



CARNIVOROUS

Ghosts Don't Lie

When they told me to stay
away from the carnival, I
should have listened.

Instead, I took a date.

LISA ACERBO

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Carnivorous

By Lisa Acerbo

Chapter 1

The clock on the stove read 3:04 am. Accustomed to waking up at the witching hour from the most unpleasant dreams, I admitted to myself morning had arrived, ready or not.

I'd turned thirty-one three days ago, and a few friends had taken me out for a quiet celebration, which meant lots of talk about boyfriends and booze. While I couldn't participate in the boyfriend talk, I could sure drink. The next day I woke up with a hangover and leftovers, but no man in my bed. Now, as the smell of coffee filled my small apartment, I rooted around the fridge looking for sustenance. I felt lucky when I pulled out a piece of leftover birthday cake. Unwrapping the red velvet delight, I grabbed a fork and took a big bite. Dessert for breakfast. Life could be worse.

The warm coffee offered solace. While I sipped, Tracker, my basset hound, begged for a treat. I let him lick icing off my finger as I forked bites of the slightly stale confection into my mouth. Coffee and cake sloshed together in my stomach, making me wonder if a healthy breakfast might have been the smarter choice. A yawn limped from my lips, and I headed to the bathroom in the near darkness

I clicked up the light switch and faced the mirror. Big mistake. Huge. I couldn't see my brown hair or green eyes. Instead, a stupid ghost stared at me.

“Where have you been? I’ve been waiting for so long!” The translucent figure didn’t actually say the words, or maybe it did. I wasn’t sure if it was even there, but I saw and heard the spirit clearly. Anger tore through the bathroom. Lights flickered. The top of the toilet shook.

Did I mention that ghosts started visiting me when I turned the ripe old age of three and followed me into the psych ward, through my attempted suicides, and now to my sad, small apartment in Humble, Connecticut, a sleepy town with many stately, antique homes full of specters. Luckily, I lived in a modern, run-down one-bedroom apartment in a small complex hugged by high hills.

Most ghosts left me alone exactly for the fact that I’d built a life to avoid them. Obviously, this one was different.

“What do you want?” I asked. Fear was not an option, and over the years I learned the direct approach was best. I squinted in the subdued light, trying to get a better look at the filmy sketch of a once human. I thanked the gods I was home and not in public. One-sided conversations usually did not go over well.

“No one will help me, but you can. I was murdered.” The words swam like minnows in my head. “Evil is coming. More will die.” Ghostly anger built. The toilet overflowed with black ooze.

This would turn into one hell of a cleanup if I didn’t get the wraith to calm down. “You have no reason to be mad at me. I didn’t do anything to hurt you.” The blood that dripped from the ghost’s mouth should have been shocking, but after years of deaths and ghosts, I viewed it with indifference. Maybe even a little cynicism.

My only concern came from having to tell the ghost no. Some didn't listen to reason. While sewer sludge all over my floors held little appeal, if it meant the ghost would depart, I'd shovel shit.

"Listen, you seem nice and all, but I don't do murders or goodbyes or reach out to loved ones. Go haunt..." I had to pause and think, "that Long Island woman who's a medium. She can maybe do it."

"No. It has to be you!" The scream tore through her. "It's coming here."

"I tried nice, but you wouldn't listen to reason." I don't do nice well or often, but I'd given it my best try. Tired, cranky, and feeling old, my anger built and I boomed, "Go away!"

I smelled the sewage in the toilet. I turned off the light. I'd wait until morning to pee, and hopefully the lovely specter would be long gone.

The cries of the ghost fading, I traipsed back into the kitchen. Tracker looked concerned when I grabbed my mug and cake and opened the computer sitting on my kitchen table.

What else was I to do but check email? I work from home as an online university instructor. It paid the bills, but little else. Most importantly, it kept me out of public spaces. With a lack of emergency student emails or university correspondence, I found myself Googling recent tragedies in the local newspaper. I knew I shouldn't do it, but I did.

Nothing on the front page. If she'd been murdered, the story should be there unless someone attempted to cover up the truth. It didn't take me long to figure out who was doing the haunting. The ghost, formerly Sue Ellen, had lived a few towns over. Whatever ghosts were created of, their presence left me with more than words and images. Lucky

me, I knew a little of Sue Ellen's story, or at least the story of her death. Her demise made me want to vomit up breakfast.

I read the obituary, which definitely failed to tell the entire truth. Releasing a dramatic, Oscar award winning sigh, I headed back to the bathroom. The ghost lingered, looking almost hunched, if ghosts could collapse on themselves.

"Fine, I'll help. But leave me alone for a few hours. I have to give the whole thing a little thought. The actual plan about how I can help isn't crystal clear yet."

The ghost smiled, that is if ghosts do smile, and my head filled with the one word that scared me more than ghost.

CARNIVAL.

Chapter 2

I watched the workers set up the carnival as Tracker and I traipsed around what used to be an empty field sheltered on three sides by a long stretch of woods. I wondered how a carnival scheduled to be around for three days could profit. Harder to understand was the reason why people loved the cheap glitz, unhealthy food, dangerous rides, watered-down drinks, and tawdry games.

A recent news story flashed through my mind about a carnival that had set up on the grounds of an elementary school, the workers taking residence in recreational vehicles on the school property. A week after the carnival closed one of the workers had been arrested for child molestation. He had a long criminal record and continued his winning streak by taking a kid or two behind the House of Horrors for some fun times. From what the ghost shared with me in the bathroom, this carnival looked to be a heck of a lot worse. I couldn't wait.

A ragged hodgepodge of rides, attractions, tents, and booths abounded. Workers, most looking like they lived the hard life and indulged in too many drugs and drinks, scurried like rodents. Skeletal frames, wrinkled faces, and cloudy eyes were everywhere. The only thing more depressing in my sight line had to be the weathered rides and games dulled by excess. They had lost their gloss, all except the Fun House. It gave me the heebie-jeebies. I actually started to shiver, and it took a lot to scare me. I mean, seeing ghosts pop up in the middle of a street or while peeing on a toilet in a public building and not screaming bloody murder is a real skill set. It takes stamina and a strong constitution.

