

# RING RIDER

The Enchanted Circus of Jules Compere

BOOK ONE



JANE GEORGE

Beeswax  
Books

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JOHN BURNINGHAM

In gratitude for your picture book, CANNONBALL SIMP, which left a  
profound and lasting effect upon my childhood imagination.



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BOOK ONE


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The Enchanted CIRCUS  
of Jules Compere





## 1 THE CALLIOPE SINGS

 light breeze, borne by the euphonious breath of the steam-powered calliope and not by the elements, blew the Ringmaster's hair across his forehead. Jules acknowledged the summons, the secret music. He lifted his top hat, smoothed his hair, then set the hat firmly atop his head. His circus had an enchanted way of communicating its needs to him. Something was up. Something big. He must seek out the Panhandle Prophet for a chat.

Still, he lingered near the shabby velvet curtains at the Back Door, the performer's entrance to the Big Top, and scrutinized the new unitards worn by the acrobats. Rich, blood-toned rubies, emeralds like snakes' eyes, ocean-blue sapphires, and glittering diamonds—all fake of course—covered the performers from head to toe. The corner of his mouth lifted ever so slightly.

Robey appeared at the Ringmaster's side, huffing and puffing, attired in his clownish finery. Moments later a donkey, dressed much the same, joined him.

Jules leaned toward the old clown. "What do you think?"

"About that noise the calliope just made?" Robey appeared half-interested in his boss's question as he made a last-minute adjustment to the spangled surcingle buckled around the donkey's belly.

"No, no. What do you think about the acrobats' new costumes?" The

Ringmaster gestured toward the gravity-defying formation of humans taking shape in the ring. “Their new act is called The Tower of Jewels. The unitards are most impressive, conceptually speaking.”

Robey looked up, his impatience to be in the ring written in every wrinkle on his road-weary face. “I think the unitards cost too much.”

“The acrobats need impressive costumes. The ringcurb magic doesn’t have the same effect if they don’t have a *donvrai*, now does it?”

“Shhh, no such talk where anyone can hear.” Robey cued the donkey to enter the ring on the last notes of the acrobats’ music, played by the somewhat bohemian circus band. “You’d better go talk to The Prophet now. Maybe he’ll know how we can save this tour.”

The Ringmaster could form no words due to the lump in his throat. Robey was correct. His beloved circus was in deep financial trouble.

“Go on, now,” Robey called over his shoulder while trotting out into the spotlights and applause. “Try and be back for the Blow Off.”

Jules bit back the impulse to reply with sarcasm. Blow Offs were for Sideshow. In his circus there was no Sideshow; he was adamant about that. Sideshow had led to Grandpère Zazar’s ruination. Besides, it belonged to the past. Audiences weren’t interested. Attracting patrons to the circus was hard enough.

But he smiled as he left the Big Top to search out the Prophet. Robey, his dear old friend and advisor, had been trying to get his goat.

Which reminded him, he’d had a dream recently about a fantastic act of flying goats. What a crowd pleaser that would be! As he strode across the grounds to his trailer—an old converted train car—he made mental notes on goat choreography and costumes. He stroked his pointed beard with two fingers. Feathers, there must be feathers. Long ones. In his dream, the goats looked as if they were having a grand time. Only goats that loved to fly would be considered.

Yes, yes, that would be fantastic. He hung up his performance coat in a tall, glass-fronted cabinet and set his top hat above. By the time he sat down at his roll-top desk, he was completely absorbed and had forgotten why he had left the circus tent in the middle of a performance and come to his trailer in the first place.

The industrious scritch-scratch of pencil upon notepad was interrupted by a loud gurgling voice, "Jules..."

The Ringmaster continued to write. An epiphany regarding the goat act lurked just beyond the ringcurb of his mind, out of the spotlight.

"Open the nightstand, Jules."

He poured some now tepid ginger mint tea and kept on documenting his dream. Were nannies or billies better suited for performance? He supposed he'd leave that up to the individual goat.

"Jules! You heard the calliope. GET IN HERE."

The Ringmaster put down his pencil and tucked a rogue strand of hair behind his ear. Oh. Right. Abandoning the brilliant aerial goat act, he headed through the train car and into his bedchamber.

He sat on the corner of his bed, running his fingers over the crimson brocade coverlet in nervous anticipation. What was the Prophet going to reveal? Based on past experience, it was sure to involve change, hassle, and an expensive need to gas up all the trucks. After a few minutes, Jules opened the doors to his bedside cabinet.

He didn't wait for the voice to speak. "You know there's a show in progress, right? What's so important?"

"There's another one."

More responsibility. His nerves jangled like a tambourine. Jules shot to his feet and paced at the foot of the bed. "It has been a while since the last one. But the coffers are low, low, low. Can't we finish out the show here, then head to Indianapolis and do the shows there first? That way we can make payroll."

"This one's bad. I feel it," the voice said, resonate and loud from inside the nightstand.

Resigned, Jules steeped his hands against his forehead. "Where are we headed and when?"

"You think I know everything?" gurgled the Prophet. "Ask the frickin' Ju-Ju already."

The Ringmaster fetched his deceased Grandpère's most magical object from its hiding place, opened the tin, and scattered the contents upon the bed. Over time he'd become adept at reading the messages therein.

He sat down hard on the bed, and the Ju-Ju bounced around. "You're

right. It's bad. If we don't rescue the girl the same night the three magic words are uttered, there's a good chance she could die at the hands of others."

"And when will that be, oh Wise One?" The Prophet was back to his usual snarky self, which meant he was confident Jules was on board with the mission.

Jules heaved a sigh. "Tomorrow."

"And where will that be, oh Wise—"

"Knock it off." Jules squinted at the magical object he'd unwisely rearranged by sitting on the bed. "Uh, Florida. Gator Glades, Florida."

The voice took on a business-like tone. "That's twenty hours away. The timing is critical with this one. We have to leave tonight."

Jules stifled a groan and wished he'd added a shot of his favorite single malt to the ginger mint tea. This spur-of-the-moment sojourn to Florida was going to make him very unpopular with most of the circus performers. The roustabouts would need to strike grounds and pack up right after tonight's show. But none of that mattered if he could save this girl.

"If you head back to the Big Top right now, you'll make the Blow Off," the voice added and then made gum-smacking noises.

