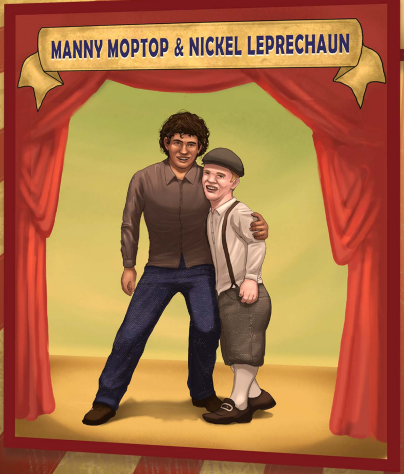
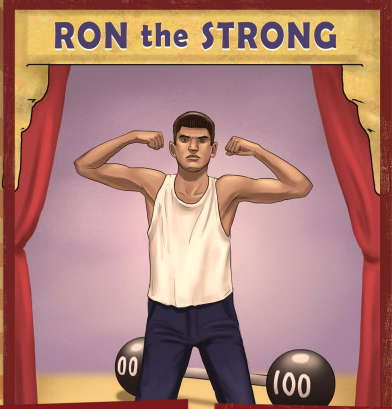


FREAK SHOW SUMMER



ANTHONY BARTLEY

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by
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Content Notice:

This book describes scenes of violence, bullying, and prejudice that may be traumatic for some readers.

This book is set in a period of U.S. history when modern values on human rights, equality, and acceptance of people based on who they are rather than appearance did not exist. The book depicts the concepts of moral superiority based on prejudice and fear of people just because they look different. These concepts are not right today, and they were not right at the time when this story is set. The material is presented for historical accuracy and the author, and the publisher condemn these practices in all their forms, whether in history or today.

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Chapter 1

Order and Chaos

The brawl started as most did at *Oliver Neil's Marvelous Carnival*. Someone insulted Olga One-Ton the Fat Lady, and this upset her husband, Huffman the carnival foreman. Words exchanged, names called, then a punch thrown. Sometimes somebody spits out a tooth after that first hit, but this time it was only blood.

A man charged screaming, "For the Order of the Lions' Den!" He slugged away at the big foreman, who blocked and dodged the swings with ease and expertise. Huffman didn't even lose his sweat-stained derby hat.

The big foreman rubbed his fist as if it itched. "Here comes a little chaos for the Order." The precise jab slammed into the man's nose.

With another bloodied fighter in the mix, the jeering crowd turned into a frenzied mob. Carnies and townies clashed into a blur of swinging arms and flying chairs.

Thirteen-year-old Manny Dobra watched his best friend Nickel Leprechaun scamper across the sideshow tent. The fourteen-year-old dwarf dodged a bottle as he ran toward the stage under which Manny hid. With his flat cap askew on his head, Nickel dropped to all fours and frantically crawled under.

“Holy Baloney! That was close,” Nickel said as he scooted closer. “If I was an inch taller that woulda smacked me good.”

A thrown chair clattered above.

“Good thing you haven’t hit your growth spurt yet,” Manny said.

“Ha! Good one, Dobra. I’m gonna use that line in my show.”

“Glad I could help.”

Something shattered against the base of a nearby support post, spraying glass over the boys. Manny plucked an inch-long sliver from his thick, curly hair.

“Damn it!” Nickel crawled farther back. “This one’s almost as bad as the Wichita brawl of ’37.”

As Manny retreated with his friend, they churned up dirt and sawdust. The particles tickled the inside of his nose. Above them, a loud thud sounded then a body rolled off the stage. A figure lay on his side, but Manny recognized the scaly skin of the one and only Herb the Alligator Man.

His lively blue eyes stared at the pair, then he smiled. “What y’all doin’ in dat dere rabbitty hole? ‘Fraid a lion gonna mash ya?” He laughed, got to his feet, and jumped onto the stage. His running footfalls banged overhead. There came another loud thump of a body hitting the floor.

“Either Herb’s met his match,” Nickel thumbed above him, “or he got himself some revenge.” The boy rubbed his hands together as if warming them. “I can’t wait ’til I’m

old enough to be out there sockin' mouths and knockin' heads."

