this section of forest. He convinced himself that the absence of animals was due to the disruptive human activity that must have taken place during the grave digging. Or maybe an animal's sense of smell was so sensitive that it could discern the smell of a rotting body, no matter how deeply buried, and instinct would make it avoid the area. Yes, that was it, thought Casey as he quickened the pace. If this had been in an open area, or a desert, birds of prey would've descended upon the area after the dumping of a dead body. But since this was a forest, it had resulted in the opposite.

His mind relieved, Casey whistled a childhood song, off tune, and continued his fateful walk.



“Well I'll be a son of a gun.”

Casey let out a low whistle. He had just emerged from the forest and found himself on the edge of an empty, graveled parking lot. Looking left and right, he calculated the width of the lot to be about one hundred yards,

and it was about twenty-five yards to the opposite side. Casey traversed the distance slowly, his eyes glued on the sight before him. When he reached the opposite side, his hands grabbed onto a chain link fence and he pressed his nose to it, like a gawker at a zoo, to get a better glimpse of what was inside. But the fence wasn't built to prevent animals from escaping. It was erected to prevent humans from entering. And it looked like it was up to the job.

The fence enclosed an area the size and shape of a football field. It stood twenty feet high and was topped with barbed wire. An opening in the fence was sealed off with a section of chain link that sat on steel wheels, and had been slid across the opening. And the mortise lock that ensured the gate was secure, posed a formidable barrier to entry.

The establishment that was so competently protected brought a smile from Casey, for it brought back wonderful memories of similar establishments he had visited as a child. He wished the gate was open and he could enter, but the sign on the fence that proclaimed it was '*Closed for the Season*' reminded him it wouldn't be much fun at this time of year anyway.

Releasing his grasp on the fence, Casey stepped back a few feet and looked up at a spot about five feet above his head. Attached to the fencing were beautiful, hand-carved wood letters, which spelled out the name, *Wasseck County Carnival*. Every letter was upper case and over two feet tall. The intricate scrolling and edgework was highlighted by, what looked like, real gold leaf, while the main body of the letters was the color of treated redwood.

Well, Mr. Wasseck, whomever you are, you sure know how to build them, thought Casey. He slowly scanned the carnival's grounds from left to right, relishing in the architectural and design elements of the attractions: the various game and food booths; the towering Ferris wheel; the double, camel-humped roller coaster; the majestic carousel with its elaborately carved horses and chariots; and numerous other, smaller thrill rides. Oh, what a shame these marvels of engineering were stilled for the winter, thought Casey, for they are so full of life when moving, surrounded by celebrating throngs of people, causing shrieks of laughter and screams of fear. Such a waste that here it sat, a beautiful carnival, dormant for months, looking like a still painting.

Wait a moment. What was that?

Casey silently scooted to his right, closer to the center of the fence. When he reached the gate he pressed his face as close as possible to the chain links. He had recognized movement near one of the food booths to his left, and had changed his position to provide a better vantage point. Yes! Yes, there it was again! Someone stepped behind *Harry's Hot Dog Booth!*

Keeping his eyes focused on the booth, Casey was soon rewarded. A young woman, probably about sixteen or seventeen, stepped out and examined the clapboards on the side of the booth. She looked down at the paintbrush in her hand then back at the boards. Her face scrunched up as if she had tasted a lemon. She folded her arms and started tapping her foot.



Casey leaned into the fence, cupped his hands, and yelled out, "Staring at it won't get it painted!"

The young woman, visibly startled, turned her head so fast that Casey half expected her to self induce a whip-lash. But once her eyes settled on Casey, she quickly regained her composure.

"Well, instead of you standing there all insulting and stuff, why don't you offer to help me?"

Casey threw his head back and laughed. She was a hot ticket; dishing it out as good as she could take it. He spit on his hand and held it out, as if to shake hands. "You hire me and I will. Is it a deal?"

The young woman walked over to the fence. As she approached, Casey was able to get a better look at her. She was one of those rare specimens that actually looked better up close. He noticed her skin was flawless, what he could see of it. It appeared that someone, her mother or father, thought it would be wise for the girl to wear World War II era WAC (Women's Army Corps) coveralls; the kind made famous in the *'Rosie the Riveter'* posters. In a way, it made sense, for the olive drab, herringbone twill uniform would protect her torso, arms and legs from paint splatter. But the weight of the material was all wrong for the heat of Indian Summer. She must be sweating up a storm, thought Casey. But when she reached the gate he noticed that her blue eyes were wide and bright, displaying no sign of exhaustion, and the forehead under the silken black hair was void of perspiration. This hot ticket was also one cool chick.

