



CALEB YARROW



EUNICE YARROW

Chapter 4 — History Repeating

Part I: The Faceless Man Gets a New Face

The silence that followed the feeding was a silence unlike any the survivors had known. It was not the hush of peace, nor the lull of exhaustion. It was the silence of a stage awaiting the next act. The lanterns guttered once, twice, before steadying into a cold glow. Every eye turned to the centre of the ring where Faintly stood with her cane, her figure small but commanding against the vast, blood-soaked mandala of sawdust.

“Attend,” she said softly, and her voice travelled to every corner of the tent. “The Circus repeats. History repeats.”

She raised her cane and struck it once upon the floor. The sound reverberated like a coffin lid slamming shut. From the shadows beyond the ring came a figure that had not been there before. At first it seemed only a skeleton, a Victorian cadaver garbed in tattered frock coat and high-collared shirt. The flesh had long since sunk away from its face, leaving a skull grinning beneath the rim of a tall hat. The air grew colder as it entered.

“Behold,” Faintly intoned, “the Faceless Soothsayer.”

The cadaver moved with impossible grace. It lifted its hands, bones wrapped in scraps of dried skin, and clapped once. The sound was hollow, echoing strangely, as though through tombs. When the clap faded, the tent shimmered. The canvas trembled, the benches groaned, and all at once apparitions appeared.

One by one the slaughtered townsfolk took their seats again. Pale, translucent, but recognisable. The man who had screamed too long, the boy who had begged at the canvas, the mother torn from her child. All returned to their places, their eyes empty, their mouths slack. The benches filled until it seemed the tent was as it had been at the beginning: ninety-nine within, and yet more than living.

Sarah Weaver drew Macy closer, whispering a prayer she did not believe would be heard. Sheriff Harlan Greaves clenched his jaw, hand twitching toward the holster that no longer held his gun. Pastor Elias McCallum murmured scripture under his breath, though his voice was dry and cracked. Tom Brackett sat stiffly, his calloused fists tight, while Alma Brackett’s lips trembled as if words hovered there unspoken. Mr. Withers hunched, his old eyes sharp but wet. Derek Cole’s face was pale, caught between teenage bravado and the terror of truth. Nate Harker, who carried himself like a drifter too cool for fear, had gone ashen. Miss Prudence Clarke sat bolt upright, lips

pursed, trembling only in her fingertips.

The Faceless Soothsayer raised a decomposing finger. Slowly, inexorably, it turned and pointed directly at Caleb Yarrow.

Caleb gasped, his body jerking upright. In an instant he vanished from his bench and reappeared in the centre of the ring before the cadaver. His boots sank into the sodden sawdust. He tried to move, but invisible chains bound him.

The Soothsayer's hands rose and closed upon either side of Caleb's face. The touch was gentle, almost paternal, yet the air shook with the force of it. The tent warped, canvas rippling as though pulled through time. Shadows lengthened, light fractured. The survivors clutched the benches as the world bent around them. Then, with a lurch, the vision began.

Caleb's Sin

The survivors saw Caleb as a younger man. His shoulders broad, his step confident, though a bottle swung loose from his hand. The scene was a cramped room lit by a single bulb. A young woman stood before him, pleading. Her voice quavered, though her eyes were firm.

"You're drunk again, Caleb. Please, not tonight. Please."

Caleb sneered, his words thick. "You nag and you whine. Always in my ear. Can't a man have peace in his own house?"

The bottle swung in his hand. He set it down hard on the table, liquid sloshing. He advanced on her. She backed away until she struck the wall. Her hands rose in supplication.

"Don't," she whispered. "Don't, Caleb. I love you. I don't want this."

But her plea only inflamed him. His mouth twisted in a grin that was not joy but cruelty. He reached out, fingers closing around her throat. Slowly, deliberately, he tightened. The survivors saw the light dim in her eyes as she struggled, her nails raking his arms. He laughed low in his chest as her legs gave way. When at last her body went slack, he held her a moment longer, savouring the power, before letting her crumple to the floor.