Noticing a couple of workers taking a smoke break by the port-o-potties, I sauntered over to see if I could chat them up. Not to be boastful, but it often worked. My curvy frame and kewpie doll cheeks weren't without appeal.

"Do you work here?" I already knew the answer to my dumb question, but conversation had to start somewhere.

"We do. What you need, missy?" Scarecrow skinny with lots of rough, untamed facial hair, his hard, squinty brown beads of eyes roamed my body.

"Just wondered who owns this place?" I tried to look cute and innocent. It takes a lot of acting. "I love the history of these carnivals."

"Do ya now?" His smile made my stomach flip, though not for the right reason. "Why Mr. Winters, of course." He pointed to the picture of a round-faced, jovial man painted on the side of the carousel. "That there's his picture. A few years back, but you'd swear he hasn't changed a bit."

I stared at the image and realized I'd seen the man before. The ghost had showed me the exact same face.

"Thanks," I said quickly. I dragged Tracker behind me, forcing myself not to run away. Far away. I didn't want to return later at night, but I knew I would. The ghost had extracted my promise.

I hated when I followed through on promises.

The evening of August 23rd loomed overcast and humid with the threat of a thunderstorm invading the air. The people of Humble arrived like small packs of wild dogs, their territorial BMWs and Lexus sedans arranged on the street even when red signs declared "No Parking." The lesser vehicles, Toyotas and Fords, parked in the far lot, the owners not powerful enough or without funds enough to disobey the laws.

Children ran and screamed, dragging balloons or tired parents behind them. Although it was not yet night, darkness invaded inch by inch like a slow-fought battle. Little freaks broke into boisterous play around me, running amok, ignoring the call of parents, yelling about the next ride. Teen girls talked about friends and enemies while the boys talked about, well, you know.

I walked by the Ali Baba with a drab orange and yellow painted sun between two large rows of seats, each at the end of a long arm. Just looking at it and waiting for the ride to rise and spin made my stomach heave.

Kids tramped in and out of the Fun House. An aura of darkness surrounded the exterior, but the little ones, too innocent, didn't sense it. They were like flies to honey. Strings of bright lights and carved clown faces embraced the building. A huge neon "Fun House" sign dangled crookedly. A painted mural covered one side of the building. I'd have to go take a closer look as soon as I found some courage. The outside reminded me of two double wide trailers stacked on top of each other, lots of cheap metal and plastic. My second sight caught something more. Something permanent and evil resided underneath. The Fun House emitted a supernatural residue, and my body took it all in. I so wished I lived somewhere, anywhere, else right now.

Assuming the children running were the most vulnerable, I waited for a sign or symptom of the evil within. The sun hit the horizon as I sat on a bench, water bottle in hand. Kids went up the brightly painted wood plank steps hemmed in by cheap metal railings and came out a staircase not fifty feet away. Nothing stranger than a make-out session between two high schoolers occurred. I had to admire the girl's technique. I learned a thing or two.

When darkness finally cocooned me inside its depths, a voice filled my head. One I recognized. I shivered.

Chapter 3

While I schooled my face into its usual pissed off expression, I wasn't the slightest bit surprised by Andreas' unwelcome arrival. I hated other psychics, though I've met very few legitimate ones. He was the real deal, which only made me dislike him more.

"We doing this, Natalie?" he asked, sitting on the bench next to me, his lean frame too close. I could smell his icy aftershave even if it looked like he hadn't picked up a razor for a few days. Stubble covered his square chin and accented a hawkish nose. His brown eyes were direct and honest as he stared me down, waiting for a response.

"Doing what?" I balked, trying to figure out if there was a way to make him leave.

"Dealing with whatever your ghost friend told us to deal with."

"I don't have friends, ghosts or otherwise, and she told *me* to deal with this. There is no us."

"Duly noted." He smiled. "But I'm here so I should help out. I might have given up poker night with the boys for you. You should be thanking me."

"Did you?"

Another sweet smile.

I hated his smile almost as much as I hated him. Yet I followed him when he stood and took a stroll around the carnival. We stopped for a moment to watch children on the Balloon Race where small cars decorated like hot air balloons circled each other while rising and falling a few feet.

He grabbed my hand. "So we don't look suspicious."

I tried to pull away, but he held tight. Typical. One look at my face would inform the world I was so not into this guy at the moment. *So* not liking this public display of

affection. I have issues, what can I say? “Whatever. Holding hands is a distraction. I need to focus and you’re making that hard to do.”

“Do you want children?” His finger caressed my palm.

My mouth fell open for a few seconds. “What a weird question from someone I don’t know well.”

He shrugged. “Look at the kids on the ride. They’re cute.”

“Yuck. No kids. Ever.” I tried to push myself as far away from him as possible.

A couple passed us, and the girl giggled. I shot her an evil look. He sent another smile my way, but it fell from his face when we circled back to the Fun House. It still didn’t look at all sinister. Happy screams radiated from inside while laughter met us as patrons exited through a moving drum painted bumble bee black and yellow. It kept going around in dizzying circles and the children had to balance to make it through. The biggest catastrophe so far was a skinned knee.

Mr. Winters’ portrait dominated the mural on the side of this attraction, and we went to admire it. He was painted as a king riding upon a lion. Circus animals, clowns, and happy patrons surrounded his flowing red robes. Creepy and disturbing, but also a clue. I needed to understand him and fast, but my brain didn’t want to comply with the request. Must be because Andreas remained close. Too close. And he smelled good. Too good.

I shook those thoughts away and focused my senses. I didn’t have to look at Andreas to know we were vibing. Something would change at the carnival after the kids went home and the late-night thrill seekers came out. While intellectually I understood the stroke of midnight didn’t mean the rides spun faster, the food turned poisonous, or that

the creepy costume characters became real, I still couldn't shake the idea that as soon as midnight hit, the freak show began. I was overjoyed. Not.

