

Dream Angel

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(an original novella prequel to Dream Dancer)

By

Denise Dietz

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ONE

Paris, 1850

“The lady’s about to fall, Mum,” the little girl gasped. Pigtails swaying, her chin tilted like the prow of a miniature ship, assuming the ship crested a wave.

Without looking at her daughter, Hortense Downing-Cox Kelley said, “That’s part of her performance, Charlotte. She *pretends* she’s going to fall. Sometimes it’s all right to pretend.”

Hortense heaved a deep sigh, then slanted an angry glance toward her stepson, Sean. He was the reason why she and five-year-old Charlotte were stuffed like sausages into this small compartment, this ridiculous red box, surrounded by other spectators, all of whom were shouting and applauding in *French!* He was the reason why every time she took a breath, she smelled sawdust and horse manure. He was the reason why she spent the afternoon at a circus when any sensible woman would be sipping tea in the comfort of her own parlor.

But then any *sensible* woman wouldn’t have married Timothy Kelley.

Hortense had succumbed to Timothy’s devilish charms, enhanced by the Irish brogue – and, to be honest, the Irish tongue – that tickled her ears. Twenty-nine years old and plain as a pudding, she had ignored every warning issued by her proper British parents; had even ignored their threat to disinherit her.

Prudently, she hadn’t told Tim about her parents’ caveat. Which, as it turned out, had been her biggest mistake. When her new husband discovered the truth, he had carted her across the sea to an obscure French relative who smelled of onions and owned a café. Tim had the good grace to wait for the birth of his daughter before setting sail for America, but that had been five years ago and Hortense had not heard from him since. Furthermore, if she had tricked him into marrying her, his duplicity was far more profound. For he had neglected to tell her that he had buried the first Mrs. Kelley in Ireland, nor that the issue from his previous marriage, a twenty-year-old son named Sean, lived above the onion-woman’s café.

Sean had been cordial enough during their introduction, but Hortense had been astute enough to read the unspoken words he directed toward his father: *Did ye wed yourself an elderly lass with an inheritance, Da?*

A pity Hortense had been too busy vomiting in the loo – or whatever the blasted French called it – to hear Tim’s reply. Carrying a child was a bloody nuisance. Truth be told, Sean had been of more assistance than his father. As Hortense’s belly expanded into an unbelievable girth, reminiscent of an elephant, it was Sean who finished her chores, helped her rise from chairs, and fetched the midwife when her labor pains began.

As far as Hortense could ascertain, the only advantage to birthing a child was that one’s figure tended to change. Before Charlotte, she had been thin and angular. Now her breasts were globes, her hips bounteous. Even her hair could be considered more mahogany than brown. A pity Tim hadn’t stayed long enough to savor his wife’s new, enticingly abundant body.

Sean hadn’t left with his father, and Hortense knew why. The lad, now twenty-six, had an Irishman’s fondness for children. He adored Charlotte, and while one half of Hortense deplored what she considered a lamentable, if not downright disgraceful weakness in a man, the other half was eternally grateful. In Hortense’s opinion, a baby was just as bothersome as a pregnancy. Especially since Charlotte was a sickly child with none of her father’s robust qualities.

Nor Sean’s, for that matter.

Which was the fly in the bloody ointment, Hortense reminded herself daily. Sean looked too much like Tim. The same thick ebony hair, the same merry green eyes, the same broad shoulders, narrow waist, and muscular legs. And if that wasn’t enough, her stepson possessed his father’s charm. Hortense had seen young ladies pretend to swoon so that Sean could catch them. Not necessarily *fille de joie*, either. Well-bred girls swooned!

If honest, and Hortense was always honest with herself, she had seriously considered the same ploy. However, she feared rejection. Not because she was Tim’s wife and older than Sean, but because she knew full well that he wanted to woo an heiress. To that end, Hortense had re-established contact with her parents. It had taken five years, but the Downing-Cox’s desire to see their only grandchild had helped a great deal. Finally, Hortense swallowed her pride, begged for mercy, vowed she’d never stray from the fold again, and was anxiously awaiting a reply.

She fibbed, of course. About straying. Despite Sean’s many attributes, he possessed one fatal flaw. He could be bought.

“Look, Mum! Look, Sean!”

Charlotte's strident voice pierced Hortense's haze, and she allowed her gaze to follow her daughter's small finger, gesturing toward the building's apogee.

The chit atop the rope was taking dainty, tentative steps, as if she wanted to tease the prudent people who were safely rooted below. She didn't use a balancing pole, nor an umbrella. And what on earth was she wearing? Hortense darted a quick glance toward Sean. His mouth had become unhinged, his attention riveted on the rope. No. His entire focus was on the piece of baggage who'd just finished performing a series of dazzling back-flip somersaults.

Hortense's heart sank to the bottom of her shoes. The young girl who now *danced* across the rope was certainly no heiress, and yet Sean's expression clearly revealed that he didn't give a fig. Hortense's corset felt too tight. The candied apple she'd eaten earlier rose in her throat, whole. Even while she lost what remained of her breath, her mind raced. She wanted Sean to play the part of her devoted companion. An obstacle to that scheme danced above her head. Surely there was some clever way to get rid of that damned ropewalker, that damned Petit Ange.

Along with the rest of the audience, Sean was clapping and yelling, "*C'est magnifique! C'est la plus belle—*"

"Ohhhh." The world whirled and the applause dimmed. Shutting her eyes, Hortense keeled over.

TWO

Sean Kelley wondered if his stepmother's convenient faint yesterday had been a ruse to leave the Nouveau Cirque. Reluctantly, he had carried her out, Charlotte walking in his shadow. Once they'd reached their hired carriage and drawn its curtains, he had loosened Hortense's corset stays. Whereupon, her eyes had fluttered open, and God knows what might have happened had Charlotte not been present.

Sean had no illusions. He had no guilt, either. He wasn't related by blood to Hortense, and his father had spent the last five years in America. Furthermore, he suspected his stepmother was about to regain her inheritance, and he had no qualms about playing the part of her amorist.

At least, not until he'd seen Petit Ange.

His first glimpse of the “Small Angel” – whom he now thought of as *his* small angel – had not been during her performance. On the rope, she’d been too high up for anyone to appreciate her flashing gray-green eyes; too high up for anyone to admire the honey-colored hair that framed her blush-stained cheeks. Her lower limbs and hips, although they seemed in perfect proportion, were really small for her robustly developed breasts and shoulders.

She was, in a word, perfection. And it was this perfection that had brought him back to the Cirque’s cellarage, despite Hortense’s wrath, despite the fact that today’s post had included a generous draft from her father.

Upon cashing the draft, her anger had swiftly become a list of promises. Sean could have a dozen new suits, a new horse, a townhouse in London.

Except...that wasn’t his dream. No one knew his dream. He wanted to own a traveling circus, the finest in the world. He wanted to work for P.T. Barnum’s Museum in New York City, America. Someday, when Sean had learned all he could about showmanship, he wanted to establish The Sean Kelley Circus.

And he wanted Petite Ange for his circus.

In truth, he wanted Petit Ange for his wife.

The Nouveau Cirque was housed in an octagonal building, with seats facing three sides of a single ring. Along the ringbank were plush red boxes. Behind the boxes were arena seats, then a gallery that extended to the roof. There was no menagerie or Congress of Freaks, but the audience could descend to the basement and inspect the horses. A forty-piece string and woodwind orchestra occupied a platform above the performers’ entrance. The Cirque changed its bill monthly, holding over the most popular acts, and regardless of this afternoon’s enthusiastic applause, Angelique Aumont feared she might not be held over.

“You silly peagoose!” London-born Gartrude Starling, the Cirque’s pretty trapeze artist, gave Angelique the budge. “Even if your rope act weren’t spot-on, half the fellows would pay dear for your maidenhead.”

Since Angelique usually thought in French, it took her a moment to translate Gartrude’s remarks. Then, cheeks ablaze, she reached out to caress a dray horse’s velvet muzzle.

“That cannot be true,” she replied in her heavily accented English.

“Wot cannot be true? That they’d pay dear or that you have a maidenhead?”

“Do hush, Gartrude, *s’il vous plait*.”

“God-a-mercy, Petit Ange, my brother Tom says he’ll marry you!”

“*Mon Dieu*, I shall never wed a *cirque* performer,” she exclaimed, then smiled to take the sting out of her words.

As if summoned, Tom Starling appeared, and the only English word Angelique could summon up was “dolt.”

At twenty-three, five years older than Angelique, Tom was a tall, blunt-faced man. He wanted to wed her in order to bed her, but Angelique knew that marriage was out of the question. Her parents had died within two weeks of each other, Papa first. On her deathbed, Maman had confessed that she had a sister, to whom she’d written a letter. The sisters had been close once, and Maman had no reason to believe that Tante Bernadine wouldn’t welcome Angelique with open arms. The *dilemme* was that those open arms would have to extend across an ocean, for Tante Bernadine lived in Connecticut, America.

“Petit Ange,” Tom cried. “*C’est magnifique! C’est un triomphe!*”

“She twigs English, you great booby,” Gartrude said.

“*Merci*, Tom.” Angelique smiled again. “However, I am...how you say?...deliberating a new act, something more daring. Perhaps even...” She paused, trying to keep the excitement from her voice. “Perhaps even the forward somersault.”

“No girl can do the forward,” Tom said. “It’s impossible.”

“God-a-mercy, no *man* can do a forward somersault on the rope. And what could be more daring than your costume?” Gartrude wrinkled her nose. “If there wasn’t beads sewed at your bosom and between your legs, gillys would think you was in the nuddy.”

“*Mon doo*, who cares what *they* think?” Tom waved his arms expansively.

A third smile tugged at the corners of Angelique’s lips. The flesh-coloured tights and leotard, beaded for propriety’s sake, had been an inspiration. She had heard the indignant, astonished, and admiring gasps from the audience, and a few gallery faces were beginning to look very, very familiar. From her rope, she couldn’t see the ringbox gillys, but...

Speaking of familiar faces, the young man from yesterday was here, visiting the horses again. Only this time he’d waited until *after* her performance.

Angelique knew that her parents had fallen deeply, irrevocably in love during their first meeting. Papa’s traveling *cirque* had been performing in England. Maman’s papa, a prosperous

shopkeeper, had been occupied when Papa entered the shop, so Papa asked Maman for the white satin braces, embroidered with forget-me-nots. Maman melted at Papa's smile, but she didn't understand French and became confused, until an elderly gent said, "Galluses, Miss, the things to hold your breeks up by." The second time Maman and Papa met, Papa had learned English, Maman French. Almost immediately, Maman accepted Papa's bouquet of forget-me-nots and his marriage proposal.

Maman's parents had disapproved; had, if fact, locked Maman in her small attic bedroom until Papa's *cirque* left London. However, Maman then made what she called "a journey of the heart." With only one gown, one pair of shoes, one pair of gloves, and one bonnet, she had followed Papa to Paris.

Angelique had never quite believed the romantic tale. Now, she did. Briefly, she stood, unmoving. Then, as if pulled by a puppeteer, she walked toward the dark-haired stranger.

In his green eyes was a kind of lazy amusement, which made Angelique speechless and a little angry. For how was she to impress him if she couldn't think of anything to say? She felt a peculiar sense of inadequacy, a fear that whatever she said or did would seem foolish to him.

As he stared at the blue silk robe that concealed her costume, his absorbing gaze seemed to undress her. In truth, she could almost swear that his eyes were *discarding* her costume.

She found herself studying the face around those eyes, noting his expressive brows, bold nose, compelling mouth, and deeply cleft chin. Handsome but not handsome, she thought illogically, wondering how he would look with a mustache and beard. He possessed a pirate's arrogance, and she imagined him bare-chested, wielding a cutlass, lithe as a panther.

And, in all probability, just as dangerous.

"Do ye comprehend English?" he asked.

