



Bird

★ meets ★

Cage

ANYTA SUNDAY

Table of Contents

Love's Landscapes.....3
Bird Meets Cage – Information5
Acknowledgements.....6
Bird Meets Cage7
Part One: Then8
Part Two: And Then.....33
Author Bio55

Love's Landscapes

An M/M Romance series

BIRD MEETS CAGE

By Anyta Sunday

Introduction

The story you are about to read celebrates love, sex and romance between men. It is a product of the *Love's Landscapes* promotion sponsored by the *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* and is published as a gift to you.

What Is Love's Landscapes?

The *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* invited members to choose a photo and pen a letter asking for a short M/M romance story inspired by the image; authors from the group were encouraged to select a letter and write an original tale. The result was an outpouring of creativity that shone a spotlight on the special bond between M/M romance writers and the people who love what these authors do.

A written description of the image that inspired this story is provided along with the original request letter. If you'd like to view the photo, please feel free to join the [Goodreads M/M Romance Group](#) and visit the discussion section: *Love's Landscapes*.

No matter if you are a long-time devotee to M/M Romance, just new to the genre or fall somewhere in between, you are in for a delicious treat.

Words of Caution

This story may contain sexually explicit content and is **intended for adult readers**. It may contain content that is disagreeable or distressing to some readers. The *M/M Romance Group* strongly recommends that each reader review the General Information section before each story for story tags as well as for content warnings.

This story is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

All rights reserved worldwide.

This eBook may be distributed freely in its entirety courtesy of the Goodreads M/M Romance Group. This eBook may not be sold, manipulated or reproduced in any format without the express written permission of the author.

Bird Meets Cage, Copyright © 2014 Anyta Sunday

Cover Art by Natasha Snow

This ebook is published by the *M/M Romance Group* and is not directly endorsed by or affiliated with Goodreads Inc.

BIRD MEETS CAGE

By Anyta Sunday

Photo Description

A man stares into the camera, a glint of magic in his dark eyes as he inhales his cigar making it sparkle like golden starlight.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

He called himself Stardust, but one of my friends told me his name was Jean. I met him during the summer I worked at the cotton candy stand when the circus came through town.

He was made of big dreams, sunshine, and raw sense of being that I'd never known existed before him. His eyes were black as mud, his lips were the same color as the cotton candy I sold, and his smile could put a solar eclipse to shame.

He was everything I wasn't. He was the first man I ever loved, and he left without me ever telling him that the way he looked at me broke my heart.

I'm older now, and even if that circus never comes through town again, I'll still call him Stardust.

Sincerely,

Natasha

Story Info

Genre: historical (set in the late 40s and early 60s)

Tags: age gap, circus, reunited, musician, acrobatics, clown, trick riding, first love, big top, outdoor sex

Word Count: 16,348

Acknowledgements

Thank you to Teresa for content editing, Lynda for line editing, Averin and the LL team for proofreading, and Sunne and Vicki for beta reading the first rounds, and Jenni Lea and Mishyjo for helping me with the American terminology! I am grateful to you all for not only catching inconsistencies, but also giving me tips to make this a stronger story. And a special thank you to Natasha Snow for the awesome prompt AND for the lovely vintage cover art. Big hugs to you all.

BIRD MEETS CAGE

By Anyta Sunday

Part One: Then

MOST OF THE stalls were run by circus folk.

Thanks to a nasty round of influenza, I'd been hired on as casual staff.

I wiped my hands, sticky from cotton candy I'd been trying to save from a sudden rain shower, on my apron.

The food and game stalls studding the fringes of the fairgrounds sat quietly, in lonely striped silence, awaiting the next wave of visitors. The peacock colors and vibrant life that had minutes ago rustled all around me, flirting with smiles and sparkling silver coins, had been lured on by a clown playing the flute. With oversized crimson shoes, he'd clomped over sun-browned grass, piped his merry tune, and the crowd had giggled and followed. To the crown of the circus. The tent.

The magic.

The rest of the place was left drained of color. Empty. Just like our town would be, when the circus left.

"Damn you, you bunch of fat-heads," came a hard voice followed by a throaty growl. "I was meant for piper today."

A high-pitched honk sounded, and a clown stumbled out from behind a roasted nut stall, trying to attach a red rubber blob to his nose. Getting his nose on seemed the least of his worries. Rain had dribbled through his greasepaint; his eyes were ringed with black, and his smile looked like it was melting. Soil dusted his red polka-dot pants and blue vest like he'd been rolling in one of the fields.

He touched his head. "Great. They took my damn hat as well."

He looked up; I glanced to my rescued cotton candy, and then to my trumpet case under the counter.

"You!"

Me.

Begrudgingly, I looked up at the clown. He was younger than the others I'd seen passing through; he had all his hair, and his greasepaint didn't get lodged in the cracked skin around his eyes. "Cotton candy?" I asked with a wan smile.

He snorted. “Cotton candy!” he said, as if that were the vilest filth in the world. And then he stopped, gave up fiddling with his nose, and plunked it on the stall ledge with a sigh. His pitch sweetened. “Actually that would help.”

He pinched a stick and procured a quarter from behind my ear. “There you go. So, kid”—he munched on the raspberry cloud—“did you see the bastard clown that stole my flute?”

“There was one leading the crowds to the show,” I said, looking over the tops of stalls to the tip of the red-and-gold-striped tent beyond.

“Yeah? What did he look like?”

I blinked. He was kidding, right? “Ah. Like you.”

He munched more of the cotton candy. “What, confident and swoon-worthy?” His melting smile quirked as his lips curved. “I’m kidding with you. Jesus, kid, you’ve gone white as me. Like I told you I want to go all the way with you or something. That’d be the joke of the day. Crack me right up.” He winked. “Now, what color were his shoes?”

I stammered out an answer, staring at the candied apples lined up on the adjacent counter. His words trumpeted in my head, but I didn’t have control over the sound, like I usually did when I played my instrument.

When I lifted my gaze again, readying myself for whatever else this clown might have to say, he was halfway toward the tent.

~*~

THE CLOWN HAD left his nose behind.

I ducked out of my apron, took the honking rubber nose, and dashed down the rows of stalls, searching for him.

The laughter of a five-hundred-plus crowd roared, and for a moment the gold and red stripes of the circus tent glowed brighter. I headed towards it, drawn by the sound, the color, the warmth it emanated.

Clipping around one side of the tent, I caught sight of my clown and followed after him, veering around tent pegs until his figure blinked out of sight. The tent door flapped in a breeze and I moved to it, sneaking closer and closer until water dripped from the slanted roof onto the back of my neck, sluicing a path under my cotton shirt. Through a narrow gap in the door, I peeked inside the tented arena.

There was so much vibrancy, it should have been difficult to know what to focus on first. I could have looked at the hundreds of cheering people curved around the ring, or the lively band as it played “The Circus Bee”. Perhaps I should have been drawn by my love of the trumpet, and honed my gaze on the glittering brass instruments. My clown might only have been yards away, a tiger lurking in the shadows even closer than that.

And I was drawn to the ring.

To him.

He danced on a cantering horse, arms stretched above his head, fingertips inches from a million glittering constellations suspended above the ring. His costume played from dark to light blue, shimmering in the light. He leaned back, as if he wanted to give his body to the stars and have them embrace him; then, in a sassy change of mind, he flipped backward, landing easily on the horse's back.