The light bulb flickered, and the room dissolved into darkness. The vision shifted. Now Caleb heaved a heavy bundle wrapped in blankets into the back of his pickup truck. The night was starless, the prairie endless. He drove deep into the dark, headlights cutting only narrow paths. At last he stopped, dragged the bundle into a shallow ditch, and covered it with soil. He stood panting, the earth still loose beneath his boots.

Then the vision shattered. The tent returned.

The Mother's Denial

Caleb convulsed in the ring, his body writhing as though struck by lightning. Foam flecked his lips. His eyes rolled back. His screams were muffled, caught in his throat.

On the benches Eunice Yarrow wept. “No,” she cried. “No, not my Caleb. Lies, all lies. He never... he never...” Her voice cracked, her frail hands trembling. But deep in her heart she knew. The truth had always lingered in shadows, unspoken, ignored. She had known and done nothing.

Caleb turned his face toward her, eyes wide, tears streaking through the grime. “Mama!” he choked. “Mama, help me! Please!” He could not move, bound by the Soothsayer’s grip. His pleas were desperate, childlike. Eunice rocked, sobbing hysterically.

The apparitions stirred. The dead rose from their benches, pale faces turning toward Eunice. One by one they descended upon her. She screamed, thrashing, but their hands passed through flesh and yet tore it apart all the same. They ripped, clawed, rent her until nothing remained but tatters of cloth and the echo of her wails. When it was done, they drifted back to their seats, serene once more.

The benches shook as the living recoiled. Sarah clutched Macy, shielding her eyes. Miss Prudence Clarke gasped sharply, hand to her mouth. Derek Cole swore under his breath, voice breaking. Nate Harker muttered, “Christ Almighty,” his bravado fled. Sheriff Greaves’s face was stone, but his knuckles were white. Pastor McCallum’s scripture faltered into silence.

In the ring, Caleb convulsed still, sobs tearing from his throat. The Faceless Soothsayer’s hands did not move from his face.

And Faintly’s eyes turned to Sarah.

“Do you understand?” she asked quietly. “There are no innocents. You brought them to me.”

The tent seemed to hold its breath, waiting for the next strike of the cane.

For a long moment, no one breathed. A tremor went through the tent-poles as if the structure itself had shuddered at Eunice Yarrow’s unmaking. The apparitions sat again in their rows, every face a pale coin, their attention fixed upon the ring where Caleb writhed under the Soothsayer’s hands.

Faintly lifted her cane and rested its ferrule lightly upon the sawdust. “History repeats,” she said. “The Circus does not forget. Nor does it forgive.” Her eyes settled on Sarah.

Sarah’s mouth opened, then closed. Words crowded her throat and found no passage. She tightened her grip on Macy instead, as if braiding the child into the bone of her forearm might keep her anchored to this world.

“Now,” Faintly said, turning from them to the benches, “we ask for judgement.”

She extended her free hand, indicating both the living and the dead.

“Jury,” she said, and her voice was almost tender. “What is your verdict?”

The living stared at one another, struck dumb. Sheriff Harlan Greaves’s jaw flexed against whatever words he might have spoken. Pastor Elias McCallum looked down at his hands as if they were someone else’s. Tom Brackett shook his head once, a breath short and rasping. Alma Brack-

ett's lips moved without sound. Mr. Withers blinked tears into his wrinkled palms. Derek Cole scrubbed a trembling knuckle over his mouth; Nate Harker stared hard at the sawdust as though the pattern might release him if he memorised it. Miss Prudence Clarke's spine stayed ramrod straight, but her eyes were wet and bright.

In the hush that followed, Caleb's small animal sobs stuttered. The Soothsayer's bony palms cupped his face; the skull's empty sockets seemed to gleam.

Then, without a whisper, the dead rose.

Row by row the apparitions stood, and as one they lifted their arms. Fists closed, thumbs turned downward, the gesture plain as the gallows. The sound that followed was not a shout but the breath of wind through a field of dry grass.