His voice was as mesmerizing as his eyes, and she felt a shudder build at the base of her spine.

"I guess you do not, mademoiselle," he said. "So perhaps you will not take offense when I say you're the prettiest lass I've seen in the divil's own time and I've a mind to lay with you."

Angelique's bones turned to water and she cursed herself for her tongue-tied inertia. She usually had a pert remark for any man, no matter what his age, and this young man deserved nothing less than a slap across his smug face.

"I would imagine ye did not sleep well last night," he continued, his voice a croon. "Nor did I. To tell the God's honest truth, I did not sleep at all. But I've a perfect cure for that,

mademoiselle. A carriage awaits my return and the parson lives but a short ride away.”

Parson? Still dazed, Angelique allowed him to lead her outside the building.

He halted, gently caressed her face, then smoothed the wind-tousled hair away from her forehead. “Sean Kelley is me given name, lass.”

She finally found her voice. “I am Angelique Marie Danielle Aumont, Monsieur, and you are a rude, insufferable—”

“Connoisseur of beauty,” he finished, in perfect French.

They stood there, staring at each other, and Angelique understood that he had been teasing her all along. She didn’t know if she should slap him, sputter indignantly, or laugh, so she followed her only other impulse and swayed toward him, her eyes shut. His hands closed about her waist, drawing her closer, and she felt his powerful leg muscles. Without conscious thought, her mouth parted to receive his kiss.

It was several moments before he released her, but when he did it seemed too soon and she felt cheated. Opening her eyes, she saw that he was gazing at her tenderly.

“Ye must go back now, me precious darlin’,” he said. “Your family would be troubled to have ye disappear with no word of warning. And I would not be troubling your family, for I might have need of their blessing.”

Impulsive words sprang to her lips. *I have no family. I do not care if I never return to the Nouveau Cirque. I do not care about the forward somersault. I do not care about anything except you.*

Instead, she said, “Blessing? Do you intend to wed me, Monsieur?”

“Aye, lass.” He smacked his forehead with the heel of his hand. “‘Tis a swell-headed mooncalf I am, niver bidding your consent. We shall talk more tomorrow, if that pleases ye.”

Talk more? His Irish-green eyes had done most of the talking.

“Does that please ye?” he pressed.

She nodded, thinking about her maman and papa.

As he walked away, she could still smell the masculine sweat on his clothes and the scent of leather from his boots, and she felt both dizzy and lonely.

He halted and made an about-face. With a glance that took her in from head to foot, Monsieur Kelley smiled. His thumbs snapped the galluses that held his breeks up, and Angelique fell deeply, irrevocably in love.

THREE

Hortense knew exactly what she must do. Her faint two days ago had been far more beneficial than a mere loss of consciousness, for upon awakening her mind had been crystal clear and her scheme had been conceived as quickly and easily as Charlotte.

Impatiently, she served the café's customers. Soon, very soon, she needn't perform the hateful chores that secured her lodgings above the café...if one could call them lodgings. The room she shared with Charlotte boasted a feather mattress, a chiffonier, a wooden tub, and a tiny parlor. Hortense yearned for the spacious interior of her parents' home, where she wouldn't have to elbow her daughter or the onion woman or Sean every time she walked down the hallway toward the loo.

Her usual mode of transportation, a carriage, would have been more comfortable, but a hackney was more prudent, and as soon as her despicable tasks were accomplished, she had set out in all haste. Thank goodness she had reached her destination in the nick of time; before rather than during the Cirque's opening spectacle.

Clothed in a severe black gown, a heavy black veil fell from the top of her head to the tips of her toes. Now all she had to do was enter the bloody building and find Petit Ange.

Early this morning, while preparing the café's daily fare, Sean had told a delighted Charlotte all about his propitious meeting with the Cirque's *danseur de corde*, but Hortense had no way of knowing if his puffery had been truth or fantasy.

The orchestra had been playing a song called *Susannah* by American composer Stephen Foster, Sean had said, and forever more that would be his favorite ballad. Petit Ange, whose real name was Angelique Aumont, had been in the basement with the horses. Surrounded by a mob of admirers, all of whom toted bouquets of flowers and boxes of candy, she had left her suitors to stroll with Sean.

"Did she swoon and did you catch her?" Charlotte had asked.

"No one can catch a falling star," he had replied. "But sometimes, if you're very good, ye can capture a dream."

In Hortense's opinion, Sean was neither good nor virtuous, but perhaps God did not consider Sean's weaknesses imperfections. After all, God was a man.

The smell hit Hortense as soon as she spied her first horse. Withdrawing a handkerchief from her beaded reticule, she pressed the small square of linen against the piece of veil that hid her long, sharp nose. In doing so, she dropped her reticule.

"You've lost your *porte-monnaie*, Madame."

The voice was young, musical, heavily accented. The hand that held out the reticule looked young and strong, with fingernails buffed to a soft sheen. Hortense felt resentment build anew. After years of washing and chopping vegetables, her own hands had become rough and chapped, her nails ragged.

Snatching the reticule, she silently thanked God for gloves.

"Are you in mourning, Madame?" the young girl asked.

"What? Oh. Yes. My...father recently expired." Directing the handkerchief toward her eyes, Hortense gave what she hoped was a convincing snuffle. "But one must take the good with the bad, mademoiselle, for I inherited a small fortune."

"I have suffered a recent loss as well, Madame. My papa never earned a fortune, but he died happy."

"How did he die?"

"He fell from a rope," the girl said. "Maman followed him."

"Your mum fell from a rope, too?"

"No, Madame. She died of a broken heart. You see, she was part Irish and the Irish can only love once."

Totally nonplused, Hortense stared into the girl's gray-green eyes, now shiny with unshed tears.

"You are Angelique Aumont, are you not?" Hortense finally managed.

"*Oui*, Madame. And you are...?"

"Hortense Downing-Cox Kelley," she said, then took a deep breath. "My husband told our daughter all about how he met you yesterday, after your performance. He sang your praises, mademoiselle."

"Your husband? Your daughter?"

"My husband, Sean. Our daughter, Charlotte, is five years old. We saw your rope act the day before yesterday, and I have to admit my husband was smitten, one might even say

thoroughly infatuated.”

With satisfaction, Hortense saw the tart’s face turn white as a ghost. Even though it hurt her pride, Hortense continued with the words she had rehearsed inside her parlor. “Only last month my husband became infatuated with a young girl who appeared in a production of Mr. William Shakespeare’s ‘A Midsummer Night’s Dream.’ Sean has a...fondness...for performers. I myself once considered the stage, but a well-bred lady...” She shrugged.

Had she gone too far? The chit’s eyes were now more green than gray, jade rather than slate.

“If you are such a well-bred *lady*, Madame, why do you endure your husband’s indiscretions? Why do you forgive his misdeeds? I am merely a lowly performer, but...”

“I remain loyal to my husband, mademoiselle, because, deep down, he loves me. As you say, the Irish only love once.”

Hortense felt her heart pound. She knew that beneath her veil, her face was red and splotchy. Mentally reaching into her bag of tricks, she withdrew her last weapon. “Sean will never leave me, mademoiselle, for I am once again with child. We hope and pray that this time I shall birth a healthy son.”

“A healthy son,” the girl parroted.

Hortense nodded and patted her belly. The onion woman’s food, not pregnancy, had caused its roundness, for she and Sean had never shared a bed. Momentarily, she felt shame at her fib. Then she remembered what she had told Charlotte: *Sometimes it’s all right to pretend.*

“Perhaps you should sit down, Madame Kelley. I did not know he was married, I swear! You look unwell. Please sit down. There is a bench—”

“No. No, thank you.” Hortense did indeed feel shaky as relief washed over her. Still, she had one more piece of business to negotiate. At five feet, five inches tall, she topped Petit Ange by a good two inches. And although she desired nothing more than to sit, once seated she’d be at a disadvantage. “Sean will return to you, mademoiselle. He will tell you lies, just as he did with his actress. He will say he is not married. He might even swear that Charlotte is not his daughter.” Yanking off her left glove, Hortense flaunted her wedding band. “Charlotte is a Kelley, and so am I, and may God strike me dead if that isn’t the truth.”

“Madame, you are upsetting yourself for nothing. I will not see your husband again, I promise.”

“I appreciate your sincerity, Angelique, but unfortunately that’s one promise you’ll never

be able to keep. So here's what I propose." Hortense reached inside her reticule. "I shall give you a share of my inheritance, more than enough to settle someplace far away from your Nouveau Cirque. You could find yourself a husband, or set sail for America, where I've heard the streets are paved with gold."

"Truly, that is not necessary. Only today I received a letter from my Tante Bern—"

"No, please, I insist. Perhaps you might leave right away, tonight. Should my husband discover that I have paid you this visit, he'll beat me. He has a violent temper and I could lose my baby." Shamed anew by the monstrosity of her lies, Hortense saw a tall, toad-faced man race toward them.

"Petit Ange!" he shouted. "Here you are! Everyone is celebrating Gartrude's birthday. There's cake and *vin rouge* and—"

"A moment, Tom. I am conducting an important business transaction."

"Thank you." Hortense realized that her face was not only red and splotchy, but slippery with perspiration. If she really was with child, she had no doubt she'd miscarry. "*Merci, Angelique.*"

"*Bonne Chance*, Madame Kelley."

"Good luck to you, too."

Sometimes luck had nothing to do with anything, Hortense thought. Neither, for that matter, did good behavior. Catching a dream was easy. Holding onto it required assiduity, duplicity, pretense, and sweat.

FOUR

Charlotte possessed a lisp that would doubtless be considered an asset one day. For now, it made her words too large for her tongue and more often than not her attempts to converse — especially in French — were misunderstood.

Desperate, she switched to English. "Sean, you must listen. Mum made Petit Ange leave the Cirque. I do not know what Mum told Petit Ange, but I do know that Mum gave Petit Ange

some of Grandfather's money. Mum showed me the leftover banknotes, bundled inside her beaded reticule."

Sean hunkered down and stared into the child's owl-round eyes. "I understand what you're sayin', little darlin'. What I cannot understand is why Petit Ange would accept a bribe... why she would accept your mum's money."

"I do not think it was the money, Sean, but what Mum told Petit Ange."

"And why do ye tell *me* all this, knowin' I shall be leavin' ye? For I could niver stay after hearin' 'bout your mum's fiddle-tinkering."

"You'll leave anyway, once we return to England," Charlotte said, "and you must find Mademoiselle Cinderella."

Heartsick, his hopes for the future dashed, Sean managed to give his stepsister a lop-sided grin. "And when I find Mademoiselle Cinderella, what must I do?"

"You must kiss her awake."

"'Tis the Sleeping Beauty who was kissed awake."

"*Oui*, but Mum...benumbed Petit Ange."

"Where did you learn that word, sweetheart? Benumbed."

"From Mum. She looked and sounded like a crow, all braggy."

"And did your mum happen to mention where Petit Ange would be goin'?"

"She said something about America," Charlotte lisped.

Sean could feel his face settle into new lines of despair. "'Tis a podgy place, America."

"As big as London?" Charlotte's eyes grew even rounder. "Mum says London is bigger than Montparnasse, and Montparnasse is lolloping big."

"I've niver visited London, darlin', but I've heard America is a wee bit bigger."

"Perhaps that is why my papa is lost."

"Perhaps." Sean tried to keep the anger from his voice. "If I should happen to trip over Timothy Kelley, do ye want me to kiss him awake too?"

Charlotte giggled. "In the fairy tales you have read to me, no man kisses another man awake. And I do not believe my papa is asleep. Just lost. Please, Sean, you must promise to look for Petit Ange and kiss her awake."

"I promise to try."

"You said if you are very good, you can capture a dream."

"Then I shall try and be very good. But first I must find the means to reach America. It

takes money and...why do ye stare at me like that? Have ye another secret?"

"*Mais oui.* I have been naughty."

"You? Naughty?"

"I have been very naughty." She sighed. "Close your eyes."

