

# **CARNIVAL TRICKS**

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## CHAPTER ONE

The wooden, narrow-eyed door guardian wore a permanent open-mouthed scowl hovering on the verge of a war cry. A garish array of feathers spread over the headpiece perched on his furrowed brow.

Fortunately, no one who stared up at his head, mounted over the door, was terrified of him.

Under the frightful Zulu mask, a bored bouncer routinely checked IDs and waved customers into Zanzi-Bar.

The wine bar and nightclub in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, prided itself on its selection of South African wines, its mismatched name notwithstanding. In the dark interior of the bar, spotlights pulsed, bathing the wooden dance floor in pools of white and red. A Latin tune thumped through the loudspeakers; the compulsive rhythm set hips rocking to the beat. Leggy waitresses meandered around clusters of couches covered with zebra-skin and leopard-skin patterns.

One of the waitresses walked to the bar, which displayed an outstanding array of wines and spirits. Sofia Rios tucked a stray lock of brown hair behind her ear, leaned against the wood façade of the bar, and flashed the bartender, Stefan Agnor, her sweetest smile. “I need a Jameson on the rocks, an Eikendal merlot, a brandy, and a Sprite on the house.”

He chuckled as he set a wineglass filled with a pale pink wine on a tray marked with Chelsea’s name. “That smile’s really cute, but it isn’t going to bump you to the head of the line, munchkin.”

Sofia rolled her eyes. “For the record, I’ll have you know that I’m wearing four-inch heels, which elevates me two inches above munchkin status.” She was not going to admit to the blisters on her feet.

“So you’re what, five-foot-four now? Color me impressed.” Stefan began work on another order. His blond hair, slightly longer than was fashionable, lent new meaning to the words “artistic disarray.” He grinned at her. “How are you doing tonight?”

Sofia’s rosebud mouth twisted into a wry smile. “Had a microbiology exam this morning.”

“You aced it, right?” He turned his back on her and reached for a bottle of Absolut.

Her eyes narrowed as she focused on the ice chips beside the sink. The transparent shards quivered and then leapt, as if flicked by an invisible finger, into the sink. She shrugged. “Won’t find out for another week, but I hope so because I hauled ass on that one.”

“And such a cute ass it is too.” Stefan turned around and leered at her. “When do you get to anatomy? I can help you with the practical exam.”

“I bet you can. Tell you what; you rush my order and I’ll bump you to the front of the line on my practical.”

“Ahead of the video game-playing geek who lives on your right and the overweight accountant who lives on your left?” Stefan snorted. “Oh, can you tell that I’m really worried about the competition?” He set a glass of Sprite down on her tray.

Chelsea, a well-endowed blonde, swung by the bar and hefted her full tray. She arched an eyebrow, and her grin was wicked. “The hot guy’s back.”

Sofia leaned to look past Chelsea’s shoulder. “Where?”

“He sat down in your section again. That’s three nights running. Maybe he’s got a thing for you. He’s not alone this time, though.”

Stefan jerked his head in their direction. “Go get their order. I’ll have this one filled by the time you get back.”

Sofia grinned. She leaned over the bar and kissed him on the cheek. “I’m moving you up to the head of the line.”

Stefan snorted. “I should be so lucky.”

As she returned to her section and to the three new customers who had claimed a large circular booth, Sofia tugged down her white shirt to cover more of her bare midriff. She blamed her fluttering pulse entirely on the dark-haired, leanly muscled man whose steady green-eyed gaze seemed to take in everything, from the small mole just over the left side of her mouth to the fact that her manicure was slightly chipped. His mouth was firm and unsmiling, which was a shame. A smile would have gone a long way toward making his rough-hewn features more attractive.

She inhaled deeply and fixed a warm smile on her face. “What can I get for you, gentlemen?”

“I’ll have a Kahlua coffee martini,” one of the man’s companions said in a reedy voice. Sofia placed him somewhere between fifty and sixty years old. His tweed jacket was too large for him, and his large brown eyes darted from side to side behind the large frames of his eyeglasses. He was definitely not typical nightclub material.

