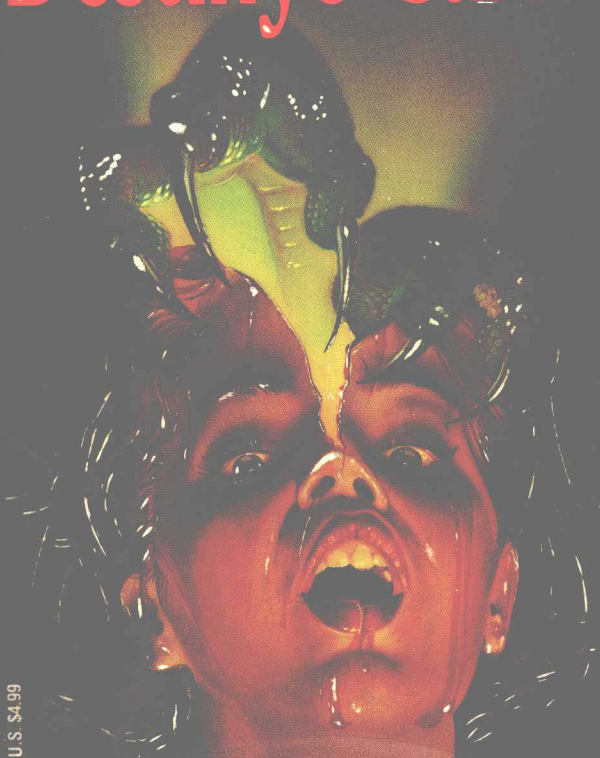


Unspeakable evil. Sinister powers.  
Creatures of darkness. Welcome to...

# Destiny's Carnival



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**WARREN MURPHY**  
and **MARK BROWNWOOD**

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CARVING

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Warren Murphy  
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# PROLOGUE

ANOTHER DIRTY STEEL town, another dirty freak show.

And they wondered why he drank.

Inside the sagging carnival tent, Tony Mazlin dropped his empty wine bottle and staggered to his feet. But the sudden exertion seemed to take his lungs by surprise and he hacked a string of thick wet coughs into his fist before he was able to catch his breath.

Mazlin hunched over until he was sure the spasm had passed. Then he wiped his hand on his pants, grabbed onto a tent cable for support, and worked his way outside.

Spinning stars winked at him from a night sky so thick he had to gulp for breath, but the air he swallowed had a curious metallic taste.

*Welcome to Allenville, P.A. Another place to forget.*

As he held onto the side of the tent for support, he glanced up and read aloud the sign over the entrance.

"The Great Gamzino." Next to it was a painting of a younger, more sober Tony Mazlin. The paint on the portrait was peeling away, yellowed oilcloth showing through the scabrous blotches.

*Who cares? Who looks at signs, anyway?*

He looked around for someone to keep partying with,

preferably someone with another bottle. But the roustabouts had gone to bed by now and their trailers stood as silent as mausoleums.

He looked back at his portrait, and now it made him angry because it reminded him of what he had become. He clenched his fists for a moment, then stumbled away from the tent, searching for a whipping boy, a punching bag—anything to dump his fury on.

Past the bright midway, past the trailers, stood another set of canvas lean-tos. These half-inflated tents were grimmer than the others and squatted in the gravel without signs, facing away from the rest of the carnival. To see the wares of these showmen, one had to want to very badly.

A grin played around Mazlin's face as he circled the largest tent—centerstage for the freak show. It reminded him of a slaughtered pig's bladder, lumpy and reeking, and it cast a long and deep shadow, a shadow darker even than the empty cornfield on the edge of the carnival grounds.

On this chilly October night, the brown cornhusks rubbed together in the breeze, making a sound like the crinkling of old documents, like whispers in the dark.

He paused at the front of the tent, bending over to peer inside at the malformed pieces of humanity. More than a dozen of the stunted people crawled across the floor, setting up a tiny stage, bolting together a ticket booth. Others just lingered near the tent's far wall, groaning in the pain that was a constant in their lives.

Mazlin studied each one's special deformity. He had seen them all a hundred, a thousand times before, but he still loved to look at them. One of the creatures sported a bulbous harelip while another clutched a broom between

two flippers sprouting from where his shoulders should have been. The nearest hunchback had a single bare breast planted in the middle of her chest, the only marker of femininity on the creature. All were stunted, barely four feet tall, and . . .

. . . *And they're all freaks and I love it*, the Great Gamzino thought.

Outsiders were always surprised by a carnival worker's casual use of the word *freak*. But inside the world of the carnival, the word carried little emotional baggage. Their tent was called the freak show and even the twisted little mutants referred to each other and themselves as freaks. It was only on the lips of such as Tony Mazlin that the word became bitter and cruel.

