



The
**MIDNIGHT
CARNIVAL**

by ZACHARY STEELE

THE
MIDNIGHT
CARNIVAL

ZACHARY STEELE

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The autumn wind sliced through Willowbrook like a cold knife, carrying with it the acrid scent of decay and the distant echo of laughter that seemed more sinister than jovial. Raven Brume, a silhouette against the flickering porch light, pulled her obsidian shawl tighter, its fringe dancing like dark flames in the spectral breeze. The ancient swing creaked beneath her, a mournful sound that matched the dilapidated Victorian looming behind her—a structure that seemed to absorb light rather than reflect it.

A month in this town, and still, the house felt like a stranger. Its peeling paint and overgrown garden stood in stark contrast to the manicured lawns and cheery decorations adorning the rest of Maple Street. Tonight, on All Hallows' Eve, the disparity was even more pronounced.

Raven's pale blue eyes, luminous in the gloom, tracked the parade of costumed children giggling their way down candy-strewn paths. Teenage revelers huddled in conspiratorial clusters, their whispers carried away by the wind before reaching her ears. The

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world beyond her decrepit porch pulsed with life and excitement, while Raven remained trapped in a bubble of isolation.

With a sigh that seemed to carry the weight of centuries, she tucked a wayward strand of midnight hair behind her ear. “Another night in exile,” she murmured, her voice barely audible above the rustling leaves. Her parents, as usual, were absent—their business more pressing than the loneliness of their daughter in a strange town.

The flickering grins of jack-o'-lanterns lining the street cast an eerie glow, transforming the familiar into something otherworldly. Shadows danced and twisted, taking on lives of their own in the corners of Raven's vision.

Then, cutting through the cacophony of Halloween revelry, came a sound that made Raven's skin prickle. A melody, faint but insistent, wove through the air—a haunting symphony of ethereal chimes and ghostly bells that seemed to call to something deep within her soul.

Drawn by an irresistible pull, Raven rose from her perch and stepped into the night. The music grew stronger with each step, leading her past houses festooned with plastic horrors and into unfamiliar territory. As she turned down an unmarked lane, a flash of color caught her eye.

There, tacked to a gnarled oak, was a poster that seemed to glow with its own inner light. “***Come one, come all to The Midnight Carnival,***” it proclaimed in script that writhed before her eyes. The illustration beneath depicted a grand carousel, its horses frozen mid-leap, surrounded by masked figures that seemed to stare directly at Raven.

Her heart quickened as she spotted more posters materializing

in the mist—a hall of mirrors that reflected impossible angles, a fortune teller’s tent with eyes peering from between the folds, a maze of shadows that seemed to shift and change even as she watched.

The wind howled, and the music swelled to a crescendo. Raven stood at a crossroads, both literal and figurative. The rational part of her mind screamed to turn back, to retreat to the safety of her hollow home. But a deeper, wilder part of her soul yearned for the unknown.

As if in answer to her unspoken desire, a gilded envelope danced on the breeze, swirling around her feet before coming to rest against her boot. With trembling fingers, she broke the crescent moon seal and withdrew a single ticket. Her name, “**Raven Brume,**” shimmered on its surface in ink that seemed to absorb the very starlight.

“Impossible,” she breathed, but the ticket pulsed warmly in her hand, as real as the goosebumps rising on her skin.

The choice made itself. Clutching her invitation to the impossible, Raven plunged deeper into the night. The laughter and light of Willowbrook faded behind her, replaced by the whispering of unseen creatures and the rustle of wings in the darkness.

She emerged into a clearing bathed in an otherworldly glow. Before her stood The Midnight Carnival in all its eldritch glory—a swirling tapestry of shadow and light, of terror and wonder. Tents of midnight velvet and blood-red silk pulsed like living things, and at the center, a grand archway beckoned with letters that twisted and reformed before her eyes.

As Raven crossed the threshold, the very air seemed to change. The scent of caramel apples mingled with something ancient and

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unknowable—the perfume of secrets long buried and truths best left unspoken.

From the depths of the carnival emerged a figure that seemed more mirage than man. Cloaked in a suit that shimmered with the light of distant galaxies, his face obscured by a top hat crowned with a silver ribbon that caught the light of stars not visible in this sky.