"Is it weird that the carnival doesn't close? It's open 24/7?" I asked.

"Not at all." Even I couldn't miss the sarcasm in his response. "I've always wanted to stay up all night with you. I just didn't think it would happen like this."

I couldn't tell if the last part of his response was serious or not, but it sure got me thinking about what I might do if I survived the night. A long dry spell was ongoing and I had needs. I could do worse than Andreas. Really, I could.

He no longer held my hand, and I kind of missed the feeling. I'd never tell him that though. I hated him, remember?

We sat, we strolled, and listened to jaunty tunes blared on a repeated track. The rides still ran at two in the morning, and by that time, I couldn't get the lyrics to "The Lion Sleeps Tonight" out of my head. Without any dinner, I was running on empty and in serious need of an espresso. Not that I'd risk eating or drinking from the booths that dotted the carnival landscape serving all the traditional crap from fried dough to cotton candy and some watered-down alcohol for the adults.

Andreas had an uncanny way of reading my mind so I wasn't surprised when he said, "I can run to Dunkin'. It's open 24/7 too and it's right down the road. Don't even have to move the car it's so close."

"You'd do that?"

"Only if you promise to stay out of trouble until I get back."

I pulled out my wallet to hand him some money.

He waved my hand away. "My treat."

I looked him over. A mask of worry and fatigue covered his face.

“You know what, I’ll go,” I said. “You want anything?”

He shook his head. “I’ll let you know if anything exciting happens.”

I loped out of sight, a little too excited for my treat and the chance to leave the carnival for a few minutes.

When I got back, large light and sweet coffee in hand, I cruised around looking for Andreas, noticing how the workers slowly shut booths down and headed off the property. That had to be a sure sign of something bad to come.

My spidey sense brought me back to the Fun House where very few fun seekers circulated. I chugged my bitter brew and waited until Andreas showed up. The malevolence now seeping into the air from the structure instinctually kept most people far, far away from this attraction. Even the make-out champs looking for a quiet place to canoodle avoided the building. Smart.

Andreas returned a few minutes after me, and we walked around the back. I chucked my empty coffee cup to the ground.

“Really?” Andreas said.

“They have clean-up crews.”

He sighed. I noticed the grass had turned brittle and brown, the leaves of the trees wilted on the stems.

“No Entrance, No Exit,” I read the sign above a weathered door. “This must be us.” Turning the knob, I pushed. A loud creak and announced my arrival. I jammed the door open with a large branch. If I was going in, I wanted to be able to get back out. Upon stepping foot inside, the room appeared surprisingly normal. Then again, darkness embraced most of it, only a single bare bulb above the door shone weakly. It set Andreas’ face in terrifying shadows. I had to look away.

“What do you think?” he wondered aloud.

“Damn creepy. Duh.” It was hard to see him through the gloom that clung like spider webs, visceral and alive. I waited for the bite to follow as we stepped deeper. I also expected to meet a wall, broken parts of rides, racks of uniforms, a table, something, but dead space and unnatural quiet prevailed. I kept walking into the despairing darkness. Smart, right?

“You want to leave?”

“Nope. This is what the ghost called me to do. Can’t turn back now.” I crunched my jaw closed, teeth grinding together.

“Sure you can. Got to stay alive so you can fight another day.”

I thought about this for a moment. “At least I know there’s an ever after. Can’t all be bad in the afterlife.”

Andreas ‘humphed’ and walked forward. “You’ve seen what I’ve seen.”

The air in the room grew thick. We advanced like two lovers strolling on the beach full of dead, rotting fish. The last bit of light from the open door faded away. A pervading dust had taken residence and each step swept it up, causing my eyes to tear. The moldy, acrid smell filled my nose and a sticky dampness entrenched itself upon me. Definitely supernatural.

“Time to pull out the old flashlight.” I retrieved my cell phone from the back pocket of my jeans, hit the flashlight app, and shone the light.

“So modern,” he said.

I turned the light on Andreas and took a quick step backward. He became a monster in the dim beam. I closed my eyes and shook my head. When I opened them, he returned to normal. “Let’s keep going.”

“Where? This doesn’t seem to lead any place.”

I shrugged. “I don’t have a floor plan. You’re welcome to go back if you’re scared.”

He followed like a lost puppy. We entered a chamber that must have been directly under the Fun House. How that was possible, I couldn’t tell you. The hated track music seeped through the ceiling like a water stain. Yes, a lion does sleep at night.

I was stunned when we reached a bedroom, antiquated but functional. A huge bed covered with dusty linens in a delightful shade of rose dominated the space. When I flashed my light upon the covers, I couldn’t help notice the stain, something dark red, rich in color and crusty.

Andreas reached down with his finger to touch the stain and then sniffed.

“Gross.” I wanted to gag. I’ve seen so much worse, usually on ghostly entities walking around the neighborhood, but I found it harder to watch other people deal with the reality of murder and mayhem.

“Blood. Not that old. Maybe a couple weeks,” he said.

“I’m deeply disturbed that you can tell such a thing, and I’m rethinking leaving.”

“Too late now. You went in, now you have to stay in.”

“Who says?” I huffed.

“Me. I’m not helping you find the way out after all this. We have work to do. This looks seriously illegal and bad. Very bad. Worse than last time.”

“Don’t remind me about that other time. Did I mention I hate you?”

“Every time you see me.”

Lights sat upon nightstands, but from the amount of congealed dust covering them, I assumed no one ever turned them on. Upon a chair hung a wedding dress, carefully

draped. Beneath the dress, red satin slippers. And did I mention there was the skeleton under the sheets?

For a long moment, I just stood there looking down at the slumbering bones and fleshless grin, unable to react. The body, sunken and sallow, had lain in the same spot for a long sleep. What was left of her skin was mottled with rot. The rest had fused with the bed. My flashlight app revealed a gray film spreading from the body across the sheets and bedspread. I held back my panic. I was supposed to be used to this kind of creepiness. I should be impervious to this display. Staying aloof kept me out of the nut house, but something felt different down here. This wasn't your typical haunting or possession.

