

Chapter One

A SONG FOR THE BROKEN

Nothing is ever beyond repair. Or so Jules Compere liked to think. He frowned at the back of the grease-stained coveralls bending over in front of him. The repairman's head wasn't visible. The man's muttering indicated that he did indeed possess a head, although, to Jules, the reliability of its contents remained in question.

The majority of the calliope's brass innards lay glinting in rows upon the grass. Each time a defective part was quarantined amongst the others, dollar signs mounted in Jules' head.

It was out of the question that he should leave the magnificent antique calliope in less than perfect working order. Its toots and whistles sang out the soul of Circus Lunastrata. This circus he'd inherited at age eighteen from his Grandpère Zazar was a living, breathing, magical entity in its own right. Jules relied upon the calliope to share Circus Lunastrata's secrets, to keep him apprised of the organization's mysterious inner workings.

As its leader—a distinction he felt inadequate to fulfill even after twenty-one years—he was able to hear the hidden communications in the calliope's music. Only one other member of Lunastrata shared this ability, his dear old friend, mentor, and clown extraordinaire—Robey.

"Are you able to repair it?" Jules inquired, receiving only a grunt in return. He glanced at his pocket watch. Mike's Mechanical Musical Instrument Restoration billed in four-hour increments. Only fifteen minutes remained in the first billing period.

He must face reality, something he preferred never to do. His happy place was under the spotlight in the center of the circus ring. But face reality he must. There was no way around it. The calliope must be fixed. The repairman must be paid.

No funds existed in the Lunastrata cash ledgers for this unexpected expense. As much as he regretted doing so, Jules had no choice but to ask young Walter Winstanley to put the repair cost on his father's platinum card. It was grossly unfair to the boy, but the show must go on. He'd make it up to Wally somehow.

Jules caught sight of the slightly vampiric-looking cook over by the Midway. The beloved wreck of an old mansion was home to the circus when they were here at the Funny Farm, nestled amid the

fields and woods of Wisconsin. Jules did a double take. Wally was behaving strangely. The teen dipped and swayed, feinted and jabbed. What the heck was going on?

Autumn leaves swirled about the kid's high tops as he caracoled across the lawn, revealing his mock sparring partner, the lovely and equally young Evangeline. Ah, the goings on became clearer. She chased Wally over the grass, fists raised. The pair, acting more like little kids than seventeen-year-olds, laughed and pulled funny faces, the only two people on the planet.

The scene caused Jules to smile yet made him uneasy. He could teach those two Roman riding, how to project their voices across a Big Top, or if he was so inclined, he could even teach them a thing or two about bona fide circus magic, but he was wholly unprepared for *this*.

He looked back toward Evangeline and Wally, for Evan now went by her stage name, *Evangeline*. Their battle had degenerated into poking at one another's midsections. Oh dear.

The teens chased each other around the trunk of the old oak that grew next to the Midway. Jules indulged in a sigh. Neither kid had experienced anything near this level of joy in a very long time. That they'd found each other, formed a connection, was both wonderful and deeply disconcerting.

He tugged on his goatee. They were both so young. So damaged. The odds of a scorched earth break up were high. How would he as their guardian—and Circus Lunastrata—manage the fallout?

"Testing the pipes now," said the repairman from Mike's.

The calliope blurted forth a tuneless cacophony of notes. Still broken. Out came more parts, followed by a string of curses from the repair guy.

Jules admitted there was one bit of positivity to come out of Wally's blossoming relationship with Evangeline, the kid swore a whole lot less. Back in June, he'd given Wally a book of magical words and ordered him to use them instead of cussing. It had worked, sort of.

When Wally now swore it was in a language of combined profanity and magic. Jules had an ulterior motive in giving Wally that particular book and expanding his magical vocabulary, but the time was not right to reveal it. To Wally, or to anyone else. In fact, there was a second, more advanced book of words sitting in his desk drawer right now, destined for Wally's underhanded education.

A few more forlorn toots emitted from the proud historical organ. Carved figures cavorted on either side of the pipes. In tandem, the painted ladies flashed their eyes at Jules, telling him to listen up. Even with its guts all over the ground, the Lunastrata calliope was on the job.