“Welcome, Miss Brume,” he intoned, his voice resonating in frequencies that made Raven’s very bones vibrate. “We’ve been awaiting your arrival for... quite some time.”

Raven’s voice caught in her throat as she managed to ask, “How do you know who I am?”

The figure’s smile was a crescent moon, sharp and knowing. “The carnival knows many things, my dear. It appears only to those whose souls cry out for that which lies beyond the veil of the ordinary.” He extended a gloved hand, each finger adorned with rings that seemed to contain entire universes. “I am the Ringmaster. Your ticket, if you please?”

As she surrendered the gilded slip, Raven noticed that the Ringmaster’s eyes were not eyes at all, but swirling vortexes of stardust and shadow.

“Ah, yes,” he purred, returning the ticket with a flourish. “Do enjoy your time here, Miss Brume. But remember—in The Midnight Carnival, nothing is as it seems... and perhaps, that is precisely what your heart desires.”

Before Raven could form a response, the Ringmaster melted into the shadows. The carnival surged to life around her—a symphony of mechanical marvels and whispered promises. Lights pulsed in harmony with her racing heart, and the air itself seemed charged with potential.

With a deep breath that tasted of magic and danger, Raven stepped forward. Each footfall carried her further from the world she knew and deeper into the heart of an enigma that had been waiting an eternity for her arrival.

The Midnight Carnival had begun, and with it, Raven Brume's transformation from spectator to protagonist in a tale yet unwritten.



Raven plunged deeper into the heart of the Midnight Carnival, each step carrying her further from the world she knew. The air shimmered with an otherworldly energy, thick with the intermingling aromas of spun sugar, mulled cider, and something far more arcane—the musty scent of ancient grimoires and smoldering herbs that tickled the back of her throat.

Wrought-iron lampposts dotted the thoroughfare, their flames dancing in hues of violet and emerald. The light they cast seemed alive, reaching out with spectral fingers to caress the faces of silent onlookers. Shadows pooled in impossible angles, defying the laws of nature and sanity alike.

Raven's eyes darted from one fantastical sight to the next. A ring toss game featured bottles that seemed to phase in and out of existence, their silvery surfaces rippling like mercury. A vendor offered candied apples that pulsed with an inner radiance, their crystalline shells refracting rainbows with each turn.

Yet for all its vibrancy, an eerie stillness permeated the carnival. There were no crowds, no eager patrons jostling for a glimpse of the next wonder. The carnies—if they could be called that—acknowledged Raven with knowing smirks or enigmatic nods, their eyes too bright, their movements too fluid to be entirely human.

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A crimson tent loomed before her, its velvet folds rippling in a nonexistent breeze. *“The Hall of Mirrors—Discover Your True Self,”* proclaimed a sign in script that seemed to writhe and shift even as she read it. Raven’s heart thundered in her chest, a primal part of her screaming to turn back. But the siren call of the unknown was too strong to resist.

She parted the heavy curtains, the fabric warm and alive beneath her fingers, and stepped into a world of reflections and revelations.

Candlelight flickered from ornate sconces, their flames casting an amber glow that danced across hundreds of mirrors. Each frame was a work of art—intricate carvings of thorny vines and chimerical beasts that seemed to undulate in her peripheral vision.

At first, the distortions were playful—her reflection stretched and compressed like taffy, eliciting a nervous chuckle. But as she ventured deeper, the mirrors began to reveal truths that lurked beneath the surface of her consciousness.

One reflection frowned back at her with an expression of such profound sadness that Raven’s breath caught in her throat. Another showed her eyes as hollow pits, endless voids that threatened to pull her in. She recoiled, only to find herself face to face with a tarnished silver oval that reflected not her present, but a moment frozen in time—her bedroom back home, stripped bare, a study in abandonment and loss.

“This isn’t real,” she whispered, her voice trembling.

A sound like the rustling of moth wings echoed through the hall, carrying with it a whisper of her name. Raven pressed on, her reflection fracturing and reforming with each step.

She halted before a mirror that filled an entire wall, its surface

clouded as if veiled by the mists of time. As she watched, transfixed, shapes coalesced within the glass. She saw herself in a crowded school hallway, a ghost among the living. Her classmates passed through her, unseeing, unhearing—a pantomime of connection that left her untouched.