"It's not from the skeleton," Andreas said. "The blood I mean."

"Good to know." I should have cared, but at the moment my insides twisted with a premonition. Fear overtook me, and the sudden riot of emotions left me wanting to heave, something I refused to do in front of a relatively attractive man.

"You okay?"

"Nope." The sickness turned heavy inside of me. "She's the queen."

"What does that mean?" Andreas asked.

"Not sure, but I just saw it. Saw her eating, no, drinking from someone." Whenever there was an abundance of psychic energy or whatever, I became feverish and aching. Great for dates, classrooms, and shopping malls. Hence why I was practically a recluse. This place was nastier than any place I'd ever been and made me feel equally as lovely.

"Keep going?" he asked.

"Why not?" I put on my best happy face.

I gazed at the bed and thought I saw the skeleton—"Did she move?"

“You saw that too?”

“We should depart this special place,” I said, and this time Andreas didn’t contradict me.

Before I turned to go, I noticed a second pillow. I bent low to see it was free from dust that wafted up from the other side of the bed. No gray film stained the linens here, but there was an indentation. A rather large, body sized one at that.

“What now?” Andreas asked.

“This is just not right.” I said with more bluster than I felt as I pointed to the indent. “Someone’s been sleeping next to their queen. Why can’t I get the ghost who wants to say goodbye to fluffy their cat? Send them over to the other side in one quick and easy step?”

“It’s because you usually send the ghosts away as soon as they appear. You don’t like to listen to their stories.”

It was true. I have no defense. But how did that lead me here? “True, but this is so out of my element. I shouldn’t be here.”

“You’re here because you’re probably the only one who can handle it,” he said. “Well, you and me.”

“Thanks for the vote of confidence,” I said in a salty tone.

“No problem. Just don’t forget I plan on pushing you in front of me for protection against any monsters or ghosts we come upon. Be ready to defend me.”

“Did you bring a weapon?”

“No, did you?”

I looked around, but the room held little. “No. There’s the lamp.”

“We’re so done for.”

“Think positive.”

I did, at least until I heard something go bump in the night. It was about twenty feet away and closing in rapidly.

Whipping around, my thin beam of light did little to illuminate the thing, but that might be for the best. Whatever it was, it didn't look human. Worse, more than one creature bumped along. Up until this moment, I'd never believed in zombies, Big Foot, werewolves, or vampires, which might be considered odd for someone who sees ghosts. But seriously. Who believes in vampires? As I saw them stagger forward, I realized I might have to rethink my whole life's philosophy.

“Run!” Andreas screamed as he hightailed it out of there. I followed close behind.

Chapter 4

We made it out, but not before a slimy hand tried to grab the shirt off my back once or twice.

Gasping, I asked, “What now?”

“You got any weapons at your place?” Andreas asked.

“A few,” I said vaguely. No way he was learning about my entire stash. I worked hard to build up a good collection, and I didn’t plan to share them or information about my weapons with anyone.

“Should we go grab some before fighting the big, bad monsters?”

“Sure. Right. You stay here. I’ll be back in a jiff.”

“Can’t I come with you?” His voice turned soft and seductive.

“That would be a huge no. I don’t have strange men over.”

“Strange?” He looked down at his olive-green shirt, jeans, and Converse sneakers. He ran a hand through his neatly styled dark brown hair.

“Looks can be deceiving.” I left him pondering what I meant and headed home, which wasn’t far away, and raided my storage area in the basement, dragging out two lovely swords. I had a variety of weapons, including guns, but didn’t know if supernaturals died from bullets. I’d have to go with everything I watched on television. Swords should do the trick.

Tracker had been inside for a while and I didn’t want to have to clean up dog crap after tackling the bathroom earlier so I made a pit stop at the apartment and took him for a quick walk around the block. Nothing like delaying monster killing to snuggle with your favorite four-legged friend.

There's no way to hide a sword, so I was slightly surprised when not one carnival worker called me on them as I walked back inside the gates. I guess it was just the way my night was going. That and the fact that many of the workers and the paid guests had mysteriously disappeared off the grounds. Could it be the malignancy that conjugated in the early morning air?

I tipped my head back to see the moon. Daylight wasn't too far away. Sad sigh. I could no longer delay slaying the evil.

I found Andreas on the same bench where I left him. "Anything happen?"

"Nothing out of the ordinary. A couple of teens went in and the same teens came out. They found a quiet place behind the trees to do the unmentionable. Otherwise quiet. I think the carnival is winding down for the night."

"Any noise from the creepy things inside?"

"Creepier than teens?"

"Yeah."

He shrugged, all macho and noncommittal. "No sign of them. Should we head back in and end them?"

"No, I'm good out here. Let's see if they want to come visit us." I made sure the swords were positioned well across my back and by my side.

"That might take a while. Do I get one of those?" Andreas pointed at a blade.

"Maybe later." I fidgeted with the weapons, stalling.

"We're going to go in, right?" He looked at the Fun House, lights on the outside twinkling in the darkness, neon colors swirling into unrecognizable designs. The portrait of Mr. Winters beckoned us in with his friendly smile. "I don't want to sit on a cold bench all morning. I have a life and things to do."

I pulled my swords to the side and plopped down on the bench next to him. “Must I?”

“You must.”

“Not the way I expected our date to go.”

“This is a date?” One of Andreas’ eyebrows rose in skepticism.

I wasn’t even sure why I’d said such a stupid thing. Fear. Must be the fear. “That’s a neat trick you got going with your eyebrow. Keep it up and maybe they can find a place for you here as part of the freak show. I’ve been on worse.”

“Worse what?”

“Dates, idiot.”

He stood and offered me a hand, then pulled me up next to him. I followed Andreas to the Fun House. The time had come to blow the roof off the joint. I looked at the front of the Fun House and wished I could be one of the normal people. But I wasn’t. We slunk back through the same door that warned us not to enter, past the creepy bed where the queen’s skeletal form still slept. And, as expected something roamed, waiting patiently for our return.