Perhaps *he* should be kissed awake, Sean thought, as he suddenly realized that his stepsister's hands had been behind her back ever since they'd begun their conversation.

"Do you have a going-away present for me, sweetheart?" he asked, squinting through his dark scrim of lashes and wondering if she planned to present him with her favorite toy, a floppy-eared rabbit she had named Fromage.

"Yes," she said. "My gift is heavy, for it is filled with America."

Withdrawing her hands from behind her back, Charlotte thrust forth her mother's beaded reticule.

FIVE

Thanks to Hortense, Sean Kelley knew more about Tom Thumb than he did his own father. Timothy Kelley had blown in and out of Sean's life like a black squall, while Tom Thumb remained a constant source of discussion.

General Tom Thumb stood less than two feet tall, weighed fifteen pounds, and had visited England in 1844. Tom's popularity had been so extensive that his likeness was reproduced on plates, mugs and fans. Tom Thumb dolls were sold in the shops, a song was composed in his honor, and there was even a children's dance called the Tom Thumb Polka.

The American Dwarf had been accompanied by his guardian, P.T. Barnum.

Over the years, Sean had only half listened to Hortense's excited chatter about how she'd seen Tom Thumb sing, dance, recite poetry, and perform his clever impression of Napoleon Bonaparte. Sean had no doubts about that; after all, Barnum had exhibited his star attraction inside a public hall. But when Hortense lapsed into tales about Tom Thumb's visits to Queen Victoria at Buckingham Palace, Sean stopped up his ears. Hortense could not have been in

attendance when the Queen's pet poodle charged Tom and the boy brandished a tiny cane and began fencing with the dog. Yet Hortense made it sound as if she'd been among the Queen's guests, and her frequent brags would have made Timothy Kelley – a windbag of the highest order – flush a vivid crimson.

Finally, one fact penetrated Sean's fog-drenched brain. During his London visit, P.T. Barnum had earned a bloody fortune. Tom Thumb's appearances at Buckingham Palace had been rewarded with expensive gifts and gold coins. His public performances brought in hundreds of dollars a day, and Barnum had collected the proceeds from the Tom Thumb booklets and souvenirs that sold by the thousands.

Furthermore, Barnum didn't even have to perform.

Not that Sean was against performing. While attending the Nouveau Cirque, he had recognized his own dormant desire to strut before an audience, the focus of everyone's attention, a manipulator of emotions...not unlike Napoleon.

And wasn't Napoleon's campaign merely one hell of an immense circus?

Still, in Sean's admittedly biased opinion, Barnum had bested Napoleon. Why commission armies and structure expensive wars when you could hire the talent that would eventually stud your life with legendary superlatives? In years to come, the public would no doubt remember Tom Thumb, but they'd also speak, with awe and admiration, about the man who had turned a child with a defective growth gland into a vast, universal luminary.

The object of Sean's musings came into view. P.T. was clothed in black. The hair that framed his balding forehead was in its usual disarray, but the deep nose-to-mouth lines that dominated his bulldog-like face revealed a smug smile.

"She agreed to the tour," Sean guessed, greeting his benefactor.

"She did, indeed." Barnum darted a glance toward one of his most popular attractions, The Happy Family, a large cage filled with animals considered natural enemies – cats and dogs, owls and mice, hawks and sparrows – all living together in harmony. "But the girl drives a hard bargain, lad. Aside from her fee, one hundred and fifty thousand dollars, *payable in advance*, I'll be responsible for the salaries of two servants, her musical director, and a male singer to accompany her in duets. Needless to say, I agreed to pay all travel and hotel expenses for the entire entourage."

"Ye take a huge gamble, sir, bringing Jenny Lind to America. She's a concert singer, not a music hall singer, and there's no evidence that she'll appeal to a widespread populace."

“When I want your opinion, I’ll ask for it!” Almost immediately, Barnum’s face relaxed into a second wreath of a smile. “We must whet the public’s appetite, Sean, and I would guess you have some tricks up your sleeve.”

“Yes, sir. I’ve been thinkin’ ye could use the average punter’s adherence to religion and morality since the lass herself regards her voice as a gift from God.”

“Splendid.”

Encouraged, Sean continued. “I’ve also been thinkin’ we could auction the first ticket.”

Barnum’s brow furrowed. “Please explain that scheme.”

“First, ye must convince your chums that high bids will be good for their own businesses. Then we inform the press.”

Barnum snapped his fingers. “If my friend John makes the outstanding bid, he’ll sell more hats.”

“‘Tis that very notion I had in mind,” Sean said, relieved that his benefactor required no further explanation. “I needn’t state the obvious. Dishes, fans, flasks, trivets, and—”

“Figurines. Yes. Before I forget, Charie told me to invite you to a small dinner party. You’ve quite won her over, lad. My daughters, as well.”

Sean had a great deal of respect and admiration for Charity Barnum. Despite her stern appearance, she possessed a lively sense of humor and always had a witty backchat, no matter how transparent or insensible the tease. Furthermore, she’d taught him how to speak like a gentleman, even though his blasted tongue frequently betrayed him by revealing his provinciality. If he could only find a woman like Charity Barnum, Sean often thought, he’d gladly relinquish his bachelor status.

He heard the echo of little Charlotte’s voice: *Please, Sean, you must promise to find Petit Ange and kiss her awake.*

Upon reaching the shores of America, Sean had settled in Brooklyn, across the East River from New York, then initiated a search for the beautiful, albeit elusive, ropewalker. Months later, after listening to Sean’s effusive praise, Barnum had renewed the search, vowing he’d hire a “live angel who walked on air” for one of his many exhibits. However, it soon became apparent that the lovely, golden-haired *danseur de corde* had no desire to walk an American rope, much less be kissed awake by a specter from her past.

Angelique Aumont issued forth a deep sigh, then a second sigh.

She might as well get her wiffles over with now. Soon her corset strings would be knotted so tightly, any huffs and puffs would be impossible. Or, at best, painful.

Seated directly in front of her bedroom dressing table, she darted a glance toward the gown Tante Bernadine had selected for tonight's dinner party. Several unladylike ruminations filtered through Angelique's brain, most having to do with a cow's defecation, but the word she chose to murmur was, "Drab."

"Wot did you say?"

"I said my gown is drab."

Angelique stared up at her friend and maidservant. Tante Bernadine had sent Angelique the funds for her journey to America, while Madame Kelley's generosity had paid Gartrude Starling's way. Wanting to get the "lay-of-the-land" before she sought out a "Yankee-Doodle circus," Gartrude had joined Tante Bernadine's large staff of minions.

"Dull, dreary, colorless," Angelique added, almost spitting.

"But the black'll make your hair shine more yella'," Gartrude said.

Instantly contrite, Angelique jumped to her feet. "*Merci*, Gartrude. Tante Bernadine says no one should have hair the color of mine. Of course, she's also displeased by my mouth, my eyes, and my chin. Too bold, I suppose."

"You cannot alter what God has provided."

"True. But I can alter that hideous gown."

Thirty minutes later, a froth of lace, pinched from one of her many petticoats, decorated a bodice that was now décolleté. Long fitted sleeves had given way to puff sleeves, and artificial flowers enhanced her twenty-inch waistline. Angelique's busy fingers flew across the black material, stitching row upon row of pleated ruffles. Once the gown had been flounced, it was no longer ground-length, so a pink taffeta crinoline peeked from below the modified hemline.

"God-a-mercy," Gartrude said. "Your auntie will put on a tantrum when she sees wot you've done."

"Unfortunately," Angelique said with mock-seriousness, "Tante Bernadine suffers from a gastric disorder and cannot attend Charity Barnum's dinner party."

Gartrude nodded. "We heard she'd overeaten herself and suffers from the belches."

Angelique giggled, aware that her aunt's recurrent bouts of indigestion were a constant

source of amusement for the servants and frequently led to forbidden festivities. She was also aware that Gartrude usually played ringleader when those festivities were sampled, swallowed, and rued the next morning.

Truth be told, Angelique suddenly felt festive; the very same feeling she experienced when she saw a loose balloon skim the rooftops and float toward the sun. She only hoped that tomorrow morning she wouldn't rue tonight.

SIX

Escorted by her uncle, an astute businessman who was nevertheless overwhelmed by his acerbic wife and her seven cats, Angelique entered P.T. Barnum's ornate mansion.

Like almost everything Barnum did, his mansion had been designed to attract attention. Called Iranistan, or "Oriental Village," it looked like a sultan's palace, executed in rust-colored sandstone, capped with domes and spires, adorned with intricately carved arches that framed the broad piazzas on each of its three floors.

Two of Barnum's daughters, Helen and Caroline, greeted Angelique with air-kisses that narrowly missed her cheeks.

Following the girls, Angelique ascended a carved walnut staircase, leading to a huge central dome at the very top of the mansion. The sitting room boasted a circular divan that could accommodate forty-five people. Diamond-shaped windows were set with panes of colored glass, casting an unusual glow, turning the room into an implicit fairyland.

Charity Barnum approached. Her warm welcome could have been uttered in Greek or Hindi, yet somehow Angelique managed to stammer an acknowledgment as she stared at the man who stood beneath a window. The pane cast a reddish hue, but the sun had already begun its descent, so the flickering color merely tinted his thick ebony hair.

Deciphering her guest's avid gaze, Charity laughed and said, "Would you like an introduction, my dear?"

"*Mais oui*," Angelique replied, her head bobbing like a child's teeter-totter. At the same

time, a portion of her brain sternly told her heart to stop swinging like a pendulum.

She maneuvered the room carefully, as if she trod a lofty rope, but her mind raced. Would Monsieur Kelley call her Petit Ange and reveal the circus background Tante Bernadine had tried so hard to hide? Would Monsieur Kelley even recognize the Nouveau Cirque girl he'd wooed so briefly? Angelique's lips tingled with the memory of his kiss.

Charity accomplished the introduction, but once again Angelique didn't hear one word through the cloud of imaginary bees that seemed to buzz round her gilt curls.

Instead, she focused on Monsieur Kelley's ice-green eyes. Until his eyes were hidden by his bow, which, in her opinion, was nothing more than a mock nod. And yet, perhaps his arrogance was merely indifference. Perhaps he did not recognize Petit Ange after all, for he raised her glove-clad hand to his lips, kissed her cotton knuckles, then murmured, "'Tis a pleasure to make your acquaintance, Mrs. Aumont."

"*Miss Aumont.*" Charity smiled wickedly and gave Monsieur Kelley a wink, just before she excused herself to welcome six new guests.

Angelique stifled a gasp. Charity had obviously cast herself in the role of...what was the English word? Matchmaker. Did Charity not know that this blasted snake in the grass, this man who looked so *bon* in black trousers, starched shirt, and gray vest, was already married? Perhaps "snake in the bosom" would be a more appropriate designation, considering how his gaze devoured the mounds of her breasts, rising above the froth of lace at her bodice.

"Our host has spared no expense on his home," Monsieur Kelley stated, his voice low. "Marble fireplaces, gilded ceilings, elaborately carved doors, and all sorts of superfluous paraphernalia."

Angelique blinked, surprised by his choice of subject. "Do you envy Monsieur Barnum his possessions, Monsieur Kelley?"

"Not at all. But I do envy him his business acumen. While he was in France..."

Monsieur Kelley paused, as if waiting for her reaction to the word "France." Angelique kept her face expressionless.

"While he was in Paris, the estate of a Russian prince was auctioned off. There were many valuable pieces, including silver flatware, a gold tea set, and some rare china. The items could have commanded enormous bids, but their value had been diminished by the fact that they bore the prince's monogram and coat of arms."

Angelique stifled a second gasp. Bloody oath, she and Monsieur Kelly could have been

situated in Eden, rather than Fairfield Connecticut. Lulled by the snake's deceptively hushed tone, she suddenly realized that his hand cradled her elbow. *Snakes have no hands*, she thought incoherently. And yet this reptilian rascal was expertly guiding her toward the walnut staircase.