Manny smiled and nodded, but unsure if he was as eager. He self-consciously rubbed a long thin scar running from the corner of his left eye and toward his left ear. Another scar disfigured his right arm. The flesh looked as if someone had smeared bright globs of pink clay from elbow to wrist. Many of the carnies say that the Order of the Lions' Den, the Oldies, caused the fire that night nearly a decade ago.

Making punching noises, Nickel watched the fray then glanced at Manny. His noise-making paused as he seemed to notice the downcast appearance of his pal. "Oh hey, I meant nothing by it. You know me, ninety percent mouth ten percent brain. Who knows? When you're older, you'll ball up those hams," he held up his fists, "and wallop those Oldies like Huffman does."

Manny lifted his scarred-up arm. "I've got an arm that'll scare the bejeezers outta them."

"That's the spirit!" Nickel patted his buddy on the shoulder. "It looks perfect for popping an Oldie in the kisser." The boy swiveled his head left and right. "You ready to skedaddle?"

"Out the front or back?" Manny looked behind him at the covered exit, but he knew how to remove the panels.

"Safer going out the back." Nickel's smile gave his eyes a mischievous squint. "The front has the excitement. Might get hit, but we'd have a good story to tell the girls."

A worm of apprehension wriggled in Manny's belly, but his friend had a point. He could sneak out the rear and miss the whole thing or face the maelstrom of punches. Courage plucked the worm from his belly. "Front way it is!"

The two army-crawled forward and entered the brawl.

A bottle shattered against a lantern post. Glass shards flew like grenade shrapnel.

Manny kept his head low and brought his arms up as a protective barrier against the violence. He flinched at a scream of rage. Turning to his left, Manny watched as a man attempted to grope Harriet the Bearded Woman. This assault on her caused anger to bubble in him. He smiled when she whacked her attacker on the head with a spittoon, sloshing thick black tobacco juice over the man's face and chest. While he stumbled backward, Harriet hauled off and slugged him in the nose.

"Nice hit!" Yuri the Yeti called out to her in his Russian accent.

Nickel sprinted past two men grappling, each trying to throw the other to the ground. One of the grapplers was Bill, Huffman's righthand guy—in his forties, lean and scrappy.

"Clobber 'im, Bill!" Nickel said as he went by.

Bill glanced down. "Beat it, kid. You wanna get murdered?"

A skeletal hand grabbed Manny by the shirt collar. As he turned to defend himself, he recognized the thin form of Ben Beanpole. "You and the pipsqueak are gonna keep marchin'" While Ben hurried toward the ten-in-one archway with Manny in tow, he snagged Nickel by the ear. With a shove, the boys stumbled onto the carnival thoroughfare.

"And stay out, ya hooligans." He smiled, did a funny little jig, and headed back.

"Well, damn," Nickel said massaging his ear.

Though the fight made Manny shake with nervous energy, he still wanted to watch. At the same time a yearning to huddle down somewhere safe snaked its way into him.

The thud of a body slamming into the archway wall made the boys retreat a step. Nickel began to lean around

the doorway then paused. "Owie crow-pappy!" He pointed up the thoroughfare.

Oliver Neil, carnival owner, marched at them with his shirt sleeves rolled up past his elbows. In one hand he gripped a sawed-off shovel handle and a leather belt in the other. His brown fedora sat low on his head and his piercing green eyes scowled from beneath the hat's brim. With his moustache waxed and curled on the ends, he looked rather sinister.

"Gentlemen, I highly recommend you dawdle somewhere else, or I just may think you're involved with this fracas." He paused and glared at them. "And you don't want me thinking that."

Manny gave a quick nod, "Yessir."

"Making like a frog and hopping to it, sir." Nickel spun and walked as fast as he could without running.

Manny hurried after his best friend.



Chapter 2

Arrivals

The line of carnies included performers and roustabouts, men and women, young and not-so-young. Sporting a bruised cheek and with his sleeves still rolled up, Oliver Neil marched along the accused brawlers. He uttered words like “pathetic,” “ridiculous,” and “disappointing.” Manny felt relieved that he and Nickel had escaped the ruckus when they did.