“Me too,” the third man squeaked. He seemed slightly younger, but cut from the same cloth. If Sofia mentally merged her geeky video game-playing neighbor with her overweight accountant neighbor, and then aged him thirty years, she would have expected him to resemble those two men. They seemed like professors or scientists, grossly out of place in a nightclub.

How different they were from the man who stared intently at her. He did not belong in a nightclub either, but that was because she could imagine him in military fatigues, toting a machine gun with easy expertise. He looked dangerous enough for that impression to fit.

“And you?” she asked.

“Water.”

“No vodka tonight?” She smiled. “Sodas are complimentary for designated drivers.”

“Water’s fine.”

Sofia resisted the urge to roll her eyes. Couldn’t he be friendlier? A smile wouldn’t crack his face. At least he had not sounded irritated, though his indifference was insulting. Then again, she was not in the market for another guy, so what did it matter what he thought of her?

She straightened. “I’ll be right back with two martinis and a glass of water.”

Stefan arched his eyebrows when she returned to the bar. “No hot date, huh?”

He had always been good at reading her mood. Sofia shot him a dirty look. “When do real men give me the time of day?”

He pressed a hand to his chest and managed a passably good impression of pain. “You wound me, baby. What do they want?”

“Two martinis and water.”

“Boring.”

Stefan was often right, but not that time. Sofia’s eyes narrowed. From her place at the bar, she watched the man scan the club while his two companions sat in silent and apparent discomfort. Something was not quite right, but she could not place her finger on it.

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She had remembered what he ordered.

Kyle Norwood gritted his teeth. *Damn it.* Observant people were dangerous.

It probably did not matter, though. She was just a waitress, one of the regulars he recognized from his prior two visits. Many of Zanzi-Bar's customers and employees were regulars, a fact that made the nightclub a perfect place for a drop. He did not want to be surprised by hostile parties or unexpected enemies. It had happened on more than one occasion, and the last time had left scars, physical and emotional.

"Where are they?" A thin voice, its tone whining, interrupted his thoughts.

Kyle glanced over at Alvin Smith. The lanky professor was one of the leading minds on genetic manipulation. He and his counterpart, Bert Reynard, were scientists at Proficere Labs, a research facility that prided itself on work so innovative and so cutting-edge that it would have been illegal if only the authorities knew *what* to make illegal.

Kyle would typically not have taken them on as clients, but it was not his call. Zara Itani, his boss and the owner of Three Fates, an agency of mercenaries, made those decisions, and she tended to skim close to criminal behavior. Her close connections with the government allowed her to escape without repercussions, most of the time.

As long as she extended the same courtesy to her employees, he would be happy to take on any job she offered. Zara paid well and did not micromanage. One could not hope for much more in a boss.

He continued his scan of the club, mentally checking the employees against the employment records he had downloaded from Zanzi-Bar earlier in the week. Once he confirmed that they were all longtime employees, he moved on to the customers. The three men at the bar flirting with the male bartender were regulars; he had noticed them the prior night. Young professionals

occupied some of the tables in the other sections. Unless he missed his guess, and he rarely did, he pegged them for lawyers or bankers. They looked just uptight and miserable enough.

Four students in University of North Carolina sweatshirts and jackets, their backpacks sprawled in untidy heaps beneath their chairs, occupied a table in his section. The waitress stopped by their table and chatted while unloading their drinks from her tray. Laughter, warm and infectious, exploded before subsiding into muted chuckles. The students were regulars too, judging from the waitress's easy conversation with them.

What was her name? He frowned as he searched his memory of her employment records.

*Sofia...Sofia Rios.* She had begun working at Zanzi-Bar several months prior, typically for three or four nights a week.

Several minutes later, she reluctantly wound down her conversation with the students and headed toward his table. She set two glasses of martini in front of Alvin and Bert, and slid a glass of water toward Kyle. "That will be twenty-two fifty, including tax."