His fingers were as gentle as she remembered, and the gesture felt familiar, even after all this time. She wanted to pull away, express indignation at his assumption that she'd yield to his grasp, but curiosity overwhelmed her. He hadn't finished his anecdote and she suspected that he was leading up to something profound, something personal. She would not, could not, admit that she enjoyed his warm palm against her elbow, his fingers lightly, almost negligibly, stroking her arm. Truth be told, she could no more sever Monsieur Kelley's silky, webbed filaments than a bee could sever the complex filaments of a spider's web. She hoped that, once she found her voice again, she'd be able to *sting* her way free.

"Barnum bought the prince's entire lot," Monsieur Kelley continued, leading her out onto the third floor piazza. "The prince's initials were P.T., so Barnum had an engraver add a final B."

"What about the coat of arms?"

"It could have been created with P.T. Barnum in mind, for the motto on the escutcheon read: 'Love God and Be Merry.'"

"Is that your motto as well, Monsieur Kelley?"

"Yes. But I have not been very merry."

"Why?"

"Because a rope walker, whom I loved with all my heart, did a moonlight flit."

"Equilibrist."

"I beg your pardon?"

"Equilibrist, not rope walker."

"What, may I ask, is the bloody difference?"

"A rope walker walks. An equilibrist performs." Raising her chin, Angelique asked the question that had burned her tongue ever since Charity Barnum's introduction. "Could you not love God and make merry with your wife?"

"Ah," Monsieur Kelley said.

"Do you mean 'ah, the equilibrist discovered my secret' or 'ah, 'tis the reason she did a moonlight flit'?"

Her venture into idiomatic English caused Monsieur Kelley to issue forth a burst of laughter that could surely be heard by the couples below, circling Monsieur Barnum's opulent

fountain. “Hush!” Angelique stamped her foot. “Why do you chortle like a peagoose?”

“I have niver heard of your peagoose, darlin’, but I would imagine it honks. A peafowl is an ornamental pheasant, the peahen is the female peafowl, and the peacock has a greatly elongated tail that can be erected and spread at will. I am fairly certain they niver chortle. ‘Tis the hyena that chortles.”

Angelique tried to maintain her composure. She had, of course, learned the word peagoose from Gartrude, and now she felt like one. “Why does my misery incite a chorus of chortles, Monsieur Hyena?” she asked indignantly.

“‘Tis happy I am that you’re miserable, Mademoiselle Peahen.”

“Oh...oh!” Enraged, she turned to leave the piazza, but he gently grasped her shoulders and pulled her against the length of his body. She could not see his face, yet she felt his tense thigh muscles and wondered how that was possible. Wouldn’t her numerous petticoats ensure an impenetrable obstacle?

“I have been disconsolate too, Angelique,” he huffed into her ear. “Niver knowin’ how me stepmother accomplished her flummery.”

“I did not say I was discon...stepmother?”

“Aye, lass.”

“The lady in mourning was your stepmother? She said her papa had died and left her a small fortune. She gave me a portion of her inheritance. I did not want to take it, but she became so agitated I truly thought she would swoon if I refused.”

“Hortense faints at her convenience, and the only thing she mourned was my neglect, once I’d seen you. Her papa is alive, or at least he was, though I suspect he became a wee bit paddywhacked when his daughter discovered the loss of her favorite reticule. I pray daily that my stepsister, Charlotte, was able to maintain an innocent demeanor, for it was little Charlotte who pinched Hortense’s beaded reticule, filled with her da’s boodle. Thus, I was able to leave France and—”

“But the lady swore...she said God would strike her dead if she wasn’t a Kelley. *Mon Dieu*, that wicked woman wed your papa.”

“Aye, lass. That pawky bitch wed me da, Timothy Kelley. Hortense and Tim were made from the same tatter’d cloth. ‘Tis lucky you and I were cut from a stronger fabric, Angelique, for I swear by all that’s holy that I’ll not be losin’ ye again.”

Sean’s beguiling brogue whiffed inside her ear. Her back was still against his broad

chest, and she felt his fingers trace her bodice, as though he contemplated the fit of her gown. Apparently satisfied, he circled her heart breast with his first finger. Her nipple grew taut and quivered, not unlike the magic jumping beans sold to Cirque gillys. Angelique shivered with delight, even as she realized that she must immediately annul this *affaire d'amore*.

Bloody oath, but she missed the Nouveau Cirque, missed her freedom, missed her independence. Just like her corset, she was now restricted to drab ladylike activities and drab gowns. Tante Bernadine had even picked out a drab, wealthy fiancé.

However, all thoughts of her suitable suitor fled when Sean turned her around and traced the soft, moist, inner edges of her lips with his tongue. Eagerly, she opened her mouth and shut her eyes and pressed herself so close to his body, she could smell whiskey, tobacco, and boot leather. A moan forced its way up her throat. Her heart felt the gravitational pull of a forward somersault. She had never performed the forward, and that very thought caused her to pull away.

"I am a virgin," she confessed in French, her cheeks hot, her eyes downcast.

"I niver doubted that for a moment," he said, tucking an errant curl behind her ear. "We shall be wed before we—"

"*Non.*"

"What do ye mean, no? Are ye sayin' you'll not marry me?"

"I am saying that our marriage will be a...what is the English word? Hindrance? Obstacle?"

He snorted. "I cannot be dissuaded, if that's what's frettin' ye."

"Sean, you know nothing about my family...my life...my corset," she cried.

"Corset?"

"My aunt, who is also my guardian, tolerates my uncle's friendship with Monsieur Barnum. She admires and respects wealth, but she abhors Monsieur Barnum's menial background. And his fame."

"This is America, lass. Your aunt can refuse to bestow a blessing on our marriage, that is her God-given right, but she cannot forbid it."

"You would wed me without permission? Without a marriage portion?"

"Who has been filling your head with such twaddle, Angelique? In Brooklyn, where I reside, one does not speak of dowries. Still, you bring me a great gift..." He paused and gave her the most beautiful smile she'd ever seen. "Someday I shall own a circus, the finest in all the world, and you shall perform. But only if it pleasures you to do so. If it does not, you can run

our household and raise our daughters, just like Charity Barnum.”

“Suppose we have sons?”

“We shall have daughters, but they’ll not play the equilibrist.”

“What will they play, *mon* Sean?”

“Equestrians. Should our wee lasses fall from their horses, ‘tis not such a lengthy journey to the ground.”

“I would rather count the stars.”

“And so you shall, as soon as we are wed.”

Angelique looked up at his face, at his earnest expression revealed by the capricious moonlight. *I would follow this man to the ends of the earth*, she thought. She heard music; Monsieur Barnum’s black pianist, Old Blind Joe, who could hear a song once and play it perfectly. She knew that Monsieur Barnum’s entertainment, prior to Charity’s sit-down dinner, included excerpts from a melodrama called *The Drunkard*, which portrayed the evils of alcohol.

Meanwhile...

“This time I have the carriage, Monsieur Kelley,” she said. “My uncle drove us here in a brougham. I propose that we leave Madame Charity’s ‘small’ dinner party, congested by so many people that we shall not be missed, then find a secluded place to plight our troth and return one half hour later.”

“*Non*, mademoiselle,” he said. “What I have in mind for ye would take far more than half an hour.” A solemn expression briefly transformed his face. “In truth, lass, we must say our vows first.”

“After we prove how much we love God, may we be merry? *S’il vous plait, mon* Sean?”

He let loose with another delighted burst of laughter, just before he lowered his head and gave Angelique a kiss that seared her lips and sealed their bargain.

SEVEN

Tante Bernadine’s “picture room” boasted ornately framed portraits and a billiards table.

Angelique had a distinct feeling that the people depicted in her aunt's paintings were not truly related, yet the men and women who graced the walls had always provided a strange sort of comfort.

This evening, however, they looked tragical and seemed to avoid her eyes.

Seated on the floor, surrounded by Tante Bernadine's seven cats, Angelique watched tears drip from her chin and stain her saffron-colored evening gown. She had complained of a sniffy nose, a croupy cough, an aching head, a rotting tooth, even, somewhat desperately, a broken-winded gastric disorder, but her aunt still insisted that she first meet, then dine with her "intended."

A hungry Tuesday meowed and rubbed against Angelique's drawn-up legs. Thursday was asleep atop Angelique's belly. Friday played with a ball of yarn while Monday chased a billiard ball. None of the cats, including Sunday, Saturday and Wednesday, seemed perturbed by Angelique's shuddering sighs and sobs.

She had been weeping steadily for two hours, and the cats, clever creatures, had most likely decided she had no tears left. They were "on the dot," as Gartrude liked to say. After all, how much salty moisture could a person, even a woman, produce?

Enough was enough! Angelique shook her head, spraying the last of her tears over Thursday and Sunday. A sleepy Thursday hissed, but Sunday gave Angelique a haughty glare, then washed his whiskers with one dainty paw.

Flexing her fingers, Angelique allowed her mouth to quirk at the corners. After years of hauling herself up and down a rope ladder, her hands were neither dainty nor delicate. In truth, she possessed a man's hands. Perhaps Monsieur Macy would consider her paw too rough to flaunt his ring of engagement; a ring that bore his family crest and motto: *abusus non tollit usum*. Abuse does not take away use.

Love God and Be Merry. It had been a full fortnight since the Barnum dinner party, yet Angelique had only seen Sean Kelley once – during a tea given by Charity Barnum. Tante Bernadine had attended the event, but Charity, still playing matchmaker, had managed to squire Angelique into her husband's private study, an orange-colored, satin-walled library.

There, Sean had given her a kiss that left her breathless. And yet he seemed preoccupied.

"Mr. Barnum will hand over the funds for my traveling circus," he finally said, "should Jenny Lind prove to be a success."

"Jenny Lind?"

“The concert singer.”

“*Oui*, I know who you mean. My aunt says her character is ‘simplicity and goodness personified.’ Why would Mademoiselle Lind make a difference?”

“In order to pay her wages, Barnum has mortgaged the contents of his American Museum and borrowed all he could.”

“But why would she not be a success, *mon* Sean?”

“Barnum himself doesn’t know, but Jenny has a host of, er, *attributes* which might lead to the wreckage of his enterprise.”

“Can she not sing? Monsieur Barnum has said she would be adored, even if she had the voice of a crow.”

“He can make that claim, aware that the glowing reviews from her Liverpool concert have been pushed into print. Do you know Jenny Lind’s life story, Angelique?”

“Of course. Who does not know her story? A poor and lonely little girl, Jenny oft sang in the street. One day she was overheard by a famous *danseur*, who arranged for her to audition at Stockholm’s Royal Theater.”

Sean remained silent for a moment. “Jenny is a bastard, the illegitimate child of a woman named Anna Marie Fallborg. Jenny was born in secrecy and taken, under cover, to the home of distant cousins. She was then given away to a childless couple. The *maid* of a professional dancer overheard Jenny singing to her cat, and the rest is common knowledge. Except....”

“Except what?”

“She has described herself as having piggy eyes and a big broad nose.”

“Is it her appearance or her illegitimacy that bothers you?”

“Both,” he answered truthfully. “Did ye know that the Danish children’s book author, Hans Christian Andersen, wrote stories about her and for her? ‘The ugly Duckling’ and ‘The Emperor’s Nightingale.’ I must keep the newspapers busy with those very details, so they will not dig up a scandal. I’ve also suggested that Barnum initiate a Jenny Lind Song Contest. Two hundred dollars shall go to the winning ode, which will then be set to music. I’d like you to win that prize, lass.”

“Me? *Mon Dieu*, I can barely think in English, much less write it.”

He grinned. “I’ll write the ode for you, and your beauty shall do the rest. I cannot imagine Barnum passing up the opportunity to display a beautiful woman.”

“Is that an honest ploy?” she asked, blushing at his compliment.