Short and clear, the toots told Jules to seek out the Panhandle Prophet—the pickled punk residing in a jar of formaldehyde, his personal oracle and very best friend.

Jules stuck two fingers in his mouth and issued forth a wolf whistle, loud and strong. The flirty game of goth-goes-the-weasel ended, each teen going rigid as if they'd been caught dancing naked in the moonlight. They turned, staring back at him like infatuated meerkats.

He inclined his head toward his trailer, a converted railway car. "Come on. Let's go." They both trotted over to him without hesitation.

"There's another one, isn't there?" Wally blinked under a shock of spiky, long black hair, his usually pale cheeks flushed.

"Another kid who needs rescued, right?" Evangeline added. "Same as me and Wally, and Johnny, and the twins?"

Jules' gaze slid to the calliope and back. "Why do you think that?"

Wally shrugged. "Sounds nuts but... I'm pretty sure the calliope *sang* it."

Jules clapped Wally on the shoulder. "It did indeed."

He extended his arm up and around Wally's shoulder as they walked. The teen cook was already taller. With his other arm across Evangeline's shoulders, he drew the kids close.

Shaking his head, Jules whispered, "You both truly *are* members of the Center Ring now, aren't you? Such a big change, so quickly." He grinned ruefully. "Will you remember to keep your voices down when speaking of all matters magical? The only persons at Lunastrata who can hear the calliope 'sing' are the members of the Center Ring, besides the Pickled Punk, that is."

Wally laughed in that cynical way he had that was half a snort. "Not sure the punk fits the definition of 'person.'"

"Yes, but never let him hear you say that," the Ringmaster said. "He's sensitive."

Inside his ornate, converted train car trailer, Jules brought out the Pickled Punk—a deformed fetus in a jar from the days of Sideshow—from the oracle's usual resting place in the bedside nightstand. He carried him to the parlor, placed his jarred friend on the orange tuffet with green tassels, and unscrewed the lid. Bubbles rose to the top of the formaldehyde, indicating the punk was waking up.

Evangeline and Wally sat glued together on the ornate love seat. Jules pointed to a chair across the narrow room, indicating Wally should sit there. Wally rose, and Evangeline's delicate features scrunched up. Jules frowned. His intention hadn't been to separate them, only to distribute energy evenly around the Prophet on the small ottoman. He sat in his antique oak swivel chair in front of his

roll top desk, equidistant between the two younger people.

The bubbles increased. The pickled punk's wrinkled and leathery dome—at odds with fetal youth—appeared, followed by his one permanently squinted eye and one protruding bulbous eye.

When his mouth was above the level of strong-smelling liquid in the jar, he spoke, "He's a ghost."

"Who is?" Evangeline said. "The next kid rescue?"

"How's *that* going to work?" Wally slumped in his chair, apparently sulking at being made to sit apart from Evangeline.

Wally's face bore an odd expression though, a reaction to the word *ghost*. Jules made a mental note to ask Wally about it later. Of course, he rarely remembered his mental notes, so he determined to do better, and on a whim, jotted it down on a desk tablet. The beginnings of the note turned into a ghost doodle. No matter, he'd remember what it signified, for sure.

"Dante Delgado," said the Punk. "You'll find him on the side of the road."

Jules smiled wryly, mostly to himself. This being the first time Evangeline and Wally had ever been present at a calliope-called meeting of the minds, the punk was being especially mysterious and melodramatic.

"We are now to provide succor to the spirit world are we?" Jules pushed back into the chair and crossed his legs.

"The boy is a ghost of his former self. He's quite corporeal." The Prophet plopped an elbow on the edge of the jar, looking like a tiny misshapen sailor at a bar. "Dante is an angry mess. Not that he doesn't have a right to be."

Wally's features visibly relaxed.

What did his cook have against ghosts? Jules recalled that Walter Winstanley, descended from a long line of Winstanley inventors, was deeply uncomfortable with most of the unexplainable goings on at Circus Lunastrata, even if he put a good face on it. Unfortunate, that. It was going to make Wally's acceptance of his donvrai all the more difficult.

"Have Robey take these two along when he goes to pick up Dante," the punk said. "He's going to need back up."

"Back up?" Jules leaned forward. "I'll not send my young charges into a dangerous situation."