"Guilty," faintly announced softly, as though acknowledging a foregone conclusion. She gave a single, delicate clap.

From the shadows at the ring's edge came the sound of hooves—light, precise, almost dainty. A small pony stepped out, though its proportions were subtly wrong: legs a touch too long for the barrel of its body, eyes a little too large and glassy, mane lying flat as hair combed over a corpse. It moved with ceremonial calm, circling the ring upon neat, exact hooves that left no imprint in the blood-wet sawdust.

Upon its back balanced a ballerina.

She was small and slight, a figure carved from pallor. Her tutu hung like frost; her slippers gleamed with a sheen like bone. Her head was turned a full one-hundred-eighty degrees upon her neck so that her face regarded the tail of the pony while her body faced the pony's ears. The pony paced; she flowed—arabesque, passé, attitude, each position held with aching purity. There was grace in her, and also the stillness of a morgue.

The music found them again—thin strings, music-box chiming, a tune you might hum to a child you wished to keep asleep forever. The pony circled. The ballerina unfurled her arms and sheered them through the air like the wings of a white moth. The dead watched with bright stillness; the living watched because they could not look away.

At the end of the first circuit, the ballerina drew herself up into a single, perfect balance. Her toes kissed the pony's spine, her arms rose into fifth position, her turned head made of the whole a grotesque crown. Then, with a liquid ease, she folded down and slid from the pony's back to the floor. She landed without a sound. Her head, still backward, considered the ring.

Caleb thrashed once, an eel on a hook. The Soothsayer did not release him; the skull tilted, as if amused.

The ballerina approached. As she walked, the vertebrae at the base of her skull began to move—slowly at first, a grinding turn that set teeth tingling in the watchers' jaws. Each bone complained faintly, a dry series of clicks. Vertebra by vertebra, degree by degree, she rotated her head until at last her face came to face with Caleb's. The transformation was not swift; it was deliberate, as if she relished the re-alignment of the world.

Caleb's eyes were huge, whites striped with red. Recognition broke across his face like a wave striking a rock. He knew her. The young woman from the vision, restored not to life but to form. Her mouth held the colour of snow. Her eyes were not dead; they were patient.

"No," he croaked. "No—"

The ballerina lifted one hand and set her cool palm against the side of his face. The other hand rose and settled atop his head, long fingers splayed like a crown. She leaned forward until her lips met his and held there—a corpse's kiss. It was not lust, not tenderness. It was claim.

Under her upper hand, one nail lengthened. It sharpened to a wicked point with a soft sound like a thread being drawn through cloth. She pressed the nail into the centre of his brow. The skin dimpled, then broke. Blood welled. Her mouth did not leave his. The nail traced a vertical path, slow as the second hand of a clock, parting skin and hair, kissing bone, sliding back along the curve of his skull. The cut reached the nape; the music swelled.

The tent seemed to lean in. The lantern flames thinned into needles of light. The ring's ash-circles glimmered blue, pulsing to the rhythm of the ballerina's breath.

Faintly lifted her cane and brought it down once. The crack of ferrule on board was a pistol shot. The raven's head on the cane turned and hissed, the word carried on its narrow tongue: "Finale."

What followed was as fast as a snake strike.

The ballerina's hands abandoned their places in a blur, found the edges of that parted seam with uncanny accuracy, and pulled. The sound was wet silk torn in one clean, greedy rip. The skin of Caleb's face came free in her right hand—mask and scalp together, flesh like a bloody veil. Beneath, the skull gleamed raw and livid, blood fanning in quick breaths. His scream tried to escape but found no lips to shape it.

Her left hand slip-knotted about his neck. The fragile-looking fingers hardened like iron. She squeezed—once, twice—and whatever flutter of life remained in Caleb went out with a dim sigh. His body sagged against the Soothsayer's grip, then slackened utterly.

