

## CHAPTER I

*Cincinnati, Ohio*  
*August 1880*

MANY DIME NOVELISTS EXPERIENCED CREATIVE blocks to their writing, but Lydia Pelton doubted any of them would stoop to impersonating a clown and rescuing a three-legged goat from the circus to overcome them. A wise decision on their part, no doubt. Letting Theresa convince her this was the best solution to both of their problems bordered on lunacy. Not only had they abandoned their corsets and skirts for—Lord, forgive them—oversized trousers and red shirtwaists, but they'd concocted the most ridiculous plan of extracting a bleating goat from the circus. At night. When everything was quiet and calm.

They were fools. The stench of the outhouses they hid behind only confirmed it.

Theresa tugged on Lydia's shirtsleeve and pointed between the wooden buildings toward the lantern light of the circus grounds' guard.

If he adhered to the same path as last time, he'd exit from between the colored tents, then meander toward the big tent—the opposite direction of the menagerie.

Lydia scratched at the tacky white paint on her face and watched the light grow brighter. *Please don't let this go like I'd write it.*

He exited and proceeded just as expected.

Good. Maybe tonight wouldn't be a catastrophe. After all, if she'd written this, the guard would have visited the necessary and discovered them. It was a perfect plot device for fiction. Not so much for real life.

Lydia leaned in toward Theresa to keep her voice low. "It's not too late. We should leave now before we're caught."

"Don't be such a coward. You're a Guardian, and Guardians do not leave the defenseless in the hands of such negligent brutes."

They might be Guardians, but half of their group were tucked in bed in their homes, like reasonable people. Besides, the oath they'd made during their school days to protect the defenseless hadn't been meant to extend to animals, but that was Theresa for you. She couldn't abide the abuse of man or beast—even if that beast were a three-legged goat owned by the Adam Beadle Circus. Lydia should have called on Nora and Flossie for help with her creative block. Maybe then she wouldn't be in this impossible position with Theresa.

"What if we're caught?"

Theresa readjusted the cone-shaped hat over the tight bun on top of her head. "With as often as I've evaded Grandfather's and Mrs. Hawking's supervision—tonight included—you have nothing to be concerned about. Just follow my lead. Now come on. Topsy needs us."

She darted to the nearest tent, leaving Lydia to debate her next action in the shadows.

*Just because you would pen this as a complete disaster doesn't mean that's how it will happen. Just pretend you're one of your heroines. Or better yet, Billy Poe.*

The hero detective of her crime novels embodied bravery, determination, cunning, and strength. To accomplish this rescue mission, she'd take on his persona, not a damsel-in-distress heroine making stupid choices that placed her in danger. Granted, she was making a stupid decision now, but friends did stupid things for each other, right?

Lydia sprinted to Theresa's side.

The odor of the watchman's cigarette lingered in the air, but no one else wandered about. They dashed from one tent to the next, pausing at each one to ensure the path remained clear. Once they reached the menagerie tent, Lydia rubbed her palms over her coarse trousers and forced slow, quiet breaths. The next time she wrote a scene where someone sneaked around, she'd remember to include descriptions of sweaty palms, thumping heartbeats, and breaths held until dizzy for fear of being heard. No experience could go wasted. Not even something as absurd as rescuing a goat from the circus.

Theresa had better appreciate how much Lydia valued their friendship.

Muttered conversations and rumbling snores indicated they were close to the compact village of caravan wagons and sleeping tents. Much too close. Based on how many wagons she'd seen earlier, Adam Beadle must employ nearly one hundred people. It would take only one person to spot her or Theresa and sound the alarm.

This was their last chance to reconsider.

She crouched next to where Theresa struggled to lift the canvas bottom from between the tent pegs. "We should leave. It's too risky right now."

Her friend scowled. "The last show is tomorrow. It's tonight or never."

"Never sounds good."

Theresa dropped the canvas and planted her fists on her hips. "Neither the Guardians nor a Plane abandons a battle plan when a life is at stake. Topsy will die if we don't rescue her."

