

Chapter One

A LIGHT BURNED inside each house along the road, save for one.

Most of the Swiss town's inhabitants were seated comfortably under the big top of our traveling circus. We'd held a show every night that week, despite advertising as "one night only." While this inaccuracy initially encouraged attendance, the profit margin inevitably waned, as those who wanted to see the show had now done so. Our money-hearted ringleader, Ziro, accepted that he'd squeezed all the juice he could, and relinquished, underlining "one night only" with black paint on each poster around town to emphasize that this time, he *really* meant it. As it often did, the sudden scarcity resulted in a sellout for the final performance, leaving most of the houses empty but warm by the glow of some dutiful pilot light.

A line of beacons with one broken link – the dark house, the one showing signs of disuse and waste. What had happened there? A hard and fast tragedy that had shocked the community, or the slow and quiet kind none ever spoke of? The Swiss, being a polite people, wouldn't have told a traveling acrobat either way. I knew only that if I'd been born in this town, the dark home would have been mine.

As I strolled the deserted street, waiting patiently for my portion of the show to begin, the singsong voice of The Human Thesaurus rang from inside the tent, delighting the audience with his wealth of wordage as he cycled through increasingly obscure synonyms for any word the audience suggested, all in Swiss-German, given our location. My conversations with the resident wordsmith on the long roads between shows had provided me a diction many considered outsized for an uneducated, thirteen-year-old circus performer, and a female to boot.

Gooseflesh bubbled upon my arms, and I knew the chilly gaze of Ziro's sentinels, the Mirrors, traced my steps. I could not see from where the Flemish twins watched, so I was careful not to stray too far, lest they be motivated to reacquire me, a process that rarely ended well for the fleeing performer. The brothers had grey eyes flecked with yellow, set into ashy skin only a shade lighter than the irises. The jugglers swore each twin could see through the other's eyes, but I did not believe as much. The Mirrors wore, as they always did, matching cloaks of powder blue and a peacock feather earring. They were entirely mute, and never showed the faintest shadow of a facial expression. A bejewelled dagger rested on each man's belt, rumored to have ended lives before.

I put aside the familiar sensation of unflinching surveillance, and inhaled deeply. Wealthy towns always possessed the best candles, and the night's breeze carried not the acrid and fatty signature of tallow, but something light and sweet – the expensive bayberry, or beeswax even.

One of the company horses, Charles, chewed morosely at a spare bit of hay scattered behind the big top. I ran my hand along his worn muzzle while my sight returned to the empty house. For the thousandth time, I was grateful to no longer dwell in such a place, even if Ziro's circus was hardly any rosier.

The thunder and grace of equestrian dance, the siren call of the calliope, the colourful nonsense of clowns and jugglers, the barely contained menace of big-toothed predators, the scream-inducing phantasmagoria – what child could resist such a menagerie of charm? I purposely recalled little of my previous life, except that setting off with the aft-mentioned characters sounded much more appealing. So I'd volunteered to join the company, stowing away in a costume chest until my dexterity and bravado earned me a permanent position in the show. I had escaped my deplorable upbringing but somehow still managed no improvement in my station.

"I summon *again*, The Amazing Beatrix," Ziro's voice flared inside the tent, waving away my cloud of thought.

Charles jostled at hearing the ribbon of anger in our master's voice. The horse and I were both well acquainted with the sting of his whip.

I departed the mistreated horse and cartwheeled through the tent flaps, up the gangway and into the centre of the big top, where my ringleader waited with concealed fury. His body was a block of flesh and bone, carved by a lazy sculptor with no eye for detail. His perfectly square shoulders were adorned, as always, with the golden epaulettes he felt signalled regality. To me, they looked more like the push brooms used to clean up after the animals. He wore a suit of black and white pinstripes, a relic of apparel from his early days as a clown. Clowns ranked only a hair below jugglers in my index of most disliked performers.

I snapped into an acrobatic pose as the roll of the snare finished in a cymbal splash, and the Swiss audience applauded politely.