My flashlight highlighted their deformities as the undead creatures crowded in to join the party. Whatever they were, they looked regurgitated. Pruned and molded skin sat like plastic wrap over gnarled and twisted human forms. Pale, unfocused white eyes found me. Since I don’t know what the creatures actually were—hell spawn, deranged voo-doo jeje spirits—we’ll call them henchmen.

No matter what I named them, one of my new friends, its gray cotton candy tufts of hair springing to life like a halo, dive-bombed me, bowling me over before I had a chance to even draw my sword. We fell into a heap with the creature wedged on top of me, its knees planted across my chest, making it hard to breathe. Not that I wanted to

draw in air; this particular henchman was in a great need of a dental cleaning. Its rank breath seared my face.

Rat-eaten fingers aimed at my eyes. This could have been my sad, unnoteworthy end, but the monster was thrown off balance by a blow from Andreas. My cheek exploded in pain as those disgusting fingers clawed it. A new scar for my collection. Joyful tidings.

It was quicker than me to rebound ended up on top of me again. Oily hands squeezed my neck, forcing the little remaining air from my lungs. Stars filled my vision, and pain radiated from my stomach where the monster's knees sank. Monster slaying was not my forte.

I tried to pull the sword from my hip, but it slipped from my hand. Everything in my mind began to blur. My world tipped sideways, out of focus.

“Get moving, Natalie!” Andreas' voice shouted in my ear. “No time for a nap.” I couldn't see him so I had to assume he was also battling some of the evil undead.

I forced myself back into the present, bringing my arms up and pushing against the blood crusted, mangled chest with all my might. It felt like cooked spaghetti with extra sauce. Henchman #1 tilted away, off balance for a second. It was enough. I rolled from under it.

I sprung up, blood dripping down my face. I wasn't sure if I wanted it to be my own or the creature's. Having henchman's pus-filled goo on me made me want to find a shower posthaste. Mr. Winters' evil dead servants should have easily killed us being that I counted three of them, but they either wanted us to suffer a slow, agonizing death or Winters wanted us alive, at least for a little while longer. Either way, I'd become the monster's entertainment for the moment. No other imaginable reason existed for it not to rip me apart and feed on my flesh.

Henchman #1 faced me and put on its best carved pumpkin smile. This time I was able to draw my sword.

“Sadistic torture before painful death?” I asked.

The creature didn’t answer. Shocker. It cocked its grotesque head and stared. I didn’t want to die even if I had no family or fortune to leave behind. I still had a lot of Netflix to binge. I channeled my fear and focused my resolve. I’d never killed a non-human entity, but I’d put this one back in the ground.

I noticed the two others moving my way, and I couldn’t tackle them all. I had to get out of this underworld chamber. Divide and conquer.

I hated to remove my eyes from the evil moving closer, but I did, scanning the darkness for a way out. When I spied it, I let my legs do the running. Henchman #1 followed. I assumed it lacked the brains to do otherwise. It wanted a fight, a chance to cause pain, and possibly to suck out my eyes from the sockets. Who could know for sure?

I didn’t give myself time to think and hauled ass to the door. Outside, the sweet night air was a grateful reprieve from the smell of dead meat and open bowels. Luckily the crowds had dramatically thinned, and the few remaining ride workers didn’t seem overly concerned to see a lurching, slug-like creature chasing a woman brandishing a sword. Go figure. I ran full speed past the Ferris Wheel and the Tilt-A-Whirl. The creature followed me.

Great, I had henchman #1 all to myself. Lovely. The evil servant was tall, quite an impressive size actually, and I didn’t think I’d be able to behead it unless I got it to the ground. I guess the mighty Mr. Winters knew how to pick his special someones. Not that

I was sure if beheading would work. Remember, I don't believe in most supernatural stories except for ghosts. Ghosts I get.

I didn't see henchmen #2 or #3 so I trusted Andreas was having fun keeping them entertained. I fervently hoped he hadn't let them out to play at the carnival like I had. This would be hard to explain to the authorities if they showed up.

I did the most stupid thing I could think of. Sword in hand and staying low, I rammed the creature's legs, hoping to bring it down while avoiding dagger-like teeth, the only part of its pretty face that remained somewhat intact and useable.

Thunk.

We both hit the ground with gracelessly. By some miracle, I'd held on to my weapon. I stabbed without elegance. Metal hit flesh. I've got to say, I don't know what I was expecting it to feel like, but it was squishy. So, so squishy.

Not that any of my antics stopped henchman #1. Slick fingers pawed at and ripped my favorite shirt away, exposing my left boob. I hoped this wouldn't give Andreas the wrong idea. The undead reached for the soft flesh of my exposed stomach. If I was a few pounds lighter it might not have found as much to grab onto, but I was happy he didn't reach higher. Nipple twisters hurt. I pushed the henchman's hand away and continued to attempt to detach its head from its neck. It looks way easier to do on television. In real life, the decapitation was a fail. Huge fail. All I got was blood and goo all over me. As if my shirt wasn't ruined enough.

Henchman #1 twisted away, picking me up off the ground, sending me gliding through the air. The wind whistled in my ears, only stopping when my back hit concrete. A burst of colors filled my vision. Road burn wrote a poem across my back. I was mad.

I watched the creature lurch closer as my sight cleared. I was ready. Picking up my sword off the ground where it landed, I ran toward the monster screaming, my rage evident to everyone who might have failed to notice.

My aim wasn't great but I sliced. Then I went into berserker mode. Slice, slash, cut, repeat. When it was over, I fell to my knees alongside the decapitated head. A hand still twitched, but otherwise henchman #1 lay quiet. He looked ugly but peaceful in his forever nap. Still, I'd be giving up medium rare hamburgers for a while.

I attempted to stand, but the action sent a throbbing pain rushing to my temple. I guess I hit my head harder than I thought. I wanted to vomit but forced myself to focus on my surroundings. Where were the other two precious ones?

The area remained quiet as if all the people somehow knew to get the hell home. Or maybe they saw a crazy woman with a sword hacking away at a beast in the darkness.

