



Chapter Two — The Summons of Faintly

The weather broke as if cut with a blade.

One moment Flint Creek lay under the red, shuddering sky of the long storm; the next, the clouds sheared apart and left a winter moon like a coin set in iron. Snow hardened to a thin crust. Every ribbon of wind simply... stopped. In the clearing silence, the Big Top stood where there had been only empty field—black and crimson stripes climbing into the dark, guy-ropes humming with a vibration that could be felt in teeth and bone.

No one spoke. They did not need to. The voice was already inside them.

“Come along, darlings”.

It was not a sound so much as a warmth behind the eyes, a breath at the nape, the certainty one feels when stepping from a curb without looking. The first to move were the children, then the very old, then everyone in between. Doors opened up and down Maple and Main as if on a hinge shared by the whole town. Sheriff Harlan Greaves came out with his coat half-buttoned; Pastor McCallum with his stole twisted; Tom and Alma Brackett from the diner still wearing their aprons; Mr. Withers, Mr. Crenshaw, Mrs. Callahan, the Parkers and the Daltons. Two hundred and twenty-three souls fell into the same slow march, each person discovering that their feet already knew the way.

Susan Weaver tightened her grip on Macy’s mittened hand and tried to say her daughter’s name, but the word failed somewhere between chest and tongue. Macy blinked up at her and then toward the tent—curious, unafraid, as if a bedtime story had stepped down out of the book.

They followed the length of River Road to the derelict fairground by the grain elevators, and where the old fence should have been there was a gate of black iron topped with spearheads. Beyond it ran a midway no one in Flint Creek had ever seen: bulb-strung poles casting a dim rim of light; banners painted with hand-lettered promises; the smell of sugar, burning fat, and something like old coins rubbed between wet fingers.

“Closer”, the voice coaxed. *“You’ve waited long enough”.*

Past a row of painted boards advertising acts that did not yet exist - **THE UNSTITCHED WOMAN, THE BOY WHO BREATHES SMOKE, THE BEAST TAMER WHO TAMED HIMSELF** - they came to a wagon with a metal chimney and an enamel sign: **ANGELO'S CHUCKWAGON**. Steam curled from the vents. The man inside was tall and narrow, wearing a paper hat and an apron stippled with old stains. His smile showed too many teeth and all of them perfect.

"Welcome, friends", Angelo said, as though he'd been expecting them for years. He reached for tongs that were not there and produced a hotdog anyway, held in bread that had not been in his hand a second earlier. The mustard line across it was too neat to be real. "First night's on the house."

No one reached for the food, but several townsfolk swayed closer. Angelo's eyes flicked over them like someone reading a list. When his gaze touched Susan, he paused and tipped an invisible hat.

"Long time," he said, as if they shared a secret. Susan didn't know him. She knew him.

Macy tugged once at her mother's coat and then stopped - frozen not with fear but with concentration. When Susan looked down, the child was cradling a bird against her chest. A raven. Its feathers were clotted with frost; one wing beat uselessly against her wrist. The head tilted, the beak worked once, twice, and the body went slack.

Macy whispered, light as steam, "The lady in the hat is waiting."

The words lifted the hairs along Susan's forearms. "Where did you...?"

But Macy was already staring past the chuckwagon to the creatures sweeping the path.

They were small and hunched, the size of children but wrong in the angles—arms too long, hands too clever. Their faces were almost human except where they weren't: flat noses, heavy brow ridges, mouths too wide. From their scalps hung ropes of dirty white hair, matted into dreadlocks that brushed their shoulders as they bent. Each pushed a broom with bristles the color of old bone. They worked without pause, whispering to one another in soft clicks, leaving behind a path that was too clean, as if their sweeping erased more than dirt. When a wrapper fluttered from nowhere and landed at Macy's boots, one of the cleaners scuttled forward on knuckles and knees, plucked it up, and held it to the light. The wrapper winked out like a snuffed firefly. The creature grinned—small, quick, shy—and returned to its work.

"Monkeys," someone behind Susan breathed.

"Not quite," said Angelo, smiling without warmth. "We call them stewards. You'll learn the names for things."

Cages lined the shadowed edge of the midway. A lion slept standing, ribs counting themselves under dull hide. An elephant with one tusk traced slow, nervous loops with its trunk, the tip of it tapping bars in patient arithmetic. A bear sat upright and blinked its one good eye at each passerby as if committing them to memory. On the far end, a tall shape watched from a straw-littered pen - a shape with shoulders like a man's and eyes that reflected light like a cat's. When Susan looked again it was gone.

"Nearly there", the voice said, richer now, amused. *"Don't dawdle. The hour's late and my hands are cold."*

At the tent mouth the canvas was parted by two stewards who pressed their brooms into the snow and bowed. The flap's inside was wet with condensation and smelled faintly of incense and iron. The light that breathed from the seam was a thin red, as if each lamp were filled with blood.

This was where the first person vanished.