"So you want to be hired," said the girl with a sly smile. "Well, that would be up to my daddy. You see, my family's the caretakers here."

Casey twisted his head and looked around at the deserted parking lot and carnival grounds. A dense forest surrounded the entire area. Casey couldn't imagine a more isolated, remote location. "A carnival in the middle of nowhere," proclaimed Casey. "Does it do much business?"

"We're told it's packed in the summer."

"You telling me that you and yours don't come here yourselves during open season?"

"No," said the young girl bluntly. "We don't like what goes on in places like this. You know, the drinking and carrying on and stuff."

"Some people would call that fun."

The young girl shook her head. "We're good Christian folk, we keep to ourselves. It's why we like the caretaking. No one bothers us. Well, maybe a drifter once in a while."

It was Casey's turn to smile slyly. "Like me."

"Like you."

There was an uncomfortable moment while the young woman looked Casey up and down, like a plantation owner eyeballing a potential slave. Usually, if an attractive young woman gave Casey the eye, his ego would jump up a notch. But for some reason, he wasn't flattered this time; he was uncomfortable yet he didn't know why. He conquered the awkward moment by forcing out a question.



“So how many years have you and your family been caretaking?”

“Since I was a baby.”

“Then how is it you don’t know how to paint?”

The young woman crossed her arms and pouted. “Cause it’s my first year having to whitewash. I’m usually helping my ma with the general cleaning.”

Casey nodded his head. “Okay. I’ll buy that. Well, if you want to learn, I can teach you how to do it. And how to do it right.”

The young woman bit her lip, contemplating Casey. Without saying a word, she walked over to the ticket booth, a small, wood shack positioned just inside the gate. She squatted down and pried out a large knot from the front of the booth. She reached in, pulled out a skeleton key, then made her way to the gate that Casey was now leaning against.

“Back up a bit,” she commanded.

Casey obliged and the young woman unlocked the gate. She grasped the chain linking with both hands and slid the gate open. Casey stepped across into the carnival’s grounds. There it was again, that fleeting feeling that someone had just stepped over his grave. What was wrong with him? Why was he entertaining thoughts of doom and gloom? Regardless of his emotions, Casey remembered his manners. He held out his hand.

“Casey Leester. At your service.”

The young woman took his hand and shook it firmly. “Leola. Leola Bailey. So what brings you to these parts?”

“Looking for work. Got hitched last month but we have to live with my wife’s folks until we can afford a place of our own,” said Casey. He tried to judge Leola’s age. He wasn’t sure if she was old enough to understand the need of newlyweds to escape from their parents’ roost. “How old are you, Leola?”

“Sixteen,” said Leola haughtily. “Why?”

“Oh, no reason,” said Casey dismissively. He looked at the hot dog booth then the brush in Leola’s hand. “How about showing me to your daddy? Once I tell him how hard I’ll work, I bet he hires me on the spot.”

“Well, aren’t you the confident one.”

“I sure am. So put that there key away and take me to him. Then we’ll come back and paint that booth.”

Leola pursed her lips as if to say something but held her tongue. She instead walked calmly to the ticket booth, deposited the key in its hole, placed the knot back in position then turned to Casey. “I’ve a better idea,” she said with a slight smile plastered on her face. “What’s say we paint it, then I show my pa what a good job you’ve done. Then he’ll be more apt to hire you.”

For some reason, Casey felt that Leola’s words didn’t ring true. But that was ridiculous; he had no reason to doubt her. He drove all doubt from his mind. “I guess you know better than I how your daddy will react to me.”

The smile on Leola’s face broadened. “I sure do.”

Leola walked toward the booth and Casey quickly took up station with her. She looked him up and down then nodded at the duffel bag slung over his shoulder. “How many shirts you’ve got with you?”

Casey stopped and pointed at himself with both hands, indicating the tattered, plaid shirt he was wearing. “You’re looking at it.”

“Then you’d best take it off,” said Leola seriously. “The paint’s oil based. It won’t wash out.”

“Okay,” said Casey with a shrug. He unbuttoned his shirt and peeled it off, revealing a sinewy, taut physique. As he placed it in his bag, Leola’s lips parted ever so slightly. The tip of her tongue emerged just long enough to wet her lips, then it darted back out of sight, like a cuckoo after marking the hour. Casey, oblivious to Leola’s telling expression, stepped behind the booth. His eyes settled on a couple of extra brushes and two coffee cans filled with white paint. Leola nodded toward them.