“Is this how I truly see myself?” Raven murmured, her voice barely audible. “Invisible? Alone?”

The scene shimmered and changed. Now she beheld her parents, seated at a dinner table with a conspicuous empty chair. Their features were blurred, but their body language spoke volumes—shoulders hunched, gazes averted, lost in worlds that didn’t include their daughter.

A lump formed in Raven’s throat, hot tears pricking at the corners of her eyes. “Enough,” she commanded, willing the vision to dissipate. “These are just tricks, illusions!”

“*Are they?*” The Ringmaster’s voice slithered into her ear, smooth as silk and cold as the void between stars.

Raven whirled to find him standing mere inches away, his eyes swirling pools of cosmic dust and shadow. “What do you want from me?” she demanded, her voice echoing off a thousand reflective surfaces.

He cocked his head, a smile playing at the corners of his mouth. “The real question, my inquisitive little raven, is what do you want? These mirrors don’t lie—they simply reveal the truths we bury deep within our souls.”

“I didn’t come here to be tormented,” Raven retorted, summoning what courage she could.

The Ringmaster’s laugh was a cascade of tinkling glass. “Oh, but you did, whether you knew it or not. The carnival calls to those

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who seek transformation, who yearn to shed the chrysalis of their old selves.” He gestured with a gloved hand, and suddenly a new exit materialized—an archway draped in midnight blue velvet. “But perhaps you’ve had your fill of introspection for now. There are other marvels waiting to be explored.”

Raven hesitated, torn between the desire to flee this hall of truths and the fear of following this enigmatic figure deeper into the unknown.

“The choice, as always, is yours,” the Ringmaster said, noting her indecision. “But remember, the night is young, and time has a peculiar way of flowing here in the Midnight Carnival.”

Before Raven could formulate a response, he melted into the shadows, leaving behind only the lingering scent of ozone and starlight.

She stumbled out of the Hall of Mirrors, gulping in the night air. But the atmosphere had shifted—the carnival’s music now a discordant symphony that set her teeth on edge, the lights dimmer and pulsing like the heartbeat of some vast, slumbering beast.

Across the way, a smaller tent caught her eye. Twinkling lights spelled out “*Madame Seraphina—Seer of Souls*” in constellations of silver and gold. Drawn by the promise of answers—or at least some semblance of guidance—Raven approached.

The tent’s interior assaulted her senses—a heady mix of incense and herbs that made her head swim. Beaded curtains whispered secrets as she passed, and at the center, seated at a table draped in fabric that seemed woven from the night sky itself, was Madame Seraphina.

The fortune teller’s eyes were closed, her weathered face a mask of serenity. Yet as Raven approached, those eyes snapped

open, revealing irises of swirling mist.

“Welcome, Raven,” Madame Seraphina intoned, her voice resonating with the wisdom of ages. “We’ve been expecting you.”

“You know my name,” Raven said, no longer surprised by the carnival’s omniscience.

A smile played at the corners of the seer’s mouth. “Names hold power here, child. They are keys that unlock the doors of destiny.”

Raven sank into the chair opposite Madame Seraphina, feeling the weight of unseen eyes upon her. “Can you tell me what’s happening? This place... it’s like nothing I’ve ever experienced.”

The fortune teller’s gaze softened. “The Midnight Carnival is a crucible, my dear. It burns away the dross of our everyday masks, revealing the raw truths that lie beneath. It calls to those who carry a void within them—a hunger for something more.”

“But I don’t know what I’m seeking,” Raven admitted, her voice barely above a whisper.

“Perhaps not with your waking mind,” Madame Seraphina replied. “But your soul knows. It cries out in the language of dreams and shadows.”

She extended her hands, palms up, an invitation. “Shall we see what the tapestry of fate has woven for you?”

Raven hesitated for only a moment before placing her hands in the fortune teller’s. The old woman’s touch was cool, like water flowing over river stones, and Raven felt a jolt of energy pass between them.

Madame Seraphina’s eyes fluttered closed, and she began to hum—a low, hypnotic melody that seemed to resonate in Raven’s very bones. The candles surrounding them leaned inward, their flames stretching into impossible shapes. The air grew thick,

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pressing against Raven's skin like a living thing.