“*Honest* ploy?” Sean roared with laughter, then held out his arms and pressed her face against his vest. “After Jenny Lind’s opening night, we shall be wed,” he said. “Does that make you happy?”

“*Non.*”

“You keep saying no to me, Mademoiselle Peahen,” he teased, holding her at arm’s length. “What bothers ye now?”

“My aunt...”

Angelique could not find the words to tell him that Tante Bernadine was already busy planning her niece’s wedding to Monsieur Arthur Macy, who lived in a village called South Carolina. Jenny Lind’s New York performance was several weeks away. Sean needed Monsieur Barnum in order to found The Sean Kelley Circus. Angelique did not want to divert his attention from the task at hand – selling Jenny Lind to the public and keeping the details of Jenny’s birth a secret.

Even though they’d only been in each other’s presence three times, Angelique understood Sean well enough to know he’d give up his *cirque*, his dream, if he believed their future together threatened.

“I’ve told ye before, lass,” he said. “Your aunt cannot dissuade me.”

Angelique managed a nod and a smile.

Somehow, I must keep Monsieur Macy waiting for my answer, she had thought.

Somehow, I must poke my feet.

“Mr. Macy is waiting, my dear!”

Tante Bernadine’s strident voice interrupted Angelique’s reverie, even though she had not yet gotten to the best part – the part where Sean had soothed her fears with his experienced hands and warm lips.

She shivered at the memory.

“Are you cold, my dear?” Tante Bernadine picked up Thursday and cuddled the cat against her flat bosom.

Not sure whether the question had been directed at her or the cat, knowing that, despite her shivers, her face was flushed, Angelique simply followed her aunt into the hallway.

Tossing Thursday back into the picture room, Tante Bernadine set a brisk pace toward the staircase. “Don’t drag your feet, Angelique,” she called over her shoulder. “Mr. Macy admires punctuality and would not appreciate a slowpoke.”

“I do not care what Monsieur Macy admires or appreciates,.” Trying to keep new tears at bay, Angelique took a deep breath. “I will never marry him, for I am in love with another man.”

Tante Bernadine halted so abruptly, Angelique very nearly plowed into her.

“Have you been playing the whore behind my back?” Tante Bernadine asked.

Angelique squared her shoulders and fibbed with a reply she’d soon regret.

“*Oui*,” she said.

EIGHT

Monsieur Macy was old – thirty-five, perchance forty. Angelique felt a flush of anger color her cheeks, eclipsing the splotch from her aunt’s slap.

Did Tante Bernadine honestly believe Angelique would marry this *grenouille*...this frog?

He was no more than five feet, five inches tall, with a head that seemed too large for his narrow shoulders and thin body. His eyes bulged. His nose was flat. His brown hair seemed too luxurious for his age, and he possessed wide, fat, frog lips. Even if Angelique had not loved Sean, she would have been repulsed by Monsieur Macy.

Perhaps, she told herself, his disposition did not match his froggy exterior. Perhaps she judged him unfairly.

Tante Bernadine’s hisses still echoed in her ear. “You must make certain Mr. Macy is charmed by your bodily assets. We need him to wed you within a few weeks, for you might be with child. Men put such store in breasts, my dear. Thus, I give you permission to strut and preen...in a ladylike fashion, of course. Furthermore, you will not leave this house until the day of your wedding.”

For the first time in her life, Angelique wished her gown was more demure. She watched Monsieur Macy’s gaze linger on her décolletage as he bent to kiss the back of her hand, and she felt the urge to slap him senseless.

Speaking directly to Tante Bernadine, Monsieur Macy said, “She’ll do.”

“I’ll do what?” Angelique asked recklessly.

“Her hips are too small,” Monsieur Macy continued. “However, she looks strong. I am a widower. My last wife died giving birth to twins.”

His voice contained a controlled anger, but Angelique didn’t know if his ire was directed at his wife’s demise, or at the fact that she had presented him with twins before she had conveniently, and probably exhaustedly, expired.

“How old are your twins?” Angelique asked politely, swallowing an impolite rejoinder. “Are they boys or girls?”

“Girls. They are six months old. I need heirs, sons...” He paused as his mud-colored eyes touched upon her hips again. “My first wife was barren,” he said, strolling over to the piano. “Do you play, Miss Aumont?”

Bloody oath! Had his first wife died from exhaustion, as well? Angelique bit her lip to keep from asking. “No, Monsieur, I do not,” she said.

But I can dance across a rope, she thought, tempted to giggle at the absurdity of the situation. Her one saving grace, and apparently her only escape from this marriage of convenience, was small hips.

“You shall learn how to play,” Monsieur Macy said. “I like music.”

“I cannot learn,” Angelique retorted, “for my hands are too small. However, I compose verse and have written an ode for Jenny Lind, P.T. Barnum’s ‘Swedish Nightingale.’ I hope to win Monsieur Barnum’s contest, a two hundred dollar prize, since I am, at present, bereft of funds.”

Despite Tante Bernadine’s loud gasp, Angelique continued. “Would you care to hear my verse, sir?” Sean had not yet delivered the ode he had mentioned, but this morning Gartrude had recited a poem that was circulating among the servants. “In my verse, I pretend I am Monsieur Barnum talking to Mademoiselle Lind, and this is what he says. ‘They will welcome you with speeches and rockets. And you will touch their hearts and I will touch their pockets. And if between us both the public isn’t skimmed. Then my name isn’t Barnum and yours isn’t Lind.’”

Monsieur Macy’s eyes were cold. “I admire wit, my dear,” he said, “as long as it’s not directed at me.”

“My niece meant no disrespect, Arthur,” Tante Bernadine cried. “She doesn’t even know how you earn your living.”

“How *do* you earn your living, Monsieur?”

“I own a large plantation, Miss Aumont, and have many slaves.”

“I do not believe in slavery.”

“My slaves have been discombobulated recently, for I have purchased an elephant to plow one of my fields.”

“An elephant?”

“It was P.T. Barnum who arranged the sale.”

“You are acquainted with Monsieur Barnum?”

“He is my friend and business partner. In return for his advice and help with my elephant, I loaned him ten thousand dollars so that he could fulfill his contract with Jenny Lind. Do you understand, Miss Aumont?”

“*Oui*, Monsieur Macy, I am no ninny. And although we have just met, I realize that you are no altruist. What did Monsieur Barnum pledge in order to secure your loan? His museum? More elephants?”

“No, my dear. He pledged his soul.”

True to her word, Tante Bernadine kept Angelique a prisoner, although her jail cell was spacious, her fellow inmates one uncle, seven cats, and a bevy of servants.

Somehow, Tante Bernadine had discovered that Sean was Angelique’s “lover.” Perhaps she had intercepted a letter before Angelique and Sean had begun using Gartrude as their courier; before they’d begun using false names.

Drawing a tiny peahen in a cage, Angelique now signed her letters “Mademoiselle Peonne.” Sean was “Monsieur Hyene” – even if he didn’t chortle much anymore.

Although Barnum seemed pleased with Sean’s tireless efforts, Jenny Lind was a conundrum. Solving the riddle of the Sphinx, Sean wrote, would be easier than solving the riddle of the Swedish Nightingale.

Not knowing that she cringed from attention, Barnum, with Sean’s help, had mounted an inspired campaign. As Jenny’s steamship approached the docking area at the foot of Canal Street, every wharf, window, and rooftop along the waterfront crawled with “a sea of humanity.” Unfortunately, once Jenny had descended the gangplank, she was almost trampled. Then, safe inside Barnum’s carriage, over two hundred bouquets were thrust through the windows, drowning everyone with perfume and petals.

“Ye would not think me a lad it ye could smell me,” Sean had written, “and poor Jenny was frightened out of her wits.”

She was now living at Irving House, the most elegant quarters in the city, and Sean hoped she would honor her contract since, apparently, she had gotten cold feet halfway through her voyage and begged to be taken home.

But, he wrote, all of this was not Angelique’s concern.

Of course it was her concern! The colder Jenny’s feet got, the longer it would take for Mademoiselle Peonne to escape from her prison and join Monsieur Hyene.

Angelique heard the unmistakable footsteps of her aunt. Quickly, she thrust Sean’s latest missive beneath her pillow. He had included the Jenny Lind ode on a separate piece of paper, but she had not read it yet, and she had a sinking feeling she’d have to decipher the poem tonight, by candlelight. Damn and blast!

“I want you to stay by my side,” Tante Bernadine said without preamble. “You must learn how to manage a household, my dear. Mr. Macy has a large staff and will expect you to oversee their various duties.”

“Monsieur Macy has slaves!”

“Slaves are unpaid servants, Angelique, and Mr. Macy expects—”

“An heir. He wants sons, Tante, and my hips are too small.”

“Fiddle-faddle. The next time he visits, we shall pad your hips.”

“I suppose that’s an *honest* ploy!”

“Of course. Just as your ‘padded belly’ will be an honest ploy.”

“What makes you so certain I am with child?”

“The wages of sin—”

“I have never earned those wages. I fibbed about my *affaire*. I cannot offer you proof of my chastity, Tante, but this morning my bleeding began.”

“Flowers,” Tante Bernadine said, her cheeks crimson. “In America we call it flowers. And if you are not with child, Arthur Macy will soon pad your belly.”

“Monsieur Macy will never get the opportunity, for I would rather sleep with a toad. No, a newt!”

Angelique was prepared to endure her aunt’s face-slap. However, she was not prepared for her aunt’s smile.

NINE

Charity Barnum handed Angelique a cup of tea and a handkerchief.

“Warm your stomach and dry your tears,” she said.

“But why did Sean leave? Please tell me.”

“It’s really quite simple. Jenny Lind’s opening night was a success. My husband kept his promise and gave Sean the funds for his traveling circus.”

“But why would he leave without *me*?”

Charity walked over to the window and looked out, her head bent, as if she contemplated the verdant lawn below. Then she made an about-face. “Don’t you know that your wedding is the talk of New York, child? Your aunt picked Grace Episcopal Church as the site, a reception will be held at the Metropolitan Hotel, and my husband will provide the entertainment.”

Angelique felt the color drain from her face. “I know nothing of this. I never said I would wed Monsieur Macy. In truth, last night I incurred his wrath.”

“And how did you do that?”

Angelique’s hands were shaking so badly she placed her teacup and saucer on a small table. “Monsieur Macy began to...to...”

“Seduce you?”

“*Oui*. Frightened, I reached out blindly. The first thing my hand encountered was his hair. Only it was a—”

“Wig?”

“*Mais oui*. His pate is bald, and he was very angry, so this morning I made my escape.”

“How did you escape?”

“I dressed like my maid, Gartrude. We are the same height and I hid my hair beneath her hooded cloak. Tonight Gartrude will pack some of my clothes and my letters from Sean, leave the house as Gartrude, and meet me here. I am truly sorry, Madame Barnum, but I could not think of any place else to go. I have no money and your house was nearby.”

“Please call me Charity, and my husband has money for you.”

“He does?”

“Yes. Two hundred dollars. You won the Jenny Lind Song Contest.”

Charity walked over to the piano and picked up some sheets of music. Then, in a small but clear voice, she sang Sean’s *Ode To Jenny Lind*.

“Oh, Jenny Lind...oh, Jenny Lind,
Your magic, angel’s voice,
Hath claimed the hearts of all our men,
All smitten long past choice.
We beg of you to stay with us,
With always one more song,
For you have won our very hearts,
Your lilting voice so strong.
Fair tribute to your beauty, and
The angel’s voice you own,
Your gift to us, beyond all doubt,
When nightingale hath flown.
All hail the Swedish Nightingale,
Of beauteous form and song,
Our favored choice, this angel’s voice,
May she remain here long.”

Charity smiled sweetly. “Ordinarily I sing hymns, and God does not care what I sound like, so I might have been off-key.” She placed the music sheets on the piano. “My husband plans to make your last verse the chorus.”