“My daddy said each can should be enough to paint two sides of the booth. And I may have a bit left over cause the front of the booth has that big opening.”

“Well, you’re daddy knows what he’s talking about. I think we’ll have just enough,” said Casey as he held his hand out to Leola. She looked at it blankly for a second then realized he wanted her brush. She handed it over and watched as Casey dipped it in the paint, and wiped off the excess on the lip of the can. He stepped toward the rear of the booth. “Come here and I’ll show you how it’s done.”

Leola approached and Casey placed the brush in her hand and adjusted her grip. He turned her to face the wall and stepped behind her, placing his right hand on the back of hers. Then, like some sort of futuristic, exoskeleton teacher, he controlled her hand and

applied paint to the clapboards in a fluid up and down motion. “The trick’s in the wrist,” said Casey. “That’ it. Nice and easy.”

Casey was pressed so closely to Leola that his warm breath was tickling her right earlobe, sending shivers down her spine. She felt her nipples harden and her stomach fluttered. Casey, meanwhile, was all business. Though Leola was a sexually attractive young woman, there was something about her that made her unattractive to him. She was just a bit off, though he couldn’t put his finger on it.

After five or six strokes, Casey was sure that Leola had the hang of it. After all, she was whitewashing a hot dog booth, not painting the ceiling of a chapel. He let go of her hand and stepped back.

“You go that way,” said Casey as he pointed to the right hand side of the booth. “And I’ll go this way. We’ll meet in the middle of the opposite side.”

“Sounds good to me,” sighed Leola as the wave of hormones that had coursed through her body abated, like an ocean’s swell at low tide.

Casey smiled, grabbed a brush and a can of paint, then concentrated on the job at hand. He soon found himself in a rhythm; his long, perpendicular paint strokes covered the boards efficiently. He found he was whistling to himself. And why shouldn’t he? It was a warm, fall day, he was engaged in honest work, and it was work he excelled at. He looked forward with high hopes. Soon he’d meet Leola’s father and his work would be rewarded.

But if, at that moment, a psychic, clairvoyant, or fortune teller had told Casey what his reward would be, he would've bolted like a jackrabbit, headed for the proverbial hills, and never looked back.

# 3

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## SETUP

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**H**alf an hour later, Casey and Leola were painting the same side of the booth, their hands and arms covered in spots of paint. Fifteen minutes later, their brushes were side by side, completing the whitewashing. There was a few feet of clapboard left to cover and Casey, wanting to prove he was a gentleman, suggested that Leola step back, relax, and let him finish it.

“That’s mighty kind of you,” said Leola slyly as she retreated a few feet behind Casey. “This hard work has made me overheat. Any more and I’d feel faint.”

Casey concentrated on the job before him. “I wouldn’t want you getting all hot and feverish.”

“I already have,” said Leola as she dropped her brush and paint can, then unfastened all of the coverall buttons above her beltline. Grabbing a lapel in each hand, she spread her garment open, baring her chest like

Superman exposing his stylized 'S'. She then moved her bra cups aside and released her grapefruit sized breasts; her raspberry hued nipples hard with desire.

Casey, who had just completed the last stroke, stepped back, placed the brush and paint can at his feet, then admired his work. Satisfied, he turned to Leola. "Leola. I think—"

Leola rushed him, grabbing Casey's biceps with her hands while she pressed her lips against his. Casey, caught totally off guard, recovered quickly and brought his hands up. He grabbed Leola's wrists gently, yet firmly. He pushed her away. "Hey, Leola! What are you doing? C'mon, now? I told you I'm spoken for!"

Leola backed away, panting. "Since when has that stopped any man?" She rushed forward again, more determined this time, like a shark coming in for the kill. This time, instead of grabbing Casey's biceps, she gripped his wrists and, as she pressed her face close to his, she pulled his hands to her breasts. She knew she had placed his thumbs directly over her nipples.

"Can you feel how excited I am?"

Casey immediately broke Leola's grip and turned the tables. Grabbing her wrists, he pushed her back forcibly.

"Stop it!" he said with the stern tone of a commanding officer.

Leola's eyes shot daggers at Casey. "What's a matter with you? You queer or something?"

"No. Not at all."

"Oh, so it's me then. Am I ugly or something?"

"Of course not, Leola. You're a very pretty girl. Believe me. But I just got hitched to a fine woman. And I'm asking your daddy for a job," Casey said as he shook his head. "And I'm sure he wouldn't take too kindly if he thought I was messing with you."