"Yeah, *that's* never happened before." The Prophet guffawed. Formaldehyde-scented bubbles rose and burst. Evangeline held her nose. Wally shifted anxiously. The punk continued, "Throw the peanuts for the details."

Jules nodded to Evangeline. Knowing what to do, the girl threaded her way through the train car to his bedchamber and a few minutes later returned with the antique candy tin containing Grandpère Zazar's most precious enchanted object. The Ju-Ju that brought out the most magical abilities—donvrais—in those drawn to Lunastrata.

The coming of a new teen denizen was always foretold first by the calliope. Details such as who, when, and where were provided by the Pickled Punk and the powerful circus peanut candies. Jules had never known the process to be simple or straightforward.

"Go ahead," Jules leaned back and re-crossed his legs. "Toss them there, on the Oriental carpet."

Evangeline popped open the tin. The stale, peanut-shaped marshmallow candies flew into the air and landed ploppity, plop, plop. At once, Jules discerned the rune-like message spelled out by marks that had appeared on the enchanted sweets, but he hesitated to speak.

It's a good thing he did. Wally sprang from the chair and leapt to the floor on all fours, inspecting the peanuts.

"San Diego." Wally twisted his neck to meet Jules' gaze. "That's where we get Dante Delgado. At a roadside stand... selling roses."

"You can read them? That is so cool." Evangeline knelt next to Wally, her long auburn hair trailing across his arm.

Wally shrugged and gathered up the candies. To Jules he said, "Was I right?"

"Absolutely." Jules grinned in a way he hoped was encouraging.

Evangeline offered the tin to Wally. The kid's long fingers shook as he took it and packed away the candies. He stood and passed it back to her, his hand grazing the tops of her fingers, lingering there.

Ah, how Jules envied them. And worried.

"Mr. Compere, may I take a look at the accounting?" Evangeline said out of the blue, nodding at a notebook atop his desk.

"Certainly," he answered.

Wally looked equally surprised as Jules handed over the ledger without protest. But Jules had nothing to hide. If she could make any sense of his admittedly creative bookkeeping, more power to her.

Evangeline cracked open the book and ran a finger down the columns. "Look at this," she said not to Jules but to Wally.

The two stood shoulder to shoulder and went over the accounts, forming a portentous picture in Jules' mind, accompanied by the overpowering cologne of *déjà vu*. A shiver ran up and down his spine faster than a puck hitting the bell of a strongman carnival game. Evangeline and Wally in charge? Was he seeing the future of Circus Lunastrata?

Clanging footsteps resounded up the iron stairs, the door squeaked, and in hustled Robey, clown of mature years, dear friend, and mentor.

Undeterred by the clown's entrance, Evangeline said, "If I'm right, we can cover the costs to pick up Dante if we book four shows on the way to San Diego."

Intrigued, Jules pulled a dog-eared map from his desk drawer. Robey stopped him by placing a hand on Jules' arm.

"Shows?" Robey stuck his thumbs in his red suspenders. "We can't do any shows. Not without the Big Top that burned down..." The clown inclined his head ever so slightly toward Evangeline.

Jules winced at the look on Evangeline's face. Why was it that helping these kids tended to cost his circus so much?

The Pickled Punk belched, and everyone turned to look at the oracle-in-a-jar.

"Got another psychic hit." The Punk slammed a tiny fist between his eyes. "This Dante kid could be the saving of Circus Lunastrata, but going to get him might tear the whole business apart forever."

Wally shifted uncomfortably at that news, and Jules caught it.

"Dante who?" Robey asked.

Jules quickly filled him in.

Robey's voice rose to a higher pitch. "Why risk it? Word's already going 'round that Lunastrata's cursed 'cos we performed without the Big Top to raise bail money back in July. There's been some *strange* goings on around here, let me tell you. Unless Dante Delgado has a spare circus tent lying around, I don't see how we can get him right now."

"But how can we just ignore the summons?" Evangeline cried. "What would've happened if you all had decided not to rescue *me*?"

Jules studied the wallpaper and struggled to keep a blank face. She'd hit a nerve. If they hadn't gone to Florida in June, the circus would still have its magical Big Top, but Evangeline would be dead. Of course, her life had been imperiled more than once since coming to Lunastrata...

"You're taking your chances with us now, kid." Jules grinned at her.