"Call it a finale." Jules raised his hands over his head as he exited the room. "We don't do a Blow Off!"

The Prophet's sarcastic cackle followed Jules out of the trailer and into the night.

## 2 GATOR GLADES

**T**van needed a magic word strong enough to stop the yelling. No other words had ever worked. If the screaming didn't end, she might implode. Panicky, out of options, she grasped at miracles from half-remembered fairy tales.

She searched her memory for a word that would transport her hundreds of miles from the Gator Glades Trailer Park and her latest parental units at foster house Number Eight. The words, "I'm sorry," just made them nastier, and she would never have the nerve to scream, "shut up," the way she'd wanted to so many times.

"Worthless kid!" The dish drainer hit the wall, hurled by her foster mother—who was high again.

"Abracadabra," Evan whispered. She moved her lips as little as possible, and as each syllable left her mouth she sadly hoped for some kind of miraculous rescue.

No good.

"What?" Barbara's voice cut, and Evan's shoulders inched higher. The dish drainer had left a dent in the shiny, vinyl wallpaper printed with smiling daisies. "Why do I even have this piece of junk if you don't wash any dishes?"

Evan squeezed her eyes tight then opened them as she said, "Hocus Pocus." She waited a second, but as a magic word, it was useless.

Wild-eyed, Barbara peered at Evan as if she were the crazy one here. "Wash that pan and heat some soup for dinner, you useless stick."

Barbara's reddened nose and the dark circles under her eyes made her look like an evil clown as she came closer. Spiked blond hair added to the effect. Her breath reeked of fermented potatoes and burned-down house, with an added hint of something akin to the frog Evan had dissected last year in Bio class.

When Barbara and Gary got to be too much to take, Evan usually went for a walk. But today she hadn't escaped fast enough.

She shuddered, and Barbara saw it. Evan forced her hands to stay at her sides. If she made any protective gestures, Barbara was sure to hit her with a mean left.

Barbara's face hovered just inches away.

Evan pulled out one more magic word from a faraway time when she'd owned a raggedy pink tutu and a doll to match. "Bibbidy-bobbidy-boo."

"You're a freak!" screamed Barbara.

"Shut up!" Evan shouted back. "Just SHUT UP!" The words were out before she could clamp them down.

"You little..." The closed-fisted punch followed Barbara's words like thunder after lightning. Evan's head smacked the wallpaper, pain exploded behind her eyes, and she slid to the floor. Barbara wavered overhead as Evan struggled to see straight and not vomit. Few cardinal rules existed in Barbara and Gary's mobile home, but not puking inside was one of the biggest.

"Stop staring at me all goo-goo eyed. Get up and do something useful." Barbara jammed her pointy shoe into Evan's thigh.

Gary stumbled into view. "Why'd ya go and hit her in the face? You know she's not half bad lookin." He leered at her.

The pit of Evan's stomach froze, sending frost tendrils along the muscles of her arms and legs. She gaped at him in disbelief. Could this foster placement possibly get any worse?

Yes, it could. The creep actually licked his lips. "You're no princess. I've seen you going off with those boys."

Because she'd gone out with a few guys to get a couple hugs and kind words she was fair game? Ew!

Barbara turned to pummel Gary, then hesitated, instead grabbing an iron

frying pan. Amid the shrieking, Evan pulled herself to her hands and knees. It was only a matter of time before Barbara turned her focus from Gary to the object of Gary's interest. Her.

As if on cue, Barbara yelled, "You look at her like that again, and I'll bash her pretty little head in!"

The door was open. Evan just had to push aside the screen door. And run.

But her legs quivered. Crap, she was going to puke.

Fast as a lizard scuttling off a hot garbage can lid, she launched out the door and down the metal steps. Wet grass met her face, and she hurled up what was left of her long-ago lunch of boxed macaroni and cheese. Neon orange. Nice.

Her head throbbed to the banging inside the trailer.

She stood, shaking, and met the wide eyes of the ten year-old, redheaded boy next door. She looked at his bike then back to him. Desperate, she was still too much of a chicken to just grab the kid's bike and run. Maybe she deserved to be stuck here at Lot 26, Gator Glades Parkway, living life as Gary and Barbara's doormat.

The banging grew louder, closer to the door. The kid turned and ran inside his own trailer.

Evan sprang toward the kid's bike. Her heart hammered in her ears, adding to the pounding of her head. At least the bicycle wasn't a horse. Since the incident at foster home Number Three when she was six, horses scared her stupid.

Mounting the getaway vehicle, her feet slipped then found the pedals. The fat tires squished through the grass. With a few determined pumps, she veered out of the Gator Glades Trailer Park and towards downtown. She'd been attending the eleventh grade here for a few weeks, her fourth school so far this year.

Spring semester would end in a week. Finals were over. No one would miss her.

Well, maybe the guy from English she'd made out with at that insanely stupid end-of-year assembly last Thursday. He might pine all summer.

Her heart remained secure as a bank vault; she only went out with guys who were cute but who would never come close to setting off a love alarm, or even an infatuation warning.

She was sixteen—seventeen at the end of July—old enough to drop out. She was still young enough to steal something big and get sent to juvie. Maybe she should get out of this system and into another one?

It wasn't like all eight previous faux parental units were horrible; the first few she couldn't remember, and Number Six had been great. But that hadn't lasted.

After parking the bike out of sight near the bridge, Evan gazed into the glorious flamingo-colored Floridian sunset. She had no place to go. And no money. She shoved her hands inside the pocket of her sweatshirt.

The dusky sky deepened to dark coral. One of her favorite colors. This was her first sunset as a free person. She could feel her eye swelling. It stung.

No one was going to hit her again. Ever.

Suddenly it didn't matter that she had nothing and nowhere to go. She wasn't going back to the Gator Glades Trailer Park. Or any other foster home either. She was done with all that. From now on she was a grown up. On her own. She'd figure it out.

The lights of a convenience store on the other side of the bridge beckoned to her in the approaching twilight. Her worn sneakers made little noise as she crossed the textured metal bridge. Marsh gases rose up from below along with a few runaway fireflies blinking on and off like her wavering optimism.

In front of the glass double door to the mini-mart, Evan hesitated. The smell of warm coffee and donuts wafted from inside, mocking her desire for unattainable things such as comfort and home.