The wind picked up again, rustling the cornhusks, and it circulated the smell inside the tent and wafted it toward Mazlin's nostrils. It was the stench of something from a zoo, a hot and greasy smell, like a tiger's breath after it has feasted on raw meat. And the sound of the mutants' voices annoyed Mazlin's ears, a grunting undercurrent flowing beneath some alien dialect.

Yes, he did hate them, hated these runts more than anyone else in his entire miserable life. These pieces of deformed flesh belonged out here, in the back, away from human society.

Angrily he pulled open the tent door and stepped inside.

"Hey, Gumby," he roared. "Anybody in here got a bottle?"

The nearest imp wrenched its neck around, bending an oblong skull at an almost cruel angle to stare at Mazlin from above a flattened spadelike nose. It moaned a little and the soft wheeze of mucus rattled from its mouth be-

fore it turned and hobbled to the back of the tent. None of the others even glanced up.

"A bottle. I want a bottle," Mazlin shouted, but the freaks kept their eyes locked to the tent floor, prisoners.

Finally, Mazlin's voice cracked and he reeled backward, hoarse and breathless. He heard the cornstalks rustling again but now there was no wind. And yet the crispy sound of dried leaves grew louder.

Mazlin spun around in time to see a man step from the cornfield, a figure dressed in a burlap robe, but so tall and thin, he could have been a stalk himself. Bathed in shadows, the man's face shone pale in the dusty night and Mazlin sucked his breath in.

"Scared the hell out of me," he grumbled. "What are you doing here, anyway?"

The stranger stepped closer, revealing swollen purplish lips and cheeks so white, they could have been mirrors reflecting the moon.

Mazlin said, "You better get out of here. We don't like strangers hanging around the carnival."

The stranger tilted his head, stringy gray locks hanging over the collar of the robe as his puffy lips parted. But no sound came out, and he seemed amused by that.

The bustling from the tent grew silent and the only sound in the thick night was Mazlin breathing. He pointed his finger at the tall stranger and stumbled toward him.

"Read my lips," he growled. "We are closed."

The tall man's eyes focused on Mazlin, and their lids opened a bit wider. "My carnival never closes." His voice flowed soft, swirling in the air with the hint of a European accent.

Mazlin coughed, "Get lost," and punctuated it by jabbing his finger into the man's sternum.

But the finger seemed to miss the bone. Instead it slipped in through what Mazlin thought was a strange jellylike goo, until it was buried in the man's chest up to the knuckles of the fist.

Mazlin stared at his hand. So did the stranger, whose head shook from side to side in a motion of intense regret.

"Your finger," he whispered. "I am so very sorry. But you must not touch the body."

He looked up past Mazlin, and before Mazlin could register another thought about his finger or his body or any other part of his failed life, his knees buckled from behind. When he hit the gravel, he felt tiny hands and mouths tearing fabric, pinching flesh, nibbling on his muscles. And the smell of a tiger's breath, of a charnel house, soaked his nostrils as they swarmed on him.

A small soft litany of sound floated in the night as the freaks chanted, "Welcome home, Master. Welcome home."

And then they fed. And the tall stranger's eyes danced above the pack as they crowded around Mazlin's corpse, pushing and shoving for the choicest meat.

"Enjoy this small meal, my pets," he whispered to the bobbing, stained, deformed heads. "Next will be the wedding feast."



# CHAPTER ONE

THE GREYHOUND BUS chuffed away, washing him in diesel fumes, but Coley O'Brien ignored them and stood on the curb, staring at the Allenville hospital across the street.

*What now? 'Hi, Pop. Sorry you're dying of cancer and all that, but you're a sorry excuse for a human being and nobody really cares.'*

The thought brought a sour smile to his hard young face and Coley decided that anything worth doing was worth getting over with. He picked up the canvas gym bag the bus driver had dropped onto the sidewalk, then darted through the heavy traffic to cross the street.

He hesitated again outside the hospital's entrance doors, then leaned against the wall and smoked a cigarette. It was a crisp autumn day and he felt chilly through the threadbare denim jacket he wore.

He tossed the cigarette away, still unsure about entering the hospital, but the decision was made for him when a woman with a bandaged ear came out through the automatic doors and Coley was bathed in a gust of warm air from inside the building.

*Go ahead. Go in. At least be warm.*

The hospital smelled of medicine and nervous people.

He saw by the clock over the receptionist's desk that visiting hours were almost over, which suited him fine. *In and out. Hi, Pop. Good-bye, Pop. You got any money for bus fare? I don't think you'll be needing cash where you're going.*

The door to room 347 was the last on the corridor, farthest from the nurse's station, in a corner without light.