Kyle pulled a couple of bills from his wallet and tossed it on the table. "Thanks. Keep the change." His gaze darted to the entrance as three men strode into the club. They were built like wrestlers and looked like thugs despite wearing tieless suits. One of them he recognized; the thick black mustache was a point of pride for Luis Sanchez, chief lieutenant in Rue Marcha, one of Colombia's most vicious drug cartels. "We're leaving," Kyle said, his tone flat.

"What?" Alvin asked. He followed Kyle's gaze. "But he's here, Kyle."

Kyle's eyes narrowed. "He's your customer?"

Alvin nodded.

"Do you know who he is?"

Bert's lips pressed into a thin line. "He's the man who agreed to our price."

Only then did Kyle take a closer look at one of the two men who accompanied Sanchez. The man matched the photograph the scientists had shown Kyle previously, but Sanchez's presence was hardly coincidental. *Damn*. He would need all of the devil's luck to get out of this mess.

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Sofia cast a quick look at the three men who had just entered the club. Zanzi-Bar attracted a wide range of clientele, including gangsters looking to move up the food chain. The three men would not have overly alarmed her if not for the reaction of the man in the booth, the one called Kyle. He looked up and met her gaze. The slight upward motion of his chin told her to leave.

She did not need to be told twice. With slow, careful steps, she backed away from the booth.

Motion flickered in her peripheral vision. Two UNC students shot to their feet and spun around, automatic pistols in their hands. "IGEC agents. You're under arrest."

Sofia's eyes flared wide. What was the International Genetics and Ethics Council doing in a nightclub in Chapel Hill? Why were they pointing their weapons at the innocuous geeks instead of the suited gangsters or the man, Kyle, who so obviously exuded danger?

The men in suits reached into their jackets, the motion so smooth it was practically instinctive.

Kyle lifted the edge of the small table and flung it, drinks and all, in the direction of the three thugs.

Sofia ducked, shrieking, as bullets laced across the room. She dropped to the ground and rolled into the cover of the circular booth. The two scientists huddled beside her. One of them, hands trembling, opened a steel briefcase.



It *wasn't* a briefcase but a cooler. A pale blue florescent light activated as the case opened. The light glowed softly over test tubes filled with translucent liquid tightly packed among cooling crystals. A mini disc, encased in a thin jewel case, was nestled in a bed of Styrofoam.

The scientist ignored both test tubes and mini discs. He reached for a circular metal tube, two inches long and no thicker than a toothpick. He wrapped his fist tightly around it and lunged from the booth. Gunfire cut him down two feet from the door of the bar.

He screamed, writhing as a pool of blood formed beneath him.

*Oh, God.* Ducking beneath the spray of bullets, Sofia leaned out, grabbed his feet, and dragged him back into the booth. His gaze was panicked, and his breath came in quick shudders. Blood bubbled out, mixing with the spittle leaking from the side of his mouth. He reached up, his fingers like claws, raking her shoulders as he fought to breathe. In his eyes, terror supplanted panic.

Sofia leaned over him and raised his head to elevate the pressure off his punctured lungs. She flinched as a sharp pain pierced her bicep, but it vanished instantly. He died moments later, his final breath escaping in a rattling wheeze as his eyes rolled up in his head.

Gunfire faded into smoky silence. Stunned, Sofia looked up. One gangster was dead, and the other two had fled. Three of the IGEC agents were down. One sprawled unmoving across the floor, blood leaking from a bullet hole in the middle of his forehead. The other two groaned softly, injured. The remaining scientist cowered as the last IGEC agent slapped electric handcuffs on him, but there was no sign of Kyle or the cooler.

## CHAPTER TWO

Kyle walked, his pace no faster than those of the college students teetering unsteadily out of the bars and clubs on Franklin Street. The steel cooler felt heavy, a burden that stood out, stiff and formal, in a collage of scruffy backpacks and classy handbags. Training contained the urgency that dogged his steps as he wove past cheerful and belligerent drunks, leaving behind the violence that fractured Zanzi-Bar.

He squeezed his eyes shut and gritted his teeth. Willpower wrapped tight spirals around the vibration of cold anger.