“Sean’s last verse.” Angelique looked down at the floor. “Sean wrote the ode,” she said. “The money is his, not mine.”

“I suspected as much. Nevertheless, Phineas will hand over the two hundred dollars if you give him permission to use your likeness on posters and music.”

Lifting her teacup from its saucer, Charity took a delicate sip. “I’m glad you came here, child, but why did you not make your escape earlier? Did your aunt threaten you? Was that a nod, Angelique? What did Bernadine say?”

“She said Monsieur Macy would ask for his loan back, the ten thousand dollars he loaned Monsieur Barnum. Monsieur Macy said Monsieur Barnum pledged his soul, but I am not certain

what he meant by that.”

“He meant Iranistan.”

If possible, Angelique’s face grew even whiter. “Oh, no! By running away I’ve ruined everything. Monsieur Barnum will lose his soul and you will lose your home. Oh, Madame Barnum...Charity...I am so very sorry. Perhaps they have not yet discovered my absence. Perhaps I can return and—”

“Nonsense! Mr. Macy’s loan was repaid, with interest, after Jenny Lind’s second concert. Still, I appreciate your sacrifice. And so will my husband.”

“I do not understand.” Staggering toward an armchair, Angelique sank onto it. “Will Monsieur Barnum find Sean for me? Does he know where Sean is?”

“No. But Sean left a map, detailing his route. You see, Phineas promised to purchase elephants for Sean’s circus, from the dealers who supply his wild animals. Unfortunately, they cannot go to a store and say, ‘Six elephants, please,’ so it might take some time.”

“A map, you say? Then I shall simply follow Sean, meet up with him, and explain away the misunderstanding.”

“You will do no such thing! You cannot travel across the country, unescorted. I have a better plan in mind, but I want to discuss it with my husband. For now, you must rest in one of our guest bedrooms. I would imagine you are exhausted.”

Despite the fact that she had spent a sleepless night, Angelique wasn’t tired. Maman had made a journey of the heart and followed Papa to Paris. Angelique would make a similar journey, even though the ends of the earth might be a wee bit farther.

TEN

Sean Kelley celebrated Saint Valentine’s Day by hiring an equestrian.

Maureen O’Connor was beautiful, despite the anguish that tinted her blue eyes almost purple. In truth, Sean had a feeling his own eyes reflected her deep sorrow.

Except when they touched upon Maureen’s son. Sean was impressed by the fact that the

dark-haired, blue-eyed little boy didn't try to hide behind his mother's skirts. Instead, Brian O'Connor stood directly in front of Maureen, as if he'd fiercely attack anything, or anyone, who threatened her.

Sean hunkered down. "And how old might ye be, lad?"

The boy held up six fingers.

"And what will ye be doing while your mum rides the horses?"

"Whatever ye wish me to do, sir."

"Can you ride?"

"Of course," he replied, as if Sean's question was ludicrous. "But..." the boy paused and looked up at his mother. "But I want someone to learn me how to tame the cats."

"*Teach* you," Maureen corrected, "and we've gabbed about this before, Brian, over and over again. 'Tis the reason why I left my last position," she said to Sean. "The owner of the circus believed it would be good for business, puttin' a wee lad inside a cage filled with Bengal tigers. I told him what-for and he sent me packing."

Sean felt his face flush, for he had been thinking the very same thing. While no Tom Thumb, Brian O'Connor, even at six, had a devil-may-care demeanor. He was, Sean concluded, a man inside a boy's body.

"Folks think I'm daft," Brian said earnestly, "but I can talk to lions and tigers, and they understand every word I say."

Maureen pointed to an ugly scratch on her son's arm, beneath his rolled-up sleeve. "One tiger did not understand your words!"

"Yes he did, Mum. Mr. Browne's whip made him forget."

"Ye must snap a whip to tame the cats, Brian," Sean said.

"True, sir, but Mr. Browne struck the tiger's nose."

"You were in the ring? Performing?"

The boy shook his head. "We was practicin'. I know how to snap the whip, sir, but I'd never hurt a cat. Just like Mum would never hurt a horse."

"Which is why I hired your mum," Sean said with a grin. "And I believe I have more than enough chores to keep you occupied."

"I'm good at chores," Brian bragged. "But someday I'll tame your cats."

Watching Maureen and Brian O'Conner walk toward the Cook Top, Sean hoped that "someday" would come soon. He desperately needed a star attraction.

And he needed the elephants Barnum had promised to deliver.

Traveling from town to town by horse and wagon, Sean found that many roads were impassable, especially during rainstorms. If swollen streams blocked the road, elephants could double as wagon-pushers. With elephants, Sean could erect a huge canvas tent. Right now, more often than not, he presented his show outside, usually in a farmer's field. And although his loyal troupe was willing, Sean would not allow them to perform during turbulent weather.

He had heard of an elephant named Matthew Gray. Matthew Gray plowed a plantation owner's fields. The owner, who lived in South Caroline, wanted to sell Matthew Gray to the highest bidder. Apparently, his field hands feared a whipping less than they feared the huge, four-footed, flap-eared mammal.

Sean had been all set to visit the plantation and make a bid, until he learned the name of the owner. Arthur Macy. Angelique's husband. Sean would die a thousand deaths, or push a thousand wagons across a thousand swollen streams, before he'd set eyes on the woman who had married for wealth rather than love.

While he suspected her aunt had something to do with Angelique's decision, that didn't negate the fact that she had betrayed him. He had *not* believed the newspaper story, had, in truth, been writing a letter to "Mademoiselle Peonne," when Barnum entered the room and announced that he would provide the entertainment at Angelique and Arthur Macy's wedding reception.

"Do you think the happy couple would enjoy excerpts from 'Romeo and Juliet'?" Barnum had asked.

"I think Mrs. Macy would prefer 'Beauty and the Beast,'" Sean had replied bitterly. "Or 'Blue Beard.'"

Perhaps his new equestrian could mend his broken heart, Sean thought, picturing the masses of red hair that framed Maureen O'Connor's porcelain complexion and dark blue eyes, aware that below her neck and shoulders her breasts and hips were well-rounded, her waist as small as a whiplash popper.

During her audition she had said she was a widow. But a vivid blush had stained her cheeks, and something in her voice didn't ring true.

The last thing Sean needed right now was an irate husband.

Of course, there was always Panama Drayton. The statuesque trapeze artist had made it very clear that she'd be willing to perform with Sean beneath the wagons. But even if he had been tempted, the strong man, Bobby Duncan, had already staked his claim. Well structured with

cast-iron muscles, each brain cell Duncan lacked was stored inside his powerful arms and shoulders. Sean did not want to tangle with “the strongest man in the world,” nor did he want to lose him, for it was the sideshow exhibits that kept his circus afloat.

After opening in Brooklyn, he had toured New England, and at one stop in Waterville, Maine, so many people lined up to buy tickets, his troupe had given continuous performances, starting in the wee hours of the morning, ending late at night.

But those early shows had been confined to buildings and tents. People preferred to sit under a roof, even a canvas roof. In order to make a profit, Sean needed huge audiences, which meant an oversized tent, and it was difficult to raise up and tear down an oversized tent without the help of elephants.

The one snag to staging a circus in an oversized tent was that the people in the back rows had difficulty seeing the show. Sean had discussed this with Barnum, who offered a solution. Enlarge the ring where the acts were performed. That, Sean insisted, was out of the question.

“The diameter for circus rings is thirteen meters,” he had told Barnum. “Circus horses all over the world are trained to perform in rings of that size. If every circus had a different size, horses would have to be re-trained every time they appeared with a new company.”

“Then add a second ring,” Barnum had said.

Sean planned to add a second ring. And a third ring. The most popular acts would perform inside the center ring.

But three rings would make it problematical to hear the clowns’ silly gibber-jabber, so he would initiate yet another daring innovation. His clowns would perform their routines with no dialogue at all – in pantomime.

First, however, he needed a star performer. And more exhibits. Barnum had promised Sean two cameleopards. Cameleopards possessed amazingly long spotted necks, but they also had long black tongues, allowing them to encircle tree branches and eat the leaves that would otherwise be out of reach.

I’ll wager Americans have niver seen a cameleopard, Sean thought. *In truth, I’ve niver seen one meself.*

He shut his eyes as a headache galloped inside his skull.

Once, not too long ago, he had pictured Angelique as his star performer, her rope stretched tight across the tent’s top, drawing every gaze toward heaven.

If you’re very good, he had told Charlotte, ye can capture a dream.

Had Sean been able to “capture” Angelique, he would have filled his circus posters with her likeness. And he would have introduced her to the world as Dream Angel.

ELEVEN

“Will you please, please be quiet.”

“I am sorry, Mademoiselle Lind.”

“Not you, Angelique, the bird!” Jenny Lind pointed to a small birdcage. Inside, a canary was singing its heart out. “Get rid of that bird. It’s giving me a headache. I want it gone from my dressing room before I return.”

Sweeping up her long skirts with one hand, Jenny turned toward the door.

Angelique leaned over to pick up a discarded shawl, and heard the door slam. She could usually determine Jenny’s moods from the strength of her slams. This evening Jenny was very angry.

“And what am I supposed to do with you?” Angelique asked the bird.

Thanks to Charity, Angelique had become part of Jenny Lind’s entourage. Monsieur Barnum had been reluctant at first, but when Charity reminded him of *their* difficult courtship, he boomed his big laugh and agreed to make Angelique one of Jenny’s two personal tour servants.

Angelique often wondered if she wouldn’t have been better off setting out on her own. Jenny was spiritual and devout, but she hated thanking people, disliked staying at a table after she’d finished eating, was wracked with headaches and rheumatism, and plugged up her ears with wool stoppers at night to “shut out the noises of the world.” She could be sweet and generous – at Christmas she’d showered everyone with gifts – but Angelique knew that, as the tour progressed, Jenny was growing increasingly distrustful of Monsieur Barnum. Angelique also knew that Jenny’s advisors had pleaded with her to break her contract. After several months of touring, Angelique could speak English with only the smallest trace of an accent. But since she was a servant, and French, everyone assumed she couldn’t understand what they said, and she heard things she wasn’t supposed to hear.

Tonight Jenny was angry because someone had told her that the structure for her Tennessee concert would be a tobacco warehouse. Before confronting Barnum, she had peppered her servant, and the poor canary, with indignant epithets.

Still, Angelique gladly endured the singer's insults. Because she was close to Sean. She could *feel* it. Even better, she had overheard Monsieur Barnum teasing Jenny, asking if she'd like six elephants to share her stage before he delivered them to a friend in Missouri. Jenny had *not* been amused, and Angelique had a feeling Barnum would soon lose his famous singer.

So, just in case, she had asked to borrow Sean's map. Then, using one of Sean's old letters for paper, she had drawn a copy. The next stop on Jenny's tour was St. Louis. On the map, near St. Louis, Sean had inked a big black X.

A knock sounded at the door, and without thinking Angelique said, "Enter."

The furniture was suddenly dwarfed by a tall stranger whose over-large hands clutched a bouquet of flowers...and a cowboy hat.

Stifling a yawn, Angelique repeated the words she'd said at least a hundred times before. "Miss Lind prefers that flowers be delivered to a children's hospital. If there is no children's hospital, any hospital will do."

"Yes, ma'am. Problem is, these ain't my flowers."

And that canary ain't my bird, Angelique thought, her mouth quirking at the corners. "If you did not purchase the flowers," she said, "who did?"

"I dunno, ma'am. A gent outside the theater give me four bits to make sure these here blooms got brung to Jenny Lind's room. Are you her?"

"Yes," Angelique fibbed. "But please return those, uh, blooms to the gent, and tell him what I said about hospitals."

"Cain't do that, ma'am."

"Why not?"

"I need the money."

"Suppose *I* give you six bits and...why are you shaking your head?"

"Ain't never took no money from a girl, ma'am, and don't plan to start now."