The horse cantered on, mane and tail whipping in a steady rhythm, following the lively beat of the music. Again the man somersaulted, sleek, and graceful. As he rounded the ring, I saw his face. He smiled as if lost in the moment, as if the crowd didn't exist and he was simply living in the music and the rush of straw-scented air breezing over him. He and his horse were one, both with eyes as dark as night and hair to match. They left a shimmering dust trail, where the horse's hooves dug into the finely-shaved wood that laced the earth, like cosmic dust. *Stardust*.

A second horse entered the ring, and the rider's next somersault had my heart lurching into my throat. He twisted in the air, light and free, and for a moment I was looking at a soaring bird.

I wished his back wasn't to me, wished I too was privy to the moment he landed on the second horse and the crowd let out the collective breath they'd all been holding.

“Hey! What do you think you're doing?”

I was hauled backwards by my shirt. Magic and color morphed into a muscular man with painted eyebrows and a glare to cut stone.

“Sorry, I was just—”

He marched me away from the tent. “You're not meant to be here,” he said, and shoved me toward the stalls that paved a way through the fields. “Off you go.”

I slunk back to my stall. Fiddling with the clown's nose, I stared through another rain-shower toward the crown of the circus. The tent; the magic.

Him.

~*~

IT FLUTTERED ON a wooden post outside the fortuneteller's tent.

I ducked out, past Johnny working the stall next to mine. I ripped off the wet circus poster, folded it, and jammed it into my pocket.

Ignoring Johnny's arched brows, I ducked back to my stall. I blocked out the murmur of his voice and the splashing pearls of rainwater against the canvas roof. Sitting on an upturned bucket, I pulled out the poster and studied it

The Circus Ring

The Grandest Show In The World

Here for a Never-Before Two-Week Stint!

Featuring:

The Topsy-Turvy Twins

Willy the Whip Master

Beatle the Tiger

Moon the Balloon Horse

And Blue, the Acrobatic Trick Rider

Blue curved over the silhouette of a horse. This was him. Blue was Stardust.

The name I'd given him shadowed me through the arduous heat of the next three days.

Stardust.

~*~

SWEAT MIXED WITH the sweet smell of cotton candy, and I wiped my arm over my beading brow.

What wouldn't I give for the rain showers of the days before?

Amongst the chatter of a light crowd trickling in from a show came a sharp cry.

"Get off me!"

I jerked toward the familiar female voice.

Uptight and prim, with a warmth only my mom and I could detect. Without a doubt my sister, Rosa. And she was pinned to the grass in front of the nut stall by a...

Clown.

"Sorry, Ma'am," the clown said, struggling to unhitch a button from his shirt that was lodged in the belt of my sister's dress. "I fell over my shoes."

Rosa swatted at his hands. "Off me. I'm a married woman!"

The clown gave up fiddling to untangle them and yanked the button off. "Well that there is a mighty pity," he said, leaping elegantly to his feet and offering her a hand.

She refused his offer of assistance and he plucked up his fallen hat, tipping it to her, before clomping around a corner.

I finished swirling cotton candy and darted over. She was on her feet now, pulling up her dirt-stained gloves.

"Ridiculous. Circus. What are you thinking working here?"

I tugged her into a quick embrace. "How was the honeymoon?"

She nodded curtly and followed me to my stall. "It was all right, I suppose."

She might have said more. Might have elaborated on her new husband and their plans for the future: white picket fence, four children... I didn't hear any of it.

Standing at the counter—with a casual lean, shadowed eyes, and rosy lips—was Stardust.

I blinked and took in his black shirt and the smattering of dark chest hair peeking out the top. Heat that had nothing to do with the sun wormed its way to my cheeks—and my johnson.

Stardust chuckled and I snapped my gaze from his tapering torso to his face. "Sorry," I murmured. "Cotton candy?"

"They call it candyfloss where I was last." His voice was smooth and accented. But I couldn't place it. Like it had been watered down by time spent in foreign lands. Or was an amalgamated mix of everything. Whatever it was, it was exotic.

Perhaps it was Circus.

On automatic, I picked up a stick and went through the routine of making him a fresh batch. I kept glancing over at him. I wanted to say something. Keep talking to him. Keep him there.

But how? What could I say?

I glanced from my sister to the stalls around us and back to him, searching for inspiration.

"I saw you ride," I blurted. "You were... good."

"You're only ever as good as your horse," he said, his eyes twinkling in amusement as he glanced toward the cotton candy machine.

I couldn't look away from him. "Your horse must be the best, then."

He laughed, and a web of cotton candy wrapped around my hand. I looked down. The whole stick, my hand, and part of my arm were overloaded with a cloud of sweet cotton.

I pulled back and offered a small, embarrassed smile. "I'll make you a new one."

Stardust crooked his finger at me; as if I was attached to strings and he was my puppet master, I moved forward. "It's a little like you're star struck," he said quietly as he peeled off the cotton candy from around my hand.

His fingers grazed over mine and sent a tickle of goose bumps up my arm.

"You don't have to be, you know," Stardust said. "I'm just a guy. One who'll even eat the candyfloss that's been wrapped around your hand. We'll call it the thirty-second rule."

He slipped some candy into his mouth and licked his lips, making the bottom one glisten in the sunlight.

"How do you fly like that?" I said, though it came out breathy.

Stardust carefully plucked the cotton candy stick from my tightly pinched fingers. "You think I fly? That might be the best compliment I've ever had."

My throat tightened. At a loss for words, I clamped my mouth shut on a strange-sounding gurgle.

Stardust twirled his tongue on the top of the cloud I'd made. "I've been doing it since I was a kid," he said; the way he said it made it seem as if he was old. He couldn't have been more than my sister's age. Twenty or so.

“You grew up in the circus?”

“I grew up in the world. Never stayed more than a summer in the same place.”

“Oh.” Wow.

Clearly Stardust was everything I was not. Elegant and graceful where I was clumsy; a man of the world where I was a seventeen-year-old kid from a small Pennsylvanian town. A town I'd never left, and likely never would.

“Thanks for this,” Stardust said, dropping a coin on the counter.

I could see him retreating already, and panic made me lurch forward, banging into the counter. Candied apples rocked. “Wait,” I said. Stardust paused. “I play the trumpet.”

He raised a brow.

“I... I wanted to know who I'd talk to about performing a little.”

“You want to join the circus, Floss?”

“N-no. I just thought if there was any spot to showcase local talent, that maybe... It was just a thought.” More than a thought, it was a dream; it was why every day I'd trudged my instrument into work with me. I hoped that I might be able to play. Show off. Shine for a few minutes. The circus brought in a big crowd too, a crowd I could never have when they left.

Stardust smiled again. “Everyone deserves a little magic. Let's see if I can't find some for you.”

And with that, he twisted and left.

Rosa cleared her throat. “He's a bit strange, isn't he?”

Strange? No. Unique. Yes. “What do you mean?”

“Eating candy from your hand like that. You'd think he was starving. Or...”

“Or, what?”

She lowered her voice. “You know. Fruity.”

~*~

FRUITY OR NOT, the rest of the day my hand still tingled with Stardust.

I didn't think he'd eaten the candy because he was desperate for all the food he could get. I thought he'd done it as a message. Like he was telling me he

knew what I really was, and that was okay. Like the handshake for a secret club.