"If we get caught—"

"They'll assume we're clowns."

No, they wouldn't. Clowns were *men*, and a blind person could see there was nothing masculine about either one of them. Theresa, with her small chest and petite features, might pull off the appearance of a young boy, but Lydia had curves that no amount of binding cloth could hide. Add her thick black mass of curly hair that couldn't

be stuffed inside a muck bucket, much less the triangular little hat tilting to one side on her head, and no one could deny it. She was a woman.

With a coroner father and a healthy imagination, Lydia well knew the risks they faced should the largely male circus population discover them. But Theresa would never retreat. Her big heart outweighed reason.

Lydia sighed. She couldn't leave Theresa behind. If they worked together, they might make it out unscathed.

Maybe.

"Fine. But you know this is illegal, right?" Lydia wedged her hands between the hard-packed ground and rough canvas.

Theresa joined her. "Not when I'm paying for her. I'll slip a note and the outrageous sum Mr. Beadle demanded beneath the ringmaster's wagon door on our way out. I'm not giving the man a chance to raise his price *again*. I barely had enough from my painting commissions to pay this amount."

Unladylike grunts escaped as they pulled upward against the tension formed by two tent pegs and the weight of the canvas. They managed to raise an opening about a foot high.

Theresa dropped to her stomach and squirmed her way through. Once on the other side, she held the canvas for Lydia. "Be careful not to stand too quickly. I bumped my head on the underside of a wagon."

Lydia eyed the insufficient opening. *You can make it. Just think small.*

She thrust her arms and head through the hole, then clawed at the packed dirt. Filth and pebbles wedged painfully beneath her nails. With toes jammed into the ground, she wriggled until, finally, her bust cleared the opening.

At least Theresa had insisted on wearing trousers. With all the flailing she was doing with her legs, her thighs would surely have been exposed in skirts. Now to get her lower half through.

She glanced around. A few low-burning lanterns hung from wagon

fronts and revealed there was nothing within reach. Theresa didn't weigh enough to hold down a sheaf of paper, but she was all Lydia had.

"On the count of three, pull me." She dug her toes deeper into the ground outside the tent and grabbed Theresa's arms at the elbow. "One. Two. Three!"

Theresa yanked. Her grip slipped, and she tumbled against the wagon.

Lydia didn't budge, but the commotion woke the wagon's occupant.

Yellow-and-black eyes flashed in the dim light.

A tiger's clawed paw shot out the cage bars toward Theresa.

Lydia grasped Theresa's legs and tugged them from beneath her.

Theresa yelped as she fell.

The tiger growled, clearly disgruntled at having missed out on a midnight snack. The paw disappeared, and padded feet paced the small confines of the cage.

Lydia fisted her hands to stop their trembling. Praise God for His protection.

"Thanks for the rescue. Now let's get you inside." Theresa crawled to the canvas stretched tight over Lydia's waist, and tugged.

Unfortunately, without standing and becoming prey for the tiger, her attempts were futile.

Lydia tapped her forehead against the cool ground. Of course she was pinned in place. It was exactly the thing she'd write to build excitement and anticipation for the reader. But this was not fiction, and the anticipation of being caught was making her nauseated.

Canvas bit into her as she twisted onto her side. "Find something to use as a wedge."

Theresa crawled beneath the tiger's wagon and disappeared from view.

Rummaging came from the other side of the tent, accompanied by the annoyed huffs, rumbles, and bleats of the other animals.

*God, if we make it through this night without injury or detection,*

*I promise Theresa and I will never do something so foolish again. At least not until Theresa's next harebrained idea.*

Maybe bargaining with God wasn't her most glorious moment, but at this point they needed a miracle.

Theresa came around the side of the wagon with a three-legged goat wobbling behind her on a rope lead. "Look who I found!"

Make that more than a miracle. How would they get a goat *out* if Lydia couldn't even get *in*?

At least the goat wasn't the only thing Theresa had brought. She set two small decorative wooden boxes in front of Lydia.

"This is the best I could find," Theresa said. "Will they help?"