The Pickled Punk waved his baby arms. "I'm seein' something, I'm seein' something." Wait,

wait. It might be a Big Top. It's kinda vague. I think there's a chance that rescuing this new kid will somehow bring us a new Big Top."

Robey crossed his arms and scowled.

"No new kid, no new Big Top," the Punk repeated.

"No shows en route, no new kid." Jules waved his hand toward the punk and the candy tin. "All signs point toward going to rescue Dante Delgado."

"We can do it," asserted Evangeline. "Especially with my new bareback act. The circus is only cursed if we believe it is. Circus Lunastrata *is* Circus Lunastrata because of the Ringmaster's dream to make it a circus family, to provide a home for teenagers, like me, with nowhere else to go."

Despite his best efforts, Jules choked up a bit.

Robey shoved his baseball cap backwards on his head, revealing a combination of shiny scalp and wire-gray hair with a mind of its own. "It's your circus, Jules."

If only that were true. Jules slowly closed his eyes, indulging in a brief respite before opening them again. He belonged to Lunastrata, not the other way around. "We roll in the morning. Give the order, Robey."

"Aye aye, Captain." The clown sent him a sad wink on his way out the door.

After returning the candy tin to its hiding place in Jules' bedroom, Evangeline and Wally clasped hands, making their way to the exit.

It was now or never. Jules forced out the words, "Hold on a sec, Walter."

The teen reluctantly let loose of Evangeline's fingers. The girl briefly narrowed her eyes with concern. "See you later," she called, and bounded down the stairs.

Wally watched her go then spun around to face him. "Yes, sir?"

Jules cleared his throat. "I need to speak with you."

Chapter Two

HAUNTED BARN

“Sit down, son.”

The Ringmaster cleared his throat, again, and Wally stood by awkwardly as his boss poured mint tea into a cup and raised it somewhat shakily to his lips. Wally sat on the edge of the loveseat.

Man, asking for money must really embarrass Compere. That had to be what this was about.

“It’s no big deal,” Wally said. “Really.”

Compere did a spit take onto some loose papers on his desk. A display that was totally unlike his usual debonair self.

Wow, the Ringmaster was really uptight.

While Compere located a handkerchief and began mopping up the small amount of liquid, Wally tried to explain, “I prefer not to put any charges on my dad’s card. A zero balance kinda says ‘fuck you,’ doesn’t it? But if we need to pay for the calliope, then we need to. It’s okay, Mr. Compere.”

The Ringmaster dabbed his lips, compressing them into a slim smile. “It pleases me to hear you say, ‘we.’ Wally, I want you to know the circus, and I especially, appreciate your generosity. Not only for the special expenses, but for all the high quality groceries you pay for too.”

Compere began to twiddle his thumbs. The man was so anxious it was contagious.

Wally allowed a nervous laugh to escape. “A charge from Mike’s Mechanical Musical Instrument Restoration oughtta make my dad go ‘what the fuck?’ He only gives me the card to try and buy my loyalty, you know.”

“That’s two F-words in under two minutes.” After reaching into a drawer, Compere flung a booklet at him. “There’s another list of magic words to improve your vocabulary. Memorize them.”

Wally folded the pamphlet, rising off the cushion just enough to stick it in the back pocket of his jeans.

“Sorry. It’s just that my dad is such an assho—cus pocus.” Wally hastily changed verbal course after a glance at the Ringmaster’s face.

Compere’s voice deepened. “Has there been any word from your mother?”

“No.” Wally choked.

“I am sorry.” Compere sipped his tea. “However, that brings up a point. Since I am *de facto in loco parentis*, I feel the need for you and I to discuss a topic that both of us would probably prefer not to talk about.”

Uh-oh. Wally forced himself backward into the loveseat so he didn’t fall off.

“I’d like to speak man to man about personal relationships and er, responsibilities,” Compere said.

Despite his effort, Wally felt himself oozing down and half off the sofa. If only he could roll underneath it and hide. He couldn’t look the man in the eye. Compere was going to give him “the talk?” Seriously? He wanted to curl up and die.

No wonder Compere was so tense.

Apparently, Wally’s body language wasn’t enough to stop the Ringmaster from talking. The showman went on and on about risks and preventions and...