Mrs. Dalton reached for her husband's sleeve and came up with a handful of air. He had been beside her, muttering about foolishness, and then he was not. No sound. No gasp. There was only the negative shape where he had stood, the crowd's gentle forward pressure filling it. The Pastor lifted a hand as if to bless the absence, found no words, and lowered it again.

"Jacob?" Mrs. Dalton said, small as a child in church. The voice in every head laughed once—bright, delighted, wicked—and the crowd moved on.

Sheriff Greaves tried to step sideways, to break the current. His boots would not obey. He swore softly and someone shushed him, not because swearing was rude but because the shushing felt required, the way kneeling feels required when the hymn begins.

"Keep Macy close," Alma Brackett whispered to Susan, her own eyes glassy. "Keep her - "

Alma's sentence didn't finish. A man in a brown coat - the retired banker, Mr. Crenshaw - turned to look back toward town and folded inward like paper, as if some unseen hand had creased him along the spine and tucked him between pages. The place where he'd been smelled briefly of penny candy.

Angelo watched with an expression that was almost pity. "Openings are hungry," he said to no one. "The first night is always the worst for nerves."

The stewards held the canvas wide and bowed again, dreadlocks swinging. The voice did not instruct them. It did not need to. The will of the thing under the hat was sufficient.

Inside, the temperature climbed to the edge of comfort. Condensation dripped from the ribs of the tent and pattered into sawdust that had been raked in careful spirals. The benches rose in tidy tiers. No usher pointed; still, each person found a seat as if assigned. Flint Creek fell into itself - neighbors breaking apart and settling in new configurations, couples divided by the current, children placed between strangers whose names they knew by sight but had never spoken.

Susan and Macy sat together mid-ring, dead center. Pastor McCallum ended up three rows behind them; Sheriff Greaves two rows ahead, hat clenched in both hands. Tom and Alma Brackett were separated by six seats and did not seem to notice. Mr. Withers rocked without his chair, body remembering a habit in its absence. The Daltons... only one Dalton remained, holding both hands out like someone who has forgotten how to pray.

A drip fell from the top seam and struck the packed dirt with a soft *tch*. Another, another. The red lamps around the ring pulsed like slow hearts.

"Welcome," said the voice aloud for the first time.

Faintly Macabre stepped into the ring as if the ring had been made for the precise length of her stride. She was tall in a way that made other tall people feel abbreviated. The top hat added height she did not need; its brim threw a surgical shadow across her eyes. A frock coat snatched the light along its lapels; tails whispered behind her. The corset beneath - black lacquer, ribbed and glossy - caught each breath and made it purposeful. In her right hand she carried a cane of dark wood topped with a raven's head - beak open, a tiny red tongue visible. When she clicked the ferrule against the boards, the sound arrived in the ribs before it reached the ear.

Her smile was not cruel. Cruelty required effort. This smile was the resting expression of a mouth that had known a thousand kinds of hunger and survived them all.

"My beloveds," she said, and her voice climbed every tier at once, stroking foreheads, cooling cheeks, finding the soft meat behind the heart. "How long you've waited. How well you've waited. You've done beautifully in my weather."

The word *my* slid into the air and settled like dust.

Susan knew her. She knew the cadence of that voice the way one knows a lullaby one has not heard since the crib. A memory rose and dissolved - her father laughing when the power failed; a woman's shadow across a doorway; the taste of syrup and iron. She swallowed against the sudden salt in her mouth and felt Macy's fingers working restless circles into the wool of her coat.

Faintly's cane lifted and the raven's head turned toward the benches, beady yellow eyes gleaming. The lamps lowered themselves until the ring was the only bright thing in Flint Creek. The crowd leaned, not forward but inward, as if all their spines had been threaded on one long string and that string had been drawn tight.

"You will have questions," Faintly said. "Some of you will try to keep counting yourselves and find the sums do not hold. The arithmetic of a new night never pleases the old day. Let it go. There is time. There is always time in my house."

Somewhere above, something heavy shifted. A trapeze bar swung once, once more, then was still.

"Before we begin, hospitality." She turned her head just enough and Angelo was there, though no door had opened to admit him. He bowed from the waist, paper hat crisp, apron fresher now, the stains gone or cleverly arranged. "Refreshments," he sang, voice bright as brass. "A taste for the brave, a comfort for the shy."

No one rose. No one needed to. The stewards moved with their bone-brooms, and where the brooms passed, small paper trays appeared on knees: a cup of something hot, a roll smelling faintly of cinnamon, a sausage that steamed. The lion in its cage yawned; the elephant sighed; the bear put one paw to the bars and left it there like a reminder.

Susan did not look at the tray on her lap. She stared instead at Faintly, and Faintly - without moving her head - looked back.

"Mrs. Weaver," the ringmaster said, and did not say. The physical mouth remained closed; the words arrived braid-tight at the base of Susan's skull. *"You brought me a gift."*

Susan did not understand until Faintly's cane tipped and the raven-head sniffed the air, as if scenting the small, stiff weight in Macy's arms. Macy held the dead bird more carefully, sudden protectiveness flooding her face. The child's eyes shone in the red light; she did not seem to be afraid.