Lydia pulled one closer. "It's not much, but I guess we'll see." She sucked in her stomach and jammed the box into the narrow space between herself and the canvas. With some effort, she forced it onto its tallest side. It only created a couple more inches, but every bit counted. After turning over carefully, she worked the other box into place.

Perfect. Now she just had to wiggle inside without her rear end knocking the boxes over. Maybe they'd get Topsy out without being caught after all.

"Stop!" A man bellowed the order from outside the tent.

Of course. She should've known better than to even think they might succeed.

Well, if she was going to be caught, it wouldn't be with her body half outside. She rolled onto her stomach and kicked toward Theresa.

Before she could maneuver herself fully inside, a slippered foot landed on the back of her calf and rolled off. She winced, and the person who'd stepped on her grunted. Seconds later, the full weight of their body crashed atop her legs. Once again, she was pinned partially outside the tent.

*Really, God? Was this punishment?*

Unable to move, she listened as multiple sets of feet pounded closer.

"I've got this one, you grab the other," the same voice yelled.

The person on her legs scrambled to get up, and the pressure on her legs lifted. Using her elbows as leverage, Lydia attempted to pull

the rest of herself through the tent's makeshift opening. She managed a couple of inches, but with a painful jolt, the weight on her legs returned, heavier this time, almost as if a second person had joined the first.

A scuffle ensued, and the weight shifted. "Don't be getting any funny ideas," the pursuer growled. "You're under arrest."

Great. Just what they needed. The police. But they hadn't been shouting at her. They were after someone else, and that person was now writhing around on her legs. Unfortunately, once the officer removed his quarry, he wasn't likely to miss her legs sticking out from the tent. If she and Theresa didn't disappear posthaste, Papa would hear of her escapade within the hour and make her a cadaver for the morgue's collection.

Lydia stretched her arms toward Theresa. "When I say *now*," she hissed, "pull!"

Theresa looped Topsy's lead to a wheel's spoke on the next wagon over, then planted her feet and leaned forward enough to avoid the tiger's reach.

The clink of iron outside the tent indicated the application of handcuffs. A moment later the weight on Lydia's legs lifted.

"Now!"

She pushed with her feet. Theresa heaved.

Her hips cleared the opening, and Theresa tumbled backward.

Lydia jumped up, only remembering the tiger when its paw swiped at the hat still tied to her head. She shrieked. The hat came loose and flew through the air, bouncing off poor Topsy's face. The goat scrambled awkwardly to the end of its lead and bleated with the volume of a fire bell. Then, as if that weren't enough, the tiger roared.

"By thunder! What was that?" the officer outside exclaimed.

Uh-oh. Time to make a swift exit.

Lydia bent to retrieve the borrowed hat. A man's face peered through the still-propped-open space at the base of the tent. The dome-shaped hat strapped to his head left no question that they'd just been caught by the police.

“Hey, you!” the officer called. “Stop right there!”

Theresa tugged Topsy’s lead free, grabbed Lydia’s hand, and dragged them through the narrow space between the tent and wagon wheel.

“Hall! There’s two more of ’em inside! Yount! Slide through and corral ’em.”

And now there was to be a chase too? Had God decided to bring one of her books to life? She glanced back in time to see a twig of a man in an officer’s uniform slide through the opening with far more ease than she.

Theresa took the lead, slowing only when her three-legged goat couldn’t keep pace. Without any discernible logic, she cut between the wagons and temporary pens. Camels spat in their direction. Elephants trumpeted at them. A trio of black-and-white monkeys jumped and screeched inside their short red cage wagon like they were vicious and rabid. One reached out and tried to grab Lydia as she passed.

Enough was enough.

Only one real exit existed—through the tent’s flap and out into the circus camp.

Two steps from freedom, she crashed full force into a man’s short, lithe, muscular body. He took one wide-eyed look at her and then grinned.

Wasn’t he one of the aerialists she’d watched at yesterday’s show? Great. Now they were going to have the circus as well as the law after them. She should have known that if *she* wouldn’t have allowed her characters an easy escape, God wouldn’t either.