Please, make it stop.

Wally searched his memory for a magic word that would make someone shut up. He failed. He’d actually read the book of magic words in his pocket this time, but for now he’d have to listen. Compere droned on. Wally kept his eyes shut.

“...but Wally, I’m afraid I’ve saved the worst for last.”

Wally took a chance and opened his eyes. “Are we still talking about STDs?”

“No.”

“Good.”

“I hope you think so in a minute.” The Ringmaster’s voice had taken on a slight quaver, which worried Wally. Compere was a man who faced chaos and catastrophe with cool-headedness.

Wally admired him for it. Wanted to be more like him.

If they weren’t discussing pregnancy and disease anymore, then Compere should be less nervous, not more. What the heck was wrong now?

Compere kept on talking and Wally kept on half-listening.

“...it gets in your blood. There’s nothing you can do.”

Wally sat up. “Sex?”

The Ringmaster sighed. “Circus magic.”

A bead of cold sweat ran down Wally’s spine. His breath caught. *The worst for last.*

All of a sudden Wally didn’t want to know what Compere was talking about.

Despite Wally's wishes, Compere continued, "When a member of the Center Ring is forced to leave Lunastrata, an inescapable depression sets in, a melancholy so vicious the exile sickens." Compere coughed. "And dies."

"Huh?"

"This is what is happening to Hurleigh O'Quinn right now." His voice fell to a murmur. "There's nothing I can do."

Wally's thoughts spun faster and faster. Hurleigh had been a trusted member of the Center Ring, yet he'd been secretly working with Patrona, Compere's aunt—who felt she should have inherited the Ju-Ju by birthright—to ruin Circus Lunastrata. Hurleigh had nearly gotten Evangeline killed, so he deserved what was in store for him, but still.

Wally shuddered.

The Ringmaster took another sip of tea and briefly shuttered his gaze. "If you or Evangeline try and leave, it will happen to you. I'm sorry."

He couldn't believe what the Ringmaster had said. *It couldn't be true.*

"Wally, did you hear me? I need you to share this information with Evangeline."

Shock shrunk Wally's vocabulary down to nothing. "Yes, sir," he barely whispered.

Wally stumbled down the iron steps at the rear of the Ringmaster's trailer. He'd already been told last summer, after he'd eaten that shitty, enchanted circus peanut, that he could never leave the circus. It had ruined *everything*.

He could never form a band. Never find his mom.

Never go home again.

Wally had managed to keep a semi-permanent panic attack at bay by not thinking about it. His existence before Evan's arrival had been more of a living death, a half-life, anyway.

But...

Actual. Fucking. Death?

No way.

A huge black reality-wave crashed over him then receded. The Pickled Punk had mentioned something about the circus falling apart if they went to get this Delgado guy. Did Wally dare hope?

He'd be free then, right?

A second black wave, swollen with guilt, flooded his thoughts. He felt like a turncoat even wishing for a second that Circus Lunastrata would go out of business. This place was Evangeline's hard won home. The bareback horses carried all of her dreams for the future.

Evangeline loved Circus Lunastrata.

After he'd traveled about twenty feet across the graveled parking lot filled with vintage circus trucks, Evan skipped to his side. He had to remember to call her Evangeline. That's what she wanted. It was a beautiful name—the stage name had even been his idea—just not what he'd called her when he'd first met her in June. She must've been waiting for him to come out of the Ringmaster's trailer.

Sweet. And cute. And hot.

And the last person he wanted to see right now.

He doubted he could look her in the eye. She'd know something was up, if she couldn't tell already from his face. So perceptive, that one. She fascinated and unnerved him at the same time. She laid bare his every secret. He looked down at his sneakers as he kept walking.

"So?" She beamed up at him.

Keep looking at your shoes, dude. "Uh, so what?"

"What did the Ringmaster want to talk to you about?" She touched his arm. Her index finger accidentally tickled the area just inside his elbow, sending a sensation straight down to his navel. Damn.

"Nothing much, really."

"Is it something you can tell me? We tell each other everything."

Not hardly. He took a deep breath.

A quick glance at her face told him she felt shut out by his private audience with the Ringmaster. Compere, in fact, had asked Wally to share the particulars of their discussion with her, everything except the credit card part, which Compere considered personal.