Andreas interrupted my repose. "They disappeared," he said.

"What?" I wasn't quite fully functioning.

"They, as in the other two creatures, disappeared. His eyes widened at my disastrous state. "Maybe that's a good thing. You don't look so hot."

"Thanks a bunch."

"I tell it like I see it. Want me to walk you home?"

"Sure. There's a ghost I need to summon. This whole adventure is way over my pay grade."

Andreas didn't say a word to me on the way home, which was fine. Tiredness dogged my every step. He deposited me at my apartment door with a quick goodnight. I guess the rank odor emanating off my body and the blood dripping down my face was enough to keep him at bay.

I went in. Tracker took one sniff and slunk back to his dog bed. I flipped up the bathroom light and stared at the mirror. It was horrifying, but it was only me. A chopped up, spit out version of me, but my face nonetheless.

I turned on the water in the shower to extra hot, stripped, and jumped in. I stood under the liquid fire for a long time.

Chapter 5

After my shower, I changed into matching comfy pajama tank top and shorts with pineapples. Looking less like a ragamuffin, I found my conjuring paraphernalia. The kit contained simple items, but it was easier to have them all stored together than to scrounge for them every time I needed to call a spirit. Luckily, my days of welcoming spirits into my home were few and far between. I flicked away some Tracker hair dust bunnies and blew the grime from the cover once I retrieved it from under the bed. I keep it hidden just like my weapons.

You never knew when break in could occur. I lived in a somewhat isolated apartment, and I'm a single woman alone. Call me a pessimist, but it could happen. I didn't want to find out what people would say if they found out about my stash of seven swords, two guns, throwing stars, and police batons. Add witchcraft stuff to that and, well, you can just imagine the reaction of my neighbors. I had to question my own sanity seeing that I was more worried about my fellow apartment dwellers' response to my lifestyle choices than losing all my money and possible rape.

I went into the living room, opened a window to invite the spirit in, and set up my circle with candles, incense, and salt. You never knew what would arrive, invited or not, when you made the call. Thankfully, only Sue Ellen showed up.

"Spill," I said without preamble. It's best to get right to the point with ghosts. "What's happening at the carnival?"

Her bloody face remained impassive as her story filled my head.

“My friends and I went to the carnival. We thought it would be a fun girls’ night. There was a man, I can’t even tell you what he looked like, but as soon as I met him I was enthralled.”

A face of a young, handsome man popped into my mind, although the edges of his image blurred like the paint had begun to rub away from the corners. It didn’t matter. His face was much too familiar.

“Mr. Winters,” I said. “You showed me his ugly mug the first time we met. He’s painted all over the carnival. Pure evil.”

“I don’t know who he really is, but he said his name was Afanas,” the ghost’s words whispered in my mind.

“That should have been your first clue. Stupid name. Never follow anyone with a stupid name. Definitely don’t date or marry them.” I felt her sadness rush over me. She’d never have any more dates, never find a husband. Not that I had much of a chance of doing that either.

“I don’t think anything would have helped me survive the night. It was like I was spellbound. My friends tried to pull me away and force me to go home, but I wouldn’t. He took me down into the chambers under one of the rides.”

Pain from the ghost echoed through my body. I shivered. “The Fun House.”

“It’s not fun. Far from it. Under it...I don’t know how it works, but there are rooms.”

“I got a glimpse.”

Her form shriveled in on itself. “I didn’t care. All I wanted was for Afanas to kiss me.”

“Did he oblige?” The thought made me sick.

“Yes, and it felt like he sucked my soul from my lips. I had no control, and so when he placed me on the bed next to the corpse, I didn’t scream or run. I didn’t even try to fight.”

“It doesn’t sound like you could.” She sent every emotion she’d felt at the moment. The pain, the rage, the fear made me want to hide under the covers and never emerge.

Her ghostly shadow fluttered before me like a butterfly. “It drank me.”

“Excuse me?” Images ran through my head. This was going to be a record night for puking up my guts from things I never expected to see in this lifetime.

“The corpse in the bed suddenly came alive. It’s slithered over to me. Huge fangs sank into my neck. There was pain. So much pain.”

Another wave of intense emotion and physical trauma hit me. I dropped to my knees.

“And then nothing,” she continued. “And here I am. You have to stop it. Them. Whatever is going on at the carnival. You have to stop it so I can move on.”

Her final pain, her last moments, crushed me like a truck.

“Burn the bed. Make her run red. Cut off his head,” Sue Ellen said, and then she disappeared like a puff of smoke in a magic trick.

When I could finally lift myself out of the fetal position I curled into, I pondered her last words to me. Why rhyme? Ghosts, they can be wily. Was she helpful or vengeful? You can never be sure. I couldn’t tell if the spirit wanted me to know the truth or join her in the afterworld. That was why she had turn all prophetic and rhyming. Either way, her poetry sucked, but it was all I had to go on, so I’d take the advice.

For now, sleep and think about her words. It sounded like Sue Ellen had been drained by vampires. Vampires? I didn’t believe in them. Or did I? Maybe I had to now.

Vampires at a carnival. A carnivorous carnival. Go figure. I'd go back at night and conquer the carnival once and for all.

I fell into an unsettled sleep and dreamed about fangs. Big, hungry, blood-covered fangs.

Chapter 6

The next night at the carnival started off not so wonderful and went downhill fast. Andreas showed up again, surprising me outside my apartment, stalker that he was. The same songs pulverized my ears on repeat. A lack of sleep left me with a pounding headache that neon lights and loud noises intensified. I found henchman #2 waiting near the entrance. Did it intuit I'd be back? I had to admit, while not your stereotypical, charismatic vampire, the looks it sent my way said *lunch is served*, and *I have the fangs to eat you up*.

I ran through the bumper cars, the screams of the patrons on the ride haunting my ears. The undead, rather hideous vampire servant needed to be herded away from the few customers who remained at the carnival for God only knew what reason. Why couldn't everyone stay home and Netflix it tonight? My life goal involved sitting in front of the television and escaping reality.