Before she knew what had happened or how, her feet left the ground and her body flew through the air like she was an aerialist herself.

Only her flight didn’t include grabbing a trapeze.



## CHAPTER 2

WHY DID HE ALWAYS GET the runners?

Officer Abraham Hall pushed faster in pursuit of the second member of the aerialist burglar duo. Officer Zimmerman had nabbed the first, but this second one was proving wilier. Lucian, Abraham's best friend and former partner, would be merciless in his circus jokes once he found out about tonight's chase.

Abraham pivoted around the corner and darted through the tent's still-swinging flap.

Only a few feet in front of him, his suspect heaved and flung something—no, someone—Abraham's direction.

The person slammed into his midsection before he could dodge.

Air exploded from Abraham's lungs. His feet went out from under him, and he landed on his back, a suffocating weight sprawled across his chest. He lifted his head, and brown trousers and a bright red shirt obscured his view. Dark eyes blinked owlishly at him from a white-painted face.

A clown.

Of course he'd been accosted by a clown. He hated clowns. With a shove, he freed himself, twisting to focus on the escaping burglar, now several yards away.

Another, much-smaller clown blocked the aerialist's path. Undeterred, the man shoved the obstacle aside only to be met with another in the form of . . . a three-legged goat? He tumbled over the goat's back.

That ought to slow—

But no. Somehow the cheat managed to tuck his body into a roll and pop back to his feet instead of landing face-first like a normal person.

This whole night was a farce. Vaudeville couldn't have come up with more buffoonery.

Abraham groaned as he pushed up from the ground. The mayor would have his head—and his job—if he didn't catch the fiends who'd been burglarizing the homes of the wealthy since the circus had arrived.

Shaking his head, he started after the aerialist again, but the smaller clown cut in front of him. He avoided the boy but collided with the goat.

Once again, he hit the ground—this time with the beast's only back leg bucking against his shoulder. Would this never end?

Elephants trumpeted as Officer Yount cut between them and the camels.

Abraham twisted away from the goat, and his foot slipped. Was that . . . excrement? His stomach lurched. By the size of the pile, it had to be an elephant's. He pulled his foot free and scraped it along the ground. He could just imagine Lucian's take on this.

Where was the good God he served? Of course, things could have been worse. He could have landed face-first in the vile stuff.

Yount angled toward the escaping aerialist, and Abraham charged to his feet to help corner the suspect against the wagons.

The aerialist ran faster, leaped against the side of the nearest wagon, and clasped a ring at the top. He swung and contorted to drop on top of the small red-and-gold wagon next to it. The force of his landing and the weight of his body tipped it over. The wagon cracked against the ground, and a side door swung open.

Three angry, screeching monkeys burst forth.

Two of them launched at Abraham. He ducked when he should have dodged, giving one the perfect perch on the back of his head. The other clambered up his front and dug into his pockets. Before

he could grab the monkey on his front, the one on his head started jumping and slapping its tiny hands against him, all while screaming at a deafening pitch. Abraham reached behind him to fling it off, but the wretched beast gripped fistfuls of hair and swung around without letting go. Abraham would end up either bald or with a massive headache. Likely both.

“Get off him!” A female voice cut through the screeches. A thwack followed, and the monkey released its grip and flew through the air.

With one tormentor gone, Abraham wrapped his hands around the other, still busy picking his pockets, and hurled it.

A different shrieking started, and he twisted to find the monkey, intent on retribution, tangled in his rescuer’s black curls. Since when were clowns female?

A shrill whistle cut through the chaos, and the monkeys froze.

“Come!” The command bellowed from the front of the tent.

Two of the monkeys scampered toward the gangly man standing in front of a growing crowd of circus workers. The third, however, remained thoroughly snarled in the clown’s curls.

Between her screams and the monkey’s screeching, Abraham’s ears would ring for weeks. He snagged the rascal’s hand and untwined it from her hair.

The ungrateful beast sank its teeth into his hand several times until, finally freed, it joined the others on the man’s shoulders.