If he tried to tell her right now, the words would clog his throat. Choke him to death. He sped up his steps.

"Wally." She trotted to keep up. "Come on. What's going on?"

"Compere asked for another loan. A big one." He tried to walk even faster, but she grabbed his arm, spinning him around to face her. He determinedly studied the dirt.

"That hasn't upset you that much before. Is your dad going to cancel the card?"

Wally shrugged. He had no way of knowing what his father might do at any given time. "It's hard to see the Ringmaster beg."

Evangeline pursed her lips, making him long to plant a lengthy kiss on them. He held himself back. Damn again. “That’s not all of it though, is it? Did he say any more about going to rescue this Dante guy? I mentioned performing four shows on the way because we’re not making any money sitting here at the Farm. Did he like my idea?”

“Guess so. He really didn’t say.”

Her voice grew louder. “If we can pull it off, it’s a fantastic idea. Only, I have next to no clue how a circus works... I just wish I was more confident.” A look crossed her face that told him she’d said more than she’d intended. She switched gears. “But the Ringmaster said something else. Something that upset you.”

Wally kept his gaze steady on the pebbles at his feet.

“You’re not going to tell me, are you?” She let go of his arm. Cool air replaced where her warm fingers had been.

He should change the subject. Fast. “Uh, have you noticed anything kinda strange going on around here, lately? Weirder than usual, I mean?”

She gave him a teasing grin. “Your soup had way too much pepper in it. That’s not like you.”

He just couldn’t talk right now. And she’d mentioned the soup—embarrassing situation number one today—and with her usual uncanny perception, had put her finger right on one of the strange goings on.

“It wasn’t me,” he said.

“But, you made the soup?”

Wally took a step backward. “That’s the thing, see. I’m chopping celery when the can of black pepper rises into the air and dumps itself in the soup. There wasn’t time to start another pot.”

A hint of a smile quirked her lips. “Wait a minute. You only use fresh ground pepper.”

“Out of peppercorns.” He took another step backward. “Can’t justify the expense when there’s cans of already-ground stuff around.”

“That fly into the air by themselves?” Her smile deepened.

He leaned back on his heels. “Yes.”

“I don’t know what’s funnier. You using canned pepper, or you talking about magic.” She laughed good-naturedly, and he could tell she meant to jolly him out of his mood. Normally, it would’ve worked.

“Gotta go.”

Shit. He hadn’t intended that to sound so curt.

Her face crinkled in confusion.

“Are you coming to the Tiny Trailer tonight to hang out?” The petite Airstream was her home away from home on the road and her private oasis here at the Farm. Lately, it had become their hideaway make-out spot. He’d thought of it as private, anyway, until quite recently.

Wally froze. Words lumped in his throat, dry as overcooked pork.

“You know what?” She kept going toward the Midway and didn’t look back. “Don’t bother.”

Fuck. He kicked the ground.

He’d been headed to the big kitchen in The Midway, his domain here at the Farm, but since Evangeline’s trajectory lay in the direction of that shabby Victorian mansion, he abruptly changed tack. Some time alone in the circus barn sounded great right now.

Dark and cool, the cavernous space offered relief and solitude. His footfalls were silenced by the woody tanbark. Next to the practice ring, the actual performance ringcurb had been stacked in curving pieces like a plate of enormous, star-spangled spare ribs. A barely discernible glow emanated from the pile. Perhaps the stars had been painted with glow-in-the-dark paint or something.

The ersatz structure invited him to sit on it, so he did. He rubbed his hand across the top section. Made of wood and paint, the ringcurb nevertheless hummed beneath his fingers almost as if it generated electricity of its own. That was impossible, of course.

But like so much of what he encountered here at Lunastrata, he was forced to acknowledge realities that did not conform to his understanding of the physical world, like, at all. He found himself saying “whatever” a lot, and focusing on getting the meals cooked, keeping the refrigerator stocked, and on the constant challenge of getting the Ringmaster to use the B-word. *Budget.*

In Wally’s previous life, he was used to being the way weirdest thing around. Here, he was the straight man with black hair and a raven tattoo on the back of his hand. *Poor little rich kid*, she’d said, and it was true. Everything at Lunastrata was just so goddamn strange. Except for Evangeline.