Who was she kidding? Committing a crime to get arrested wasn't her style. She'd survived this long mostly by being unnoticeable. Gary had noticed her, in the worst possible way. She was lucky to be out here, alone and friendless.

She left the door and went around back where the space between the dumpster and the wall would hide her from the street and any curious store employees.

The garbage made her nauseated. She sank to the blacktop and huddled against the wall. Evan was done feeling. The hard reality of the concrete block wall faded away, remote and abstract. She pulled her hood over her head and promised herself never to set foot in another trailer home. Never ever.



Hours and hours later, when the mini-mart was as dark as the moonless night, Evan woke to a persistent squeaking that sounded like rats. She jumped up.

And scared a fat man in funny clothes off his unicycle. He bounced against the dumpster and landed a few feet away. The single wheel spun, useless, in the air. It squeaked. Not rats after all. The man lay there gaping at her as if he expected her to extend a helping hand. Barely awake, confused, Evan shrunk into the shadows. All she needed to top off her day was to be accosted by some fat weirdo in a back alley.

“You are Evanja Leane, aren’t you?”

A weirdo who knew her even weirder white trash name. “Who wants to know?”

“I’m Robey.” He got to his feet. “The clown.”

A clown. Evan sized up her chances of escape.

The man’s jowls jiggled on either side of his face like an old basset hound’s, and his gray hair frizzed wildly below his baseball cap. “I’m with Circus Lunastrata. We’re in town for the weekend. And you have an appointment with the Ringmaster.”

“The what?”

He regarded her with his hound dog eyes. “You said three corny old magic words then somebody called you a freak, yes?”

Did this mean she was a freak? Bad enough when Barbara said it. After a bit of quick consideration, she figured she was like the seedlings in her science project, stunted because they’d been transplanted too many times. She was too unremarkable to be truly freaky.

A car drove past the store and rattled over the bridge. Were Barbara and Gary out searching for her?

“Whatever,” she answered and shrugged deeper into her sweatshirt.

“And whoever it was hit you...” Robey tut-tutted. “We should have driven faster. The Ringmaster won’t be at all pleased.” He picked up his unicycle and leaned it against the rusty dumpster.

“Why should this Ringmaster care?” Hunger and the thanks-to-Barbara headache frazzled her patience.

Robey’s eyes grew soft and moist. “That’s his own tale to tell, my girl. But

the magic combination of words has been uttered and you have an appointment with the Ringmaster, should you choose to keep it.”

He made a sweeping bow toward his unicycle.

Evan’s empty stomach slithered around on itself like a python. “You did say *magic words*?”

Robey nodded. “Coupled with, ‘you’re a freak.’ The charmed combo.”

Evan held onto the dumpster. Had some supernatural power heard her thoughts? Could she trust this funny old guy enough to go off somewhere to meet another man who may not be funny or old? A man who didn’t go by a normal name, but called himself The Ringmaster?

Robey smiled at her as if she were three years old. “Come along.”

She pulled back her hood and returned her hands to her sweatshirt pocket. “Who’s to say you’re not some old perv?” Her breaths came fast and shallow.

“Ah, you’ve got a spine somewhere inside that baggy sweatshirt.”

With her balled fists, she pushed the cotton fabric away from her body. It was none of his business what she had inside her sweatshirt. “The whole thing sounds kinda bizarre.”

“It’s an opportunity offered to only a handful. Not to be missed.” The clown scratched the stubble on his double chin. “Besides, it’d be sad to go through life and never find your donvrai, your true gift.”

What did he mean? Evan was suddenly so hungry she couldn’t think.

Her stomach gave her an idea. “Listen Robey, do you know the twenty-four hour diner over on Fifth and Mesa?” Robey nodded. “Tell the Ringmaster I’ll meet him there in half an hour. Inside. At a table. And he’s buying me breakfast.”

Like a ventriloquist’s dummy, the clown’s jaw fell as his eyebrows rose. He pulled a clown-nose-red cell phone out of his pocket and stepped aside, murmuring in a low voice for a couple minutes before hanging up.

“He’ll do it,” Robey said. “Be on time. The Ringmaster hates to be kept waiting.”

He grabbed his unicycle by the seat and bounced the tire on the blacktop. After mounting with more ease than she expected from someone his age, Robey squeaked around the corner of the convenience store and out of sight.

Evan let out the breath she'd been holding.

How was she going to get to the other side of town in half an hour? She'd have to use the neighbor kid's bike again. How scary could riding to the diner in the dark be? Not as bad as the time at foster home Number Four when the neighbor kid shoved her head-first into a sleeping bag and wouldn't let her out. Or when foster dad Number Three left her in a locked car at night outside his favorite bar.

Being grown up meant exploring opportunities that came your way, right? It also meant feeding yourself.

She wiped her hands on her jeans and went to retrieve the bike.

Forty-five minutes later, she leaned the bike against the phony brick exterior of the restaurant. Inside, the bleary-eyed hostess gave Evan's bruised face an extra glance, but that was all. A few late-night patrons sat scattered throughout the restaurant. The bars must be closed. She half expected Gary and Barbara to appear in search of strong coffee and a runaway foster kid.

Evan spotted Robey in a corner booth near the rear. A man sat with him, his back to her, wearing a long, hooded, dark gray cape that was almost black. The hood was pulled up. This was the mysterious Ringmaster? From behind he looked more like a debonair Grim Reaper.

Her steps slowed upon the dingy linoleum. She was getting too close to turn around. Soon Robey would see her and—

"Miss Evanja, we've been waiting for you." Robey quirked his bushy brows.

The man in the cape drummed elegant fingers on the tabletop. A cup of black coffee sat steaming in front of him.

"Slide in here," said Robey.

Evan sat and looked into the face of the Ringmaster. What she could see of it, anyway. The man had pulled his hood so far forward only his goateed chin, the tip of his well-formed nose, and the glint in his eyes were visible.

"Good morning, Evanja Leane," he said in a low, melodious voice.

Should she rise, curtsy and say, "Good morning, Mr. Ringmaster"? The blackness outside hardly felt like morning. Instead, she said, "I hate my name. Call me Evan."

"Very well."

Robey said, "Doesn't she look like that old picture you have hanging in your trailer? That Gibson Girl?" Robey nodded and smiled. The hooded Ringmaster stared at the old clown in silence.