Like maybe a “your golden hair and green eyes and blushing cheeks make me shiver too.”

Discreetly, I dug that hand into my pocket and rearranged my aching cock with it. Even through the cotton of my pants, I felt that tingle travel and caress.

~*~

LUST STIRRED, in every thought of him. Like that night, in my single bed, staring up at the attic ceiling.

A train rumbled past my house, making it shake. Just like it did every night at ten on the dot. Unlike every night, I closed my eyes and imagined I was riding on a horse with Stardust. I could almost feel the rise and fall of cantering beneath me.

He pushed me down against the horse so I lay flat, looking up at a sky full of stars. He leaped to his feet, standing close to my crotch. A playful smile touched his lips as he lifted one foot and massaged my cock with it.

My hand was under the sheets now, inside my briefs, stroking. I was so hard, aching; it felt like I would never release the rapidly building tension.

I increased my stroke. No, not my stroke—it was his foot working me as we cantered. I moaned, pushed down my pants to give him more access. Air kissed my cock, and Stardust groaned, throwing his head back toward the stars as he gripped himself through his tights.

Yes. More.

He heard my plea and his hooded gaze met mine. *Stay right where you are. No sudden movements.*

He turned around, his back to me. Slowly, his hands came down either side of the horse, his firm ass jutting out...

The rumbling stopped; the train had passed. I fumbled for the tin of Vaseline I kept under my bed, slicked some on my fingers and shut my eyes tightly once more.

Stardust lifted himself into a handstand, all sleek lines and taut muscle. *I promised you magic, here it is.* Then he scissored his legs and rolled down until he was straddling me. He moved his hands to my thighs and pushed his ass back, sliding up to my chest.

Then his mouth came down on my cock, slick and wet. He had me all the way down his throat and was lifting off again. On and off, on and off, his cock rubbing against my chest. He worked me effortlessly. I wanted to buck, I wanted to stretch myself all the way down his throat, but his words rang in my ears. *No sudden movements.* And so I lay, rigid, flying with pleasure that bordered a painful need to release—

I quickened my stroke, panting, my Vaseline-covered fingers sliding effortlessly. Firmly.

Stardust was swallowing. His throat clamping and pulsing around me—

I came.

~*~

I WAS GLAD of the sun the next day.

Glad the heat could be used as an excuse, to mask my embarrassment.

I wished and hoped to see him again.

I wished and hoped he'd never show up.

He didn't show up.

I went home disappointed.

And relieved.

~*~

I BLINKED. Stardust was at my stall again.

“Floss!” Stardust smiled and gestured to the muscled man with the painted eyebrows who had caught me gawking at the show. Thankfully, he didn't seem to remember me. “This is the man you want to talk to about playing your trumpet.”

I wiped my candy-gloved fingers on my apron. I was just wrapping up for the day.

The large man spoke, his voice kinder than the last time. “Play something for me, kid. We'll see what you've got.”

“Really?” I grinned. “Now?”

“Well I haven't got all day, have I?”

I nodded. And nodded some more. “Sure. Absolutely. I just”—I lifted my hands—“need to wash up.”

“You do that and come to my sleeping car. Blue, show him where to go.”

“Yes, Tippy.”

Tippy left, and suddenly I was face to face with Stardust. A smile played at the corner of his lips, and for a second I thought he could see into me. That he knew all my thoughts. Every dream. Every stroke.

I jerked out of my apron, took my trumpet case and marched to the fountain. Stardust was close behind me, warm, smelling of molasses. I twisted sharply and pushed my case into his hands. “H-hold that.”

He took it and I swiveled back to the fountain to wash my hands. “Thank you,” I said to him, staring at the water as it flowed over my hands, his reflection distorted in the silver bowl. Still, I could see he smiled. “Yeah. Thanks.”

“Sure thing, Floss.”

I looked over my shoulder, and there it was in full force: his smile could have lit the circus.

I followed him to the train of sleeping cars, in a smaller field on the side furthest from town. “Just relax,” Stardust said, flinging an arm around my shoulders. It was a casual fling—something a buddy might do—but for me the heat of his arm seared down my middle, making it simmer inside until I laughed, giddy and lightheaded.

“You all right?” he asked.

Just bubbling, thank you. “Nervous.”

His fingers squeezed the curve of my shoulder; he may as well have had his hand on my cock, the way it stiffened. “Think of something that makes you happy, and put your soul into it.”

Happy? Soul. He was looking at that, in its purest form, right now. “Will you be here? Listening?”

Stardust shrugged. “I have to take care of Willow. Would it help if I stayed?”

I nodded. Perhaps a little too eagerly. “It’s just,” I said, fighting off an urgent need to lean further into his warmth, feel his body pressed close to mine, “Tippy seems a little intimidating.”

“A strapping lad like you, intimidated?”

That bubbling reached boiling point, and I tensed, like that moment before climax.

He seemed to sense it too and dropped his arm. Passing me my trumpet case, he asked how old I was.

“Seventeen,” I said.

“Oh.” *Young*, I heard, though it went unsaid.

I added hurriedly, “Almost eighteen.” And because I wanted so badly to know: “You?”

“Twenty-five.”

Topsy swung open his door and chucked a cigar at Stardust. He caught it and wedged one end into his mouth.

“Get on with it, then,” Topsy said to me, and I crouched down, opened my case and set up my instrument.

I brought the trumpet to my lips and began. My lips tightened as they locked into the notes; sound cut and sliced and ripped and tore through the air around me. Bright. Lively. High and low, fast and slow. Rough and sharp. Alive, like a million bees buzzing in harmony.

It mightn't have been the magic of the circus tent, of Stardust somersaulting on a horse, but it was my slice of something.

When I finished, out of breath and high on life, Topsy flicked his cigar and nodded. “Not shabby, kid. But you've got a bit of cooking to do.”

Not shabby? Cooking? I faltered, my high dropping to my toes. I didn't dare to look over at Stardust. Disappointment was more bearable without an audience. Especially one so talented. So beautiful.

“Oh. Right. Well, thanks for listening.” I crouched, sealing my focus on packing my trumpet into its case.

A tendril of cigar smoke hit my nose. I followed its trail to Stardust, who'd moved to crouch before me. “Topsy's pretty picky,” he said. “You're actually pretty good.”

Pretty good. Coming from *him* it hurt more than Topsy's “not shabby”.

“Uh-huh. Yeah. It's fine.”

I snapped the buckles of my case, stood up, and without even an acknowledging nod, hiked out of there.

A FEW DAYS passed.

Miserable days; they should have been gray and overcast.

I hated that they weren't. That the sun was brilliant, birds tweeted, a fresh breeze made the heat bearable; that every person around me was bright and cheery, flashing their thousand-dollar smiles and brightly colored costumes.

They all seemed to live in a cotton candy cloud.

~*~

THEN HE GIFTED me magic.

I was quite sick of moping, and even sicker of accidentally honking the nose the clown had left behind. I had it tucked next to the cash register in case I saw him emerging from behind the nut stall again, but that was a trick he didn't seem to be performing anymore.

It was late at night, and Johnny working the stall next to me had already packed up and left.

A rap came at the front of my stall, above where I crouched to pick up a bunch of cent pieces I'd dropped. "Sorry, we're closed," I said, standing—

Stardust.