"Tell me, darling," Faintly said to the girl, this time aloud, gentler than a bedtime prayer. "Did it fall, or did you catch it?"

Macy considered. "It came tired," she whispered. "It wanted to sleep."

A murmur rippled through the benches, part fear, part tenderness. Faintly's smile deepened at one corner. She tapped the cane once and the drip from the tent's peak ceased. The red light sank another measure until the ring was a coin at the bottom of a dark well.

"We are admired," she said softly. "We are envied. There are beasts who would eat what you love. There are men who would name your weather a punishment, your hunger a sin. I am neither. I am Faintly Macabre, and I am here for the show that is owed. Tonight, my dears, you are the only audience that matters."

She inclined her head toward Susan - just enough acknowledgment to tether a person for the rest of her life.

"Do you remember me?" came the voice that was not spoken.

"No," Susan thought back without meaning to. Then: *Yes. I don't know how. From where?*

"From before you asked where," Faintly replied. The raven-head clicked its tiny beak and laughed.

Around the ring, small things began to happen. A trapeze strap tightened itself with a leather sigh. A knife glided out of a sheath and spun once on a table as if testing the air. A drumstick lifted, hesitated, and struck a single, hollow beat that felt like the sound of a cellar door closing.

Two stewards scuttled across the ring, dragging behind them a canvas dropcloth that left no trace in the sawdust. When they reached the center they released the corners and peeled it back with ceremony. Beneath lay a circle of boards stained nearly black. The stain glistened wet as if the wood had never fully dried.

"Accidents," Faintly said lightly. "We are a working house."

Angelo drifted at the edge of the ring, collecting paper trays that had not been touched, whisking them away with a politeness that did not bother to become sincere. Now and then he tipped his hat to someone who seemed about to speak. No one did.

On the far side, Mrs. Dalton stood, swaying, and said her husband's name again. The benches around her made a low, soothing sound—*shh, shh*—without anyone moving their mouths. Mrs. Dalton sat. Her hands forgot to be fists and opened like claws that had unclenched after a long climb.

"First nights are for introductions," Faintly said, almost to herself. She stamped the cane twice. The raven opened its beak and released a thin line of steam. The red lamps answered with a long, slow dim.

"Allow me."

The silhouette she made lifting her arms was sacramental. In that shape Susan remembered other shapes: a shadow across a nursery door, a figure in the yard the night the creek rose, a thin woman at the edge of the library stacks watching Susan reshelve a book and smiling when Susan looked up. The memories were probably false. They felt truer than the light.

Faintly's laugh was quiet enough to be mistaken for kindness. "Angelo, my dear—close the flaps."

The tent's entrance boomed shut as if a storm had slapped it. The sound ran around the benches and returned to the ring, smaller each time, like something seeking a way out and failing. The stewards stopped sweeping. The animals stilled.

"Flint Creek," Faintly said, tasting the name. "You've brought me your best weather and your bravest manners. In return, I bring you the only kind of honesty worth the hour." She pointed the cane at the boards. "Here it is."

Silence swelled. It was the sort of silence that convinces the lungs to forget their task.

"Do not be afraid," she lied sweetly. "Be entertained."

Something heavy uncoiled in the rafters - rope sliding, a groan of pulley, the whisper of silk. A breath lifted off the crowd like mist. Susan felt Macy's heartbeat through wool and skin. Faintly did not look away from them.

"I have missed you," the voice said in Susan's head, old as a lullaby. "You have always come when called."

"I haven't," Susan thought, dizzy.

"You did tonight."

In the benches behind her, Pastor McCallum's lips moved around a prayer that refused to fit his mouth. Sheriff Greaves's hands had stopped shaking; they lay quiet on his hat as if folded over a small animal. Tom Brackett stared at the circle of boards and tried to count its planks; Alma counted with him and kept losing her place.

From somewhere above, a bell rang three times. Not midnight, not warning - invitation.

Faintly lowered her arms. The raven-head tipped toward the ceiling like a cup.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” she said, and her voice made the lamps shiver, “welcome to Faintly’s Circus of the Macabre.”

The red light thickened and began to drip again, slow threads falling through the air that vanished before they touched the ring. The first act had not begun. The fear had.

Susan kissed the top of Macy’s hat and found the wool damp - not with melted snow but with the breath of the tent. Macy smiled drowsily, as if music too soft for adults had started to play.

Faintly saw the kiss and, for the space of a single heartbeat, looked almost human. Then the look was gone, replaced by the shine of someone who has set a table and is pleased with the seating.

“Keep your eyes open,” she purred, “or you’ll miss yourselves.”

Somewhere near the back, a seat creaked as if relieved of weight. No scream followed, no protest, only the small contented sigh a house makes when one more piece fits where it was always meant to go.

The raven on Faintly’s cane clicked its beak twice, and the ring went very, very still.