And he’d blown it. All because of what the Ringmaster had said. He smacked his palm down on the ringcurb. Sparks flew out around his fingers.

“Weird,” a voice behind him stole the word right out of his mind.

Johnny Dodge—boy-band blond, I-broke-out-of-juvie badass—appeared out of the shadows. Dodge was caretaker of the circus’ single elephant, Prince Solomon, who also happened to be a talking elephant.

Whatever.

“You’re out of your element,” Dodge said.

“Tell me about it.” Worried about Evangeline, Wally didn’t feel the inclination to play verbal lightsabers with Dodge.

“By element, I meant kitchen.” Dodge sat down next to him and smacked his palm on the top section of ring curb. “Look. Doesn’t happen when I do it.”

“Yeah. Weird. Whatever.” Maybe if Wally were boring, Dodge would leave him alone.

Dodge continued in an uncharacteristically pleasant tone, “I don’t see you in here very often, unless you’re watching Evangeline practice her bareback riding.”

On a horse, Evangeline was a shooting star, a symphony, a shredding guitar solo. She was fucking amazing. To think that just a few months ago she’d been too terrified to even get on a horse.

Picturing her angry and walking away, Wally twisted his hands through his hair.

Dodge cocked his head. “Trouble in paradise?”

“Rather not discuss it.”

“Yeah, well, I noticed you were in the Ringmaster’s trailer, like, a really long time.”

Ah, here it was. Wally exhaled slowly. He didn’t know how or why it happened, but a kind of rivalry for the Ringmaster’s attention had mushroomed between him and Dodge almost as soon as Wally had arrived at Lunastrata.

Wally didn’t foster it. He and Dodge hadn’t hit it off from the start, and things had gotten worse from there. After they’d gone to Las Vegas to help get Evan out of Cirque Patrona after she’d been kidnapped, they’d reached a truce of sorts. Wally was eager to keep it that way.

He stared directly into Dodge’s feline green eyes. Luckily, he was immune to the effect they had on most the girls here. “Compere needed money. For the calliope.” Wally stood up. “So now you know.”

“Now I know.” Dodge narrowed his eyes and leaned back, lounging on the stacked curb rings. “Still weird to see you in here, unless you and Evangeline are heading to the Love Shack.” He inclined his head toward the Tiny Trailer parked in the far corner of the barn. He sing-songed, “If the trailer’s a rocking, don’t come a knocking...”

“Stop.” Wally raised his voice. “You all need to stop. Right now.”

“You ALL?” Dodge said with amusement.

“You. The Ringmaster.” He raked his messed up hair back from his forehead. “Crapacadabra, he gave me the fucking *talk*.”

“The talk about fucking?” Dodge erupted, laughing so hard he came close to falling off the stack.

His laughter was nearly drowned out by that of Prince Solomon, the heretofore mentioned talking elephant, who joined them hoping, no doubt, to make more mirth at Wally's expense. It was Solly, after all, who'd coined Wally's hated nickname, Count Spatula.

Solly placed an affectionate trunk upon Dodge's shoulder. "Oh, to have been a fly on the flocked velvet wallpaper," the elephant said, referring to the décor in Compere's trailer.

"SHUT UP." Wally spun away, afraid they'd see how red his face must be right now. "We're not even..."

"Doing it?" Dodge laughed harder. "Dude, seeing you guys, everybody assumes—"

"Everybody, *dude*," Solly chimed in.

Wally rolled his eyes at the "dude" talk. The pair of them loved to mock Wally's California origins.

And, it wasn't that Wally didn't want to do those types of things with Evangeline, he did. A lot. But he didn't want anyone else besides Evangeline thinking about him doing those things. He didn't want to freaking discuss it.

Wally could not believe this shit. "It's none of *everybody's* fucking business!"

"The business of...?" Solly began.

Wally shot him a death glare, and for once, Solly actually stopped speaking.

Dodge's face contorted into a teasing mock-leer. "So why *aren't* you doing it?"

"Stop." Wally lowered his voice threateningly. "Every freaking person in this circus needs to leave me and her alone. Or get a life. Seriously."

Dodge sobered suddenly. "Ya know, Sol. He's right. If it was just Winstanley, we could bust his chops, but Evangeline's special. She deserves better."