At the rear of the area called “the boneyard” by the carny workers, three police officers stood with clubs at the ready. Though the clash between townies and carnies ended over an hour ago, the cops remained to assure peace between the two, but focused much of their efforts on the “carnival miscreants.”

Mr. Neil stepped up to Huffman, who held the brim of his derby hat in both hands. The man, bull-necked and barrel-chested, lowered his gaze from the carnival owner.

“John.” The boss rarely used his foreman’s first name. “I’m tired of this behavior. It gives my business a dirty reputation, not to mention it costs me...” He leaned toward Huffman. “Money! Which I use to pay *your* wages!”

“My apologies, sir. It’s just that—”

“John, we’ve known each other since we served in the Great War together. I understand why you do it, but it doesn’t excuse the fact that we have to leave our venue early. Do better!”

“Yessir.”

“That goes for the lot of you.” His glare seemed to break even the most hardened carnies who nodded and muttered their apologies. “Your only saving grace is that we’re headed to New Mexico and that lightens my spirit. We have four hours to pack up and get on the road because of this stupidity, so expect your pay to be less this week. Move!”

The crowd disbanded from the boneyard and went about disassembling the carnival. They were on the road with fifteen minutes to spare.

Manny hopped in the truck with Nickel and Herb the Alligator Man. The hour was late, so while Herb drove the other two hunkered down and tried to sleep. After such a conflict, Manny’s dreams as usual turned to the fire that had orphaned him so many years ago and given him the worst of his scars. He awoke often, both from the nightmares as well as the jouncing of the rough road.

The sun slipped leisurely from its bed in the east, throwing off its blanket of red, orange, and purple across the horizon. With the morning light, Manny retrieved his burlap bag and rummaged through his measly belongings to pull out what he cherished most, his sketchbook and pencil.

An hour so later, Manny paused his drawing and

leaned forward to get a better view of the terrain. The surrounding countryside lacked colors except for earthy browns and faded greens of sagebrush. The caravan rolled through the gate. With it being early morning, a small bit of movement caught his eye. Several fairground workers wandered around, measuring and marking the area. Manny glanced up as they travelled under a bright yellow banner with red lettering hanging over the entrance: New Mexico State Fair 1938.

The boys lurched forward as Herb slowed the truck. Gears grumbled and brakes squealed as each vehicle came to a halt in the dusty lot. Cab doors popped open all along the line. The carnival crew laid out tarps, ropes, and equipment needed for the setup.

With a smile and hands on hips, Oliver—dressed in a clean, white button-down shirt—shouted, “Raise the banners. Let them know *Oliver Neil’s Marvelous Carnival* has arrived.” He pointed to a group of men. “Put the ten-in-one farther west and get the Candy Castle up. The colors will draw in the crowds.” His dark hair, oiled and slicked back, gleamed in the sunlight. He reached up to twist the tips of his graying mustache.

Huffman scrutinized the roustabouts, making sure they followed orders. His gaze fell upon one worker dragging a large, rolled up canvas. “Hey, don’t drag that.”

Huffman hustled over and together they hefted the canvas onto their shoulders and carried it to where it needed to go.

As Manny walked over to a cargo truck to grab rope, he smiled to himself while observing Oliver’s good mood. He also appreciated the fact that the boss had kept him on after Manny’s parents had died. Although being laborer—or a rousty as the carnies would say—was anything but glamorous, Manny had a place to stay and friends he

could count on.

Draped in coiled rope, Manny trudged to where Huffman laid out a tent. He dropped the rope at one corner and shuffled toward the truck again for the tent poles.

Nickel lugged a box of anchor pegs and dropped them with a grunt. He stamped on the hard, desert soil. Taking off his flat cap, he swatted at a fly buzzing near his face. "It's about time we got to this place."

"Why?" asked Manny.

Nickel gawked in disbelief. "Are you serious? Oliver's here to visit his lady. A cute little number he met in south Texas five months ago...she has a kid our age. Hadn't you noticed? I mean, hell's bells, look at what a good mood he's in, especially after our last stop." They watched as the owner wandered from group to group slapping shoulders and grinning.

The boy shrugged. "I don't remember him coming to this place."

