



CHAPTER ONE

TWENTY YEARS LATER

“*Whoop-ah,*” murmured the hidden boy, holding a candied walnut high. It glistened in the slice of lamplight coming through the boards above him as he spun it in his grubby fingers. “An’ here she goes! Sailin’ through the sky, ladies and gents, sure as you like. Ain’t nothin’ our gal Wilma the Walnut can’t do. Flyin’ trapeze? You got it! Dancin’ on the high wire? A breeze, to Wilma.”

The boy pushed himself up on one elbow, his voice dropping to a threatening whisper. “But what’s this? A beast from the deep, with wide-open jaws? It *is*, my friends, an’ it looks hungry! Run! Save yerselves! It’s too late for Wilma...” With this, he flicked the unfortunate walnut into his mouth, happily crunching it for a moment or two before swallowing. He licked his lips and continued. “Not to worry, folks, she went the way she would’ve wanted.

An' luckily enough, here's 'er brother Wally, ready to take 'er place."

He flopped back down into the dust, rummaging casually through the striped bag containing the nuts. He'd pilfered it moments before from Franco the clown's wagon, and he knew he'd have plenty of time to hide the evidence before tonight's show was over. The last act was about to begin, and he had at least half an hour before he was expected back in the ring to take his final bow. His fingers closed around another sticky nut and he pulled it free.

The boy had many hiding places around this circus ring, each of them with their own particular charms. This one, right beneath the ringside seating, gave him an ant's-eye view of things, but allowed him to smell the sweat and sawdust, and to hear the lifting lilt of the music. There was also the added benefit of the occasional treat landing nearby – a coin or a sweet slipping from the pocket of an unwary punter overhead – but they were becoming rarer and rarer these days, both punters and pockets. Tonight's audience was thin.

He pressed his eye to a hole in one of the planks and looked around as he crunched his final walnut. There were a lot of empty seats, particularly in the more expensive tiers. *No takers fer the boxes tonight at all*, he thought, looking at the plush velvet cushions and roped-off sides. Everything was damp and lacklustre, a bit like the night outside the

tent. The rain hammering on the canvas was almost loud enough to drown out the ringmaster's voice – almost, but not quite.

“And now, ladies and gentlemen, boys and girls,” came that very voice, one that seemed to pull an invisible thread in the chest of every performer under this roof. The boy drew up his knees and angled himself to better see Cyrus Quinn, the man on whom this entire show depended. The ringmaster wore his golden jacket tonight, its fabric gleaming in the spotlights, and his polished top hat shone almost as brightly as his shoes.

“Our time together is almost done. But let there be no mourning – no, ladies and gents! For what you have experienced this evening, here in this ring, is magic beyond compare. You have seen lions!” The ringmaster cracked his whip and there was a burst of fire from behind him, causing a lady or two in the audience to shriek, followed by a sputtering of embarrassed laughter. The ringmaster smiled indulgently before continuing. “Tigers!” Another whip crack, another explosion of fire. “Elephants from the Land of Kings!” The third and final crack, and the last of the explosions.

“You have seen knife throwers and contortionists, wire walkers and prancing dogs, a man so strong he could move the earth itself, given a long enough lever and a place to stand!” The boy smiled at this, imagining the eye-rolling

that the strongman, his friend Crake, was probably doing somewhere backstage at these words.

“And now, ladies and gentlemen, boys and girls, *friends*, it is time to close our show with an act none of you will forget.” The ringmaster’s voice dropped slightly as he continued and every ear beneath the tent strained to hear. “The woman you are about to meet has performed before khans and emperors, sultans and doges, kings and queens. Her glittering career has taken her from the streets of Moskva in the Empire of the Rus to the palaces of Constantinople – and tonight she is here, my friends, to display to you the skill for which she has become renowned.”

The ringmaster paused to take in his audience, his smile wide, and in a louder voice, he carried on. “In the aerial hoop, she is unparalleled; her talent makes gravity weep. She dances through the air as though wings sprouted from her back.” Somewhere close by the circus drums began to roll as the ringmaster’s patter reached its crescendo. The boy had heard this a hundred times or more, but he still found himself holding his breath, his heart pounding with excitement. He spared a glance at the audience. They looked rapt, their eyes following the ringmaster as he strode around the ring. Whatever else you might want to say about Cyrus Quinn, he was a ringmaster to the core, and he knew how to hold a crowd.

Quinn stopped and held out his arms, looking from side

to side. The boy was close enough to see the glitter in his black eyes, the shine on his pomaded moustache and hair, which spilled from beneath his hat in a dark cascade, and the glint of his strong white teeth. “Ladies and gentlemen, I am proud to present ... *Annabella Sicorina, the Flying Girl!*”

The audience’s applause was thunderous, given how few of them were left, as a young woman in a sparkling red costume bounded into the centre of the ring. Her hair was piled in chestnut curls on top of her head, her lips and cheeks were painted scarlet, and as she took a bow to acknowledge the crowd, a large silver hoop was lowered until it hovered right behind her. Without looking, she hopped backwards into it, landing with practised precision just as the cymbals crashed, and the applause grew as the hoop began to rise.

The boy closed his eyes, not sure he could watch any more. His excitement faded and he let the sounds of the circus drift into the back of his mind. *Annabella Sicorina*, he thought, chewing on the inside of his lip. *This must be the fifth one we’ve ’ad now.* They never lasted long, these young women the ringmaster booked to perform not under their own name, but under the assumed persona of an aerialist he’d invented years before, an aerialist with an incredible talent – the Flying Girl.

Ain’t none of ’em a patch on my mum, he thought,

blinking away his sudden tears. She had been the first Annabella, the one who had made their circus a success. His mum was gone now, but Annabella lived on. None of the performers who assumed the name had ever quite reached the heights of the original, and the circus's fortunes had begun to slide too.