Leola's face, which had reflected pure contempt while Casey was speaking, underwent a remarkable change once her father was mentioned. She smiled, but it was a sly, devilish grin. "You're right," she said. "He wouldn't." Unashamedly, she folded her breasts, which now bore spots of paint from Casey's hands, back into her bra and buttoned her coveralls, as matter-of-factly as if she was tying a ribbon in her hair. She looked at Casey, the smile growing broader. "Come on. I'll take you to him now."

"Much obliged," said Casey as he nodded his head and reached for his duffle bag.

In awkward silence, they picked up the paint cans and brushes. Leola turned toward the center of the carnival and started walking. Casey stepped in line behind her. After walking a few feet, he felt he had to say something. If he was going to be working with Leola, he wanted to pour oil on any troubled waters he may have stirred up.

"I hope there's no hard feelings, Leola."

Leola stopped and turned. Her face was the picture of innocence. "Why would there be?"

Casey scuffed the dry ground with his toe. "Well, I'd understand if you felt offended."

Leola turned back around and started walking. Under her breath she said, "And the righteous will rejoice when seeing the vengeance."

“You say something?” asked Casey.

Leola flashed him a warm, embracing smile. “I said I’m sure your wife appreciates your allegiance.”



The toolshed that Leola lead Casey to was relatively small, about twenty feet to a side. Casey figured that there must be a larger building, probably a storage shed, somewhere nearby, and that would be where the heavy equipment: utility truck; lawn mowers; machine tools, were probably kept under wraps. He briefly looked around as Leola fumbled with the door but couldn’t pick out which building it would be on this, the back right quadrant, of the carnival’s grounds.

Leola had opened the door, so Casey followed her in. She placed her things on the floor and he followed suit. He then glanced at his new surroundings. His first impression was of a place that could turn the most outgoing extrovert into a claustrophobic. The walls were fashioned of dark brown wood. This alone wouldn’t be bad but the shed was not, to his knowledge, equipped with electricity. The only light appeared to be coming in from three small windows that were centered in the side and back walls. Pegboards covered the walls, and a myriad of hand tools were neatly hung from them. Casey noticed that, on the wall to his left, three duffel bags, similar to his, were hung just inside the door. A seed of doubt sprouted in his stomach.

The sound of water running from a faucet caused Casey to focus diagonally across the room to the opposite

corner. There, a strapping young man of about eighteen years old was rinsing something in the sink. He had looked back at Casey and then, with disinterested eyes, turned back to his chore. As for what he was rinsing, Casey didn’t have a clue; the man’s back blocked his view.

Immediately to the right, a tall, stocky man, about fifty years old, presumably Mister Bailey, was stacking bags of cement. At first, Casey snickered at the man’s choice of work clothes, thinking him to be an amateur, for he was outfitted in a heavy, grey, wool suit with noticeable perspiration showing on his face and forehead. The pants had a flat front (Casey read somewhere that men’s suits were supposed to have pleats but that practice had stopped during the war to save on fabric) and the vest was of matching material. Even in the stifling confines of the shed, the man had his tie knotted up tightly to his Adam’s apple. His shirtsleeves ended in double cuffs, held together by plain, silver cufflinks.

Any thoughts that Casey nurtured regarding the man’s work ethic withered as he studied the way he stacked the cement bags. He knew what he was doing. Wooden planks protected the bottom bags from the damp floor, and the bags were placed as closely together as possible to reduce the circulation of air. The bags were arranged in the preferred header-and-stretcher fashion, in which bags are placed both length-wise and cross-wise, allowing them to interlock, reducing the risk of them toppling over.

As each bag was placed in position, the man shouted out a solitary number, which Casey noticed was dutifully written down by, what he assumed to be, the man’s wife

and Leola's mother, Mrs. Bailey. Casey took an immediate dislike to the obese, hatchet-faced woman, that had been stuffed into her Victorian dress like ground meat into a sausage casing. And though Casey found her physically repulsive, there was still something else disturbing about her, something emanating from her. Conceit. Yes, that was it, thought Casey, conceit.

Mrs. Bailey sat on a makeshift bench, back ramrod straight, holding the chewed Number 2 pencil in her chubby little hand, with her pinky extended...as if she was holding the Queen's necklace. She looked down her pig-nose to transcribe the entry on her clipboard, which she could barely see due to her large, shapeless breasts. They looked like two sand bags, void of any definition, hanging over her stomach, which hung over her thighs, which hung over her knees, etc., etc.

Leola made a statement that pulled Casey's thoughts away from her disturbing parents, and he was overjoyed for the distraction. Though it was short-lived.