"This way, dear friend!" I yelled as we circled the Fun House. The vampire henchman followed, lurching and lumbering. Good dog-looking Hell spawn.

"Make sure you lock the doors so no one else gets in," I told Andreas.

"I should be the one going inside," he said.

I laughed in his face. "Suck it. Don't pull that sexist crap on me. Anyway, I have the sword." I peeked back at the vampire spawn. I had a couple of seconds to spare.

"Only because you wouldn't bring me one."

"You don't deserve one." The Fun House loomed before me. Afanas Winters' eyes followed me as I ran by the huge mural painted on the side. "Now shut up and lock the door once I'm inside with it." I ran inside, and the undead servant followed. Shocker.

It trailed me like a drunk after a night on the town. Entering the first room of the Fun House, our images projected everywhere, illuminated in the mirrors. Ten, twelve, twenty fugly reflections swayed and stumbled, uncoordinated.

I tried to pinpoint the real deal. I couldn't let myself think this would be an easy kill even if henchman #2 was smaller than the first one. I'd been calling them henchmen, but thingy two turned out to be female. The shredded and tattered remains of a dress adhered to rotting, maggoty flesh. Lines crisscrossed its face as if something or someone had tried to scrape away the humanity. Big ass buck-teeth fangs protruded from what must have once been pouty lips.

Focused on the fangs, I failed to follow the vampire's movements. It pounced, our battle displayed throughout the room on the huge mirrors. Through the corner of my eye, I could see our dance. My legs had grown disproportionately long in one of the reflections. I was more a freak than the monster I fought.

"Where are your manners?" I said as I tried to block a sluggish blow aimed at my face. No such luck. A trickle of blood ran down my nose. Faster than I thought possible, vampire girl ripped the sword from my hand and sent it sailing through the air to land on the other side of the room.

"You're smarter than I gave you credit for. I guess I was all caught up in your good looks and sexy outfit."

I ducked the next jab and connected a couple of weak punches of my own, but they did little against the vampire's spongy, already dead and unfeeling skin. Before I could make another move, a hard fist connected with my ribs, sending me flailing back into the glass. I heard the crack at the same time I felt blood leaking from a multitude of

pinprick punctures on my back. I tried to stand and steady myself, but instead slid to the ground.

“And here I thought you were such a nice lady. I’m obviously mistaken.”

Vampire henchwoman took a few steps closer.

Staying down meant death, or worse. I couldn’t do it, at least not today. My reflections in the multitude of mirrors projected grotesque images, sometimes bloated, other times pinched at the center, but always bloody. Pretending to have lost all the fight inside me, I bowed my head, searching with my hand. When I found what I needed, the edge cut into my palm as I lifted a large shard of glass. There was no time to aim. As the evil undead moved close, I struck. It snarled like a rabid dog when the glass sliced its skin away like the peel of an apple. The smell of garbage leaked from the wound like blood.

“Die, sucker, die!” I screamed.

I crammed my pointy glass spike into the creature’s head with more strength than I thought possible. The suck of brain matter sickened me, but I couldn’t stop. The glass entered and reentered the vampire’s skull and other areas close by. I took out an eye. Flecks of tissue, skin, and brain matter decorated me like a splatter painting. My strokes turned stronger, more determined as the vampire tottered. I was possessed.

It fell to the ground, shuddering and seizing as the shard of glass sank into its brain one final time. I kicked at it with my boot until not even a finger twitched. I looked at the seeping, maggoty mass under me, and fell into my own little ball.

I’d witnessed enough blood and guts that this should not have bothered me, so after a few moments of self-loathing, I stood shakily, staring at my reflection in the mirrors. I

shook my head in disbelief, recovered my sword, and limped off, hoping to find Andreas outside.

Instead, the Fun House had changed. I hobbled through a crooked room, air jets from the floor and walls making me squeak like a mouse when they erupted. Leaning heavily on the wall, I went up a set of stairs that shifted under my weight. The exit door I had previously entered was long gone.

I kept walking.

When I entered a tilted chamber decorated like a throne room, the man or demon or vampire also known as Afanas Winters stood there. I recognized him, and he turned out to be more handsome and compelling than his portraits. He was tall, with broad shoulders and muscular arms. Long black hair fell loose past his shoulders. He could have doubled for a Roman god, beautiful and inhuman. This was Mr. Afanas Winters. The guy who started all this ruckus.

“Listen, Afanas—can I call you Afanas?” I didn’t wait to receive an answer. “Are we really going to do this? Can’t you just pack it up and go back to where you came from? I’ve had a couple of long nights and I’m not in the mood for more fighting, chaos, and death.” Battling a vampire took a lot out of a person.

“My birthplace no longer exists. I no longer have a home. I was born in what is now Russia, lived longer than any human or any creature, but when my country tried to destroy me, I set out to explore. What a world it is. So much to see and do. So many humans to feast upon.”

“With all that, you settled on running a carnival? Seriously, you need to find a new home and some friends. Maybe take up knitting. Anything that doesn’t include mauling and murdering humans.”

He shrugged, a man without a care in the world, his tall frame moving like the wind carried him. “I like it here in this new America. And I like you a little too much to let you go.”

“That’s not at all a creepy thing to say when you first meet a woman.” I couldn’t help myself. I had to ask. “Why me?”

“You’re strong. I’ve never met a human that could best my vampire servants so easily. Poor dears. I will have to make some new ones.” He “tsked” through his teeth. “But it’s not just that. I sense something different about you. You’re not like other women.”

“You’re going to make me swoon with all the sweet talk.”

He eyed me like the evil predator he was. “You’re going to be my new bride. Don’t fight it. The old one isn’t doing so well. I’m sure you noticed. It’s time to get rid of her. Maybe you’ll hold up better.”

“I noticed her stench. Didn’t like what I smelled or saw, so thanks but no thanks. I guess fighting my way out of here and killing you is exactly what I’ll have to do.”

“I don’t want to have to damage you. That’s what happened to the last one. The lovely woman in the bed wasn’t so lovely by the time I made her my bride.”