Eventually, the boy looked up. The act was progressing well, he thought – tonight's Annabella was better than some he'd seen. She was graceful in her movements, the hoop swinging smoothly as she spun around inside it, hanging from one leg as she reached out to her audience. Applause sputtered, here and there, but the boy was dismayed to see several people getting to their feet.

Walkouts, he thought, his lip curling. *They'll be lookin' fer their money back, no doubt.* The act they were getting wasn't the one they might have been expecting, the one his mother had made famous. The death-defying, headline-grabbing Dance of the Snowflakes. It wasn't performed any more and the boy doubted it ever would be again.

The boy felt sorry for the woman in the hoop. She had to be able to see what was going on beneath her, but still she controlled her movements perfectly, the suspended ring spinning gently as she flowed from pose to pose. Finally, the ring was slowly lowered as the music crashed to an end. With one last perfect tumble, 'Annabella' dropped from her hoop to land in the sawdust of the circus ring, and she

took her final bow to thin, disinterested applause.

He could see the smile fixed on her face as she looked around. Then he spotted the ringmaster. Quinn strode across the ring to stand beside her, raising her arm in the air as they bowed together – but the boy’s attention was held by something the ringmaster had in his other arm. Something small and wrapped in a sparkling silver shawl. At the sight of it his face began to itch and his scratching fingernails came away clotted with the thick green face paint of his own act, the all-tumbling, all-bouncing Runner Beans. His stomach rolled, as though he were spinning in mid-air.

The circus music grew louder, the tune changing to one every performer knew – the melody which signalled the end of the show. Tonight, a weight seemed to keep the boy tethered to the dusty floor, and even as he watched the curtain to the backstage area twitch aside as his fellow performers streamed through it and out into the ring to take their final bows, still he couldn’t move.

That silver shawl. The boy’s heart raced as he looked at it and he swallowed back sudden fear. *He can’t be goin’ to ask her to do the Dance*, he thought, even though he knew the shawl, and its contents, could mean nothing else.

The performers bowed, each in their turn. The music surged. Luella, the oldest and most placid lioness, was led around the ring, licking her chops, and Mammoth – the circus’s only elephant – was brought out for a final trumpet.

The applause died away, the last of the crowd trickled out into the rain and finally the tent was empty but for Quinn and 'Annabella'. The boy held his breath and listened, afraid to move in case he gave himself away.

"What's the problem, eh?" the woman said, trying to break Quinn's grip around her wrist. "You can't tell me that act wasn't perfect."

"It was perfect – but it wasn't enough," Quinn replied. He shook free the silver-wrapped thing with his other hand and the boy saw her body stiffen. He watched, trembling, as the ringmaster held up something that looked like a baby, but wasn't. It was a doll, frighteningly lifelike, which had been made years before to replace him in his mother's act once he'd grown too big and she could no longer be sure that when she threw him, high above the circus ring, that she could catch him again.

"What *is* that?" the woman said, her voice tinged with disgust.

"Look, Rosie. You saw the audience tonight," Quinn began, his voice tight and urgent. "It doesn't matter how much you bring to your act, you ain't going to hold the whole tent unless you give 'em what they want." He brandished the doll. It was dressed in a tiny silver leotard, a sparkling band around its head. "And what they want is *this*."

"I told you," the woman replied. *Rosie*, the boy thought,

barely committing the name to memory. Next week, there would probably be a new performer in her place. “I *ain’t* doin’ that act. Not only is it the worst luck, tryin’ to recreate another performer’s trick, but you know I can’t do it. I can’t pull it off, Mr Quinn! And then where’ll we be?”

Cyrus Quinn’s face grew grim. He released Rosie’s hand and stroked his beard, which fell almost to his waistband. “The Dance of the Snowflakes is the only thing that’s going to save this circus,” he said. “I implore you. Please. Give it a try.” He placed the doll into Rosie’s arms, but she held it away from herself, staring down at the lifeless face with horror.

“Your *wife* –” Rosie began, looking back up at the ringmaster – “was crazy to even try this act. It’s no wonder she fell, Mr Quinn. It’s no wonder she’s dead. I ain’t havin’ no part of it, sir. No part. An’ you can take this back.” Rosie flung the doll to the floor, its loosely articulated limbs flopping wildly as it landed. “Next thing you’ll be askin’ me to take your son up with me too, just like your wife did when he was nothin’ bigger than that puppet there on the ground.”

The boy’s heart thudded painfully hard at these words and he screwed his eyes shut.

“That *boy* is not my son,” Quinn growled, “as you well know. And if you’re refusing my offer, you can consider your employment here terminated.”

“You can consider my wagon empty as of an hour from now, in that case,” Rosie retorted. “There’s nothin’ that could convince me to stay another night here, Mr Quinn. I’ll take my leave of you an’ I’ll expect my wages in my hand before I go. Good luck finding another headline act to match the one I just gave you.”

The boy opened his eyes again. Cyrus Quinn stood alone in the centre of the circus ring, rubbing his forehead with one hand. Rosie had disappeared. As the boy watched, Quinn dropped into a crouch, picking up the discarded doll. With a sigh, he retrieved the shawl and got to his feet. Then he strode out of the ring into the darkness beyond the reach of the spotlights. Faintly, the boy heard the ringmaster shout an order at someone unseen and the sound sent a jolt through him.

Quickly and quietly, the boy crept out of his hiding place and made his way to the side of the circus tent, where he’d loosened one of the ropes just enough to make space for him to come and go as he pleased. He ducked beneath the canvas and vanished out into the night, hoping he’d make it back to his wagon before anyone could summon him to face the wrath of Cyrus Quinn.