"Ma. Pa. This is Casey Leester. He sweet-talked his way in here. Made me open the gate. Says he's looking for work."

Casey turned to Leola, puzzled, but then turned back to the Baileys, who had stopped their work to appraise the shirtless stranger in their midst. Their faces were void of expression.

"I explained to Leola that I'm newly married and would put in an honest day's work for you good people if you'll hire me," said Casey hoping to soften, what seemed like, a harsh introduction from Leola.

The father, Ben Bailey, approached Casey and felt his biceps. He then poked him in the stomach. He never looked Casey in the eye or acknowledged him as a person. No. Casey was being evaluated as a slave, a piece of machinery, and Ben Bailey had to be assured that Casey wouldn't be the cog that stopped the machine or prevented it from working efficiently. Ben Bailey looked to his wife and raised an eyebrow. "Mother?"

The mother, Edna Bailey, was studying Casey with dead eyes. She turned back to her chart. "Looks strong enough."

Ben Bailey grunted what Casey interpreted as approval. But then he grabbed Casey's hands and studied the spots and streaks of white paint. "What's this?"

"I helped your daughter whitewash."

"Without my approval? No pay for that."

Casey glanced at Leola. A sly grin was cast his way. He turned back to Ben Bailey and said humbly, "I was just trying to help your daughter, sir." He swallowed hard. "That one will be on me."

Ben Bailey nodded. "All right, then." He pointed toward the dirty brushes then the sink. "Take the brushes you used and wash them at the sink before they're ruined."

Casey thought he had given this man too much credit earlier. Maybe Ben Bailey, regardless of his cement stacking knowledge, really didn't know anything about handyman work. Casey tried to make his next words seem as innocuous as possible. "Pardon me for saying so, Mr. Bailey, sir. But water won't work. I'll need turpentine.

“That’s for oil based paint,” Ben Bailey spat back. “This is that new one--”

Leola jumped right in, to make sure Casey knew she had played him. “Latex, daddy. That new fangled paint is called latex.”

You son of a bitch, thought Casey.

“Yes. Latex. Washes off with water. Get to it!” demanded Ben Bailey.

“Yes, sir.”

Casey picked up the brushes, looked at Leola, received another devilish grin, frowned, then made his way to join Amos at the sink. Amos was concentrating on the brush he was twisting and turning under the weak, trickling water. Casey leaned in and stuck his hand out.

“Casey Leester.”

Amos looked at the outstretched hand then turned back to his brushes. “I heard your name.”

“So if you know a man’s name, you won’t shake his hand?”

“Not if he’s only hired help.”

“I see,” said Casey as he pulled his hand back.

Amos looked Casey up and down and sneered. “Where are you from?”

“Over the border.”

“This here state has a number of borders.”

“That it does,” said Casey while scratching his chin. “I’m from up north.”

“Well, well, well,” said Amos as he bit the side of his cheek and squinted as if pondering a word puzzle. “That narrows things a bit. Could be another town, another state,

or even Canada. And that’s a whole different country.” Amos gazed at Casey with pure contempt. “If you’re not sure where you’re from, I could draw you a map.”

Casey returned the gaze and prayed his voice matched it. “I’d be much obliged. I’m sure I could learn a lot from a home-schooled hick like you.”

For the first time, Amos stopped cleaning the brush. He placed it on the porcelain sink bottom, grabbed a towel, wiped his hands, and turned toward Casey. “You just earned yourself a whipping.”

Casey opened his mouth. He was going to goad Amos into throwing the first punch, but he thought better of it. He had tensed himself for a fight, but he visibly softened and lightened his voice. “No need, Amos. I think I made a mistake coming here. It’s best I move on.”

A brief apology to the other family members for wasting their time, thought Casey, and I’ll be on my way. He turned to face Leola and her parents.

Ben Bailey was holding the shaft of a spade shovel as if it was a baseball bat. He was in full swing and he was swinging for the fences, which in this particular situation, was Casey’s face. In less time than it took for Casey to blink his eyes, he surmised that his nose, cheekbones, and teeth were about to be smashed to smithereens. But before the approaching tempered steel blade of the shovel blocked out his view, he had seen enough to guess why Ben Bailey was playing Babe Ruth with his noggin.

People say that, when faced with near certain death, their entire life flashes before their eyes. Well, in Casey’s case, it wasn’t his entire life. As a matter of fact, he wasn’t

reviewing his life at all, his brain was putting recent events into some semblance of order, as if it believed that by understanding why it was meeting its doom, it would somehow temper it.