Smiling. With a dark horse behind him that would have merged into the night had it not been for the colorful strings of lights outlining the circus tent.

The coins slipped out of my grip a second time.

Stardust leaned against the counter. "Floss. I know it's late."

His creamy voice, combined with the thrill that came with the night, had a shiver scuttling over me.

"Late. Yes." I bent and grabbed the coins again, setting them down next to the register. "What are you doing—"

HONK!

The horse merely twitched, and Stardust burst into a laugh. "You're unexpected. I like it."

"Why are you here, Stardust?"

"Stardust?" He looked startled for a moment.

I stammered, "Blue, I mean."

His smile stretched, like it had when he'd performed, and I bathed in its warmth. "Stardust," he murmured. "I like that." He leaned against the counter, glancing back to his horse. "I've been wanting to see you for a few days. I felt bad, about Topyy not giving you a shot." He shrugged and looked at me. "I promised you a bit of magic and never delivered. But I have tonight off from chores and I wanted to make up for it."

Just him standing there, a small grin dimpling his cheek, made up for it already. "Make up for it how?"

"There's nothing like a nighttime ride on a full moon." He patted his horse. "Would you like to come with Willow and me?"

I locked up, and Stardust led me toward a small picket gate that led to large, empty fields.

"You know how to ride a horse?" he asked, linking his fingers together to help me jump astride.

"The basics," I said. I'd never ridden bareback though. Not that I was going to admit that to Stardust. I didn't want him changing his mind.

"Up you go then," he gave me a leg up and I swung onto Willow's back, clutching at the horse's mane.

A second later, Stardust was there behind me, chuckling lightly. "You can sit up, I've got you."

I released my hugging hold of the horse, and eased upright. Stardust pressed himself tightly behind me, gripping my waist. He shifted slightly, and whatever he'd done, it made Willow move. She walked, following the fence line into the darkness ahead. The circus lights blinked, bit by bit, out of sight.

"Do you feel it?" Stardust asked. "Every step in the darkness is exhilarating. I love it and fear it and want more of it."

Yes. I felt it. Like being tickled with feathers until there was nothing but sensation.

"You could have forgotten about me," I said. "You didn't have to do this."

We moved into another field. "I was seventeen once too," he said. "I remember how it feels. I thought I was the best, then. Thought I could do anything. But Topyy didn't let me star that year. Or the year after. I was nineteen when I was good enough to attract an audience."

"You're trying to make me feel better because you see yourself in me?"

No answer. Just the wisp of his breath in my hair.

And then:

“I just wouldn’t want you giving up, is all. Keep practicing. One day you’ll play for the crowd of your dreams.” Stardust brought the horse to a halt. “The sky is so clear out here.”

I looked up, the back of my hair brushing over Stardust’s face. I hesitated for a second, and then gave in to it; I let my head rest back on his shoulder. The stars gleamed brightly, so vast that they made me, in this moment, seem so small. I closed my eyes and shivered as a soft gust of wind blew over us. His hard, warm body shifted behind me, and I peeked out from under my eyelids. His neck was so close. If I twisted just a bit, my lips could kiss him. I could breathe in his scent and taste him. A memory I could hold on to for a long time.

But Stardust was looking toward the night sky. And I was just a weight on his shoulder. Perhaps he felt the spark I had for him, but he did not reciprocate it. Not the way I wanted. Not with the intensity I wanted it.

“What about you?” I asked. “Are you living all your dreams?”

He looked at me then, and his breath hitched against my forehead. “I want to keep flying. I want all the world to see me, know me.”

And that was beautiful and sad all at once.

Soon summer would end, the circus would leave. He’d go with them, flying closer to his dreams, and there’d be nothing left of him in my town except stardust.

~*~

WE SPENT A lot of time together, after that.

We met every day and talked as he took care of his horse or mucked out the elephant enclosure.

He told me of all the places he’d been, the people he’d seen, the adventures he’d had. How he was passed around the circus for raising when his parents died, and how he’d been given his first horse at four, and taught if he fell off to get right back on again.

He laughed as he told me how Camilla the Camel had once decided to run away, and he’d had to ride after her, jump on her back and steer her back to the circus; or when a bad chicken stew had the entire circus crew sick on their opening night. *Between acts, we were all throwing up into troughs outside.*

But for all his stories, for all his jokes, for all his color, glitz, and sparkle, the thing I learned most being with Stardust was how lonely he was.

It came with a sharp edge, that realization.

He had his cigars after work, poker games aplenty. But then he went back to his section of the sleeping car. Alone. And what was the point in seeing every color of the rainbow, if you could never share it with anyone else?

His stories collected dust. Were eventually forgotten. Just another day.

Then there was me. His duster, polishing his memories and making them shine.

I wanted to be whatever he needed me to be.

So I was.

~*~

I TOOK A stick of cotton candy and met Stardust in the horse car.

He combed his hand through Willow's mane, murmuring appreciative words. He glanced over his shoulder at me.

"Thought I felt you there," he said.

It was getting too much, all these days so close together. I trembled with it: I wanted to touch him. Feel his skin against mine. Taste him. Have his silky voice in my ear.

Again, just like every time, he gave me that look. The one that said he liked me there. Needed me there. But he was sorry: he felt my yearning, but no, he couldn't give it back.

Stardust patted his horse and moved over to me in the shadows, near the door connecting the cars. He stopped in front of me, his boots touching my shoes.

"You're too young, Floss," he said.

"I'm taller," I said. Because I was at a loss at what to say, and that seemed to make some sort of sense.

A soft chuckle. "Yeah, that's very true. Suits you too." He peeled the stick of cotton candy from my hand. "I don't want to hurt you."

"You won't. Please. I need... something."

Stardust stared at the candy and then his gaze flickered up to mine. “Close your eyes.”

Cotton candy touched my brow with a soft scratch, then skated down my nose, across my cheek and over my neck to the edge of my shirt. Fingers lightly brushed the tips of my hair back, and then breath, feather light over my top lip. A whisper of a kiss caressed my skin, and it lingered, even when he drew back.

“Thank you,” I said. “That’s... enough.” It wasn’t. Not nearly. But for now—for today—it would do.

~*~

HE GAVE ME a ticket to watch his show.

I stared at him until everything else blurred but the beat of the band—or perhaps it was the thumping of my heart against my chest. Stardust leaped, twisted and turned. I gripped the bench as he swung off the side of his horse to hang, upside down, as Willow cantered around the ring. One foot pointed to the canvas roof; his arms stretched out, as if he was soaring.

The audience cheered, drowning out my yells and claps. So I clapped harder, yelled louder. But still, I would not be heard over them. I was just one amongst thousands. Stardust would never be mine; he belonged to everyone.

When the show was over, I stood near the back of the tent, waiting, until everyone had left.

Wiping the sheen of sweat off his brow, Stardust walked across the ring toward me. My tongue clacked against the roof of my mouth as I tried to say a hello. He wore his costume still; all navy, and all very tight. He stepped over the small fence of the ring in light leather shoes.

“What did you think?” he asked, his gaze darting over my plain slacks and mud-brown shirt.

“Your performance was...” I had no words good enough to describe it. Except: “Stardust.”

He laughed and drew closer, touching my sleeve, fingers bumping against my elbow. “It’s an incredible feeling being out there. So... high. I feel so high.”

