

In a field outside Flint Creek, Kansas, January 2000



Chapter 3 — Feeding Time

The silence lasted longer than breath, longer than prayer, longer than reason could endure.

Inside the big top, the ninety-six remaining townsfolk sat with spines locked and faces pale. The hush was not calm but a tightening coil, every soul waiting for the snap.

It came with the scream.

A woman's voice, high and raw, cracked the night air beyond the canvas. The sound rattled down the tent-poles and shivered through the lantern light. It was not the scream of pain but of revelation—of someone seeing what should never be seen. Her cry pitched upward, jagged, then broke into choking sobs before cutting off altogether.

The silence that followed was brief, broken by another cry, this one guttural, male, ragged as a saw blade. Then the air outside thickened with voices—shouts, curses, the babble of panic, until the panic became slaughter.

Sarah Weaver tightened her grip on Macy's small hand. The girl had already pressed herself hard against her ribs, trembling so violently Sarah could feel it in her bones.

"Don't look," Sarah whispered, though there was nothing to see, only the canvas quivering as bodies collided against it.

Faintly stood from her place near the end of the bench. She tilted her head, listening. Her face was calm, almost fond, as if the sound were a favourite tune.

"It begins," she murmured, loud enough that every ear caught the words. "The Circus collects its due."

And then the music joined.

It came from no instrument Sarah could name, but it threaded itself through the tent like smoke: low and mournful, heavy with inevitability. The benches vibrated with its notes. It seemed to come from the canvas itself, the stripes groaning out lament, as if the whole tent were a living organ.

Macy whispered, “Why don’t they let them in?” Her small voice trembled like a moth’s wing.

Sarah could not answer. She pressed the girl closer and shut her eyes, but shutting them did not silence what clawed at the night.

The Slaughter Outside

The massacre blossomed like a fire in dry grass.

Those who had not secured a seat—who had lingered, miscounted, who believed there must be space for all—were now caught in jaws and claws. None saw the creatures clearly, only the fragments that appeared in lantern flicker or lightning flash: a sweep of teeth too wide for a skull, a paw jointed too many times, a mouth that opened vertically with a wet split.

The air became a theatre of screams.

A woman ran three steps, throat torn, before something hooked her ankle and dragged her backwards. Her nails left furrows in the soil. Her body twisted once, then snapped, and silence claimed her.

Children’s voices shrieked higher than the rest, then cut short as if snatched from the throat. A boy flung himself at the canvas, pressing his hands against the stripes. “Mama!” he cried. The canvas dimpled inward with his weight—then collapsed as he was jerked back into darkness. Blood smeared the wall where his palms had been.

Hands hammered the tent. Palms slapped, fists pounded, nails tore streaks down the fabric. The begging came ragged and desperate:

“Help us!”

“Let us in!”

“Please, please, it’s eating us!”

Each voice was a thread in the larger scream, until threads were snapped one by one, silence replacing sound.

The other noises rose: guttural growls, yowls, the crunch of bone, the peel of flesh from muscle. A chuff like some immense cat echoed, followed by a wet cough. The smell seeped through seams—iron, rot, sulphur.

Still the music persisted, keeping cadence with the slaughter.

Inside

Sarah held Macy’s head against her chest so she would not see the canvas bend and quiver with bodies slamming against it. She rocked the girl gently, though her own heart raced like a trapped bird.

Around them, the ninety-six sat in strained stillness. Some clasped hands in white-knuckled prayer, lips moving silently. Others trembled so hard the benches shook.

One man could not endure. He rose abruptly, his sweat darkening his collar. "I won't sit penned like livestock," he snarled. His boots ground sawdust as he strode for the flap.

"Sit."

Faintly's word fell like iron. The man froze mid-stride. His chest heaved, but his legs bent of their own accord until he lowered himself back onto the bench. He sat staring at the ground, trembling.

Macy peered from Sarah's arms, her eyes wide. "She stopped him."

"Yes," Sarah whispered, though her throat was dry.

Inside smelled of sawdust and lamp oil. Outside stank of copper and fire. The canvas between was thinner than sanity.