The room smelled of death. The second bed in the room was empty and a nurse's aide was changing the sheets and Coley knew, without being told, that someone had just died there. But it wasn't his father. He knew that, too.

A Norman Rockwell lithograph of a family eating Thanksgiving dinner hung crookedly on the wall, under an ancient ceiling-mounted black-and-white television set that was on noiselessly, showing a soap opera.

Coley saw synthetic daisies stirring in the forced air from the heating vent. The linoleum flooring was yellowed like a heavy smoker's teeth, and a curious hissing sound filled the room.

"O'Brien," Coley explained when the nurse's aide, a middle-aged fat woman in a gray uniform, glanced at him quizzically, and she nodded toward the striped privacy curtain which divided the room in two.

Behind the curtain, Coley discovered the source of the hissing noise. A tank of oxygen pumped cold gas into a plastic tent above the old man. His face, seen through the thick plastic, was red and swollen, but his closed eyes were sunk into deep hollows.

"I'll let you know when you have to leave," the aide told Coley.

"Thanks."

“He might not wake up,” she said. “He doesn’t wake up much.”

“Either way’s okay,” Coley said. The aide looked at him sharply, then shrugged and left the room with the dirty linen from the other bed.

Coley stood at the foot of the bed, looking at what was left of Seamus O’Brien, the lump under the bedclothes of room 347. He had not seen the man for the last twenty years, when the old man picked up and left Coley and his six older brothers. Coley thought that whatever it was his father had been trying to run away from, he had not been successful. The old man’s ravaged face showed that he had not escaped much of anything in his life. The last twenty years obviously had not been kind to Seamus O’Brien. *Hell, Pop, they haven’t been kind to any of us, have they?*

Coley stepped silently to the far window, not willing yet to approach the sickbed. He rested on his muscular arms against the windowsill and stared out through his reflection toward an open field of corn where stalks and mud were being transformed into some kind of carnival fairgrounds. Trucks were pulling rides onto the field as the hands banged cheap wood together into stands for coin tosses and baseball throws. Smaller workers—hired kids, probably, Coley thought—tossed hay over the puddles and the muddier parts of the field. Garbage detail, he thought. He knew all about garbage details at the carnivals.

A cough reminded him where he was and he turned toward the bed. The figure inside the tent had moved his head a little, and as the fevered eyes opened and landed on him, Coley felt the hairs rise along the nape of his neck.

The man crooked a withered finger at Coley, who came

up to the side of the bed and sat there in a chair. He was only a foot away from the dying man's face, protected only by the plastic shield of the tent.

"Which one are you?" the old man gasped out.

"Coley. The youngest one."

"You twenty-five now?" The old man uttered the words slowly, with spaces between, as if each sound was a struggle to produce.

"Twenty-six," Coley said.

"You've changed."

"Probably I'm getting soft from living the easy life in my castle on the French Riviera."

The sarcasm was wasted on the old man, who snaked a hand out through the bottom of the plastic and reached for Coley. "Too long . . . son," he said softly.

Coley squirmed at the last word. It seemed to demand a certain responsibility from him, a responsibility he did not want. His father's hand, looking vaguely disembodied, waved around but Coley refused to take it, and it dropped back weakly against the metal frame of the bed.

"Where are you living?" the old man asked.

"Here and there. All over. I was in Ohio when I talked to Ian, and he told me you were sick, so I hopped a bus in."

"Are any of the others coming?" the old man said.

"No. They're all married now with families to raise. You know how it is." Coley hesitated a moment; that was a dumb thing to say. His father knew nothing about what fatherhood and family raising was. He added lamely, "But they're all thinking of you."

"No, they're not," the old man wheezed in a voice that

was pressed and flat. "I know what I did to you. All of you. I know."

Coley glanced at the clock on the wall. Visiting hours were over. With luck, the nurse's aide would be in momentarily to throw him out, and it couldn't happen soon enough for him. So why had he bothered coming? Why use his last twelve dollars for a bus ticket to this backwater Pennsylvania town to see a man he had always hated? Or was he just hoping that while he was here, the old man would gurgle his last and croak right in front of him and Coley could wash his hands of those memories forever?

A coughing fit shook the old man's frame and Coley glimpsed the gnarled skinny arms. Tumors riddled the old man's body, pulling the skin tight and bending joints at grotesque angles.

"I thought about it a lot, the day I walked out on your mother. I want you to know how it was."

"You don't have to talk about it," Coley said.

His father spoke between rasps. "I had to go. Suffocating. If I didn't go, I woulda wound up like Jacobsen over in Zanesville. Remember?"

"No," Coley said curtly.

"Before your time, maybe. Guy cut up his wife and kids on Thanksgiving Day. I was drowning like that. Understand, son?"