"Good grief, Moptop." Nickel spread his arms wide as if to embrace the countryside. "How about last week when we were in Texas and he disappeared for three days? He left Huffman in charge. The big galoot yelled and cussed at us the whole time. I swear his mouth muscles are bigger than his biceps." He swung his hat at the fly again.

"Oh yeah." Manny nodded. "Huffman almost beat that townie for calling Olga a 'walking whale.'" He folded his arms and stared at the vista. A quarter mile away a Model-T sat on a hill overlooking the fairgrounds. Near the vehicle, a couple appeared to watch the setup.

Nickel shrugged. "To be fair, Huffman's wife is our fat lady, but that lame-brain had no right disrespecting Olga."

"Soooo, why does Oliver scurry up here?"

Nickel drooped into a cartoonish slouch. "What are ya, dense? We gonna have to empty some of the sawdust from

your noggin? He comes for the dame, Dobra, the dame!”

“Right. The dame.” Manny watched the two figures perched on the hill.

Nickel followed his friend’s gaze. “What do you keep starin’ at? You thinkin’ them’s the Oldies?”

“I dunno. The Order always find us.” Just discussing the Order of the Lions’ Den made Manny nervous and squirmy. *They hurt people.* He clenched and unclenched his burn-scarred hand. He started back toward the trucks.

Nickel followed. “Ahhh, probably some townies wanting to ogle the carnies. See what we’re up to. So, about Oliver’s sweetie...”

Manny stopped in midstride, wide-eyed and mouth O-shaped with realization.

“*Now* he remembers.” Nickel reached up and poked the boy on the forehead. “Stop dwelling on the Oldies and get to the important stuff.”

“Got it, the pretty Mexican doll. Doesn’t she need to be married to have a kid?”

Nickel scratched above his eye. “I think she was married. My dad said her husband got killed in a railroad accident few years back. She was visiting family in Texas when Oliver met her. They hit it off and, well, he finally got us a gig here in brand, spanking New Mexico.” He replaced his cap. His red hair flared out by his ears. “Golly, dames do funny things to your head.”

Manny kicked at a weed, digging a hole in the sandy soil with his work boot. “Bummer the kid’s old man died.” Images of his early morning nightmare cascaded through his mind—thoughts of his long dead parents and their closed coffins.

The little guy grew quiet, seeming to contemplate. “Hey, I have a fresh routine for the family show. It’s a hoochie coochie kind of dance, wanna see?”

Manny grinned. "Sure."

"Watch this." Nickel proceeded to sing a falsetto "la-la-la" tune and gyrate his hips. His little legs shuffled from side to side. He raised his hands above his head and clapped with his "la-la-ing." The movements were part gypsy belly dance and part hula.

Manny's gloom lifted as he giggled at the absurd dance.

"Hey dingbats," a deep voice boomed from behind.

Startled, Nickel stopped.

Huffman stood with muscular arms folded across his thick chest. He looked like Jack's beanstalk giant standing there with legs splayed. "Quit dippity-dumping around and finish unloading."

"Yes, sir," they replied.

Nickel threw in a salute for good measure.

Huffman shook his head as the duo hurried past. Manny thought he saw the hint of a smile on the gruff, bearded face.

* * *

Carnies walked around double-checking rigs, booths, and stages. Manny and another rousty shoveled sawdust into wheelbarrows. With his filled, he pushed it to a gaming booth and dumped the last load. He spread it along the outside base of the booth. Particles of pine-scented dust wafted up and stuck to his sweaty skin.

Several roustabouts ambled by while Manny returned his wheelbarrow to the equipment truck.

Bill Hart, second in charge after Huffman, walked with them and tapped Manny's shoulder. "Boss called a meeting." He scratched his tanned face, the fingernails scraping white stubble.

"What about?"

“We have guests.”

“A new act? Cops?” His thoughts turned to the figures on the hill.

“Hell if I know, Dobra. Why don’t ya drop what yer doin’ and find out like the rest of us.” His squint deepened the cigarette wrinkles around his eyes and mouth.

Manny scurried down the carnival’s midway. Everybody else had already arrived. He noticed Harriet sitting close to Herb, and Manny wondered if they might be dating. He liked the idea. Others stood but many sat at one of the tables scattered around the boneyard. Penny, Nickel’s smaller but slightly older sister, was perched on the other side of her brother. He sat talking with his girlfriend, Margot Ristani.