He shifted and I wanted to shift with him, but my feet were glued to a soggy spot of ground. Air drifted between us—

And then he came close again. So close his lips were almost touching my ear. "I have an idea. It's not the real thing, but... tomorrow, after we're done performing, bring your trumpet. Stand in the ring and play."

Tomorrow? It was my birthday tomorrow. After work, I'd planned to spend it with my mom and my sister.

But Stardust wanted me here.

So here I'd be.

~*~

THE NEXT DAY, my eighteenth birthday, I met Stardust with my trumpet in tow.

"To the Big Top," Stardust called across the fairgrounds, waving me nearer. Gray clouds above us snapped into a sudden rainstorm. I jerked open my umbrella and we huddled under it as we hurried to the circus tent. Vast and empty and full of potential.

He perched himself on a chair and lit a cigar. It sparked and glittered. But of course it did; it was magic in here.

"Go on then, Floss. It's your cue."

I moved to the middle of the ring, pulled out my trumpet, and played. The vibrations tickled my skin as I watched him, and they became his touch, his kisses. Him.

When I'd finished my piece, I continued staring, the brass instrument hanging in my limp hand. He held my gaze, and then walked over to me; when he was close, he moved around me, slowly. His sigh hit the back of my head.

"You look comfortable in here. Confident. Do you wish you were part of the circus?"

There might have been the tiniest tang of hope in his voice; I couldn't be sure, and I didn't want to encourage it. Well, I did, but I couldn't.

I stared toward my trumpet. "I love playing. But the circus is not for me."

"Why not?"

"Because my mom's here. She's sick." I left out that Dad had died in the last months of the war. A lot of dads had died in the war.

"I'm sorry."

I brushed it off. My sister and I looked after her. We did all right. “And besides, I wouldn’t want to be so lonely.”

He stopped moving. “Lonely?”

I hurried on. “I know this town like the back of my hand. As much as the circus is you, this town is me.”

He was quiet as he finished walking around me, just his footsteps over packed earth and our breaths. I touched his sleeve when he didn’t look up at me. I felt bolder around him now to do it.

Glancing up, he stopped and then smiled. “It’s beautiful, the way you like me. You know that?”

Like? *Like?*

No. This was something infinitely more.

I pulled him close. My courage ended there though, and I could only hope my gaze said everything I couldn’t.

Stardust swallowed, his Adam’s apple jutting hard.

“Today’s my birthday,” I said quietly. “Eighteenth.”

“Happy birthday, Floss.”

I leaned in, and for the first time I told him my name. “Nathan. My name’s Nathan.”

“And what do you wish for your birthday?”

“One night. Next to you.”

His breath caught. Eyes widened. Nervous, like I hadn’t seen from him. He reached into the inner pocket of his jacket and pulled out a second cigar. He failed to light it. Cupped his palm around the end, and tried again. But it wouldn’t catch.

I took it from his lips; it felt dry and papery against my fingers. I didn’t smoke. Never had. I placed the end of the cigar between my lips, took his lighter and held it to the tip. I breathed in too hard and my eyes stung against the repressed need to cough. Smoke twisted out the sides of my mouth, and through its wispy tendrils: Stardust grinning.

“Give me that back,” he said, and pinched it from me.

My mouth felt curiously empty, and I submitted to a cough.

Stardust laughed and took my hand, pulling me toward the exit. "One night," he said. "*Next* to me."

We rode Willow back to the train cars, and set her up for the night. And then, with a nervous smile, Stardust took my hand and led me back through throngs of conversing circus folk to his sleeping car.

He had one nook of it—at the far end—curtained off by thick oriental drapes.

We stood close and Stardust's breath shuddered as he leaned closer. I held my breath, awaiting the kiss, but he tugged on the drapes behind us, curtaining us from view.

He hovered there for a moment and then spun his back to me and began peeling off his clothes. I did the same, but when we were both tucked up in his small bunk in nothing more than our briefs, staring at the wedges of moonlight printed on the car ceiling and the drapes, I made up my mind to ask him.

It was my birthday after all. If I could get anything more from him, it would be today.

I shifted in the cool sheets, turning on my side to face him. Our legs bumped together, the hairs conducting jolts of electricity from him to me. Half of his chest was free of sheets. If I touched the fine hair there, would it jolt me too?

God above, I wanted to jolt and be jolted. Jolting with Stardust.

As if reading my thoughts, he turned his head toward me. He spoke low, barely a whisper, in case we were overheard. "I'm scared to touch you, Floss."

"Why?"

His look saddened. "It really means something to you."

"And it wouldn't to you?"

"Don't you see? I'm just a moment. One quick magic trick, and then I'm gone. It... it wouldn't be right."

Boldly, I slid my hand down my briefs and stroked myself. I met his suddenly heated gaze. "Would it be so wrong?"

He reached over and wrapped his fingers around mine, halting me. "This is a shared sleeping car."

"And the rest of the crew are all outside drinking. No one's in here."

He closed his eyes but didn't pull his hand away from mine. "You'll regret this one day."

"No. I won't."

His fingers slipped to my cock, and I hissed in a breath as he rubbed a thumb over the slit at the head. I let myself go, rolled onto my back and grabbed the sheets. "Yes," I whispered. "More."

He moved onto his side, one arm pillowed under his head, his fingers playing in my hair. He wrapped his other hand around my cock and stroked, smooth and slow. I whimpered, relieved he was finally touching me. Happy, like it was me who could fly, who had the world at his fingertips.

Stardust whispered in my ear, but the words were lost to the sensation of all those jolts. They were there with every jerk of my cock, with every brush of my hair, with every warm breath at my neck.

I couldn't have held still if he'd asked me to. I bucked into the sensation, toes curling to points and stretching the pleasure. I felt like the sweetest trumpet vibration I'd ever played.

I glanced at Stardust, at the lust quivering in his cotton candy lips and the need in his deep gaze. And then—

Then he squirmed down, nose bumping over my side and hip and the curve of my ass. His hand stopped pumping and his smile touched the tip of my cock.

It was his smile. His lips. His mouth. And I needed it. My hands flew to his head, gripping his hair; I stole as much of that smile as I could, thrusting into his mouth, the head of my cock meeting immediate suction, wet and warm—

In and out, once, twice, and thrice, and like I'd delivered the last note of an overture I stilled, all the jolts and vibrations coming to a sharp and sudden end. "Stardust!"

He let me go and rolled his weight on me, jamming my release between our stomachs. I let out a shuddering breath, and stared at his shadowed face above me. I could feel his hard length digging against my thigh.

"What about you? Can I...?"

Stardust kissed me. Soft. Slow. Almost tentatively, as if he'd never really done it before. So in contrast to the confident way he'd pumped my cock. He drew back slowly. Lethargically. Whispered, "Happy birthday, Nathan."

THE NEXT MORNING, he was gone.

Though I sought to, I didn't find him the rest of the week. He was evading me, and I grew impatient, restless to see him once more.

He'd liked what we'd done. He had, I was sure of it.

We could do it some more. We could... we could...

I found him brushing down Willow in the horse car. He saw me and glanced away.

"Why are you avoiding me?" I said, coming closer. I wanted to grab him and drag him into the shadowed corner, where I could feel him against me again.

"Sorry, Floss."

Back to Floss, were we? "What happened to Nathan? That was short-lived."

