

Crime and Circuses

“Ten minutes until curtain!” A stagehand yelled too close to Valerie’s ear. “Ten minutes folks!”

“Thank you, ten minutes!” Valerie called back, trying to match the stagehand’s volume, if not harshness. She turned to another acrobat with a look of disgust. “Look at him, stomping around like he runs the show. He’s Moore’s lapdog and we all know it.”

“Be nice, Val,” Benny chided, adding some more bright blue eyeliner to her face. “Remy just wants the show to go swimmingly.”

“Oh, of course,” Valerie smirked, adding bravado to her tone. “Nothing but perfection at ‘Storyteller Moore’s Summer Circus!’”

A few of the others cheered and clapped their hands together. The acrobats were a tight unit within the circus. The six of them knew each other more intimately than anyone else in the circus. Benny may be sleeping with the stagehand, but Valerie knew her fellow performer’s body more completely than he ever would.

Something about the stagehand made Valerie’s neck hair bristle, but she could never tell if it was fear or anger. Perhaps it was his closeness to her boss.

“Best finish our faces, girls!” Benny announced. “It’s time to fly!”

Setting their final looks, the acrobats all clambered up the hidden ladders and catwalks that led up to the highest rafters. Each girl took her place in a long line and grabbed hold of her silk. Peering over the edge, Valerie listened for the fanfare and official start of the show.

Down below, Valerie could see the crowd sitting rapt at the edge of their seats. The acrobats were a little later in the show after Storyteller Moore gave his opening: 'Once Upon A Time'.

Then the clowns would perform a small vignette of whatever story they were focusing on. However, the acrobats were the stars this year.

The Six Swans was Valerie's favorite story that the circus had done so far. It required the quick and elegant flight of the swans over the heads of an attentive audience. Clowns played the six brothers on the ground, but the acrobats were the stars as they soared over the crowd. When they did Little Red Riding Hood, only one acrobat at a time was able to soar around with a cloak of red silk. Valerie preferred The Six Swans because the acrobats were all admired together.

"And these six brothers," Storyteller Moore called in a booming voice down below, "were transformed by their stepmother. For she was learned in witchcraft. Each night, the brothers were themselves for only a quarter hour. The rest of the time? They were cursed to be six swans!"

On cue, the lights swung up to the rafters of the circus. Six acrobats dove and slid down the length of their silks, arms outstretched. The tumblers who had played the six brothers took hold of the silks in the dark, swinging the acrobats out over the crowd. Valerie looked down in time to see the shock of a young girl in the crowd, meeting her wide eyes with a brilliant smile. The swans made a few laps over the crowd, rotating and twirling dangerously above the crowd. With her arms outstretched, Valerie felt like she was flying.

Once they had finished their aerial routine, Valerie and the other acrobats spiraled down until they touched the floor and danced off-stage. The swans would have another appearance later, but they had some time to rest before their next dramatic entrance over the crowd. Valerie grabbed her water bottle and watched the performance through the small monitor they had in their dressing room. On the screen, Storyteller Moore moved his hands, conducting an orchestra of 'ooh's and 'ahh's as he wove his tale of sympathy and woe.

The acrobats came out two more times. Once in the middle, when the sister looked up and saw her brothers flying by. This entrance was more complex than a simple lap around the tent, requiring flips and spins that the girls had precisely choreographed themselves. This was the centerpiece of the acrobatic act—all eyes were on the figures soaring above the benches. The final time that the acrobats appeared, Valerie and the other swans dove through hoops to ‘break the curse’ and free the brothers. By the time the show was over, the crowd was on their feet, cheering for more as the acrobats rushed off with the other performers as the curtains closed.

“Only two more days in Seattle,” Benny said, following Valerie into their shared camper. It was hardly spacious, but sharing the camper with Benny was easier than living out of her car between children’s parties. The girls only needed enough room for their costumes and a few day-to-day sundries. The circus provided anything else they needed. “Then we’re off to...British Columbia?”

“Vancouver, I think,” Valerie said. “You know what Moore says: ‘We go where the circus is needed most!’”

“You mean where the pockets are thickest.” Benny laughed, sitting cross-legged on her sleeping mat. “Oh, I forgot to mention, Remy was asking about coming over tonight and—“

“I know, I know,” Valerie raised her hands with a chuckle. “Three’s a crowd. I’m going to stop by the clowns anyway. It’s Claudia’s birthday and she always buys the best booze for fire-breathing.”

“Don’t singe anyone’s hair again, we don’t want a repeat of what happened with Rosie.”

“That was my first time!” Valerie laughed, pulling a sweatshirt on over her t-shirt. “I’ve had a lot more practice. I’ll be back late, but I’d like to sleep here tonight. I don’t care if he feels cheap, this camper is too small for three.”

“Deal!”

Valerie closed the door of the camper behind her and took a deep breath. Outside of the stadium, the circus had quartered off a section of the parking lot as ‘The Summer City’ where the performers could park the circus's many RVs, campers, and trailers. If Seattle’s iteration of the Summer City followed the usual layout, Valerie would have to go north to find the clown trailers. Once she was out of the Acrobat’s District, Valerie heard voices. One was loud and angry, the other was calm and menacing.