The waitress brought menus. Evan didn't look at the prices. She already felt like a two-bit con, and if she thought any more about the guilt she wouldn't be able to order French toast. French toast was heaven, mostly because it wasn't stale breakfast cereal. When it was her turn, she ordered it—with a side of bacon.

Who knew when she'd eat again?

After the waitress was beyond earshot the Ringmaster asked, "Who called you a freak, Evan?"

She toyed with the pulls on her sweatshirt hood before answering, "My foster mother."

"Is she likely to come looking for you?" He lifted the steaming mug to his lips. Beneath his cape, he wore an elegantly tailored, if vibrantly striped, jacket.

She saw his eyes at last. Like his coffee, they were deep brown and warm. But his words sent a chill down her arms. "The social worker might. But if you kill me, don't expect Barbara or Gary to come around. There'd be no state check in it for them."

The Ringmaster spewed hot coffee across the table. The action was in direct contrast to his almost regal demeanor. He dabbed his mouth. "We want to rescue you. You're not the first teen with nowhere else to go who's found a home with our outfit."

Evan stifled a nervous laugh.

Robey mopped up the mess with a napkin. "She's got imagination, Jules."

"She's got much more than that. The Ju-Ju is never wrong," he said to Robey and then turned to Evan. "My intention was to discover the extent of trouble we're likely to engage from your foster parents, and if your desire should be to return to them? I take it the answer is no?"

"Never." Ju-Ju? What the heck? This guy was so strange yet kinda cool at the same time.

"Very well then." The Ringmaster folded his expressive hands around the mug. "Would you like to run away and join our circus?"

The food arrived. Instead of answering, Evan crammed a piece of bacon

into her mouth and added a slug of orange juice. Of all the many questions adults had ever thrown at her, that one was definitely the most unexpected.

The Ringmaster pushed food around on his plate then laid down his fork. "Is there anything you've ever dreamed of doing, if you had the chance?"

Seriously? Her dreams were none of his business. She focused on cutting up her breakfast into same-sized squares. Thinking about your dreams just made you unhappy because they'd never come true. She ate more bacon.

"Ah, perhaps we need some help to get an answer." The Ringmaster pulled what looked like three dirty balls with matted hair from the interior of his cape. "These are my juggling dolls," he explained as he lined up the disembodied doll heads. "I use them all the time."

The glint in his eye was only slightly reassuring. He might be messing with her, or he might be a lunatic. "I can't tell if you're quirky or...creepy."

Robey reached for his pocket and began to withdraw a hard object. She yelped and dropped her fork. It clattered on the floor. With a smile, the clown then pushed the object across the table toward her. A can of mace. The waitress returned, unceremoniously dropping a clean fork next to Evan's plate.

The Ringmaster looked puzzled. "Robey, why do you have mace?"

Evan wondered the same thing.

"You sent me on a unicycle to the bad side of town, that's why." The clown addressed the omelet on his plate.

Evan took the mace, hiding it in her sweatshirt pouch. "Juggling dolls?"

The Ringmaster continued as if she hadn't just insulted him, "Yes, much less ambiguous than the Tarot and lighter to carry than a magic eight ball."

She was amused but still unwilling to share her innermost desires. "How do they work?"

"I juggle until I drop one. The one that falls is my answer." He pointed to each head. "Shirley Temple is YES, Chucky here is NO, and Pee-Wee Herman is MAYBE." The Ringmaster picked up the doll heads and juggled them. As he leaned back in the booth and tossed them higher, other restaurant patrons turned to look.

Robey hissed. "Jules, you're attracting attention."

The Ringmaster straightened. Shirley Temple's head dive-bombed the basket of little jellies on the tabletop, sending them shooting in all directions.

The Ringmaster whispered, "A yes!" He collected his juggling dolls and stuffed them away in his clothing.

"You, Miss Evan, have something you've always wanted to do."

His mischievous smile disarmed her into spilling the beans. "My dream was to be a gymnast, like in the Olympics. But there was never any money for lessons." A bit of French toast stuck in her throat. How pathetic. Thousands of girls wanted that. She drank her juice.

Instead of ridiculing her, the Ringmaster nodded sagely at Robey as the clown restacked the jellies. He turned to Evan. "What if I were to say you could learn to do flips and balancing acts better than they have at the Olympics?"

Evan wanted to stomp on the revving thrill in her chest.

What if it wasn't too late for her dreams?

She took another bite, chewed, and shrugged.

All trace of levity gone, the Ringmaster leaned forward, his gaze focused on the swollen bruise left by Barbara. "I am in deadly earnest, my girl, and we don't have much time. You are possessed of a *donvrai*, a true gift. I know this. But I do not know what your *donvrai* is. To discover it you must live and work and travel with Circus Lunastrata."

He took a bite of eggs and chewed with his neat mouth closed. He even swallowed with a sense of showmanship.

"Am I a freak, then? If I join your circus?" she asked.

His sardonic self returned. "We prefer the word special."

Robey punched him in the arm. "Jules!" The clown turned to Evan. "If you join the circus it means you're darn lucky, that's what it means."

"Quite true." The Ringmaster transfixed her with his gaze. "Telling me your dreams wasn't too difficult. Now, tell me your fears, Evan."

Her fears? Was he going to juggle heads to get those out of her too?

He counted on his fingers. "One, being hit. Two, being abandoned. Three?" One of his eyebrows shot upward. "Four?"

"What do you care?"

He could be so appealing and so annoying at the same time. Evan snapped her hood over her head and glared. He leaned even further across the table.

His breath smelled of mint and molasses even though he'd been eating eggs. "I care very deeply. Our fears deliver us. Now, what are you afraid of?"

His terrible, horrible, warmhearted brown eyes pulled it out of her.

“Hor-ses.”

The word hung over the table like an ungainly aerialist as she watched the truth soak into their faces. At least she hadn’t blurted out “clowns.”

She wished it weren’t true. Horses were big. They bit. They bucked you off and stepped on you when you were six and your sociopathic foster-brother-of-the-week—who looked like a human cube—forced you off the fence and onto the back of the meanest horse in the pasture.

Evan couldn’t get near a horse without risk of sweaty palms and puking.

The Ringmaster’s voice reined her in. “Your job shall be to care for the horses. You will be housed, fed, clothed in the circus way, and instructed in the acrobatic arts daily by Madame Zsusanna.”