What the hell were International Genetics and Ethics Council agents doing at the club? Its field agents exceeded the U.S. Marshals in the scope of its operations, and its activities spread like tentacles across the globe.

Why was the council interested in a simple research transaction?

Unless, of course, there was far more to the research than he realized.

His knuckles whitened as his grip tightened on the handle of the steel cooler.

Bert Reynard swore that the transaction was just the result of a genetic screen. Kyle, too, had scanned the research transcript and found nothing more than a jumbled mess of four letters—A, T, G, and C—adenine, thymine, guanine, and cytosine, the four nucleobases that interlinked into a sinuous coil to create deoxyribonucleic acid, DNA, the double helix of life.

And that was where he had screwed up. In a world transformed by the Genetic Revolution, he had underestimated the power of DNA—the blueprint of life—to drive men to violent acts inspired by greed or fear.

In fact, he had more than screwed up. He had not fully understood the research transcript, and he had made the mistake of taking a scientist at his word. Those intellectual types, those doctors and scientists, could not be trusted. Doctors had killed his mother with their insistence on unproven drugs.

He was enough of a realist to acknowledge that his mother would have died anyway—liver cancer spared few victims—but the drugs had killed her, not the cancer. She had died clawing at his chest, pleading desperately for help. Her eyes were wide with terror as she fought to breathe through the viscous phlegm that blocked her air passage. She had not even realized that blood was spilling from her every orifice. The autopsy confirmed that her internal organs had ruptured. Cancer did not kill her; the drugs did.

The doctors denied it. To defend themselves, they held up her scribbled consent, indicating that she had understood the risks of the experimental drugs.

Risk. Hell, no one had understood the risk, not until his mother died.

Kyle grimaced, shook off the past, and refocused on the present. Was anything missing from that cooler?

He stepped into a convenience store and brushed past its browsing patrons as he headed toward the restrooms nestled in the back of the building. The small room stank of hastily mopped up vomit and urine, but the glaring florescent lights reflecting off the dirt-stained white tiles were exactly what he needed. He lowered the toilet cover, set the cooler on top of the lid, and punched in the security code on the lock.

The contents of the cooler glowed pale blue under the light.

At first glance, everything seemed in place. The mini disc, the test tubes—both decoys—were untouched.

His green eyes flashed over the contents of the cooler yet again. His breath caught.

The microchip injector was missing.

He slammed the cooler shut. Damn it!

His hands clenched into fists, and he paced the tiny length of the restroom. If Bert had taken it, the microchip would be in the hands of the IGEC by now—hardly ideal—but the IGEC, at least, had a reputation for scrupulously playing by its excessively thick rule book.

But if Alvin had taken it...

Alvin Smith was dead. Was the microchip embedded in his corpse or was it still encased in its injector, perhaps lost in the debris and aftermath of the fight?

He jerked to a stop. The tracking code for the microchip had to be around somewhere.

He reopened the cooler and tore through its contents. A white card imprinted with an unlabeled data matrix code was tucked into the lining of the cooler. He pulled out his smartphone, scanned the image, and then hit the “Track” button. A map flashed onto the screen of the smartphone. A red dot blipped. It moved.

Kyle ground his teeth. The microchip tracker was live; it had been activated by body heat. Could the cartel—? No, Kyle was certain the Rue Marcha did not have the microchip. Alvin had not made physical contact with them.

The waitress.

Damn it. She was the only one who had come close to Alvin. She had held him as he died.

He had to go back for the microchip and get it out of the waitress, one way or another.

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Sofia released her breath in a soft sigh of relief when the medics and police officers finally left the club, taking with them the bodies of the deceased gangster, the IGEC agent, and the

scientist. She slumped down in a chair, looking up only when she felt someone crouch beside her.

“Here.” Stefan placed a steaming mug in her hands. The lightly fragrant scent of chamomile wafted toward her. “Drink. It’s good for you.”

She laughed, the sound catching on a sob. “I didn’t even know the bar carried teas.”