“You said four thousand!”

“What I promised was a fair price,” Storyteller Moore said. “It is you who fails to recognize value. Five thousand is an acceptable price for what we have to offer.”

Valerie’s feet wanted to keep walking to the clowns, but her curiosity pulled her closer to the voices. Crouching low, she risked a peek into Storyteller Moore’s trailer.

There was a strange man inside, bald and fat. Valerie could only see the back of his head but could sense the frustration in his posture. Storyteller Moore sat across from him with Remy by his side. Moore had his ankle crossed over his knee, idly toying with a puzzle cube in his hands.

“We had a deal!” the fat man yelled, pointing a stubby finger.

“Four thousand in six weeks, correct.” Moore began, setting the cube aside. “I, however, had to handle some security as we were crossing state lines. For all its liberal tendencies, Washington

is taking the opioid crisis quite seriously. And we arrived early, which you would have known if you bothered looking for us before we reached out to you.”

“So, you’re charging me for time that you’ve been sitting on your ass waiting?”

“The price of punctuality.” Moore shrugged. “That’s four days we could be going up to Vancouver for our next delivery. I have a very eager buyer who would love to pay my asking price. And borders into Canada are going to be a hassle. Consider the five thousand an investment in the future of our business.”

“Why you thieving, little—!”

“Sleep.” Moore snapped his fingers with a bored sigh. Valerie watched the fat man go limp in the chair, his head drooping. She ducked down and pressed her ear to the aluminum of Moore’s trailer.

“He’s an annoying asshole.” Remy sneered, heavy footsteps making the trailer creak. “I don’t know why you put up with him.”

“Finding someone else as susceptible to hypnosis as Trent would be a monumental task.” Moore said. “We have better uses for our time.”

“What should do for now?”

There was quiet in the trailer and Valerie held her breath, hoping Moore wasn’t listening for her. Eventually, Moore spoke. “We could settle for forty-five hundred, don’t you agree?”

“That’s most of our profit.” Remy said. “Especially for what we’re planning in Vancouver.”

“Vancouver is a new job,” Moore said. “And what have I always said about repeat customers?”

“Loyalty has a price?”

“We’ll make up the difference in Vancouver,” Moore stood, pacing. “But losing Trent’s business would be a major setback. Vancouver could be a bust, but we know Mr. Trent is an ambitious entrepreneur. For now, we can afford to break even.”

There was a moment of quiet and Valerie peered over the edge of the window. Storyteller Moore was leaning close to the fat man, Mr. Trent, and whispering. Valerie would have given anything to know what he was saying, but she knew it wasn’t good. After a moment of quiet, Moore passed behind his desk and took his seat again. “And one, two, three...wide awake.”

As Moore snapped his fingers, Mr. Trent sat upright in his chair. “—asshole! I oughta rip off that scraggly, scrub brush you call a beard! But I’m a reasonable man. You’ve been good to me in the past and your product is good. I’ll settle for forty-five hundred. We’ll both take a hit, but it seems like the only fair way we could both win.”

Storyteller Moore leaned back in his chair, brow furrowed with a slight nod. “Agreed!” Moore said, extending his hand to Trent. “Let it not be said that Nathaniel Trent is a vengeful man. Forty-five hundred it is!”

Valerie ducked down and rushed away from Moore’s trailer. Questions raced through her head: about Moore, about Mr. Trent, about the circus itself! The shows were always extravagant and huge productions. Was Moore funding them with dirty money? What was he selling? What was waiting for them up in Vancouver?

Lost in her thoughts, Valerie bumped right into Remy. She wasn’t sure how he’d gotten ahead of her until she remembered his micro camper was on her way to the clowns.

“Valerie? What are you doing out so late?”

“I, uh—I’m off to Claudia’s birthday. Benny said you were coming over, so I gave her run of the camper.”

Remy scrunched his face at Valerie as though she had ‘liar’ written on her face. Valerie only hoped his disinterest would give her a reprieve from his scrutiny. “Alright.” Remy nodded. “Maybe I’ll see you later then. Have a good night.”

Valerie nodded and walked off, careful to control her speed. She wanted to run back to her camper and warn Benny, she wanted to run to the clown district and get a posse together, she wanted to do something! With what she knew, she couldn’t pretend that everything was alright. Yet turning against Storyteller Moore would be worse than turning against the mob.

Valerie had been taking circus classes after she felt gymnastics were getting too competitive at fourteen. She never felt more accepted than swinging above the crowds and knew where she belonged. Once she graduated from high school, Valerie sent out audition videos to every circus she could think of. She made due performing at children’s parties on the side. Valerie remembered the gut-twisting rejection and the heart-stopping thrill of joining Storyteller Moore’s Summer Circus. Three years later, the circus was her family, her home.

Turning against Moore—bringing police to the circus—would make her a pariah in the only group she’d called a family. Besides, she didn’t know who else was in bed with Moore. Was it only Remy? Or was Valerie the only clueless one in a circus of criminals? It wasn’t something she wanted to think about. The question became: where could she go?

Breaking into a run, Valerie veered west towards the highway. Most people ran away to join the circus. Valerie thought she might be the first to run from it.