He couldn’t be serious.

“Jules,” Robey cried. “We’re trying to convince the girl.”

“This is not a con job, Robey. Horses are her fear, and horses will be her greatest teachers.”

Thank goodness she wasn’t afraid of clowns. Nothing against Robey or anything, but she’d had enough clowns for teachers. Still, there was no way she was doing the horse thing. Daily acrobatics sounded *amazing*...

The Ringmaster got a faraway look on his face. “Circus is family, Evan. It’s worth it.”

“I’ll come,” she said so fast she couldn’t take it back. She’d talk him out of the horse part later. “But only if you take down your hood and I get to see all of your face at once.”

The Ringmaster leaned back so hard the air *whumped* out of the padded booth. “I can’t do that.”

“Why not?” She speared her final bite of French toast and twirled it in syrup.

He slid his elbows across the table and whispered, “Removing a minor from her legal guardians, however unfit, is kidnapping. If I am recognized and you are seen leaving with me, I will end up in jail. I will lose my circus. That would mean the end of the world to me. And to a great many people who rely on me.”

The Ringmaster then mumbled some hokey, weird-sounding words into

his coffee cup. He pushed the cup in front of her. "Gaze into here. Then give Robey your answer. Now, please excuse me."

With a flourish of his cape, he rose to pay the bill. This stranger was willing to help her at great personal risk to himself. No one had ever done anything for her that even came close.

She focused on the dark liquid. Shapes appeared and coalesced into a movie, or more correctly, a memory she could see, smell, hear and feel:

*A much younger Ringmaster, a teenager, pushed aside an aged tent flap and stepped in out of a downpour. Musty canvas overpowered the faint familiar smells of greasepaint, popcorn and animal dung. The inside of the famed Big Top loomed empty and dark except for the very center of the ringcurb where a single spotlight shone down on a bed placed upon an ancient Oriental carpet.*

*Next to the bed stood a trunk upon which was painted in faded, fancy lettering: Zazar Compere's Circus Lunastrata & Caravanagerie of Wonder.*

*In the bed dozed a very small, very old man. A tiny hand emerged from beneath the blanket and beckoned the Ringmaster forward. "Come, Jules. Retrieve the box from under my bed and sit with me a while."*

*"Yes, Grandpère Zazar." Jules did as instructed.*

*The old man patted his grandson's leg and spoke with obvious effort. "You've left your aunt's care for good then?"*

*Jules shrugged. "I'm eighteen."*

*The look on his face said there was more to the story.*

*"I am sorry. I thought I did the right thing after your parents died." Zazar coughed. "And Circus is a dying art, no future for a bright boy."*

*"Don't say that." Jules grasped Zazar's cold, papery hand. "Circus is everything right and magical in the world."*

*Zazar's eyes burned bright. "Do you mean that?"*

*"Of course. You are more than a ringmaster. You're a real magician. I want to be just like you."*

*A sudden shaft of sunlight against the tent's exterior illuminated the white stars and blue moons on the canvas stripes. "Then open the*



*box, lad. Inside is my greatest possession. You are to inherit it."*

*Jules made noises of denial.*

*"Shush, my boy. I'm dying and I know it. And it's about time, too." He coughed some more and pulled his hand away from Jules' clasp. "The magic of my circus is in that box, passed from father to son by my great-grandfather who was given it by a bearded lady he—well, never mind." Grandpère Zazar turned gray with the effort of so many words.*

*Jules clutched the antique sweets tin on his lap. The tent, huge and hollow, darkened as rain beat upon the canvas. "Where are your acts? The performers? The clowns? The animals?"*

*"Gone. All gone. My tent, the ringcurb, my trunk, the calliope, and what is in the box you are holding are all that is left of my Circus Lunastrata." Zazar's eyes glittered like sequins. "But it's enough to start all over again."*

*Jules pried up the lid of the tin. The resulting pop echoed around the empty tent. He gazed upon the contents then replaced the lid. "I don't understand."*

*"What is in that box will bring to you performers who have the potential for the extraordinary, the fantastique. These acts shall remain extra-ordinary only as long as they are near this object. If they leave your circus, they leave their gift behind." Zazar gripped Jules' knee. "You must bring my circus back to life."*

*Jules tapped his fingers on the box lid. "I'll make your circus great, Grandpère..."*

*The Ringmaster's youthful eyes sparkled as the rest of his face lit up. Evan sensed a grand plan take shape within him. He could create a circus family. A circus home.*

Evan blinked back tears as the warm realization spread throughout her body. Somehow, miraculously, she'd been invited to become a part of this family.

*Zazar wheezed like a rusty calliope. "You must promise me Jules, that my circus performs under our Big Top or under the stars. Stadium circuses have no magic, no connection." His fingers clawed at Jules. "Promise me, under a top or nothing at all."*

## RING RIDER

*Jules tucked the quilt under his grandfather's chin. "I promise."*

*The crooked fingers relaxed their grip. "You are now the Ringmaster. Make me proud, Jules Compere."*

*The spotlight faded, leaving Jules in the dark. The rain pattered away on the antiquated canvas as his tears poured down. The box in his hands hummed with anticipation.*

In the wee hours of the morning, in the Gator Glades all-night diner, the coffee in the cup returned to being plain old coffee.

Evan shoved back her hood. "The Ringmaster doesn't need to show me his face right now. Please, Robey, don't leave Gator Glades without me."

### 3 WELCOME TO CIRCUS LUNASTRATA

Unable to sleep yet again, Wally plucked at his Fender with the amp unplugged. This new song was coming along okay, but there was something lacking in the bridge. It had no depth, no mystery. He worried it might be cliché.

Too bad there wasn't anyone to talk music with in this shoestring outfit. Johnny Dodge listened to nothing but classic seventies rock, and even if Dodge liked anything halfway listenable, he pretty much hated Wally. And the circus band members—who were actually pretty cool—didn't feel the same way about him. They called him kid. He was *seventeen*.

You'd think they'd be nicer to him, considering the fact that he cooked all their meals.