Dodge wandered over to the giant stack of hay bales. He cut one open and carried several flakes over to where the elephant ate and slept. Prince Solomon followed at once, leaving Wally blessedly alone.

She deserves better. Trust Dodge to get in a parting shot that could be taken two ways. Wally was only too aware that he wasn't good enough for her.

Yeah, he came from money, lots of it—too much. His upbringing in the land of extreme privilege had only served to make him feel like an unworthy fraud.

He could retreat to his food truck for a little bit while he figured out what to do. Play a little guitar. Then maybe tweak the macaroni and Irish white cheddar recipe he was toying with. As long as he stuck close to basic carny comfort food, the troops were happy. He congratulated himself on making those as

delicious and unusual as he could, while still keeping his job. Maybe someday, *in his lifelong banishment to the circus*, he'd put out a gourmet carny food cookbook.

Shit, he'd said crapacadabra in front of Dodge. Funny, ever since the Ringmaster had given him that slim volume of magic words to use instead of swearing—had *ordered* him to use it—the word combinations he'd come up with, at first to annoy Compere then because they were fun, were now a habit.

An even more compact volume titled *Advanced Magic Words*, with an even hokier cover, was at this moment folded in the back pocket of his black jeans. Compere handed it to him on his way out of the trailer after their chat. Wally barely comprehended being given it.

Did the book mean Compere expected him to make more effort to control his swearing? Or were the books of magic words somehow related to why his hand created sparks on the ringcurb and Dodge's didn't? What did the Ringmaster see in him? He shook out his hair. *Whatever*. He really did not want to know. He started for the exit.

Overhead, something whistled and swooshed through the air, falling fast. Instinct made Wally duck, so when the net landed over him he was crouched down like a snared tiger.

"What the...?" Dodge came running.

In his corner, Solly kept on eating.

"It fell." Wally pointed out what was clearly in evidence.

"It shouldn't have." Dodge also stated the obvious. The nets for the traps were always securely fastened whether they were in place for use or being stowed. Always. Rigging safety, *all* safety under the Big Top, was first priority under Jules Compere's command.

"You sure?" Wally didn't care for being netted while Dodge stood over him like he was on fucking safari.

"I stowed it myself after the Russians practiced on the trampolines this morning. I used every single carabineer, like always. This is really weird." Dodge crossed his arms in thought.

Wally lifted the net away from his face. "Do you think you can get it off me?"

"Oh. Yeah sure." Dodge rolled up the expanse of netting until Wally could scramble out. "Sorry, Winstanley."

A meaningful glance accompanied the apology. The first he'd ever gotten from Dodge. It had nothing to do with the net.

Wordlessly, Wally helped fold then carry the safety net to the wall where he assisted in hoisting it

up the ladder while Dodge secured it once again. Solly didn't lift a trunk to help.

"Dude," Dodge said when they'd finished. "What's for dinner?"

"Nitrate-free organic sausages dipped in a polenta batter and fried." Wally headed toward the wide barn door.

"What?"

Wally halted. "Corn dogs."

"With ketchup?"

He sighed. "Yeah. Homemade."

"Sweet."

Before Wally could make his exit, a sudden chill lifted goose bumps on his right arm. Weird, the cold air felt more like a *presence* than a slight breeze. But that was stupid.

He darted out of the gloomy barn, grateful for once to be in the sunshine but still no closer to being able to look Evangeline in the face. And he owed her an apology too. How was he going to explain?

Everything felt wrong. Time to get lost in some loud guitar until he had to go make dinner. He beelined to where his food truck was parked. Evangeline's Tiny Trailer was her sanctuary, and Wally's food truck was his. His electronics, his guitar and amp, his clothes, stayed in his truck whether or not the circus was on the road.

He pushed all of the crazy reality of Circus Lunastrata from his mind by fantasizing about his future band. Every great band had a great name. He could start there. His mind was a whirl as he opened the fridge to grab a mineral water, moving aside a bowl of gravy gone fuzzy with mold. If he ate that, he might die.

Shit, he'd been so worried about keeping everyone happy and fed in the Midway's kitchen that he'd forgotten to clean out his truck fridge.

Death Gravy. *Band name.*

Laughing, he picked up his guitar.