Before the shovel blocked his view, Casey had seen Leola. She had her shirt open, bra aside, and her breasts, the breasts with Casey's handprints on them, were exposed. She was looking at Casey with that same damn sly smile plastered on her face. Leola's mother was standing next to her, eyes wide with anticipation, probably hoping the shovel would knock Casey's head clear off.

Casey didn't have to be clairvoyant to know what had happened.

Leola, upset at Casey's rebuff of her, had told her mother that Casey had forcibly fondled her. The mother, seeing Casey engaged in conversation with Amos, had probably pulled the shovel off the wall, handed it to the father, and suggested he teach the young heathen a lesson. Casey was sure that Ben Bailey jumped at the chance. So that was it. Even though Casey had been a gentleman and turned aside Leola's advances, he was going to pay a price for it.

Why did he ever stop at this place? He should've just kept on walking, he and his duffel bag. Duffel bag. Of course! Now it made sense. The grave outside the carnival, the duffel bags on the walls. How many other poor bastards had come upon this place, only to be killed and buried? Casey's heart sank as he pictured his final resting place, a plot of land in the middle of nowhere. At

least they'll put a makeshift cross on my grave. That was Casey's last, morbid thought.

The shovel struck Casey's face. His nose exploded in a spray of blood, and he fell to the floor like the proverbial ton of bricks.



## 4

## HEARTLINE

When a person wakes up from being knocked out with a blow to the head, it's natural for the body to react to the head trauma by vomiting, for most people wake up in a state of dizziness and nausea. Of course, some people don't wake up at all. A blow to the front of the skull, one that can knock a person out, could prove to be a fatal blow if delivered to the back or side of the head. In addition to the immediate symptoms, a person must worry about long-term effects, which could be extremely debilitating, even fatal.

Casey didn't have time to worry about his future when he regained consciousness, for he was sure he didn't have one once he opened his eyes and was able to focus on the scene before him. He knew he must've been unconscious for at least a couple of hours, for a low sun was visible out the toolshed's west facing window and dusk would soon

be upon them. For some reason, the shed's walls seemed taller and the ceiling higher, than he remembered. How could that be? And his shoulders felt as if they had been torn from their sockets. He knew from the difficulty he had breathing through his nose that it was broken, but he was forced to breathe through it because, try as he might, he could not open his mouth. He guessed, correctly, that a swatch of packing tape was adhered to the lower part of his face. He was also aware of something wet (blood?) dripping down from his hairline, but that wouldn't be blood from his nose. If he could've tasted the liquid, he'd have a good chance of identifying it. But his tongue was a prisoner within a prisoner.

The answers to these questions would become evident once Casey was cognizant of his body's position and surroundings. He was about four feet away from the back wall. His wrists were bound by a rough, hemp rope that was tied to cleats attached to the side walls of the shed. His arms were supporting the weight of his body, for his knees were about an inch from the ground. He longed to be able to put his knees down in order to take the strain off his shoulders. He was basically in a crucifixion position and he could not think of anytime in history when a person had been strung up like that and it hadn't gone downhill from there. What the hell, he thought, what is happening to me?

Due to the way he had been restrained, it tasked Casey's neck muscles to look around. Though he would surely feel more comfortable if he let his head drop, he knew he couldn't afford to pull his eyes away from

the scene. He was convinced that his life would depend on him watching everything, seeking a clue as to how to escape his predicament, which was getting worse by the moment.

Ben Bailey stood in front of Casey. He had removed his jacket, vest and shirt and was wearing a white T-shirt. He was a muscular man and his arm muscles now rippled as he attended to the task at hand. He was holding a length of rope, about six feet long, and he was wrapping a steel staple, the U shaped ones used to hold cabling against walls, around the rope. Ben Bailey reached into a cardboard box that was resting on a nearby bench. Casey noticed a half-filled pail of water resting by the bench's leg. He would've bet his bottom dollar that the liquid dripping from his hair was water, water that had been thrown onto his face to wake him up. And he was woken up so that he could witness what was now going to happen to him.

Ben Bailey had pulled a staple from the box, and held it close to Casey's face.

Even in the dim light of the room, Casey could see it was manufactured from steel. The crown of the staple, which connected both legs, was a good inch across. The legs were almost two inches long and the tapered ends, or teeth, were razor sharp. Casey wondered why Ben Bailey was twisting these staples around the rope. He was sure he'd find out soon enough. He'd be willing to wait, for he was sure if that if the staples provided a benefit to Ben Bailey, it would be to his own detriment.