Outside

Five huddled with backs to the tent, fists raised against shadows. One man struck with a knife, the blade glinting once before the shadow lifted him screaming into the air. His knife fell, clattering against nothing.

Inside

A woman pressed her kerchief to her mouth to muffle her sobs. The sound was small, yet heads snapped toward her in fury, eyes pleading *silence, silence*. She bit her tongue until blood pooled.

Outside

A girl scrambled up the tent ropes, hand over hand, reaching for the peak. The canvas shuddered beneath her as something slammed from below. She lost her grip, fell backward, and was seized mid-air. The sound of snapping bones followed.

Inside

A man began humming to drown the screams. Another seized his arm, hissing, "Stop, you'll bring them!" But the humming grew louder—until blood burst from the man's nostrils. He fell forward, twitching. No one moved to help.

The Arena of Screams

The slaughter surged. Whole families shrieked together before their cries broke into silence. One figure spun wildly, hair matted with blood, until something coiled round his waist and yanked him into the dark.

Another begged, "Take my soul, just leave me be!" His plea ended in the wet crack of his ribs opening.

The tent walls pulsed with hands clawing, tearing seams. Some reached through gaps, nails broken, fingers bloody. Inside, the nearest spectators leaned away. Sarah pulled Macy tighter against her. She could feel Faintly's gaze, cool and appraising, upon them.

One hand thrust through near Sarah's shoulder, gripping her sleeve. She gasped. Macy screamed. Before Sarah could wrench free, the hand was dragged back through the slit with such force that strips of flesh caught on the canvas.

The Breaking

Another man rose, wild-eyed. "We can't just sit here!" he shouted. His voice cracked. "This isn't sanctuary, it's slaughter!"

He lunged for the flap.

Sarah clutched Macy, heart hammering. Faintly did not move.

The man tore open the flap—then reeled backward. All he saw was teeth. Rows upon rows, glistening in lantern light. His scream stretched impossibly long as he was lifted from the sawdust, folded into the maw, and gone.

The flap closed. The tent was whole again.

Macy whimpered, "It's going to take us all."

Sarah stroked her hair, though her hand shook. "Not us," she whispered. "Hold on."

Faintly stood in the ring, hands folded. Her eyes met Sarah's briefly, then Macy's. She smiled.

The Dwindling

The chaos outside weakened. The screams dwindled until none remained. What was left were feeding sounds—slurps, crunches, the low moans of satiation. The ground trembled with the weight of massive bodies shifting.

The music rose to fill the void. It was louder now, the notes sharp, each one driving into the skull. Some clutched their heads. Others rocked back and forth in time with it, as if compelled.

Sarah pressed her palms over Macy's ears. "Don't listen." But she herself could not block it out.

Faintly lifted her chin. "[The Circus is never sated](#)," she whispered.

And the canvas bulged inward, as if something vast leaned close to hear her.

Revelation

A lantern flared. Light spilled across the sawdust. Sarah blinked at the sudden glow and saw patterns she had not noticed before—circles within circles, etched in ash and salt.

Her stomach clenched. The benches were not haphazard rows. The ninety-five (for one more was gone) sat arranged as pieces of a design. Each body was a mark, every row a ring, the whole vast mandala surrounding the centre.

Macy tugged her sleeve. “We’re part of it,” she whispered.

Faintly inclined her head, as if approving the child’s perception.

Waiting

Outside fell utterly silent. No growls, no feeding. Only the slow, heavy breath of beasts gathered close. The canvas trembled with their patience.

Inside, no one moved. Sweat beaded on brows, ran down spines. Sarah felt Macy’s pulse racing through her wrist.

The tent had become an hourglass turned upside down. Every grain of sound, every beat of heart, fell toward what was to come.

The first act was over. The second had yet to begin.

The tent held its breath, and so did the ninety-five within. Every sound outside had gone. What lingered was not peace but waiting, the thick anticipation of jaws held shut only a moment longer.

Sarah clutched Macy’s trembling hand. She could feel the pulse pounding in the girl’s wrist, as frantic as her own. “Stay with me,” she whispered. Macy’s eyes lifted to hers, wide and wet, but she nodded.