“We don’t. I thought you could use one and sent Harry to a store for it.” He tugged up a chair, turned it around, and straddled it. His blue eyes searched her face. “How are you doing?”

She huffed out her breath. “I’m tired of answering the same questions over and over again. Yes, he’s been here for the past three nights. No, he was alone prior to tonight. No, I didn’t see him before that. No, I don’t know his name. No, he paid cash. Ugh!” Sofia forced herself to relax her two-handed grip lest she shatter the mug. She lowered her gaze. “I’m tired, and I’ve just learned that you don’t learn enough from a semester of nursing to know what to do to help a man who’s been shot in the lungs.”

Stefan shook his head. “There’s nothing you could have done.”

“Maybe not, but he died in my arms, and I couldn’t do anything except watch.” In her mug, the tea bag bobbed in response to her frenetic thoughts. She stared down absently at it until she realized that Stefan was staring at the same.

The tea bag stopped moving. She looked at Stefan, her brown eyes wide and a lump of fear clogging her throat. “I…”

A faint smile tugged up a corner of his mouth. “It’s all right, Sofia. I’ve always known that you were the one telekinetically sweeping the ice chips off the countertops when my back was turned.”

“You did? You don’t mind?”

“Why would I?” He sounded perplexed.

“Some people don’t like mutants.”

“I’m not one of those people.”

She relaxed enough to smile. “That’s good, because I’m not much of a mutant. Other telekinetics can hurl cars and create physical shields thick enough to deflect bullets. I got the short end of the stick. I have as much telekinetic power as I have strength in my finger and thumb.” She pressed them together in a pincer grip. “It’s scarcely enough for carnival tricks.”

“It’s good enough to clean up ice chips.” Stefan leaned forward and placed a brotherly kiss on her forehead. “Come on. I’ll walk you home.”

Home was a brownstone house five blocks away. As she marched up the ice-slicked stairs to the door, Sofia wondered if Stefan would ask to come in and ruin a perfectly good friendship by trying to push it to the next level, but she need not have worried. He bid her good night in a polite though perfunctory way and continued down the road. He did not try to come in; he did not try to kiss her; he did not hug her; heck, he did not even shake her hand.

Sofia opened the door and slipped in before the warm air inside the house could escape. She closed the door, leaned back on it, and wondered why she felt so insulted. Perhaps because Stefan was, in spite of his occasionally lewd humor, an intrinsically good guy—the kind of guy she should spend more time trying to hook up with.

Or not. She sighed. She did not need the complication of romantic entanglements.

Her home, a three-story house, had been just right for her parents and her. They had passed away six months prior, but she had not been able to bring herself to sell the house. It was too full of memories, of Thanksgiving dinners around the scuffed up oak dining table, and Christmas

Eves on the rug in front of the fireplace. The house was empty now, and quiet, but it retained all its memories. It was still a home.

The stairs creaked as she climbed up to the second floor, passing by her parents' bedroom. The bed was neatly made. The green bathrobe that her mother had carelessly tossed on the bed lay there, untouched. Her mother's jewelry and her father's cufflinks lay on the dresser, next to a picture of them—two people still deeply in love—their arms around each other, in front of a swirl of cherry blossoms. She had taken that picture of them in the spring, a few months before they were killed during a terrorist assault on Washington, D.C.

The three of them visited D.C. often, staying at the small town house they owned overlooking Dupont Circle. Independence Day celebrations always drew them to D.C., and she had been with them in the early hours of July Fourth when the members of the mutant terrorist group, Sakti, broke into homes and slaughtered parents in front of their children. Sakti's actions were decried as its psychotic leader's grudge against his father, but it provided no consolation for the children who lost their parents that day.

She had put the D.C. town house on the market almost immediately. Buyers had yet to show interest even though she had priced the home well below its market value. It appeared, she concluded with a grimace, that death devalued house prices.

The house in Chapel Hill, however, was still home, untainted by death, alive with memories.

She paused as she always did for a few minutes in her parents' bedroom, using a feather duster to brush off the thin layer of dust that accumulated each day. Time was determined to march on. She would have to move on as well someday.