"All I understand is that you left."

"I know. I'm sorry. Son."

*So this is it? The old man wants to wipe the slate clean before Last Call? Screw him.*

"I want you to forgive me, Coley."

"Okay, sure," Coley said, then paused. "No. No. I

don't forgive you. You had seven kids and a wife and you just walked out on all of us. No, I don't forgive you."

"I'm dying, Coley."

"I'm sorry. I've come here to be with you."

In the quiet that settled on the room, the hissing oxygen seemed to grow louder. Coley stared at the floor.

"Forgive me, Coley."

"I can't." Coley bit his lower lip. He wished he could forgive his father, but the lie would not come out of his mouth. "I want to forgive you," he said. "I want to forgive you."

"Then, do it."

"I can't. God, I can't do it. I can't forgive you, you mean old bastard."

His father's voice seemed to start in the throat, cracked and tinny, so weak it almost did not make it through the folds of the plastic tent. "Was I so mean you can't even remember the good times?" the old man asked.

Good times? Coley wanted to tell him that there had been no good times. And once his father left, bad times had gotten only worse. The family fell apart. His mother's mind had cracked and she screamed about seeing strange faces in the mirror and ghosts rearranging her furniture and she died in a state asylum. And the seven boys were farmed out to unwilling relatives and Coley had been stuck with Aunt Cleo and Uncle Nero, and by the time he was eight, he was helping them run spiritualist swindles. *Good times? Sure, you and me and the rest of the Brady Bunch.*

He tried to turn his face away. His right hand found a quarter inside his pocket and he squeezed it so hard between his thumb and index finger that his hand hurt. He

wanted to leave but he was riveted to the spot. Why couldn't he just say the meaningless innocuous lie?

Suddenly, Coley felt a chill come over the hospital room as if a freezer door had just opened and cold air had whooshed in. He snapped his head back to look at his father. The large bloodshot eyes still stared at him, still implored him. Coley heard a gurgle through the tubes in the man's nose, then a sucking noise.

Coley reached out his hand and took the old man's.

"I forgive you, Pa," he said.

But there was no change in expression in the eyes and Coley's forced bedside smile faded as he held the lifeless hand in his.

"I forgive you," he shouted. "I forgive you."

But it did not matter how loud he shouted. No sound was loud enough anymore for those ears inside the oxygen tent.

Coley staggered foggily from the hospital. The sun had broken through a chink in the clouds and the chill air, the bright sun, and the hammering sounds from the carnival all shocked him back to his senses.

His joints ached as if he had been up all night. He wished he had tears to wipe away so he could get on with his life, but things never changed and tears were only for show, anyway.

He wandered across the street toward the pounding sounds. Flapping on a pole, a large soiled banner read

**DESTINY'S CARNIVAL!!!!!!**

**THE MOST AMAZING SPECTACLES**

**IN THE UNIVERSE!!!!**

**FREAKS, FREAKS AND MORE FREAKS!!!!!**

Coley grimaced to himself. A freak show. The bottom of the entertainment barrel. Maybe a perfect stop for him. *Meet the Freak Who Wouldn't Forgive the Dying Man.*

The sun slipped back behind the dark, storm-filled clouds and heavy shadows fell over the fairgrounds again. Coley glanced back at the hospital one more time, then threaded his way through deflated tents and collapsed stands, looking for someone to beg a job from.

In the shadow alongside a trailer, Coley glimpsed a dark figure moving toward him. He stopped and the movement stopped also. The darkness seemed to swirl and, for a moment, seemed vaguely human in form. As he stared, the shadow melted away and Coley told himself that he was just spooked, still shocked by his father's death.

So why did he think he had just looked at Death?



# CHAPTER TWO

“MAKE SURE YOU tighten those freaking bolts. Don’t want some candy-ass kid falling out and then suing us for our lungs.”

Coley heard the shouted words, and since it sounded like boss-talk, he followed the sound of the Tilt-A-Whirl ride, where two grease-spattered maintenance men were working under the watchful eye of a man seated in a weathered lawn chair.

When Coley came alongside the chair, he saw that the man giving the orders was a midget, an adult but with an improbably beautiful little child’s face and golden hair neatly combed into a high pompadour. He wore a one-piece red jumpsuit that looked toddler-size, but advertised his age with a long thick unlit cigar that he chewed nervously between his little Cupid’s-bow lips. Just as Coley walked up, the man crossed his arms, sucked one cheek, and spat a brown stream of tobacco juice four feet away to land on the back of a butterfly that had lighted on a clump of grass.

“Good spitting,” Coley said.

“What do you want?” the midget snapped as he looked up at Coley.

“You the boss?”