After the last staple was twisted around the length of rope, Ben Bailey ducked under one of the restraining ropes and made his way behind Casey. With Ben Bailey's body no longer blocking his view, Casey was able to see the rest of the Bailey family. He almost wished he hadn't.

Edna, Leola, and Amos were kneeling on a makeshift pew, their faces lit by a row of candles that burned before them. The candles were of tapered beeswax, and Casey surmised that whoever made them, and it was probably Edna Bailey, had used the wrong size flat braid wick, for the candles were burning unevenly. The flickering flames danced in the eyes of the three Baileys, while throwing large, macabre shadows on the wall behind them.

Casey smirked when he noticed that his duffle bag was now hanging next to the three others he had eyed upon entering this hellhole. He had no doubt that he faced the same fate as their owners, unless he could do something to change it. He wondered if the other poor bastards had been strung up just like him, had looked at the three Baileys while the fourth moved behind him, and had desperately racked their brains to devise an escape plan. They probably had, but the duffel bags on the wall were irrefutable evidence that they had failed miserably. They were the recipients of unwarranted punishment, doled out because they had entered the carnival and paid with their lives.

When it came, it was a shock to Casey's nervous system, for he was stunned so severely that a scream never formed in his throat. Instead, his eyes just widened and he took a short breath through his nostrils, then expelled

it like a bull before charging the red cape. But his mind had deciphered the pain that had wracked his back, and he quickly deduced the cause. He had been whipped across the shoulders with the staple-twisted rope. Now he understood the purpose of the staples. They added another dimension to the whipping effect that the rope, by itself, could impose. The hundreds of razor sharp staple legs added their own notes of pain, creating a torturous harmony with the rope's own inflictions. And as the whipping continued, Casey counted the rhythm of the beating. One-two-three-four, and a one-two-three-four, over and over. Inside of Casey's head, the familiar voice of Lawrence Welk, whose radio show he never missed, was counting the beats. One-two-three-four. And a one-two-three-four. The whipping continued and the band played on.

At one point, as Casey neared unconsciousness, he looked at Leola. Her tongue was licking her lips, while she panted in quick little breaths. She was in her glory. Amos, on the other hand, looked annoyed, as if he should've been the one wielding the rope. And Edna, well, she was the strangest of them all. She was staring at a large Bible that was splayed open in her hands, and as she rocked back and forth she mumbled something over and over. A little pink ribbon, the Bible's bookmark, was dangling over the back of the Great Book, and swaying in time with Edna's movements. What passage had it marked? How many times in the past had she recited it while watching her husband torture someone to death?

Casey let his head drop and looked at the floor. After every stroke of the whip, a splatter of blood marked it; strokes to count by. Once in a while a long strip of flesh would be mingled in. Damn those staples! Damn them to hell!

When it happened, Casey wasn't even aware of it. He just lost consciousness, like a patient on the operating table asked to count backwards from one hundred. And as Casey's head drooped further, and his body lost muscle tone, the whipping ground to a halt. Ben Bailey carefully coiled up the rope and placed it in a trunk beside him. With his left hand, he grabbed a clump of Casey's hair and pulled his drooping head skywards. He dipped his right index finger into one of the rivers of blood that crisscrossed Casey's back, then used the precious fluid to draw a smile on the packing tape that covered Casey's mouth. As he let go of Casey's head he proclaimed, for all to hear, "I rejoice in my sufferings for I am now saved. Amen".

The other members of the Bailey family made the sign of the cross and replied 'amen' in unison.

Ben Bailey pulled a handkerchief out of his back pocket, wiped his forehead, then his finger. "It's time for dinner. Let's go and pray for the Lord Jesus to forgive this heathen's soul." Then, as if he had just killed something as insignificant as a bothersome fly, he said, "Amos and I will dig the grave after dessert." And with a nod of his head, the Bailey family members stood up, walked around the pew in an orderly fashion, then grabbed a candle. They filed out of the shed with the same calmness

and feeling of self-righteousness as churchgoers exiting Mass on a beautiful Sunday morning.



It was the nightmare that woke Casey up. He had dreamed that he was prone, face down, on the makeshift grave outside the carnival's gate, and his hands were stuck fast in the dirt. Leola had the wooden cross in her hand and, with the stained pointed end, was carving her name across his shoulder blades. He wanted to yell but his mouth wouldn't open. When she had finished disfiguring his back, she put her finger to his lips, as if to quiet him, even though he hadn't been able to say anything. She stood up and walked away, leaving him alone. Horrified, he realized he was sinking into the dirt. A faint voice inside of him gave warning, that if he couldn't pull himself out of the muck, he'd be gone for good. With an incredible will to live welling up inside him, Casey forced himself back to consciousness.