"Ah," the seer breathed, her voice distant. "I see a journey—not of miles, but of the soul. You stand at a crossroads, poised between isolation and connection, between the safety of shadows and the risk of light."

Raven's pulse quickened. "What does that mean? What am I supposed to do?"

"You must face that which binds you, child," Madame Seraphina said, her grip tightening. "Only by confronting the chains you've forged yourself can you hope to break free."

"Face what binds me? I don't understand—"

But before Raven could press further, the candles extinguished as one, plunging the tent into absolute darkness. She felt the fortune teller's hands dissolve like smoke between her fingers. When her eyes adjusted, she found herself alone—the table bare, the tent empty save for the lingering scent of incense and possibility.

Frustration and fear warred within her as she stumbled back out into the carnival proper. But the world had shifted once again. The once-straight paths now twisted into a labyrinth of shadows and light. The vibrant hues had faded to a palette of muted greys and sepias, as if all the joy had been leeches from the world.

Panic clawed at her throat as she spun in place, trying to get her bearings. The entrance was gone, swallowed by the ever-changing landscape of the carnival. She was trapped in a nightmare of her own making.

"Hello?" she called out, hating how small and frightened her voice sounded. "Is anyone there?"

The wind carried her words away, returning only the creaking of unseen machinery and the faint, mocking laughter of hidden

observers.

Raven closed her eyes, willing herself to remain calm. “Think,” she commanded herself. “There has to be a way out of this.”

As if in response to her thoughts, a familiar voice echoed around her, seeming to come from everywhere and nowhere at once.

“Not everything is as it seems, but perhaps that is what you seek.”

The Ringmaster.

“Show yourself!” Raven demanded, her eyes darting from shadow to shadow.

His laughter rolled over her like a wave of liquid darkness. “The game is afoot, Miss Brume. The question is—are you player or pawn?”

“I just want to leave,” she insisted, hating the pleading note in her voice.

“To leave, you must first find yourself,” came the cryptic reply. “Or perhaps... lose yourself entirely.”

Anger flared within her, a welcome heat against the chill of fear. “What does that even mean? Stop speaking in riddles!”

“Face what binds you,” the Ringmaster whispered, echoing Madame Seraphina’s words. “Break the chains of your own forging.”

Raven’s hands clenched into fists, nails biting into her palms. “Fine,” she spat. “If this is some kind of test, I’ll play your game. But when I win, I want answers.”

She could almost hear the smile in the Ringmaster’s voice as he replied, “My dear, brave little raven—the journey is the answer.”

With that, silence fell once more. But as Raven’s eyes adjusted to the gloom, she saw a new path open before her, leading to a structure she hadn’t noticed before. It rose like a twisted parody of

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nature—a massive tangle of branches and shadows that seemed to breathe in the night air.

A sign hung above the entrance, its letters formed from thorny vines: *“The Maze of Shadows—Face Your Fears.”*

Raven took a deep breath, steeling herself for whatever lay ahead. “No more running,” she whispered to herself. “It’s time to face the darkness.”

With one last look at the carnival behind her—a world of wonder and terror that had forever changed her—Raven stepped into the waiting maw of the Maze of Shadows. The branches closed behind her with a sound like fate itself sealing shut, and she was engulfed in a darkness deeper than any she had ever known.

The real test was about to begin.



Raven stood before the entrance to the Maze of Shadows, her heart a thunderous drumbeat in her chest. The archway loomed above her, a grotesque tangle of gnarled branches and serpentine vines that seemed to writhe in the flickering light. The sign above pulsed with an eldritch glow, each letter a promise and a warning.

Drawing a breath that tasted of damp earth and forgotten dreams, she stepped forward. The moment her foot crossed the threshold, the carnival’s cacophony died, replaced by a silence so profound it rang in her ears. The air grew thick and cloying, carrying the scent of petrichor and ancient stone.

Towering walls of thorny hedges rose on either side, their leaves rustling with whispered secrets. A pearlescent mist coiled around her ankles, obscuring the ground and lending an ethereal quality to her movements. As she ventured deeper, shadows

danced at the periphery of her vision—amorphous shapes that skittered and twisted, always just beyond the reach of comprehension.

The first fork in the path presented itself: to her left, a corridor bathed in a ghostly, cerulean radiance; to her right, a descent into stygian blackness. Madame Seraphina’s words echoed in her mind: “Face what binds you.” With a trembling resolve, Raven chose the darker path.