He set down the guitar on his sleeping pallet—laid out behind the seats in the front of his food truck—and clambered forward into the passenger seat. All of his electronic devices were plugged into a charging station whose black cord was lodged in the glowing red outlet of a practically historic cigarette lighter. Grabbing his tablet off the top of his laptop, he activated the music-making software. He often lost himself this way for huge chunks of time. Once in a while he emerged with an epiphany of sound, keeping all of his breakthroughs in a folder titled *Worthless Bullshit*.

The circus's errand van rattled by and parked. He glanced up, curious. On

another one of the Ringmaster's whims, Circus Lunastrata had pulled up stakes in a hurry and hightailed it down here to the land of flamingo-sized mosquitoes. He slapped an itchy vampsucker on his arm, immediately hearing his asshole father's voice in his mind, "He'll never have the guts to do that again, ha ha ha."

Then Wally remembered; the mosquitoes that bite are female. His mind balked at switching the pronoun in his dad's stale joke to "she." It was too close to his dad's philosophy in regard to his mom. *Squash*.

Wally switched off the cabin light so he could see outside better. Early morning grayness veiled the soggy Gator Glades Fairgrounds. The rear doors of the dilapidated van flopped open. A familiar shape, Robey, removed his even more familiar unicycle.

Shrouded in a hooded sweatshirt, a far more slender shape crawled hesitantly out of the van, looking around with almost cartoonish movements. Wally tried to view the scene from the newcomer's eyes. The Big Top wasn't erected yet. Only the rows of parked trucks, trailers, and RV's were visible, and most of these looked so old they should be in a circus museum. The scene was definitely scruffy. He fought down feelings of embarrassment.

Overcome with curiosity, Wally leaned forward into the dash, craning his neck to get a better look. The new arrival was a teen, that was a given. The Ringmaster didn't rescue adults, and younger kids were outside his comfort zone entirely. He squinted. The teen's gentle curves, shown to advantage by a pair of skinny jeans, caught his attention. The newcomer was a she. A flutter of excitement hit his gut. He told it to fuck off.

Wally had recently gone out a few times with Lin, one of the orphaned twin aerialists from China. He was beginning to suspect the siblings had a kind of Jekyll and Hyde thing going on, and with his usual flair for making mistakes, he'd chosen the wrong twin.

The only reason Lin had gone out with him in the first place was probably to make Dodge jealous. If Wally thought too much about it, he felt like shit. Technically, they were still dating, although she didn't seem especially into him and vice versa. To be brutally honest, he had no idea how to extricate himself from the situation. More trouble like that he didn't need.

The driver's door on the opposite side of the van banged shut. The

Ringmaster walked straight-shouldered into the mist and disappeared. Always so mysterious. Wally might never figure that guy out.

Robey and the girl made their way to Daffy Dill's Tiny Trailer, a diminutive vintage Airstream. Wally liked Daffy's trailer with its dotty yellow curtains edged in jaunty ball fringe. Normally, he despised anything so blatantly and absurdly happy, but Daffy Dill and her little house on wheels were an exception. Only last night Daffy had moved in with Chuck, the boss livestock hostler and advertising canvas man, so the Tiny Trailer was free for one person. A smallish person. The new kid, whoever she was, had lucked out.

The girl stopped abruptly as if offended by her new digs. Wally hoped she wasn't a spoiled princess, but then he didn't have grounds to be judgmental on that score. She waved Robey off with a small flap of her hand, and the clown, obviously tired, ambled away.

Wally watched as the new girl opened the door, bending her hooded head to go inside, and then she was gone from sight. But he continued to feel her presence as strongly as if she stood next to him in the food truck. He directed his thoughts to the Tiny Trailer: *please, please, be a friend.*

Humiliated by that little mental outburst, he focused instead on breakfast plans. In just a couple of hours, circus folks would start lining up outside his window, demanding to be fed.



Evan punched the pillow. Pink light charmed its way through ball-fringed curtains, and the racket of sledgehammers and loud voices came with it.

"Ease it up nice and slow." Evan recognized the Ringmaster's voice. "No. Back to the right." There was no mistaking the authority in his commands. "Got it," the Ringmaster called, and hammering commenced in earnest.

Tired and cranky, Evan flung back the chenille bedspread. She caught sight of Daffy Dill's collection of rhinestone-eyed porcelain poodles on the shelf above the berth bed. They lent the Tiny Trailer an even more childlike atmosphere.

What must it be like to have your own bedroom and stay somewhere long enough to collect things? She wasn't even sure what her fantasy childhood

bedroom would've looked like, only that there would've been no model horses on the shelves or horse posters on the walls. She cocked her head at the glittery figurines. How did the poodles keep from smashing down off the shelf when the trailer was in motion?

Careful not to stand up fully and bang her head, she took stock of her new abode. It was so tiny it was almost an aluminum exoskeleton. Last night she couldn't believe the universe had thrown her absolute rejection of trailer homes right back in her face. Sure this was a trailer but...it felt safe. It would do.

If she decided to stay with the circus that is.

She found her sweatshirt on the little built-in seat and dragged it over her head, flipping her hair out of the hood. She located her worn sneakers using her toes. Today would be unlike any previous day that had started with her tying the laces to these shoes. She may be wearing the clothes that had lived at Lot 26 Gator Glades Parkway, but she didn't live there anymore. The noise and lack of sleep were suddenly welcome.

Outside the tiny Airstream was a hectic, colorful, muddy, and decidedly poverty-stricken version of Oz. As she stepped down, a young man in his early twenties accosted her with a flamboyant bow. He wore black jeans and a black sweatshirt with a red bandana knotted at the neck. Slicked-back hair framed a non-descript face with mobile, putty-like features. He looked friendly and harmless. So far so good in the fellow circus peeps department.

With sweeping circles of his arm, he welcomed her. Then he popped upright and beamed a closed-mouth smile, all the while making gleeful, unbroken eye contact.

"Good morning," Evan said, determined to be friendly even if circus folk were a bit peculiar.

In answer, the man jigged his feet, held up his hands and looked to the sky as if it might rain. Okay, weird was too harsh for this guy. Goofy fit him better.

She glanced upward. "Oh, yeah, maybe."

He nodded vigorously, opened an invisible umbrella, twirled it, and with a wink continued on his way. Was he flirting with her? She hoped not. Maybe circus guys were just over the top. Or maybe in the light of morning this whole run-away-with-the-circus thing was crazy and she should leave now.

Her stomach rumbled. Or she could wait to leave until after breakfast.