Faintly stood serene in the ring, her eyes half closed as though listening to a lullaby only she could hear. Then, without raising her voice, she announced:

“The first act is finished. The second begins.”

The Beast Arrives

The lanterns flared brighter, throwing the sawdust into stark relief. Patterns glimmered in the dust—rings within rings, intricate, glowing faintly blue, as if fed by the blood that already stained them.

The flap stirred. Not with a breeze, but with a pressure. Something immense pressed close. The canvas bulged, strained, then slit open without blade or claw. A shape unfolded, joint by joint, too many limbs bending in too many directions.

It stepped into the ring. Its head was crowned with eyes, some blinking, others rolling, all fixed in hunger. Its mouth split vertically down its face, rows of thin teeth gleaming.

The music leapt in tempo, pipes shrieking with wild gaiety. The beast bowed low to Faintly, who inclined her head as if to a trained performer. Then the monster turned toward the benches.

The Rhythm of Slaughter

The killing was orderly now. Every seventh note of the music, the beast reached into the crowd and plucked a victim. Its movements were precise, deliberate, rhythmic as a metronome.

A man in the front row was lifted high, screaming, before his torso vanished between those vertical jaws. Blood cascaded over the sawdust in sheets. The benches shuddered, but none could flee; unseen cords bound them.

Sarah held Macy tight against her side. The beast's gaze swept across them, but passed on. Another victim was taken. And another. Each scream joined the music, an instrument of terror.

"Why not us?" Macy whispered, horrified, yet almost pleading.

Sarah could not answer. But she saw Faintly watching them both, lips curved in a faint smile. The old woman knew. The sparing was no accident.

Panic Within Order

Not all remained silent. One woman tore at her own hair, shrieking to be taken. Another tried to throw herself forward, but the benches held her. Each attempt was ignored. The beast killed by its rhythm alone.

When a child was seized, his mother shrieked until her throat split, blood running down her chin. Yet the music did not falter, and the beast did not break its pattern.

Sarah whispered fiercely to Macy, "Don't speak, don't move. Let it pass." She felt Faintly's gaze again and hated how calm it was, how knowing.

The Ritual Deepens

The ash-circles glowed brighter with every drop of blood. The floor drank it, feeding the pattern until the whole ring burned with blue fire. The survivors sat lit in its glow, their faces skeletal in the strange light.

Faintly raised her arms and swayed. "Witnesses," she murmured, "watch and remember. The Circus endures because you endure."

The beast seized another. Bones cracked, flesh tore, screams became part of the rhythm. The benches creaked under the weight of despair.

Sarah pressed her cheek to Macy's hair. "I'll keep you safe," she lied, for she did not know if safety existed anymore.

The Final Dozen

At last the benches were nearly empty. Where ninety-nine had sat, fewer than a score remained. Many had fainted, others were rigid with shock. The beast fed on without pause.

Finally, only twelve were left. Among them: Sarah, her arm wrapped around Macy; an old priest mouthing silent prayers; a young woman too numb to cry; and others whose faces blurred into masks of terror.

The beast halted. Its many eyes rolled upward. The music built to frenzy, shrieking higher and higher until it felt as though the tent itself would split.

It howled, a sound that tore through the air like thunder. Blood sprayed from its jaws as it roared. Then, bowing once more to Faintly, it folded in upon itself, collapsing through the slit in the canvas until nothing remained.

The Silence After

The music cut off. The lanterns dimmed. Only the sound of twelve frantic breaths remained. The sawdust stank of blood and iron, soaked dark where victims had been dragged away by the Stewards. The ash-circles still glowed faintly, as though smouldering with memory.

Faintly lowered her arms. Her gaze passed across the twelve, lingering longest on Sarah and Macy. "It is done," she said gently. "The Circus is fed"

Sarah felt Macy trembling, and for once she had no words of comfort. Faintly's eyes on them were not cruel, but they were not kind either. They were eyes that marked, that chose.

Then the voice in the heads of the twelve returned "Now ladies and Gentleman let me introduce the next act"