The memory of the torture flooded his brain, but for only a moment did Casey feel self-pity. Why? Because self-pity would not help him escape, it would blunt his thinking, which was the only weapon he had. Now was the time to assess his surroundings and the maiming his body had experienced.

The first thing he noticed was that the Baileys were no longer in the shed. That provided him with the first ray of hope. The second thing he noticed was the Bible. He slow-burned inside to think the Baileys had used the

Lord's Book so deviously against a good Christian like himself. They didn't deserve to have such a book in their midst, the bastards. He prayed they'd be paid back in kind someday.

Oh well, more important things to think about. Casey shifted his attention to his left hand. For the first time, he noticed that the rope that bound it to the wall was also wrapped with staples and the razor sharp legs had cut into his wrist, causing little rivulets of blood to trickle down his arms. He pulled hard, trying to free his hand, but he only succeeded in making the cuts deeper and longer.

Wait a moment.

The legs of the staples were all parallel to his arm, so when he pulled, the staples made a series of straight cuts, as if someone was drawing small red lines from his wrist towards his palm. But what if he *rotated* his hand? That would make a circular cut all around his wrist, like the cuff of a sleeve. Would he then be able to pull his hand out? Yes, he'd be leaving the skin and muscles of the hand behind, but an arm would be free!

Casey had heard of animals gnawing off a leg to escape bear traps, so why couldn't he lose a hand? Two hands! With his heart in his throat, Casey started to slowly rotate his left hand. The staples started to separate the skin of his hand from his lower arm. Faster, I must go faster! But not too fast! Don't want to slit my wrist and bleed to death on the floor of this God-awful tool shed.

And so it was. Casey twisted his hand back and forth until he was sure the skin had fully separated and,

I hope you enjoyed reading CARNEVIL.  
Please turn the page for an excerpt of the  
award-winning, sci-fi thriller:  
**STRANDED**

2012 IPPY GOLD MEDAL: SCIFI/FANTASY

A glowing skull made of smoke rises from a burning Earth. The skull is composed of wispy, blue and white smoke, with a bright light emanating from its eye sockets. Below the skull, a globe of the Earth is shown, surrounded by intense orange and yellow flames. The background is a dark, gradient black.

SIX HUMAN SURVIVORS  
ONE KILLER AMONG THEM

# STRANDED

DOUGLAS WENTWORTH

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## STRANDED EXCERPT

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The vacuum of space allowed Evelyn's hair to float freely, framing her face in spun gold. Her eyebrows and lips, animated just minutes ago with a strange amalgam of fear, wonder and curiosity, held a hint of surprise. The pale blue eyes, which had witnessed twelve years of life's experiences, were closed; the long, blonde lashes stilled.

If not for the golf-ball sized hole in Evelyn's forehead, she might be asleep.

It was this hole that intrigued Sandra Hapgood. She noticed that the inner brain matter had swollen, the result of its moisture boiling away. If Evelyn's eyes or mouth had been open upon her body's ejection from the ship, they would have swelled also. But Evelyn's death had been peaceful, and Sandra was content that she had killed her quickly.

The deck beneath Sandra's feet trembled slightly and, with her eyes still gazing at Evelyn's corpse, she instinctively began to swipe her hand across the window's sensor pad. But she abruptly stopped and rested her palm on the thick glass. Evelyn's hand was touching the other side, a mere four inches away; her fingernails soundlessly scraping the glass as the ship's main thruster engines began their forward thrust.

Sandra, her face a taciturn mask, slowly peeled her hand from the glass and swiped the window's sensor.

Upper and lower solar shields noiselessly glided towards one another, steel eyelids slowly obliterating Sandra's view.

And, as the shields winked out its sole remaining emanation of light, the starship, *Prometheus*, gained momentum; cutting through the black velvet of space while plowing indiscriminately through the fifty-two human corpses that surrounded it.

If you would like to download three, free chapters of STRANDED, or view its video trailer, please visit:  
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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Frank D'Angeli (aka Douglas Wentworth) sold his first script, a teleplay for *Columbo*, to Studios USA. His second *Columbo* script was awarded top honors in the American Accolades Movie of the Week Screenplay Competition. His debut novel, *STRANDED*, won the 2012 Independent Publisher Book Awards-Gold Medal in sci-fi/fantasy. Mr. D'Angeli resides in Massachusetts with his wife and two dogs.