

# —THE SHOW MUST LIVE ON

by Matt Hulst

The old man waited on his porch, whittling on a stubby chunk of bone.

The new clients were late.

Only by five minutes or so, but that was long enough to make him wonder if they'd backed out of the deal. If so, he understood why.

No, he thought, *they'll show*.

They always did.

The sound of Jason's station wagon turning onto the dirt road at the bottom of the hill put an end to the debate. The old man grinned at the accuracy of his prediction as the vehicle rolled into view.

"Time to do business," he muttered.

His son's car rounded the bend in the drive, followed closely by a highly-polished Lincoln Navigator that looked as out of place as a silver spoon in a shithouse. The old man descended the rickety front steps as the vehicles stopped in front of the shack he called home. Garter snakes warming themselves on the gravel slithered away as he neared, vanishing into the tall grass to either side of the path.

Jason waved hello as he got out of the car.

The old man nodded.

"Follow me, folks," Jason said to the couple exiting the Navigator. "We'll be walking from here."

The old man watched as the young newlyweds joined hands and came forward, the man in his polo shirt and five hundred-dollar sunglasses, the girl in impractical heels and a delicate white sundress.

"This is my father," Jason told them. "He's the owner. Has been since before--"

"Mister Corbin," the girl interrupted, "we drove four hours and paid a lot of money to be here. How much farther is it?"

Her eyes darted back and forth between Jason and the old man; she was scared, alright, they always were at this point. Four hours, she'd said, four hours of thinking time to contemplate what was coming. Maybe that's why she'd brought up the issue of money. City folks always mentioned their cash eventually, as if it provided any sort of leverage out here.

"Right this way, Miss," Jason said.

"Good."

"They pay the first half?" the old man asked, playing her game.

"Fifty thousand," she replied, the smug tone of her reply tapering off into a

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thirsty whisper.

"It's in the bank," Jason said.

The old man hiked up his worn pants and headed up the driveway past the house. "Okay, then. Let's go."

In back of the shack, the road ascended a short but steep hill to the park entrance, giving the newcomers their first glimpse of the rusted Ferris wheel that poked above the treetops and the huge arched sign that loomed over the broken front gate:

CLEARWATER CREEK FAIRGROUNDS.

The couple scanned these new surroundings with weary eyes. Their one defense against this unfamiliar situation--money--would not help them here, and a look of naked unease took hold of their features.

"It's just a short trek up the midway," the old man said, smiling. "Follow me."

They crested the hill and the park opened up before them, a ghost town of abandoned concessions, trailers, and motionless rides. In its heyday, the carnival had been a landmark of entertainment, drawing crowds from as far away as Fargo and Hudson. Before coming to rest in Clearwater Creek, it had been a traveling show working the Midwest circuit, one big enough to rival any of its East Coast counterparts. The old man remembered those days like tantalizing remnants of a powerful dream, recalling an age when the marks were more gullible and the laws less defined.

He led them down the central thoroughfare, stepping over collapsed lampposts and other, less-identifiable debris. They passed one vacant building after another, walking in silence toward the far end of the grounds. He could've told them how the carnival came to be, how the various attractions had been gradually acquired from different corners of the globe, but he wasn't a tour a guide and this wasn't a tour.

They didn't ask, anyway; the clients never did.

They didn't mention the shattered sections of track on the rollercoaster that bordered three-fourths of the park, or comment on the scarecrows suspended from its rotten wood crossbeams.

They passed the carousel of black horses on the right.

The blue weather-stripped funhouse to the left.

The old man squinted at the structure as they passed, noting that the iron bars were securely in place over the boarded-up windows and that the chains crisscrossing the main entry remained padlocked and taut.

As they neared the center of the park, they fell under the shadow of the Ferris wheel, one of the largest of its kind to ever be part of a traveling show. Even with all the rust, and missing four of its cars, it still dominated the park. The mere sight of it made the old man smile with pride.

As they drew close, the Ferris wheel began to turn.

The groan of uncoiled metal cut through the air like the waking yawn of some monstrous beast. The clients stopped in surprise, craning their heads upward to watch the contraption turn.

One foot. Two feet. Three.

Keeping his arms at his side, the old man made a subtle gesture with one hand, adding a stern glare for good measure. The wheel came to a halt. Though nothing