He rested his forehead against Willow's long, sturdy head. She nibbled at his neck.

"At the very least, you could answer me that."

His shoulders rose and fell, but he said nothing.

I swallowed. Moved closer. Maybe if I told him how I felt... "Stardust," I said quietly, closing the distance.

He twisted sharply. "You're quite something special, but I can't."

I opened my mouth, and he reached out and pinched my lips shut. Just to have him touch me, I was grateful. Relieved. Maybe these last few days were just a hiccup. Nothing that couldn't be fixed—

"I'm a bird."

Yes, he was. And so beautiful when he flew.

"Stop looking at me like that. I'm the bird, and you... you're the cage."

~*~

I'D BEEN PAID.

Knew it would happen.

But still. It felt like *abracadabra*, and the circus was gone.

That early sun-mocking morning, I trudged through the muddy fields. Tire grooves marked the ground, and I followed them to the spot where his sleeping car had been.

I sat on the flattened grass that might have been under his bed.

A movement in the long grass across the field startled me. I hauled my heavy limbs upright and dragged myself nearer.

I caught a flash of orange and black. Stripes.

I froze.

They couldn't have. Surely they hadn't left the—

It moved again, and I scratched my head trying to remember a time I'd seen the tiger without its handler. Would it be tame? Or would it rejoice in its newfound sense of freedom and... eat me?

I stepped slowly backwards.

Another orange flash.

I stumbled back, falling on my ass, and then the tiger spoke.

"Where the hell am I?" He sat up and rubbed his head. A man after all—a clown. *The clown.*

He blinked in the morning sun, his make-up not as smeared as the first time I'd seen him. He looked like he was made of porcelain, with a dark red smile and black stripes above and below his eyes. His tiger-striped suit billowed in a light breeze. He looked around slowly, the truth soaking in. But still, even though his lips didn't curve, he was smiling. "Ah, Christ." He spotted me sprawled on my ass a few yards away. Loosely, he hugged his knees. "They left us here, huh, kid?"

My voice came out croaky, but I wasn't surprised. I'd been holding back a cry. "Yeah."

He sighed and searched the grass around him, eventually pulling a dark case onto his lap. "At least they left my flute."

"Didn't leave me anything," I murmured.

He shrugged. "'Cept me, it seems."

I laughed. "What can I do with a clown?"

He wagged his painted brows. "Laughing already. I seem to be proving my worth."

He tilted his face to the sky and soaked in the sun.

"Why'd they leave you here?"

“Bunch of bastard clowns,” he said. “They hate me.”

“Why?”

“They’re all chrome-domes, aren’t they?” He pulled his hair. “I have all of this.”

I held back a laugh.

“I’m too much competition,” he continued. “Pulled all the ladies.”

I slipped on a chuckle. It was just... No, sorry. Maybe without the greasepaint. But with... It was a joke—

I stopped smirking. *It was a joke!* “You’re good.”

He winked back at me. “I know.” Then he fished inside his clown suit and pulled out a packet of cigarettes. He lit one up and breathed out the smoke in rings. “It was Spotty. He must have drugged me, the bastard. If I ever see him and his crimson shoes again...” He growled. “Gonna punch him in his fat red nose.”

Cigarette hanging from the corner of his mouth, he picked himself up off the ground. “Right then, kid.” He beckoned me to follow. “One door closes...” He shrugged and sized me up. “Well, you’ll do.”

He clomped his way across the field, yelling over his shoulder, “What’re you waiting for?”

I started and moved after him.

~*~

DANNY.

His name was Danny, and he was twenty-four years old. I took him home, and my sister froze. “Who’s that, and what’s he doing in our house?”

“This is...” I glanced from the clown to my sister and shook my head. “This is my door,” I said and led him toward the kitchen.

“He said it,” Danny said. “And I make a fine one.” He winked at her as we passed. “You feel free to come a-knocking any time, Ma’am.”

I yanked on his sleeve, pulling him out of harm’s reach.

There came a laugh—one I hadn’t heard for a long time. I swooped my gaze to my mom, in her armchair in the corner of the room, knitting. She purlled a few more stitches, studying Danny. “Are you as cute without the greasepaint?” she asked.

“Mother!” my sister said.

Danny placed a thoughtful finger to his chin and tapped a moment. “Some might even say cuter.” There was a furtive glance toward Rosa, who couldn’t make her mind up whether to blush or frown. She settled on sharply twisting out of view.

“If you’re going to be hanging around my Nathan,” Mom said, “you’d best wash up and join us for breakfast. Nathan, show him to the bathroom.”

I led him to it and handed him a fresh towel. “You wouldn’t have some cold cream, would you? This paint takes that, a whole lot of elbow grease, and the sacrifice of a towel to get off.”

I pointed to the cabinet next to the sink. “I’m sure Rosa has something in there.”

Danny grinned, took the towel, and leaned on the open doorframe. The mirror in the bathroom reflected us: a bright orange tiger-clown, and me—a not-quite-grown-into-my-broad-frame eighteen-year old with golden hair and skin. I almost looked gilded. Like one of those canary cages they sold at the antique store.

Stardust had been right about me, in so many ways.

“Stardust?” Danny said, raising a brow.

Had I spoken his name aloud? “Blue.”

He cocked his head. “Blue. You and Jean close, then?”

“Jean.” I tried out the name. It didn’t glitter like Stardust, but it was softer, more real. I only wished he’d been the one to tell it to me.

My gaze focused sharply on Danny. And I could see he knew. Knew what I was, what I wanted. I shifted from foot to foot, swallowing hard.

Danny’s permanent smile encased a real one. Calming. He lowered his voice. “Me, I’m a liberal man. Just saying.”

“So you... don’t mind?” *Won’t say anything?*

Danny slunk into the bathroom. “Course not. And Nathan? The rest of the world might not be there yet. But times are gonna change, my friend. Just you wait. Times are gonna change.”

I slouched my way back to the lounge. Rosa took me aside as soon as she saw me.

“Oh, Nathan,” she said, “Your... *door* has to go.”

I looked over my shoulder, to our mom and back. “It’ll just be a while,” I said. Until another one opened.

~*~

Part Two: And Then

TEN YEARS LATER, Danny was still my door.

He suffered through my first love's woes, and then we teamed up and earned our lettuce by performing duets, organizing children's parties, and running music lessons.

~*~

HE SWORE LIKE a sailor, smoked like a chimney, but boy could he make my mom smile.

We finished Mozart's 12th Allegro trumpet and flute duet and bowed to the small audience in the living room. Mom and my sister's oldest girl clapped loudly, hooting, "Encore!"

Danny—dressed up in blue and pink polka-dots—pretended to drop his flute and fumble after it, making Rosa's youngest boy giggle.

"Shall we then?" I said, lifting my trumpet to my lips.

My sister edged into the room. Our babysitting for the day was close to ending, and I wished it would last longer. Give Rosa a little more time for herself. Another bruise blossomed under her eye, and I blew my trumpet with anger. The kids liked the music, jumping and dancing once more around us. Little Tommy tugged at my pants, and in a bout of giggles, my mother leaned forward and yanked them up again.

"Nathan?" Holly said once we were done.

I knelt next to her. In the corner of my eye, I caught Danny motioning for my sister to follow him into the kitchen.

"Yeah, Holly?" I asked.

"Why does Danny dress up as a clown?"