Ziro's bulk angled precariously forward. "If I have to call your name twice again, I'll feed you to the lions," he whispered.

I knew the man well enough to understand this was no colloquialism.

"But we have no lions. You left the cage unlocked in Brussels last month," I reminded him, and even though he wouldn't dare whip me in front of a crowd, I quickly ascended the rope that hung between us.

Although he was shrewd, inventive, and driven, Ziro's most prominent feature, the one only revealed away from paying customers, was his cruelty. He had love for money alone, and anyone foolish enough to come between the two met with his merciless will, and often, his whip. The same whip that would likely find me tonight for my daydreaming.

I surveyed the night's crowd from the top of the rope – debutantes in ostentatious evening gowns, baronesses suggesting just-appropriate hints of hidden lace corsets, children eyeing popcorn, fruits, and other treats they couldn't risk eating over pristine outfits. I read people out of both boredom and necessity. I was slight, even for a girl of my age, and our troupe did not shy away from unsavoury towns. I never minded this, as the nefarious and unlawful often proved much more interesting than the moneyed. Tonight's crowd, sparkling with earls, dukes, and countesses to spare, was quite unremarkable indeed.

All but the man with flowers in his hat.

I saw him only a moment before he saw me.

A gentleman at first and even second glance, he wore a brilliant yellow waistcoat clasped tight over a crisp, cream dress shirt. High-waisted trousers anchored the ensemble, crowned by a white John Bull hat garnished with dandelions. I guessed him to be from Britain, or at least somewhere in the Isles. Below the brim of the hat peered a pleasant face accented by a smart moustache and a pair of strong eyes, all of identical chestnut colour. His powerful gaze made me feel transparent as glass, as if no amount of subterfuge or deflection could deter him from discovering all my deepest secrets.

"*Beatrix*," Ziro hissed up the rope in a malicious tone, frightening even for him.

I would meet his whip that night, and he would put his ample back into it.

I looked back to the man in the dandelion hat, but his gaze had moved on. It seemed he had decided he knew all about me from just one look. A stranger he would remain; unknown but perfect in my image of who he might be.

A trapeze swung near, and I grasped it easily, gliding through the air to the amazement of the populous below. A hundred voices rose and fell in unison as I twirled and leapt from one trapeze to the next, all at fatal heights since Ziro insisted shows with safety nets drew fewer patrons. My act came as natural to me as inhale, exhale, leaving my mind to consider the itch of regret I now felt. I made a firm point of avoiding regret's acquaintance, it was no chuckaboo of mine, but I would regret not knowing the dandelion man.

I leapt from my swinging bar, making the next with three fingers alone. All faces marveled at my skill. All but one. The dandelion man's eyes had found something of greater interest that was dark-haired, fair skinned, and blushing under the intentioned gaze of a handsome stranger. He was a wolf then. Well, of course he was. A man of that age and appearance must surely be the paradigm of a talented bachelor, and here he had found the lure of his next conquest. How disappointing. A bachelor on the prowl, even one of exceptional dress, was quite unremarkable.

I flipped onto a platform and bowed as the show carried on far below. The targeted beauty showed no interest in our theatrics, returning instead the wolf's playful leer.

The lurid exchange of honeyed smirks and batted eyelashes was noticed not only by me, but by a rather unhappy-looking man. The curtain of metals on his military dress uniform suggested general. His position next to the brunette beauty suggested husband.

The general, his wife, and a wolf in fine-tailored clothing – they sounded like the principal players of a delicious anecdote. A part of me wondered if this little drama had seen its climax, but a wiser part suspected charged glances were a preamble to a disaster yet to come.

The main event concluded below.

I took several bows from my high perch, and watched my principal players slip through the elegant crowd, no doubt bound for an even more exclusive engagement.

I slid down the rope. Perhaps I could follow –

Ziro's iron grip found my arm.

He beamed at the lingering crowd around us, but his voice was pure venom. "See to the calliope, Beatrix. Then, you and I have business. And do well to note that any more trouble from you tonight would be very, *very* unwise."