Lost in thought, Evan almost didn't notice the wee woman in yellow velour sweats who marched toward the Tiny Trailer. She carried an empty dog crate. As she approached, Evan could tell the woman was a dwarf. Her long yellow-blond hair was pulled into a ponytail on the top of her head. Despite the woman's urgency, her pretty features wore a pleasant expression, and her eyes crinkled when she saw Evan.

"Good morning," Evan said, eager to make a friend who would speak to her. "That guy doesn't say much, does he?" She pointed to the man huddled under his invisible umbrella.

The woman smiled, a bright ball of sunshine amidst the gray morning. "Hurleigh O'Quinn? You'll never get him to say anything. He's a mime."

That made sense. Sort of. "Don't most mimes talk when they're not performing?"

"Hurleigh is never not performing—he's a Method Mime. Don't expect a word. But he gets his point across as well or better than the rest of us."

"So I saw. Did his parents name him Hurleigh O'Quinn?"

"No idea." Daffy laughed. "I do know that he's Irish but he thinks he's Italian."

The dwarf's yellow sweat-suit and sunny disposition seemed to be pretty good clues to her identity. "Are you Daffy Dill?"

"At your service." The dwarf maneuvered the dog crate into the trailer.

Evan followed her inside and the door banged behind. "Thanks for letting me sleep here." Even if it turned out to be only for the one night.

"Sure, sweetie. Evan, isn't it?" Evan nodded back as Daffy clambered onto the berth. "Lucky timing for you. Jules could've put you in the twins' trailer. Those girls showed up in Nevada last year and still do nothing but fight." She set the dog crate on the unmade bed. "I was so flustered when Chuck asked me to move in with him last night, I left my babies behind. But that's love for you, for sure."

Daffy stood on the mattress, her feet making petite depressions, and loaded each porcelain poodle into the dog crate with great care.

She latched the crate door and said, "Hey, Evan, take good care of my trailer, will ya? If this thing with Chuck doesn't work out, well, I'll need my

house back.” Daffy handed her the crate then jumped off the bed with a good deal of propulsion. Upon landing she threw her arms up to demand the crate again. Evan felt like she’d just witnessed a new gymnastics move.

She rushed to straighten the blankets. “Would I have to move in with the twins?”

“Don’t know.” Daffy laughed. “You could always stay with Johnny Dodge, everyone calls him Elephant Boy.”

Just how weird did circus people get? “Elephant Boy? Like the deformed guy in that old movie?”

“Hardly.” Daffy chortled. “The twins have had the worst crush on him since day one, poor guy. That’d make them stop fighting with each other and hate you instead.”

“Great.” The circus was starting to sound like another awful foster home where she’d be automatically detested.

“I’m teasing, sweetie. You seem real nice. How somebody could give you a shiner like that, I don’t know.”

Evan’s fingers flew to her face. She pulled up her hood. It made her think of the Ringmaster. Of last night. Of intense brown eyes and juggling dolls, far away and surreal.

Daffy patted Evan on the forearm. “Don’t you mind it. It’ll heal fast. And if you want to cover it up in the meantime, help yourself to the cosmetics in the drawer.” She pointed.

“Thanks.” Evan followed Daffy out of the trailer and around the grounds like a dog, a real one, not porcelain. When Daffy finally stopped in front of a much larger motor home and appeared to be heading inside, Evan asked, “Uh, Daffy? Where do I get breakfast?”

After scooting the poodles and crate through the door, Daffy said, “Oh sweetie, where are my manners? You can get breakfast at the roach coach.”

“Roach coach?” Even her last pathetic foster home hadn’t had roaches. Maybe she should take off running before eating anything here?

“The food truck, silly.” Daffy’s smile was practically blinding. “Breakfast is only cereal and donuts today. Wally must not be feeling well. He’s the cook and one of Jules’ kids, like you. He’ll get you set up. Just remember to stay in the Back Yard.” Daffy Dill darted off, a bright spot in the mud and hustle.



What did Daffy mean by back yard? Evan made her way to the food truck by following the smell of coffee, which rose above the odors of animals, their dung, and diesel fumes—ordinary smells mixed together with an aura of electricity, a dash of mystery.

The food truck loomed out of the mud and mist, much larger than she'd expected. Painted scrollwork covered the circus vehicle. In the middle of the truck, a service window—nestled beneath a marquee supported by curling metalwork—beckoned with light and warmth.

The wheels were so big they reached her chest. She moved toward the window, trailing a finger along an oversized tire. Great, now her finger was black. She wiped it on her sweatshirt.

Finally, she worked up the nerve to peer inside the open window. And jumped back with a surprised shout. A boy around her age glared at her from behind a spiky fringe of jet-black hair. He must be Wally. She glanced from the raven tattoo on the back of his left hand to his earring. Didn't he know goth was dead?

He bent his tall frame to lean his elbows on the counter with a thud. "Want something?"

She was too busy gawping to answer. His wrists sported a mixture of bangle bracelets and tied strips of black rags. Silvery scars criss-crossed both of his pale arms, making them look like birch branches from his wrists to where they disappeared into his vintage black t-shirt that said *The Damned*. Evan swallowed. He kept up the defiant stare, directly into her eyes.

Wally had been a cutter and was proud of it. He wore the scars like badges of honor. Well aware she was being horribly rude, she still couldn't tear her gaze away.

"Look all you want," he said. "*All that we see or seem is but a dream within a dream.*"

This guy was beyond intimidating. "Uh, er...Wally?"

"Edgar Allan Poe."

"Oh, I see." She toyed with a sweatshirt pull. "Hi, I'm Evan. Well, Evanja Leane, officially. But please call me Evan, okay? I just got here last night."

"Welcome." A gleam of humor, possibly of the self-deprecating variety, sparked in his eyes. "And yeah, I'm Wally."

All at once he became more approachable despite all his terrible trappings.

"Um, Daffy Dill said I could get a donut here."

He gave a sharp nod. "Plain, or sprinkles?"

"Sprinkles."

"Figures." He slouched away to get the donut.

"Do you have orange juice?" She stood on her toes and called into the window.

"Uh huh," he answered from the depths.

Wally brought back both items. Briefly, his blue-gray eyes grew warmer and met hers. In that moment, a true and genuine smile slipped past her guard. Shit.