Darkness enveloped her like a living shroud, cool tendrils caressing her skin. She extended her hands, fingertips brushing against the maze’s walls—rough and alive, pulsing with an otherworldly heartbeat. Then, from the depths of the gloom, came the whispers.

“Alone... forgotten... unseen...”

Raven’s breath caught in her throat. “Who’s there?” she called, her voice a fragile thing in the vastness.

Laughter—soft and cruel—rippled through the air. Shadows peeled themselves from the walls, coalescing into faceless silhouettes that mirrored her form with uncanny precision.

One glided forward, its voice a chilling echo of Raven’s innermost doubts. “Why do you persist? You’re nothing but a ghost in your own life.”

Another hissed from behind, “They’re all too consumed with their own lives to notice you. You might as well be invisible.”

Raven stumbled backward, her heart racing. “Stop it. You’re not real. You can’t be.”

“Aren’t we?” the shadows chorused, their voices a discordant symphony. “We are the truth you hide from yourself.”

Something sparked within Raven—a defiance born of

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desperation. “No,” she said, her voice growing stronger. “You’re just reflections of my fears. And I won’t let fear control me anymore.”

She pushed through the phantasmal forms, their touch cold as winter frost. Breaking into a run, she plunged deeper into the maze. Paths twisted and turned, doubling back on themselves in impossible geometries. Panic clawed at the edges of her mind, threatening to overwhelm her.

Just as despair began to set in, Raven burst into a circular clearing. At its center stood a grand mirror, its frame an intricate lacework of silver that seemed to capture starlight. The surface was as dark and still as a midnight lake, promising depths beyond imagining.

Drawn by an irresistible pull, she approached. As she gazed into the obsidian surface, an image slowly coalesced—her own reflection, but with eyes that glowed with an inner fire.

“Who are you?” Raven breathed, her words barely a whisper.

The reflection’s lips curved into a melancholic smile. “I am the part of you that you’ve buried beneath layers of fear and doubt. The longing for connection, the yearning to be seen and understood.”

“I’ve had to be strong,” Raven countered, a tremor in her voice betraying her uncertainty. “I can’t rely on others. They always let you down in the end.”

“Is that strength?” the reflection challenged, its gaze piercing. “Or is it fear masquerading as independence? You’ve built walls so high that no one can scale them—not even you.”

Raven’s defenses crumbled, leaving her raw and exposed. “I... I don’t know how to change. How to let others in.”

“Acceptance is the first step,” the reflection said, its tone softening. “It’s okay to need others, to be vulnerable. True strength

lies in opening yourself to the possibility of both joy and pain.”

Tears welled in Raven’s eyes as the truth of those words resonated within her. “I want to try. I want to live, not just exist.”

The mirror began to pulse with an inner light, and the reflection extended its hand, pressing against the glass as if it could break through. Hesitating only a heartbeat, Raven reached out, her fingertips touching the cool surface.

A warmth like liquid sunlight flowed from the point of contact, spreading through her body and illuminating her from within. Visions cascaded before her eyes—moments of missed connections, opportunities for vulnerability that she’d shied away from. She saw her parents, their faces etched with concern and love, reaching out to her time and again.

“I’ve been so afraid of being hurt that I walled myself off from everyone,” Raven whispered, her voice thick with emotion.

“Now you understand,” her reflection said, its form beginning to shimmer and fade. “The power to change has always been within you.”

The mirror dissolved into motes of light, swirling around Raven like fireflies. The maze itself transformed—dark hedges blossoming into vibrant foliage adorned with luminescent flowers that pulsed with gentle radiance. The oppressive atmosphere lifted, replaced by an air of serenity and possibility.

Before her, a new path opened, lined with softly glowing lanterns that beckoned her forward. With a deep breath and a sense of newfound purpose, Raven stepped onto the illuminated trail.



The path led Raven to a grand pavilion that seemed to float at the

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edge of reality. Diaphanous curtains of starlight cascaded from unseen heights, and the very air shimmered with potential. At the center of this ethereal stage stood the Ringmaster, his posture regal and timeless. The shadow cast by his top hat obscured his eyes, lending him an air of inscrutability.