A hush fell that was not silence but shock taking a seat. The ballerina stood breathing as if after exertion, though no breath misted her lips. The pony, which had waited at the ring's edge, tossed its head with delicate impatience and stamped a single neat hoof.

"Thank you," Faintly said to the ballerina as one might to an artiste at curtain call. Her tone carried to the far rigging. "Exquisite."

The dead applauded. Not with sound at first, but with motion; their pale hands rose and opened, rose and opened, a thousand white flowers across the benches. Then the sound arrived as a dry rustle like pages turning in a book too quickly. It built, becoming a crisp clatter, a theatre of palms in a theatre of the dead.

The living did not clap. They endured.

The ballerina turned away from Caleb's body. As she passed the Soothsayer she tossed the face, underhand and casual. It drifted through the lamplight like a jellyfish. The cadaver caught it lightly, bone fingers cradling the slick weight with surprising delicacy. It raised the skin to its skull and pressed. The mask adhered as if sucked into place by thirst. Blood seeped at the edges, freckles of red blooming where cheek met bone. The Soothsayer's new face was Caleb's—familiar and wrong, eyes holes where eyes should be, the mouth slack without a tongue.

"Better," Faintly said, approving, and the raven-head clicked its beak.

Two stewards appeared. They worked neatly, reverently. One gathered Caleb's body and laid it upon a narrow bier that had wheeled itself in. The other brushed the sawdust smooth, sweeping coagulate into the ash-circles, where it vanished like rain in a thirsty road. They left nothing. When they were finished, the ring looked as if no act had played upon it but time.

As the stewards withdrew, the pony stepped backward into the dim, one hoof falling precisely into the print of the hoof before it until its body was swallowed by shadow. The ballerina followed, pausing only to incline her head toward Faintly—a gesture that required no turn at all, now that her face faced forward again.

The tent did not exhale. It simply waited.

Faintly turned toward the benches. "We proceed," she said, as if they were at a town meeting and the next agenda item were potholes. Her smile was a drawn blade hidden in velvet. "You see how the Circus teaches. How it corrects. The law outside is a thin thing, a fence of sticks in a prairie wind. Here, we do not fence. We harvest."

Pastor McCallum found his voice, or some remnant of it. "You mock justice," he rasped. "You mock God."

Faintly regarded him with a gentle curiosity. "Justice?" she repeated. "I do not mock justice. I stage it. And as for God—" She gestured to the dead whose verdict had sealed Caleb's fate. "He seems very busy tonight, doing my work."

"Your work—" Sheriff Greaves began, then stopped. His throat worked once, twice. The old lawman's eyes had seen bodies. He had not seen this. He glanced at Sarah as if the sight of a living friend might keep his boot soles on the earth. "Mrs. Weaver," he managed, and it was both greeting and plea.

Sarah did not look at him. She was looking at Faintly, and in her look was a question that had grown claws. "You said there were no innocents," she said. Her voice surprised her by how steady it was. "Does that include Macy?"

The name hung in the air. It was a bell that refused to stop ringing.

Faintly turned her head slightly, as though listening for something distant. Then she looked at the girl. Macy's small hand was still wound into Sarah's sleeve; her eyes were enormous, bright as damp stones in a creek. The old woman's face softened, and for a moment she looked almost like someone's grandmother viewing a child in a school play.

"The Circus keeps what it needs," Faintly said. "And releases what it does not."

"That isn't an answer," Miss Prudence Clarke said sharply. It was almost a relief to hear the primness in her voice, to feel a sliver of the old village orderliness poke up through the ash. "You speak in riddles when you mean menace."

Faintly's smile widened a fraction. "Every riddle is a key. It is not my fault if you prefer locked doors." She tapped the raven-head to the floor, once, twice, a metronome finding the next tempo. "We will continue."

Mr. Withers cleared his throat. "Continue?" he echoed faintly. He had been the kind of man who stacked canned goods in tidy pyramids and counted each coin twice. His hands shook remembering the purse of flesh tossed and caught, the mask pressed to bone. "You mean—more trials?"