"Because he loves it when you pull faces at him."

"Can I be a clown when I grow up?"

I ruffled her hair. "Sure, kid."

I went to the kitchen after Danny and Rosa. My sister sat in the chair, in her blue frock cinched at the waist with a wide red belt. Her hair fell in curls around her face, curtaining her from me.

Danny was crouched at her level. He lifted her chin. "That ain't right, love."

Her lip wobbled and she glanced away. "How'd you know anything, Danny? You're just a clown."

Danny stood, nodded. "You and I both know that's not all I am." He moved away from her, pausing when he caught me standing there. Though his smile was painted on brightly, his gaze sheened, and this time his mask couldn't hide his hurt.

He moved past me; I glanced to my sister and then over my shoulder to the door—

I went after Danny, catching him in the bathroom, his fingers sinking into a tub of cream, a sacrificial towel hanging from his shoulder. He looked up at my reflection in the mirror. Ten years had passed, but for a second it was that first day again, and I felt his pain. *My* pain, when Stardust left.

"Don't," I said, glancing toward the running water. "Never wipe off a clown's smile when you're sad, remember?"

He dropped the cloth in the sink, sighed, and swiped at something on his cheek. "Sometimes the laughs need to be for me, too."

At twenty-nine, I was taller and broader than him and I easily swooped him against my chest. "Let's go out tonight. Hit the town."

"As long as you don't leave me so you can rock 'n' roll with some guy behind a hydrangea bush again, you're on."

"Only happened twice."

And there it was. The slightest quirk at the edge of his mouth.

"Now you can wash up."

~*~

A YEAR LATER, when my sister divorced, we celebrated.

"Do you wonder where you might have been if you were still in the circus?"

Danny blew out his smoke in rings, tapped his cigarette, and took a gulp of beer. "Yeah, sometimes. But between you and me, those clowns drugging me and leaving me behind? Best thing that could have happened."

I smiled and drank the rest of my whiskey. "It must be hard doing what you do all the time. Looks tiring, trying to be funny."

“Trying?”

I motioned for a fresh drink and smirked.

Danny sucked in some more smoke. “Not all smiles are because something is funny,” he said.

My freshened drink came, and I sipped some more as he continued.

“If that were the case, I’d be fast out of a job. Sometimes it’s just about being there. A spot of color for people to gawk at, to brighten their day. A little chat they could have about with their neighbor. Even if it’s just to say how weird they think it is that a grown man should dress so—job accomplished. They get their conversation, a leg down and off the lonely horse. Sometimes, standing next to me makes ’em feel better about themselves—we all like to smile like that on the inside every now and then. And I like to give it. Feels like I have magic.”

Magic.

Just the mention, and all these years later, I thought of him. Jean. Blue. *Stardust*.

Danny’s barstool creaked as he swiveled around. “You wonder where he is?”

“You a mind reader now?”

“His name is practically written on your face.”

“Less and less over the years, but yeah.” *He was the first man I ever loved.* “I wonder.”

“And if you could see him again? If you could say one thing?”

I’d tell him the way he looked at me that day—when he called me a cage—broke my heart. I twisted my tumbler, picked it up, and sipped the golden, fiery liquid. Even my drink was a reminder of him. “I’d tell him I have a good life here.”

“Liar.”

“Hey, Danny?”

He let the smoke tendrils out of his mouth this time. “Yeah?”

I looked at him. “I have a good life here.”

“Yeah,” he said. “Yeah.”

We lifted our drinks and clinked the glasses together. At the same time, we said: “To Rosa.”

~*~

THE DAY OF my mom's funeral, the circus came back to town.

It fluttered on a lamppost outside the church. I darted toward it, passing Danny—dressed as a clown as my mom had wished—and my sister tucked next to him, crying into his polka dots.

I ripped off the circus poster, folded it, and jammed it into my suit pocket. Then I slipped next to my niece and nephew, and we entered the church to say our final goodbyes.

At the end, alone in the church, sitting on a hard pew with tears rimming my eyes, I pulled out the poster and studied it.

The Circus Ring

The Grandest Show In The World

Want to be a wonder of the world?

Acrobatic Auditions

Will the Amazing Blue Approve You?

I glossed over the address; I didn't need to read it really. I knew where they'd be. Since a strike in the mid '50s, the Big Top wasn't allowed anymore, and all the big events had to be performed in arenas. Not more than a half hour away, they'd erected one to be used by all the local towns.

A clomping echoed down the aisle and I glanced back. Danny shook his head. “They're back, aren't they? Those damn bastard clowns have the nerve to show their mugs back around here.” He had a ripped poster in his grip and he was scrunching what life was left from it. “Well. We've got some accounts to settle, you and I.”

I glanced down at the trick rider on the poster. “I don't think I'm going to see him.”

Danny stopped. Looked around. Frowned. “Sorry, did you hear that?” he said. He jerked around toward the doors at the back.

I listened. “Don't hear anything.”

Danny's brow creased and he craned his head. "It sounds like... like..."—he faced me—"a stupid, fucking mistake."

He clapped me over the back of the head.

"Ouch."

"Just trying to knock some sense into you, Nate. Working yet?"

He clipped me again.

"Stop. Stop. I get it." I stood up, straightened the lapels of my suit jacket, and sidled out of the pew.

"You better get it. I was the one that saw every crack in that heart after he left. I was the one who put it together. I'm the one still searching for the missing piece. You understand? You need to face him; tell him what you wished you had, so you can move on. For real."

HONK. I yanked off Danny's red rubber nose, the same one from all those years ago. The one he'd told me he'd made himself, from a mini car horn and a rubber plunger. He hadn't worn it in forever, but for Mom—for today—he had.

"What was that for? Gimme back."

I honked it again; it echoed loudly in the church. Mom would be laughing. "Why do you always have to be right?"

He looked at his one-piece suit of sunshine. "How could I be wrong?"

~*~

I WAITED THREE days before I went there. Danny too.

I slipped on a pair of jeans, a shirt, my well-beaten leather jacket, and studded boots. Running a hand through my blond hair, I stared back at myself in the mirror. Older, taller, broader, with a permanent five o'clock shadow and the first sign of crow's feet.

Danny clomped into the bathroom in his signature yellow and blue shoes and applied his greasepaint.

"Thought you were going there to punch what's-his-face."

"Spotty."

"Yeah, Spotty. What's with the costume?"

"This fight is clown to clown, Nate. Clown to damn clown."

~*~

I WATCHED FROM behind a pillar.

The arena was set up almost the same as the Big Top—it had the large round ring at the center, only with permanent seating around it, rising higher than it had in the tent.

Record music played, the beat fast, setting the tempo for the horse in the ring to canter.

A woman rode, twisting and jumping gracefully around the ring. She was talented, but I wasn't compelled to watch her. Or the lad who tricked next.

They just didn't stretch as high, fly as smooth, smile as bright.

Among the small, huddled crowds around the ring, I looked for him.

The music stopped. And then—his voice. Smooth and rich as I remembered it, with an accent I still couldn't place.

"...will be in contact."

Their smiles bright, cheeks brighter, and voices close to chirps, the crowd slowly emptied out of the arena, disappearing behind a plush red curtain at the back of the ring.

Their voices dwindled in the distance, leaving an unsettling quiet behind. I should have slunk down the aisle toward him, but I was rooted to the spot, evening sun soaking into my clothes and kissing the back of my neck.