“You have traversed the Maze of Shadows,” he intoned, his voice resonating with power and ancient knowledge. “Few have the courage to face themselves with such brutal honesty.”

Raven approached him, her steps steady and her gaze unwavering. The girl who had entered the carnival was gone, replaced by someone on the cusp of a profound transformation. “You orchestrated all of this,” she said, not a question but a statement of fact. “You brought me here to confront my deepest fears.”

The Ringmaster inclined his head, a gesture both acknowledging and appraising. “The Midnight Carnival is a mirror to the soul, young Raven. It offers a choice to all who enter its gates—to remain lost in the comforting lies we tell ourselves, or to embrace the sometimes painful truth of who we are and who we could become.”

“Then I choose truth,” Raven declared, her voice ringing with conviction. “I choose to leave this place and truly live.”

A smile played at the corners of the Ringmaster’s mouth, enigmatic yet somehow approving. “Very well. But heed this warning—the revelations you’ve gained within these mystical bounds are only as powerful as the actions you take beyond them. Will you have the courage to carry this newfound wisdom into the waking world?”

“I will,” Raven replied, meeting his gaze without flinching. “I

understand now that change begins with me.”

With a flourish of his gloved hand, the Ringmaster gestured to a towering gate that materialized behind him. Its ironwork was a masterpiece of entwined vines and blooming flowers, each petal and leaf rendered in exquisite detail.

“Step through,” he said, “and you shall return to your world.”

Raven moved toward the gate but paused, her hand resting on the cool metal. She turned back to the Ringmaster, a question in her eyes. “Will I ever see this place again? Or is this a once-in-a-lifetime journey?”

The Ringmaster’s smile deepened, holding secrets untold. “The Midnight Carnival appears to those who have need of its particular brand of magic. Should the time come when you once more seek answers that the waking world cannot provide, perhaps our paths will cross again.”

With a nod of understanding and a heart full of mixed emotions, Raven pushed the gate open. A brilliant, warm light enveloped her, and she felt herself lifted, weightless and unburdened.



Raven’s eyes fluttered open, adjusting to the soft, golden glow of morning light filtering through her bedroom curtains. For a moment, disorientation washed over her as she found herself back in the familiar confines of her bed. The boundary between dream and reality seemed gossamer-thin, and she wondered if her extraordinary experience had been nothing more than a vivid fantasy.

As she sat up, smoothing her tangled hair, something caught her eye. There, on her nightstand, lay a small silver token she had

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never seen before. With trembling fingers, she picked it up, feeling its comforting weight in her palm. Engraved upon its surface was a delicate crescent moon—the very emblem that had sealed the carnival invitation.

A smile tugged at her lips as she ran her thumb over the cool metal. It was real. All of it.

Filled with a sense of purpose and possibility, Raven got dressed, choosing colors brighter than her usual somber palette. She bounded down the stairs, the scent of coffee guiding her to the kitchen where her parents sat, absorbed in their morning routines.

“Good morning,” she greeted them, her voice carrying a warmth that had been absent for too long.

Her parents looked up, pleasant surprise evident in their expressions. “Morning, Raven,” her father replied, lowering his tablet. “You’re up early. Everything okay?”

“Everything’s great,” she said, meaning it for the first time in ages. “I thought... well, I thought maybe we could have breakfast together. As a family. I can make those blueberry pancakes you both like.”

Her mother’s face softened, a tentative hope shining in her eyes. “That sounds lovely, sweetheart. Can I help?”

As they moved around the kitchen together, an ease settled over them that had been missing for years. They chatted about simple things—the changing colors of the leaves, plans for the weekend, a new movie they might all enjoy. Raven felt the walls she had built beginning to crumble, replaced by bridges of understanding.

Later that day at school, Raven noticed a group of classmates huddled together, discussing an upcoming art project. In the past,

she would have hurried by, head down, invisible. Today, she took a deep breath and approached them.

“Hi,” she said, her voice steady despite the flutter of nerves in her stomach. “I couldn’t help overhearing. You’re working on the mural for the main hallway, right? I’d love to help if you need an extra pair of hands.”

One of the students, a girl with bright eyes and a cascade of curly hair, turned to her with a welcoming smile. “That would be amazing! We could definitely use more creative input. We’re meeting after school to brainstorm ideas. Want to join us?”