Abraham yanked a handkerchief from his pocket and wiped away the blood. It didn’t appear the bites would need stitches, but that didn’t lessen the sting.

A quick glance around confirmed the aerialist had escaped. So much for becoming this week’s golden boy. Now he’d be the whipping boy.

His rescuer clown turned damsel in distress lifted wide brown eyes to his. Tears beaded unnaturally on the paint coating her face. Frizz and wild knots stuck out in all directions. The sight was enough to give grown men nightmares. Himself included.

“That is enough.” The harsh words from the man with the monkeys

cut off her shaky thank-you. “I am Adam Beadle, and this is my circus. I demand to know what is going on.”

Abraham glanced at Officer Yount, who was brand-new to the Twelfth Ward and policing in general. So far, the man asserted his authority as successfully as a fish climbed a tree. Not something they needed in this already disastrous situation. That left Abraham to take the brunt of what was certain to be an unpleasant interaction.

“We’re Officers Hall and Yount. We caught two of your aerialists burglarizing homes, and we pursued them here. Unfortunately, one escaped after releasing your monkeys, and your clowns interfered.”

Mr. Beadle bristled visibly. “I do not hire crooks. The men you seek cannot be mine. Arrest those clowns if you wish to catch *real* thieves.”

Abraham shook his head. He must have heard wrong. “You want me to arrest your clowns?”

“These are my monkeys, and this is my circus, but those”—he jabbed a finger in the direction of the two pests edging away with the goat—“are not my clowns.”

At that accusation, the smaller figure holding the goat’s lead stomped forward. “You couldn’t pay me enough to be your clown. If you treat your animals this badly, how much worse must you treat those you employ?”

That was no young boy’s voice. Two female clowns but neither one belonging to the circus? What was going on here?

“You!” Mr. Beadle stalked toward her amid a screeching monkey cacophony. “I told you, that goat is too valuable to sell.”

“But not valuable enough to treat her wounds?”

Good grief. The petite woman crossed her arms and widened her stance as if she intended to go nose to nose with a man twice her size.

“Theresa!” The wild-haired clown snagged her friend’s arm. “Don’t antagonize the man.”

“Officer Hall, I insist you arrest these two for thieving my goat.”

“We didn’t steal her. We’re buying her!” The little clown—Theresa—

produced an envelope from somewhere within her shirt and tossed it to the ground near Mr. Beadle's feet. "The thirty dollars you required is there, just as we agreed."

Thirty dollars? This wasn't a carriage they bargained over. It was a goat. And a mangled one at that.

"Thirty dollars is no longer enough." The monkeys on Mr. Beadle jumped and screeched as if emphasizing his declaration.

Lord, help him. It appeared there was more to this supposed goat theft than first suggested. "Did you set thirty dollars as the price for this goat?"

"It was only a number I threw out, knowing she could not pay it."

But he did give it as an amount. Would that verbal dealing count as a binding contract? Abraham would let the lawyers decide. "Yount, take Miss Theresa, her companion, and the goat to the station. We'll sort it out later."

"This is preposterous! The goat is mine. She didn't even produce the money until after they'd been caught. I demand these women be charged with theft!"

The man had a point. "Charges will be determined at the station." Now back to the reason that brought Abraham here in the first place. "About your aerialists—"

"I do not employ crooks!"

Abraham clenched his jaw in an effort not to lose his temper. He'd personally caught the duo climbing out of the mayor's window and watched their acrobatics as they shinnied to the roof and jumped from house to house in an escape attempt.

Officer Zimmerman pushed his way through the crowd at the tent's entrance, pulling with him the first burglar. "I tried to grab the other one as he climbed through the opening in the tent's side, but he disappeared into the camp."

"Mr. Beadle, will you swear under oath that this man is not your aerialist? Mind you, I have evidence to the contrary, as he and his companion appear on an advertisement for your circus."

Mr. Beadle's nostrils flared, but he didn't speak.

“I’ll take that as confirmation that he *is* your performer. I need your cooperation in apprehending the other aerialist.”