Manny squeezed in next to Penny. His stomach twisted a bit, wondering if the car he’d seen earlier had been the Oldies, and now Oliver might be telling them they had to pack up already. Still, the twist in his stomach competed with the flutter of his heart because he got to be near Penny.

“Hey, Penny,” he said. “You look nice today.”

“Hiya, Manny.” Her voice was gentle and doll-like. Her smile made her blue eyes twinkle. “Thank you, but I think you’ve seen me in this dress before.”

Heat radiated up his neck and into his cheeks. “Well, you always look nice...in that dress...all the time, I mean... uhh...”

Penny giggled and patted his scarred hand.

Wanting to get the attention off himself, Manny said, “What’s all the hubbub?”

“We’re not sure, but we think Oliver wants to introduce us to his sweetheart,” said Margot. She was a tall and slender girl. Her dad was the outfit’s cook and her mom a belly-dancer and snake-charmer.

Manny exhaled with relief that the gathering had nothing to do with the Oldies.

Huffman plodded his way to the front where he and Bill pushed together four large crates into a makeshift stage. The big man stepped up and gave a loud two-fingered whistle. The chatter quieted. "Mr. Neil has an announcement."

Oliver walked into the boneyard, where all the personal tents and trailers were. He strolled onto the stage with his brown fedora tilted back, his shirt sleeves rolled up, and his tie loosened. His mustache was waxed and curled.

Though considered to have a genial manner, everyone understood he was the boss, and they respected him. His carnival was among the most successful in the West, not only because of his respectability, but also because of his business savvy and sternness when it mattered.

"I am sure many of you already know I've been seeing someone for the past few months in this part of the country. The rumors, after all, have been flying around like fur in a cat fight."

The carnies chuckled.

"That relationship has taken a step forward, and I want to present a couple new family members." Oliver signaled to an attractive, dark-haired lady and a teenage boy. "Come on up."

The pair surveyed the crowd, appearing self-conscious and uncomfortable.

"They won't bite...well, except the Alligator Man and perhaps the Yeti," Oliver said.

A growl and a bark from the crowd helped lighten the mood.

The woman and her son stepped onto the platform. She wore a faded, flowered sundress that accentuated her

voluptuous build. Her tan shoes were scuffed and worn. Yet, her high cheekbones and red lipstick gave her a glamorous appearance.

Manny blinked. No wonder the boss travelled here all the time.

Her son sported a brown, short-sleeved shirt and frayed denim pants. His hair was close-cropped and dark like his mother's, but his complexion lighter. He glowered at the ground as if it had wronged him in some way. His right foot, clad in a leather boot, rubbed along a board as if scraping off gum.

"My fellow carnies, may I introduce my lovely fiancé, Constancia Montoya—" Oliver gestured at the woman.

She waved and in a rich Mexican accent said, "*Hola*, very nice to meet you."

"Helloooo, Constancia!" Nickel called, then received a quick elbow to the ribs from Margot and a smack to the chest from Penny. His call encouraged a chorus of hellos, whistles, and howling from the crowd.

"Gentlemen, this lovely lady is here at my request to see if carnival life is worth living, so let me warn you that Constancia will be shown the utmost respect." Oliver smiled, but his eyes glinted with seriousness.

The ruckus faded.

"Friends, may I also introduce to you her son Ronaldo Montoya, a fine young man and a hard worker. You may call him Ron."

Ron remained stoic and sullen until his mother nudged him. He peered up and nodded before thrusting his hands into his pockets and lowering his eyes again.

"I don't think he's happy," Manny said.

Nickel shrugged. "Too late. He's here now."

Oliver continued, "Now that you are acquainted, make them feel welcome." He retrieved his pocket watch. "It's

ten fifty-three AM, and the gates open in seven minutes. Without further ado, let's give Albuquerque the best carnival in the West."

The crowd applauded then dispersed to their duties.

Oliver called out, "Nickel, Manny, come over here. I have an assignment for you."

Manny gulped, wondering what the boss would want with him.

The pair walked towards the stage and Manny offered a welcoming smile but was only met by Ron's scowling eyes.