Raven nodded, a genuine smile spreading across her face. “I’d really like that. Thank you.”

As the day progressed, Raven found herself engaging more—raising her hand in class to offer an insight, sharing a laugh with someone in the hallway, feeling the tentative threads of connection beginning to weave through her life. It wasn’t always easy; old habits of isolation tried to reassert themselves. But each time she pushed past her comfort zone, she felt a little stronger, a little more alive.



That evening, as Raven settled into bed, she held the silver token once more. Its weight in her hand was a reminder of the journey she had undertaken and the changes she had vowed to make. She whispered a quiet thank you to the mysterious Midnight Carnival and the enigmatic Ringmaster who had guided her toward this new path.

Across town, a young man trudged home, his shoulders hunched under the weight of uncertainties about his future. The

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streetlights cast long shadows, and a chill wind carried the first hints of winter. Lost in thought, he almost missed the glimmer of gold that caught the corner of his eye.

There, fluttering against a lamppost like a trapped butterfly, was a gilded ticket. He plucked it from the air, his brow furrowing as he read the ornate script:

“Come one, come all to The Midnight Carnival. Where dreams and nightmares dance, and truth awaits those brave enough to seek it.”

He paused, an inexplicable shiver running down his spine. In the distance, carried on a breeze that seemed to come from nowhere and everywhere, the faint strains of haunting music drifted through the night air. Carnival music, eerie yet enticing.

The young man looked up, his gaze drawn to the horizon where the last vestiges of sunset painted the sky in hues of deep purple and midnight blue. For a moment, just at the edge of perception, he thought he saw the shimmer of tents and the twinkle of otherworldly lights.

He clutched the ticket tighter, feeling as though he stood on the precipice of something both terrifying and wonderful. With a deep breath, he took a step forward, toward the promise of the unknown.

The Midnight Carnival awaited its next visitor, ready to offer revelation to those willing to face their deepest truths.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Zachary Steele is a storyteller with a passion for weaving tales that blend the extraordinary with the deeply personal. From the magical streets of modern-day cities to the neon-lit futures of tomorrow, Zachary's novels explore love, identity, and the complexities of the human condition, often through the lens of speculative fiction. With a flair for creating immersive worlds and unforgettable characters, Zachary's stories invite readers to escape the ordinary and dive into the heart of the unknown.

Zachary's work spans genres, including supernatural mystery, science fiction, and contemporary romance, always with an emphasis on emotional depth and character-driven narratives. Whether it's an android learning to feel, a witch trying to find their place in the modern world, or a young man discovering long-buried family secrets, Zachary's books captivate readers with their unique blend of adventure, intrigue, and heartfelt emotion.

When Zachary isn't writing, you can find him exploring new ideas, working on his latest novel, or connecting with readers who share his love of all things speculative and romantic.

BOOKS BY THIS AUTHOR

A Witch Out of Place

Zachary Greenmeadow, a young witch from Salem, Massachusetts, is eager to break free from the confines of his magical upbringing and make a name for himself in the modern world. Armed with spellcasting skills and a flair for the dramatic, Zachary sets his sights on becoming a famous witch influencer. But navigating the non-magical world while keeping his powers secret proves more challenging—and entertaining—than he ever expected.

Become Human

In a futuristic San Francisco, android Max is designed for pleasure, but a glitch in his programming allows him to feel emotions and yearn for something deeper than mere satisfaction. As he navigates his awakening, he forms a bond with Jameson, a detective investigating a murder tied to the elite world Max inhabits. Together, they must uncover dark secrets while Max grapples with his newfound humanity.

Portrait of Desire

Noah Spencer inherits a mysterious Victorian mansion from a relative he never met, only to discover that the house is filled with secrets and a lingering presence from the past. As he explores the home and uncovers the story of a forgotten artist named Henry Ashcroft, Noah finds himself drawn into a connection that transcends time, where love and longing continue to echo through the walls.

Shelter of the Heart

Sam Bennett, a struggling artist on the streets of West Hollywood, has lost everything but his will to survive. When a chance encounter with another artist offers him a lifeline, Sam must confront his past and rediscover the dreams he thought were lost forever. In a world that seems indifferent to his struggles, he learns that sometimes hope can be found in the unlikeliest of places.