“I’m feeling lucky.” I put on my game face and pulled out my sword from the sheath across my back. “Let’s get ready to rumble.”

Chapter 7

I have mad sword skills thanks to years of private fencing lessons with an instructor. I'm not sure why I chose fencing rather than more traditional martial arts or self-defense, but I was sure happy about that decision at this moment.

I attempted to anticipate evil Afanas' first move. He didn't have a weapon so I was feeling pretty confident until he snapped his fingers. My gaze drifted to his. Those eyes. They turned to liquid crystals and became the most beautiful things I've ever seen. I was mesmerized. All I wanted was to drown inside them. I start moving toward him, hoping for a touch, a kiss, his everlasting love.

Then that nagging, irritating voice started in my head. Sue Ellen.

"Fight him," she said. "You're the only one who can. You're stronger than this. Fight!" I flicked my gaze away from Afanas and saw Sue Ellen's shadow in the corner. It was all I needed to see the light, so to speak. Focusing on the ghost's voice, picturing Andreas, and shaking the haze from my head, I freed myself of Afanas' command. Thank the gods for that little victory.

Sword still in hand, I attacked. Afanas retreated a few steps as I advanced, my sword slicing through the air, failing to do any damage.

Damn he's nimble.

I think I've got him trapped when the back of his knees hit the huge, off kilter throne painted in the same neon colors as the Fun House sign, but he just smiles. His fangs are huge. Monstrous. I almost lose my focus realizing I'm fighting a real-deal master vampire. The head honcho. Fuck me, I'm so screwed.

I can't stop now so I surge forward again and slice. With a flick of his hand, my sword veers to the right, away from him. Something pulls at it, but there's nothing in front of me. I hold on tight and the tug-of-war begins.

"What do you want from me?" I grunt in hopes of distracting him.

"I offer you the world. To be a queen by my side. You should be kissing my feet in thanks, not trying to destroy me. You are the first woman in a long time that I believe is strong enough to complete the change."

The tugging on my sword lessens. "Queen of the carnival. Yahoo. Living like the lady in the bed? Thanks, but a big no thank you."

"She was weak. It's been a long time for her and the women she feeds on these days aren't pure. Not like in the past." He pauses, pondering the situation. "I might have to start feeding her with children or babies, but they usually have parents who come looking for them."

Afnas' smile remained nonchalant and indifferent. I wanted to smash it off his face.

"Is that what happened to Sue Ellen?"

"Who?"

"The last girl you killed, idiot."

"Was that her name? How do you know?" He shrugged. "It doesn't matter. Yes, she fed the queen. Little good it did."

Anger welled up inside me, a fierce fire of emotion erupting from within and giving me the strength to once again wield my sword. A growl crawled its way out of my mouth. "I'm going to kill you." I lunged, not aiming for his neck, but his hands. In a neat movement, his right hand separated from his body at the wrist.

Afnas howled in pain, twisting away like a cyclone. "Bitch!" he roared.

My body burned with power. I heaved my sword up and hacked at his left arm. The cuts were anything but clean, but no blood escaped as I chopped. His arm fell to the floor with a muffled thud.

A demonic scream left his lips as he drove his shoulder into my chest, sending me crashing backward. I regrouped, lunged forward, swung, and missed. He slammed me back against a wall, but I stood my ground and twisted away to the right. Raising my sword, I severed his ugly ass head from what remained of his body in one stroke.

“Serves you right,” I said. “I’m nobody’s bitch.” I gave the stump in front of me a kick and headed for the exit.

Outside, I gulped the night air and walked away from the Fun House. The Ferris wheel screeched loudly and twirled in circles even without anyone commanding the controls. It spun so fast I feared one of the cars would detach, fly into the night, and kill me after I survived vampire slaying. As I peered into the darkness, I noticed the entire carnival looked empty. Not one soul, dead or alive, remained.

Then I saw the body. Andreas was prone on the grass by a game booth filled with stuffed animal prizes. I ran over to him and pushed the tangled mass of bangs off his forehead. There was no blood, no scratches, no indication of trauma, yet he didn’t wake up. I couldn’t even see if he was breathing, so I put an ear to his nose in the darkness.

“Andreas?” I shook him gently. “Wake up.”

He didn’t stir. I roughed him up a little hard. “Get up. You can’t leave me. Not now. Not after all this.” A tear wet my cheek and I hated my weakness. Would I never see him again? Would he be taken away like all the others?

Then I heard his moan. I almost punched him. Almost. I restrained myself. He opened his eyes.

“Hey,” he said.

“Hey.” I rubbed my hand on his shoulder. I couldn’t think of anything else to say I was so relieved. I inhaled deeply and released the breath. “Are you okay? What happened?”

“I’ve been better. I wish I had a good story for you, but I’m not sure what just transpired. A surge of power hit me and I felt myself getting weak. The next moment...” He pulled himself up into a sitting position. “...I don’t know. I was out until you found me.”

“I hate carnivals,” I said. “Especially carnivorous ones.”

“Me too.” He stroked my face with his finger and I felt a chill.

“Will you live?”

He laughed at me, pulled me close, and kissed me. I let him, even with blood and guts running down my shirt and face. I kissed a ghost and liked it. But I’m still living. I guess Andreas and my relationship status will be a problem for another day.

“What do we do now?” I asked. “I mean, about you being dead and me still alive?”

He shrugged and kissed me some more.

After a few minutes, he stopped mid-kiss and stared beyond me. “Were there two or three vampire henchmen?”

“Shit.”

Lisa Acerbo loves to settle down on a dark night with a romantic thriller or horror novel and let it keep her awake until morning. Getting lost in a scary story is her favorite place to be. As for a day job, she is a high school teacher and adjunct faculty at a local community college, but her real desire is to stay home and write.

She lives in Connecticut and enjoys spending time with her husband, children, and three dogs. She is a frequent visitor to Starbucks. When not downing coffee or drinking wine, she loves to hike and help foster dogs find their forever homes.

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