"History repeats," Faintly said, as if repeating a weather report. "The town is not a new town. The people are not new people. Each of you carries a performance with you—some in pockets, some in the marrow. The Circus has all night."

Derek Cole swore softly. "You're saying everybody gets—" He cut himself off and swallowed. "Gets what Caleb got?"

"Everybody gets what they brought," Nate Harker said hoarsely, surprising himself with the sentence. A terrible sense of being known—truly, indelibly known—had wrapped itself around his chest and would not be pried off. He looked at the Soothsayer in Caleb's face and felt as if he'd dropped a coin into a well and would never hear it strike bottom.

"Not everybody," Faintly said, and there was the barest lift in her tone, like a curtain stirred by a draft that had not existed a moment before. "Some bring so little it will not support a show." She looked at Macy again, then at Sarah. "Some bring too much, and must wait."

Tom Brackett's jaw worked. "And who decides that?"

"The Circus," Faintly said, as if explaining arithmetic to a child.

Alma reached for Tom's hand. They did not often show such gestures in public. Now they clung as if they were the last true thing they had. Pastor McCallum bowed his head again and found a fragment of psalm that might endure until the next breath. Sheriff Greaves closed his eyes and pictured the jail's iron bars, the paper ledgers, the neatness of dates and charges, as if a lined page might be a raft.

Sarah considered the ring, the ash that swallowed blood, the raven that spoke, the Soothsayer wearing a new face like a man tries on a new hat in a shop mirror. She felt the weight of Faintly's earlier words settle upon her shoulders like a shawl that had been woven long before she was born.

There are no innocents. You brought them to me.

She looked at Macy, at the child's hands, at the thumbnail bitten ragged. She thought of what had transpired—and of the way the tent had chosen its ninety-nine, and of the way some were spared

until it pleased the Circus not to spare them any longer.

“Stop,” she said, surprising herself again. “Stop now.”

The tent seemed to hear. The lanterns gave a soft clicking tremor. The Soothsayer tilted its stolen face. The dead turned their pale attention toward her.

“On what ground?” Faintly asked, genuinely curious.

“On human ground,” Sarah said. Her voice steadied like a rope pulled taut. “Enough for one night. You have your show. The child has seen enough.” She didn’t look at the others, but she felt them in the air around her—the sheriff’s stubbornness, the pastor’s prayer, Tom’s farm-plain certainty, Alma’s steel, Withers’s shop-keeper’s tally, Derek’s adolescent fury, Nate’s uneasy conscience, Prudence’s stiff-spined decency. “If you want history to repeat, it can repeat tomorrow.”

An odd light came into Faintly’s eyes. “You bargain,” she murmured. “How quaint.” She turned the cane once in her hand so that the raven’s head looked at Sarah as a raven might regard a bright button. “But the Circus does love a good interval.”

She lifted the cane and struck the floor once more.

The lanterns dulled to a twilight glow. The ash-circles cooled to chalk. The stewards, as if hearing a far bell, returned—one with a basket of clean cloths, one with a long rake that found nothing to rake. The Soothsayer bowed, a shallow, courtly dip, and retreated backward into the dark, Caleb’s face clinging like a new moon to a black sky.

The dead did not dissolve; they remained, their verdicts like frost on a field.

Faintly inclined her head to the crowd—living and dead alike. “We pause,” she said, “for breath.” The smile she offered was almost kind. “There will be more.”

The tent, which had held everything so tightly, released a fraction. Men and women slumped. Sarah exhaled and did not realise until then that her lungs had burned. Macy leaned into her and finally, blessedly, wept.

Beyond the canvas, somewhere far and very near, a wind moved over the prairie, and the Circus shivered in its bones like a creature settling to dream. The interval had begun. The next act waited in the wings with the patience of the dead.

And in the ring, where nothing should grow, something small and pale pressed briefly up through the sawdust—perhaps a root, perhaps a finger of chalk, perhaps only a trick of weary eyes—before the weight of the world set it gently back beneath the earth.