Intrigued, Angelique gestured toward a chair. "Won't you sit down, sir?"

"I'll sit if you take these here flowers, and I ain't no sir. Roy Osborne's the name."

"I'll take your flowers if you take my bird," she said. "And please call me...Jenny."

"Yes, ma'am."

“Jenny.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Angelique swallowed a laugh, then placed the cowboy’s bouquet on top of the dressing table. Roy Osborne, now seated, stared at the canary. Angelique stared at Roy Osborne.

Harsh weather-lines spun out from his blue eyes. Deep furrows connected his nose to his mouth. His long, sun-streaked brown hair was tied at his nape with a piece of string, and he was perfect for what she had in mind.

But first, a few questions.

“How old are you, Mr. Osborne?”

“Dunno, ma’am. More than my fingers and toes put together, I reckon. How old are you?”

“As old as my fingers and toes put together,” she said. “Why do you need money so badly, Mr. Osborne? Are you not employed?”

“I was, ma’am, but my horse died.”

“Oh, I’m sorry.”

“Me, too, ma’am.”

“How much does a horse cost, Mr. Osborne?”

“Reckon I could git one for fifty, ma’am, a good horse for seventy-five.”

“Dollars?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“I think I’d want a good horse,” Angelique murmured, watching Monsieur Osborne squirm in his chair.

“Ma’am, Miss Jenny, I’m sorry, but I gotta’ git. You see, I’m in a, well, a hurry, a big hurry.”

“And why are you in such a big hurry?” She watched his face redden. “Oh. The water closet is down the hall.”

If possible, his weathered cheeks turned even more ruddy. “No, ma’am, it’s not that. My wife, well, she’s expecting our first young’un and I want to be there when it’s birthed. We live near St. Louie. I finished up a cattle drive an’ was headin’ home when some bastard, ‘scuse me, ma’am, when some bastard...” He smiled sheepishly and shrugged. “Guess I cain’t think of no other word, ma’am, just like I can’t seem to call you nothin’ but ma’am.”

“What did the bastard do to you, Mr. Osborne?”

“He shot my horse, ma’am, and stole my pay.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Ain’t your fault.”

“There! You didn’t call me ma’am. That’s a good start.”

“A good start for what?”

“Suppose I gave you two hundred dollars? Could you buy two horses, saddles, blankets, maybe some food?”

He shook his head. “I don’t take no money—”

“From a girl. Yes, I know. But would you consider taking money from a woman who offered you honest employment?”

“No, ma’am.”

Angelique felt tears blur her eyes. “Mr. Osborne, Roy, I need you to help me find my husband. He’s somewhere in Missouri, but I have a map. And if you help me, I’ll let you keep both horses.” She followed his gaze, and saw that he was looking at several large trunks, stacked in the corner of the dressing room. “I’ll only take one gown, one pair of shoes, one pair of gloves, and one bonnet.”

The grin he gave Angelique made him almost handsome. “Seems like you’re in a big hurry too, ma’am. Already got me a saddle and bedroll, but if you grab up them flowers and that yella’ bird, we’ll find us some horses.”

He tilted her chin with his callused finger. “Do you ride, Miss Jenny?”

Non, she thought.

“Yes,” she said.

Watching circus equestrians perform, Angelique had always believed that riding a horse would be easy as pie.

She should have known better, especially since she’d never baked a pie. In truth, she had never cooked anything at all. Circuses had Cook Tops. Tante Bernadine employed a cook.

Roy Osborne couldn’t cook, either. If she’d had any money left from the horses and gear, Angelique would have given it over for a nice hot cup of tea. Roy’s coffee tasted like gooey mud and his hardtack tasted like...well, to be perfectly honest, she had never tasted anything that

tasted like hardtack. It was saltless. It was bread. It was hard. And if she ever described it to Sean, that's all she could say.

She and Roy were getting closer to the X on Sean's map, even if she *had* delayed their journey by bouncing up and down on her saddle, not to mention falling off her damnfool horse so many times she'd lost count.

And *she* rode the seventy-five dollar horse.

Angelique heard the echo of Sean's voice: *Should our wee lasses fall from their horses, 'tis not such a lengthy journey to the ground.*

She heard her reply: *I would rather count the stars.*

Tonight there were a multitude of stars overhead, and a full moon provided enough light for a rope to be strung between two trees. Coiled across Roy's saddle was a rope, only he called it a lasso.

"Want more coffee, Miss Jenny?"

"No. No, thank you." Angelique wrinkled her nose at the thought. "But I would like to borrow your lasso, *s'il vous plait.*"

"Is that Swede talk, see-vu-play?" Roy nodded toward the canary, which for some reason Angelique couldn't fathom, he had insisted they take along on their journey. "The gent with the blooms said you was a Swedish bird, Miss Jenny. Knew a Swede once. Big yella-haired fella, same color hair as that there bird. Nice fella. Why do you want my lasso, Miss Jenny?"

"I thought I might string it up between those two trees and walk on it. If the rope is tight enough, I can do back flips. If it's really guyed out...I mean, stretched...I can try a forward somersault, which has never before been done by a woman."

Roy removed his hat, scratched his scalp, tossed the remains of his coffee into the fire, listened to the hiss, and put his hat back on. "Okay," he said.

Once they had strung Roy's lasso as tightly as humanly possible, he hoisted her up onto the rope. Immediately, Angelique clung to a tree. Damn and blast! Too many months had passed since she'd played the equilibrist.

Then she felt the magic.

Her bare feet practically skimmed the rough rope as she danced to the middle. Her calico gown was a hindrance, but she had removed every petticoat, leaving her chemise and drawers. Dare she remove her gown? No. She trusted Roy, but knew him well enough to know his cheeks would turn bright crimson and he wouldn't watch. She wanted him to watch. She wanted the

night critters that inhabited the woods to watch; the owls and possums. She wanted the fish in the stream to watch. She wanted God to watch.

This is what she had been born to do.

TWELVE

Maureen O'Connor didn't have a husband.

Sean had found this out when he and Maureen shared a bottle of whiskey. They had been inside the silver wagon, where, after a show, Sean counted his greenbacks, coins and receipts.

"I believed the lies of Aaron Fox," she said, shedding her clothes. "Aaron looks a wee bit like you, except his eyes are as blue as the bunting on an American flag." She peered into Sean's face. "Your eyes are as green as...as the flag of Ireland, I suppose."

Sean sat behind his desk. As she straddled his lap, he felt her heat. She guided his hand between her spread legs. She moaned, leaned forward, and thrust her breasts at his mouth. He opened his mouth, planning to lick, taste, suckle...

"Maureen, sweetheart," he said, instead. "Let me help you back to your wagon. No more spirits, lass, for you have a show tomorrow and must be balanced."

She tried to snap her fingers and failed. "I have jumped through hoops of fire, atop a horse, with Brian in my belly, resting against my heart."

"Yes. Brian told me. And 'twas your horse who jumped, Maureen, not you, though had I been there, you would *not* have performed." Rising from his chair, Sean set Maureen on her feet, then encircled her nude body with his ringmaster's cloak. "'Tis lucky you didn't miscarry."

"At the time I did not care. I love...loved him so much."

Sean patted her shoulder, knowing he could have her if he wanted her, knowing he wanted her but would not have her.

"I thought myself wed," she continued, "but the man-wife words were falsely spoken by Aaron's friend, who wore a borrowed frock coat and clerical collar."

With that, she gave a whimper, shut her eyes, and pitched forward. Sean caught her

before she fell, carried her to her wagon, and placed her on her bed.

Poor Maureen, still in love with the man who had betrayed her. Just like Sean was still in love with the woman who had betrayed him.

The Irish can only love once.

THIRTEEN

Raising his arm, Sean shaded his eyes. In the distance were two figures on horseback. As they drew nigh, he could see that the smaller figure, a lass, held the reins with one hand and carried something in her other hand.

A birdcage?

He couldn't quite make out the girl's features, yet his heart began to pound and he staggered backwards, until he felt the silver wagon's slats against his spine.

Was he brainsick? Of course he was. The girl who rode the dappled horse wore a floppy bonnet, a tattered gown, slippers tied to her feet with string, and dirty gloves. She looked a wee bit like his small angel, except Angelique had never learned how to ride.

He remembered one of her letters, in response to his second vow that their daughters would be equestrians. "Someone else will have to teach the children," she had written, "for I have never, nor will I ever, ride a horse. Should I fall from my rope, the net beneath is flexible. A horse's back is not, nor is the ground. In truth, Monsieur Hyene, I would rather walk."

A capricious breeze lifted the girl's bonnet from her head. As it spun toward the ground, she made a futile attempt to catch it.

Sean shut his eyes, then opened them again, but the lass, closer now, still looked like Angelique. The same robust breasts and shoulders. The same honey-colored hair, cascading down her back to her waist. And he would wager the elephants Barnum had not yet delivered that her eyes were gray-green.

Maybe he *could* wager his elephants. Shifting his gaze, Sean saw several large, dark

shapes advancing, practically eclipsing the sun. Even though they were farther away than the girl and her companion, the ground shook.

Once again, Sean focused on the two horseback riders. The elephants were expected, but what would Angelique be doing in the middle of a Missouri farmer's field? Perhaps her companion was her husband, Arthur Macy. Perhaps, unable to sell their plow-elephant, Matthew Gray, they had decided to visit the Sean Kelley Circus and ask for a bid.

The idea was so ludicrous, Sean laughed. Even if true, Arthur Macy, wealthy beyond measure, would have used a carriage to transport his young wife. He wouldn't want her beautiful rump bruised.

Furthermore, the girl's companion didn't look like a rich plantation owner. Clothed in buckskin, his long legs straddled an animal that could only be described as a nag. Or crowbait.

Maybe the two figures on horseback were merely figments of his imagination, Sean thought, the result of yet another long, lonely night with his whiskey bottle.

But then why was his circus troupe joining him? Why were they staring across the farmer's field? A few watched the lass and her companion, but most watched the humped blobs that shaded the sun, and the troupe's joyous expressions confirmed what Sean had already deduced.

P.T. Barnum was, at long last, delivering the elephants.

Duncan the Strong Man, Jack the Giant, Morgan the Skeleton Man, Grace the Giantess, and Charlene Johnson, the Bearded Lady, all grinned from ear to ear. Other performers duplicated their grins.

The clowns smiled through their painted frowns.

Maureen, Panama, and Cuckoo the Bird Girl had made a circle by joining hands, and were now dancing a wild jig.

Quite a few roustabouts had tears running down their weathered cheeks.

Only the goat, Natasha, expressed dismay – by bleating indignantly. Fearless Natasha could jump through hoops while riding around the ring on the back of a horse, but apparently the smell of elephant was not her cup of tea.

Sean laughed at the image of his goat, sitting on her haunches, delicately sipping from a china teacup.

“Why do you chortle like a hyena?” asked a familiar voice.

“What do you have in that cage?” Sean countered. Which wasn't at all what he wanted to

say. But it was the first thing that came to mind since he couldn't tell if she sported a wedding band beneath her dirt-encrusted glove.

"Cage? Oh, birdcage. A canary. It sings as sweetly as Jenny Lind, but has a much better disposition."

"You sound very...American, lass."

"And you sound flummoxed, Monsieur Kelley."

"Odd way to greet your husband, Miss Jenny," Roy muttered, climbing down from his horse, retrieving the birdcage from Angelique's outstretched fingers, then heading, reins and birdcage in hand, toward the roustabouts. "Even for a Swede," he called over his shoulder.

"Husband?" Sean quirked one dark eyebrow.

"An honest ploy, Monsieur."

"And did ye change your name and nationality?"

"*Non*. I am still French, and proud of it. I shall be Mademoiselle Peonne or Mademoiselle Petit Ange, if that is your desire. But if you do not help me off this blasted horse, I shall be Mademoiselle Sore Derriere."

"As long as you are *Mademoiselle*, I care not."