“I don’t know where he is. If you want him, get a warrant to search the premises. Until then, leave and take those clowns with you. The goat stays.”

Abraham glanced at the pitiful creature. He wouldn’t pay a quarter for the beast, but he wasn’t above using it for his purposes. “The goat goes with us—unless you would like to exchange the goat for your man?”

Mr. Beadle spun away. “Jules, see these officers and clowns off our property.”

The circus strongman, who was purported to have lifted an elephant, loped toward them from the crowd of observers. Abraham had no intention of physically opposing the man, but neither would he leave. Once he was off the property, Beadle could pack up his circus and be gone before Abraham returned with a warrant. Besides, he didn’t need one.

“The circus grounds are city property, Mr. Beadle, and while you have a permit to use them, you do not have the right to remove officers searching for a fugitive.”

Mr. Beadle flexed his fingers but did not turn around. After a prolonged silence, he acquiesced. “Escort Officer Hall through the grounds and assist in his search, but without a warrant, the tents are prohibited.”

The man knew his rights. This was not his first experience with the police.

“Please, Theresa. Officer Yount can’t carry the goat and escort us if you are uncooperative.”

The anxious whisper drew Abraham’s attention to the two clowns behind him. The damsel in distress wrung her hands as her gaze flitted between her scowling friend and a distinctly uncomfortable Officer Yount. If the little shrew decided to escape, Yount would be no match for her.

Better to amend his instructions than be reprimanded for allow-

ing two criminals to escape in one night. “You two will stay and cooperate with Officer Yount until I return, is that understood?”

“No, I don’t understand.” The shrew—Theresa—aimed her scowl at him. “We haven’t committed a crime. We should be free to go.”

Abraham removed the handcuffs from beneath his coat. He hated to shackle a woman, but she left him no choice.

“That’s not necessary, Officer Hall.” Damsel in distress placed a hand on Theresa’s arm. “We’ll cooperate and go to the station to clear up this misunderstanding. You have my word.”

“And why should I accept the word of a trespasser and thief?”

She winced. “Because I refuse to bring more shame upon my father’s name.”

Now she wanted to behave respectably? “And who would that be that it should matter to me?”

Her swallow was audible, but her words almost weren’t. “Dr. George Pelton, a coroner for Cincinnati.”

Pure fallacy. Dr. Pelton’s upstanding reputation was known throughout the city, and the man was a personal friend of the recently appointed Superintendent Carson.

Abraham scrutinized the woman before him. He’d met Dr. Pelton on a number of occasions, but he’d only seen Mrs. Pelton with her daughters indirectly when they’d delivered baked goods. With black hair and thick curls, the woman before him undeniably resembled the impression the older daughter had left. However, the white paint on her face made it difficult to discern if anything else matched what he recalled.

The sinking feeling in his gut did far more than her appearance to confirm her identity.

“Please tell me you are not Lydia Pelton.”

She offered a half smile and shrug. “I could tell you that, but I’d be lying.”

Abraham scrubbed a hand over his face. Of all the people for him to arrest. The superintendent was going to have his head for not permitting her to walk away with naught but a warning. On the

other hand, Mr. Beadle was demanding to press charges, and with the women's lack of payment before taking the goat, the man had grounds to demand it. Even if Abraham was willing to bow to the politics of his superiors, he could not release her. Perhaps if he kept her identity quiet and handled the paperwork himself, he could minimize the damage to both her and Dr. Pelton's reputations without compromising his ethics.

But he couldn't leave the search to Yount, and Zimmerman had his hands full with the other aerialist.

"Speak nothing more to anyone and do not allow your friend to cause problems. For Dr. Pelton's sake, we'll keep this quiet for as long as possible."

"I understand. Thank you."

He took one sweeping glance at her, from monkey-nested hair to her scandalously trousered legs, before pivoting away. She might be the criminal in this case, but he would be the one suffering the consequences. No matter how quiet he kept her initial arrest, the politics of its occurring meant, at best, a dressing-down. At worst? He didn't want to think about it.