She climbed the steep steps to her loft bedroom on the third floor. Her room had low, slanted wood ceilings, a pale green carpet, and a green-gold dusted wallpaper that evoked images of a

fairy meadow. Sighing softly, she tossed her backpack on the bed and stepped into the bathroom. The tiles were cold beneath her feet, and she grumbled under her breath. The water was hot though, and soon, the small bathroom fogged up. She scrubbed shampoo liberally into her brown hair and followed up with wads of conditioner. She closed her eyes. The water ran down her face, mingling with the salt of her tears.

The scientist's terror-filled face blended with her father's. The scientist's final rasping breath became her father's. She had held him as he died. Shaken and deeply traumatized, she had gone back to school and enrolled in a nursing program. She did not want to stand by helplessly as someone died in her arms, but tonight, it had happened again. She had stood by helplessly as another man died.

She dragged her hand across her eyes. *Damn it!*

Sofia turned off the water, stepped out of the shower, and wrapped a thick towel around her body. She rubbed her hand across the surface of the mirror and scowled at her appearance. She did not consider herself vain, but she looked like hell, her eyes swollen and red-rimmed.

It was just as well she was not trying to impress anyone. She twisted the doorknob and swung the bathroom door open. Perhaps if she—

She gasped.

The man browsing through the books on her shelf looked up.

She swept her hand out, flinging the female clutter from her dressing table into his face. Fueled and strengthened by panic, her weak telekinetic powers fluttered, sending a cloud of powder into the air. As he recoiled in apparent surprise, she dashed past him and ran down the stairs, but got no farther than the second-floor landing.



He threw himself over the third-floor bannister and landed in a crouch in front of her. She backed away in alarm.

He lunged at her, seizing her hands.

The towel fell away from her body as she pulled back, but his grip tightened. “Stop,” he said, his voice low. “I’m here to help.”

She stared at him, focusing on his green eyes set in a face of harsh, sculptured good looks. “Kyle?”

His eyes narrowed. “You know my name?”

“Yes...yes, the man who died called you Kyle.”

“You are much too observant,” he said. It did not sound like a compliment. His eyes raked over her naked body, and a smile, wicked and appreciative, curved his lips.

Sofia swallowed hard. She would have covered herself if she could get her hands free of his tight grip.

He released her, picked up the towel she had dropped to the ground, and wrapped it around her body. “Get dressed. We don’t have much time.”

“Much time for what?”

“To get out of here before the IGEC or Sanchez and his men show up.”

“Sanchez? Is he one of the gangsters who came to the club?”

He shoved her up the stairs. “Yes. Move it.”

She stood her ground. “How do I know you’re not one of the bad guys?”

He arched an eyebrow. “Because I haven’t hurt you. Yet.”

She definitely heard the hint of a threat in his deep voice. It was, however, offset by the glint of amusement in his eyes. “Why would—?”

“Because you’re carrying a microchip containing the genetic data that Sanchez paid dearly for.”

“A micro—” Sofia pressed a hand to her bicep. The sharp pain.

Kyle grasped her arm gently and ran his callused fingers over her skin. The sensation charged down her spine. Heat coiled in the pit of her stomach at his touch. “Is that where he injected you?” His tone was strictly business.

The man was turning her into a hormonal pile of mush, and he did not even know it.

He met her gaze, and the corner of his mouth tugged into a smirk. Perhaps he knew it, but just did not care.

She yanked her arm out of his grip and stalked up the stairs with as much dignity as she could muster, which was difficult, seeing how he had already seen her scrawny ass. At least he had the decency to wait outside her bedroom as she dressed, quickly pulling on a sweatshirt and a pair of faded denim jeans over her bra and underwear. She grabbed her backpack and stuffed into it a few changes of clothes, toiletries, her cell phone, and electronic tablet. Sofia turned around and jolted with shock to see him standing behind her.

She hissed with irritation. “Don’t you ever—?”

He pressed a finger to her lips.

She raised her head slightly and heard the soft tread of feet upon the creaky stairs.