"Ah," she said.

"Do you mean 'ah, the circus owner has lost his wits' or 'ah, Sean Kelley is a bumptious noodlehead'?"

"You thought me married to Monsieur Macy, Sean, and I cannot fault you for that. It's the very reason why I embarked on my 'journey of the heart.' Because you *are* my heart, and without a heart, one cannot live." She smiled wistfully. "I can dismount on my own, but I crave your touch, so won't you please help me?"

As he reached up, she brought her right leg over the saddle horn. A lion roared and the horse shied and Angelique pitched forward. She landed on top of him, and they both went down together, all in a heap.

Sean held onto her shoulders and rolled them over, away from the horse's hooves, until she was on the bottom and he was on top.

"Ooof," she said. "I think you weigh more than an elephant."

"Perhaps a wee baby elephant," he teased, pressing his palms against the ground and lifting his weight from her body. Then, he simply couldn't help himself. Her face was so close to his. Slowly, deliberately, he traced her mouth with the tip of his tongue until he felt the soft,

moist, inner edges of her lips yield.

As he reluctantly ended the kiss, he could see that an adorable blush stained her cheekbones. He could also see that her gray-green eyes were focused on something to the left of his shoulder. Turning his head, Sean followed her gaze.

A woman had hunkered down near them. She had brittle, rust-colored hair, and wore enough paint to challenge the clowns. Her breasts were bulldozed forward, aided by a tight corset. Above her stood an ebony giant.

“The roustabouts are wantin’ you, Sean,” the woman said. “And your friend might have to pee,” she added with mock politeness.

“Thank you, Panama.” Sean rose to his feet and helped Angelique rise. “Do ye have need of the doniker, lass?”

“*Non*,” she replied with another blush.

“Please help the roustabouts secure the elephants,” Sean told Jack the Giant, “and offer the men who have herded them something to eat and drink. There should also be a gilly with the face of a bulldog. His name is Barnum. Tell him to make himself at home.” Then, gently grasping Angelique by the elbow, Sean led her toward the silver wagon.

Once inside, she said, “Two women just stared at me with daggers in their eyes. One is quite beautiful, with an abundance of curly red hair. The other was the woman who asked if I had to pee.”

“You have nothing to fear from those women, Angelique.”

“I did not say I feared them.”

“I swear by all that’s holy that I have not slept with another lass since the first time I saw you, dancing across a rope.”

“A rope! Sean, I have performed the forward somersault!”

“And where would ye be doin’ that?”

“In the woods. My, er, escort and I guyed-out his lasso, between two trees. Why do you look at me like that?”

“When I hired my rope walker, I asked why he could not somersault forward as well as backwards. I was told that backflips allow your shoulders to flex naturally and swinging arms give additional momentum. Somersaulting forward reverses natural reflexes and the arms are no help because they get in the way.”

“I wrap my arms about my chest so they won’t catch between my legs.”

“Nevertheless, it’s too dangerous.”

“Nevertheless, I *shall* perform it.”

“May we discuss this later, Angelique?”

Just like their first meeting, his eyes undressed her, discarding her tattered gingham gown, her four petticoats, her chemise, and her flannel drawers.

“‘Tis not somersaults I have on my mind,” he said.

“Have you *changed* your mind, Sean? The night of Charity Barnum’s dinner party you insisted we must be wed first.”

“Your cowboy believes I’m your husband.”

“I told you. That was an honest ploy.”

Sean laughed, then cradled her chin with his hand. “You have been my wife since the day we met, lass, for after that I could not imagine myself married to anyone but you. We don’t need a man in a frock coat and clerical collar to say the words that will bind us.” He kissed the long lashes that shaded her cheekbones. “Although hundreds of miles apart, we were still bound to one another.” He traced the graceful arc of her neck with his thumb until he reached her gown’s bodice buttons. “I promise we shall have a ceremony, but for now, may we love God and be merry?”

Angelique replied by helping him remove her clothing, then his.

Oh, what a glorious sight, she thought, gazing immodestly at Sean’s nakedness. Jenny Lind’s voice might be God-given, but Sean’s body was, too, and Angelique knew that if she ever composed another ode, her own ode, she wouldn’t dwell on nightingales. Roy Osborne liked to share his knowledge of critters and birds. He had told her that the nightingale’s song was trilled by the male. So she would play the peahen...because she wanted to sing.

Together, she and Sean sank to the wagon’s floor. As he straddled her hips, his mouth found her heart breast and his tongue teased her nipple. With fierce abandon, she moaned her first song and began to writhe.

“You must stay motionless as long as ye can,” he whispered, “but prepare yourself for a backflip rather than a forward somersault, me darlin’, for I do not want your arms wrapped ‘round your chest. In truth, I’ll have need of your hands.”

Sean knew that Angelique was already aroused, but he wanted to make her wet, and the method he had always employed with a more experienced woman might frighten her. ‘Twas a dilemma he would solve, eventually. For now, he traced her lips with his thumb. Opening her

mouth, she sucked his thumb like an infant. He responded in kind, sucking her fingers one by one. Then he lightly caressed the area between her thighs. Wet, but not wet enough.

Angelique sang her second moan. What on earth was Sean waiting for? Heat coursed through her, and she knew that as soon as he penetrated the fire would totally consume her. She wanted the fire to consume her.

As if he'd read her thoughts, he maneuvered his body until his knees were between her thighs, spreading them apart. Then he placed his thumb, the thumb she had just sucked, directly above the core of her womanhood. He slid his thumb lower, then higher, then lower, until he had established a rhythm.

She gasped and began to quiver. Covering his thumb with her fingers, she adapted to his up-down motion, but made him press harder, until she was on the verge of losing all coherent thought.

Apparently, he didn't want her to lose all coherent thought. Removing his thumb, he bent forward, kissed her chin, then parted her lips and thrust his tongue inside. She felt his tongue caress the inside of her mouth while he rubbed his hand across her breasts, stopping every now and then to lightly scissor her nipples with his fingers. Once again, she began to tremble.

He abandoned her mouth in order to say, "Now I have need of your hand."

Kissing, then licking her palm, he guided her hand downward, until he was fully in her grasp. Why had she not thought of this herself? Eagerly, she began to insert his spit-wet, engorged tip. Tilting her head all the way back, she arched her hips. He unclasped her fingers while she urged his entry, crying his name, crying for all the lost months of their separation.

Suspended between pain and pleasure, her senses focused on the searing intrusion of his body into hers. Then pleasure began to dominate and her pain diminished. She sang her third moan, a duet, for Sean had joined in her song, and his wetness soothed the last remnants of her pain.

After their passion had been spent, she covered her face with her hands and began to sob.

"What's wrong?" Sean asked. "Did I hurt you? Are you all right? Angelique, answer me!"

"Jenny Lind once said that she could never forget the seriousness of life, thus she preferred sorrow to joy."

"*That's* why you're weeping, you daft colleen?"

"My tears are tears of joy, Sean. And I've shed a few for Jenny."

FOURTEEN

Angelique stood on Roy's guyed-out lasso, only this time the rope had been strung tightly between the tops of two circus wagons.

All the performers watched. So did P.T. Barnum. Jack the Giant stood nearby. Sean had told him to try and catch her, should she fall. She didn't plan to fall.

Once he'd accepted what he called her daft notion, Sean had offered to play ringmaster.

"La-deez and gen-tul-men," he began, then paused to wink at Brian O'Connor. "And children of all ages. The Sean Kelley Circus proudly presents Dream Angel, the first female equilibrist to perform a forward somersault. Picture tossing an egg into the air. Imagine stretching a piece of sewing thread out in front of you, then trying to catch the rotating egg. What happens if you miss?"

Barnum, who had been sitting on the ground, jumped to his feet.

"I know what you're thinking," Sean continued. "You're thinking Dream Angel has eyes to see where she'll land while an egg doesn't. But Dream Angel's legs will come between her eyes and the rope, permitting no optical help with her landing. The forward somersault requires the utmost in bodily coordination, muscular precision, and faultless technique, and has never been successfully completed by a woman. Pre-senting...Dream Angel."

Angelique leaped toward the sky. At the same time, she lowered her head. Wrapping her arms about her chest, she felt her body rotate. All she could see were her knees. Her golden hair whipped around her throat as she landed slantwise and teetered on the rope's edge. Then, with the greatest effort of her young life, she restored her balance.

The *cirque* performers applauded wildly. Barnum looked dazed. Sean helped her down from the rope and gave her a kiss, the best applause of all.

FIFTEEN

Sean had “traded” a sturdy stock horse for Roy Osborne’s nag, and insisted Roy keep Angelique’s seventy-five-dollar-horse to tote his gifts.

The gifts were for his wife, Maggie. Female performers had contributed several opening spec evening gowns – in so many garish colors, Angelique wondered if Maggie would don them anywhere but in the privacy of her own bedroom. The gowns were enveloped by a quilt that boasted a circus motif.

Sean had given Roy enough food to feed a small army, after Angelique had attempted to describe hardtack, and Barnum had given Roy money, to make up for his stolen wages.

At first Roy protested, but nobody could gainsay Barnum, especially when he insisted that Roy deserved every cent for “delivering a valuable cargo.”

“More valuable then all them there elly-phants?” the cowboy had asked.

“I’ll have to think about that,” Sean had replied, then chortled like a hyena when Angelique’s elbow poked his ribs.

Roy made only two requests: the yellow canary, which he said would be for his new son or daughter “so he or she will never be alone, without no singing,” and some elephant dung so he could prove to everybody that he’d truly seen the critters.

When the last of Roy’s trail dust had disappeared, Sean excused himself to help feed the cats, and Barnum turned to Angelique.

“I want you to finish Jenny’s tour,” he said, his voice brusque, “and by the time we return to New York, the press will be singing your praises.”

“Are you teasing, Monsieur Barnum?”

“Not at all. You are the only woman in the world who can do a forward somersault and you look like poetry in motion when you perform. So I’ll offer you the same terms I offered Jenny. One hundred and fifty thousand dollars, payable in advance.”

“What about Sean?” she asked, stunned.

“You shall be my protégé,” Barnum replied, “but Sean can be your manager.”

“His circus—”

“Can be run by someone else until the tour is finished. I have a man in mind, and I’ll be happy to pay his salary. If Sean wants to direct the Sean Kelley Circus himself, which you and I know he might prefer, I’ll give him my most popular American Museum exhibits. In fact, I’ll promise him anything he wants...except Tom Thumb.”

Later, in the privacy of their wagon, Angelique told Sean about Barnum’s offer.

“Do ye want to accept, lass?”

“Aside from the money, a great deal of money, you could choose the museum attractions that would increase your business tenfold. And I’d return to our *cirque* a star.”

“Did Barnum happen to mention when you would return?”

“He said two, maybe three years. He wants me to perform in London, Sean, for the Queen.”

“Then say yes, Angelique.”

“Would you travel with me?”

“Of course. You are my heart,” he said, repeating the words she had uttered earlier, “and without a heart, one cannot live.”

“But one cannot live without a dream, either, and your circus is your dream. *Your* circus, Sean, not Barnum’s.”

He shook his head. “You are my dream, lass.”

“*Non.*”

“There you go again, saying no to me. *You* are my dream, Angelique, and I shall follow you to New York or London or—”

“I meant I shall tell Monsieur Barnum *non*, my Sean. Not because of hearts and dreams, but because of our afternoon in the silver wagon.”

“We can make love in London, lass. We can even make love in Buckingham Palace.” He grinned. “After you perform for the Queen.”

“But I cannot perform the forward somersault when my belly is filled with your son.”

“My daughter. What makes you think you’re with child, Angelique?”

“Silly peagoose. If we did not make a baby this afternoon, we might tonight. Or tomorrow. Or the day after tomorrow.”

“You would give up the money, Angelique? The fame?”

“I give up nothing, Sean. All I want is you. And now, would you please hush so that we can love God and be merry?”