Wally's sinister hair and makeup failed to completely hide his good looks. The guy was attractive. And interesting. And therefore, dangerous. Shit, she'd smiled at him.

She waited for the horrible, awkward moment to pass then gave up. As she reached to take the food, he used a black-polished index finger to peel back her hood. An odd expression formed on his face and was just as quickly repressed. Without comment, he withdrew his hand.

She grabbed the juice and again reached for the donut.

Using the tops of his rings, Wally tapped on the counter next to her hand. "Wait a sec."

He retreated into the "roach coach" and returned with a second iced donut smothered in sprinkles. He laid the donut on top of the first one and placed a folded napkin gently beside them. "Come back for lunch. Making chili." His soulful eyes met hers again.

Evan clutched her breakfast to her chest. As she turned, a burly man holding a sledgehammer bumped her shoulder.

"Hey," he called out an alarm to everyone around. "Towner in the Back Yard."

Motion ceased and every eye in the vicinity turned her way. She wanted to crawl under the food truck. It would be easy. She'd only need to duck behind a big tire and hide.

Before she could try it, someone pushed aside the hefty man with ease. A sinuous giant, who appeared suddenly and towered over her. He looked at Evan

with emotionless eyes, and she shrank beneath him, a mouse in a cat's path. Her stomach rumbled, triggered by the smell of donuts and fear.

The giant laughed, only it wasn't a funny sound. "Not to worry. This brat here isn't a towner. She's the latest specimen in Compere's collection of pickled punks."

From inside the food truck, Wally snorted. The tall man with the bitter eyes sent him a look of pure malice, and the goth withdrew from the window.

The scary guy followed up that bit of nicety by imploring the sky. "Saints deliver me from this preposterous, mumbo-jumbo excuse for a circus."

Then the monster's heavy paw fell upon Evan's shoulder. His touch made her squirm away. No one was going to get the chance to hit her, ever again. She ran across the grounds toward the enormous blue and white striped tent now being erected, and the giant's icy laugh followed.

Had Wally seen the whole thing?

She hung back from the organized yet frantic activity. Huge swaths of shapeless canvas covered large bumps on the ground. Men and women laced canvas pieces together, their hands working with a rhythm born of repetition. The workers stuck pronged poles into grommet holes on one end of the tent, lifting the canvas.

"Shoot the kinpoles!" called a greasy-looking man in a cowboy hat. Two heavy horses and an elephant were brought under the propped canvas. Well away from the horses, Evan bent down to see underneath. The elephant got hitched to one big pole, and the horses to another.

"Pull peaks!" came the command. The giant posts shuddered, heaved, and lifted into place. The entire tent took a breath as the canvas whooshed off the ground with the exhilaration of a clipper ship setting sail.

Straight away, the whole business looked much more like a tent, the saggy kind she'd made with blankets and chairs at Number Four where the other kids would actually play with her. That unexpected armistice had lasted until there was some kind of hold-up in the support checks. Eight year-old Evan had found herself once again at Child Shelter Services, sitting in a hard chair and studying the floor tiles while waiting to be placed in yet another foster home.

"Quarter poles!" called cowboy-hat guy.

The same procedure then happened to four smaller poles. Fascinated, Evan

squatted where she could look up and see the canvas overhead. The Big Top looked larger inside than out. The two center poles had to be forty feet tall, at least.

Smells of mildewed canvas, fresh paint, and sawdust mingled with those of her breakfast and juice. She gobbled a donut—wow, candied ginger and orange zest—and wiped sprinkles from her lips.

The tent bore many signs of tears and subsequent mending and patches. Like in the vision she'd witnessed at the coffee shop, sunlight broke through the clouds overhead for a moment, outlining the blue stars painted on the white stripes and the white moons on the blue stripes. The whole raggedy affair came off more bohemian than Barnum & Bailey, but she liked it better that way.

The activity accelerated. More workers tugged and lashed ropes from the canvas to a line of stakes driven into the ground around the base of the tent. The knots they tied were complicated and tight.

"Hey, get out of the way," a worker yelled.

Evan startled. Heart racing, she ducked under a tent flap and ran. The bright ringcurb tripped her and she tumbled into the sawdust of the performance ring. Inside the circle, a peculiar electric current spun around her like cotton candy, like magic. Jangled, she scrabbled out of the ring and knelt on the matted grass, breathing heavily. Sawdust stuck to her everywhere. The taste of pine filled her mouth. She brushed herself off.

Dangit. Her last donut was over there in the sawdust, crushed, inedible. Those donuts were marvelous, too. She'd wait until lunch rather than face the embarrassment of asking Wally for more.

After that stupid ass smile she'd given him, he might even think she'd dropped her donuts on purpose just so she'd have an excuse to talk to him before lunch. But he didn't know her number one rule: never go out with a guy you might actually like.

Movement caught her peripheral vision. The Ringmaster strode into the tent, last night's cape replaced by narrow-striped pants and a vest over a "pirate" shirt rolled up to reveal his forearms. He spoke to a worker while pointing at the main poles.

So intent was he on discussing the rigging he didn't see her. She spat out

shavings. At the noise, the Ringmaster's gaze fell from the heights to land squarely upon her. The resulting shiver started at the nape of her neck and ended in the bottoms of her feet.

"You shouldn't be out of the Back Yard." He spoke to her in the same distant tones of authority he used with the workers.

What was she, a dog? "What exactly is the back yard and where do I find it?"

A brilliant grin interrupted his goatee and slim mustache, and he once more looked like the whimsical man who juggled doll heads. If she had to guess his age, which she was terrible at, she'd say he was around forty. "The Back Yard is what the towners long to see, the life behind the Big Top. When you make your official entrance into the ring, my dear, it will be to perform for the towners. Your place now is in the Back Yard, with us, your circus family."

He extended a hand to her. The warmth in his eyes made her think of really good things like chocolate chip cookies and golden retrievers. She grasped his fingers, and he pulled her to her feet.

"Egads, we're behind schedule." He glanced at his elaborate antique wristwatch. "The Flying Fruits are clamoring for a practice this afternoon and the traps aren't up yet. You'd better run along. Oh, and, Evan, Elephant Boy will come by the Tiny Trailer later to take you to tonight's show. And the hood's a good idea." He pointed to her head. "Until we're out of Gator Glades."

## RING RIDER