Stardust stood on the far side, at the edge of the ring. He shuffled over packed dirt. A new song came on, fast and rhythmic.

And just like that, he swung up on his horse and urged it into a canter. Around the ring they rode, moving as one, and I was watching a bird taking off into flight once more. Stardust climbed gracefully onto all fours, and then stood.

He was just as breathtaking as he had been twelve summers ago. He stretched his arms above his head and then out to the sides as he lifted his leg. Higher, higher. Bending over, he braced his hands and lifted the other leg.

That's when it happened. He was coming out of his handstand, his legs scissoring as he curled to a sitting position. He let out a sharp cry and his right arm gave sharply, throwing him off balance.

He tumbled off the horse.

I jerked out from behind the pillar and raced down—

Stardust broke his fall, twisting neatly into a roll. But instead of standing up and getting out of the ring, he just sat there, staring at the ground. Or maybe the triangular pattern fencing the ring.

The horse slowed to a walk, crossed the ring and nudged his shoulder. Stardust absently patted its nose, and then leaned against it.

I was already halfway toward him; I wasn't going to retreat. But I slowed my steps. What was I to say? How the hell was I going to say it?

He spotted me. I knew the second he had, the way he straightened abruptly and pushed to his feet. His tightly fitting costume clung to him just the way it had back then; he looked just the same. Like it was summer of '49 and I was crossing to chat with him after one of his practices.

Only his smile was gone, and his eyes seemed darker than the dark they'd been. Back then, there'd been a swirl of something more. Hope and aspiration. The exhilaration of the next show. Yes, there'd been a shade of victory in his gaze, of having a plan that would help him conquer the world.

"Floss," he said, stepping to the edge of the ring.

I stopped on the other side of the low fence. "Stardust." He was smaller than I remembered, maybe by a foot. But otherwise, still the same.

Music buffered us. Made it easier not to talk right away. But the song was winding down, and I couldn't take the intensity of his stare anymore. I glanced from him to his horse.

"Willow's looking good," I said.

"You remember Willow?"

When it came to him? Everything.

Stardust twisted toward his horse, petting it. "It's not her, though. She passed on."

"Oh. I'm... sorry."

A flutter of awkwardness pulled between us. "It was a while ago now, '55."

A while ago now. Just like we were once a while ago. It was an "a while ago" I finally wanted to put to rest, bury. Leave behind me for good. That was why I was here.

I straightened. Sucked in a deep breath, and faltered when he rubbed his shoulder with a wince. "That was quite a fall you took..."

He shrugged with his good shoulder. "I'm used to falling now."

The way he said "now" had me wincing too. "What happened?"

He laughed, but it was hollow. "Sometimes big dreams have a way of turning into nightmares." He focused on rubbing his horse's neck under the mane. "Why'd you come?" he asked. "Curiosity? Or... something else?" His hands stilled.

You broke my heart seemed impossible to say. Besides, I wasn't that Stardust-struck kid anymore. My twenties had given me a few things. Confidence among them.

I stepped over the fence, came up behind him, and rested a hand on his shoulder. His tremble carried through my arm. It'd been... well, it'd been a long time since I'd felt such a jolt. I leaned toward him and spoke in his ear. Another little something sparked between us. "Curiosity is definitely a part of it."

He twisted, resting his head back against the horse. Holding my gaze, he said, "You've really grown up, Floss."

"It's Nathan."

His lashes closed briefly as he drew in a breath. "What else do you want, Nathan?"

My name on his lips sent the largest jolt through me, sparking sense-memories of *then*. His voice in my ear. His kiss tingling my bottom lip. His fingers in my hair, nose down my side, mouth locked around my cock.

I steeled myself against the memories. "To tell you I'm more than a cage," I said. "I'm a home. I hope you are as happy in yours as I am in mine." I leaned forward, bumping my nose against his, and kissed his lips—sweet, as if he'd recently eaten candy. "I'm here to say goodbye, Stardust."

I kissed him once more, and left.

~*~

HE FOLLOWED AFTER me.

He kept calling my name; I kept ignoring it. Outside, in the adjacent arena grounds, I waltzed down an aisle of stalls so much brighter than they had been back then.

Breezes hit my back, bringing my name closer.

I turned a corner—

And jerked to a halt.

I blinked, not sure quite where to look first. Down the way, flanked by candy and toy stalls, were two rolling clowns. Stripes versus spots. A small number of people stood, backs pressed against the stalls, watching the ruckus.

And then... there—tingling awareness of Stardust at my side.

HONK!

My clown rolled again, pinning Spotty beneath him and landing a punch to his nose. *Whoosh*—

Danny was thrown off him by a third clown who appeared suddenly from behind a cotton candy stall. Their yells were indecipherable, save the odd curse and Danny's "Bastard!" when a rainbow-colored clown kicked him in the side with his elephant-sized shoes. Spotty lunged at him, his smile dazzlingly bright in the last stretches of evening sun. Danny jerked back and yanked at his fake nose. It stretched and pinged back into his face.

"Drugged ya!" Spotty cried. "I shoulda *ended* ya!"

Spotty crashed into the cotton candy stand, and a pegged stack lining one side toppled over and joined the chaos.

Cotton candy flew in all directions, and the crowds didn't know whether to stop them or laugh. I knew better than to get in the way. This business was strictly theirs.

They rumbled and tumbled, and Stardust edged closer to my side, until I was just as much watching him out the corner of my eye as I was the fight.

A loud horn blasted and circus security were about to enter the fray. The clowns broke apart.

Spotty scrambled up, hooked an arm around Rainbow and dragged him off, giving Danny the finger.

On his knees, Danny yanked at the hair on his head. "I still got mine."

He wiped the blood off his lip and straightened his dirt-and-candy-covered suit. Glaring at Spotty retreating through the crowds, he muttered, "I got more important confrontations than this, anyway."

Danny stormed off, and I moved after him.

Stardust caught my hand. "Wait."

I faced him, but I didn't think there was anything he could say that would change what had happened. It simply was, and now we could move on. "What we had was a wonder of the world. Let's leave it at that."

He opened his mouth and clamped it shut again. And I stood too long, staring at the way the light picked out the red strands in his dark hair, the way his eye-shadow glittered.

I stepped back, and he spoke. "Jean. My name's Jean."

That one word had me frozen. How many times had I imagined him sharing his name with me? How many times had I murmured *Jean* alone at night?

"Jean."

And he smiled. It cracked the skin at the edges of his eyes and that made his smile shine brighter. I zipped up my leather jacket as high as it would go and forced myself to step further away. "Bye, Jean."

~*~

HE FOUND ME in an ad in the Yellow Pages. *Music Lessons with Danny and Nate*. He hired us.

We went to perform. I knew the moment I saw the sleeping cars. Still, I moved forward. The door opened, and Stardust came out, hiding behind a sparkling cigar.

Danny looked from him to me and back again. "I'll just wait outside for a few."

When he left, I stepped up onto the lowest rung leading into the car. Stardust didn't move. I took the cigar from him and butted the end against the metal car. It hissed and I chucked it over my shoulder, walking up another step. We were level now, and Stardust was swallowing.

"What do you want?" I said.

He stepped back into his car, and I followed him to his tiny area screened by heavy drapes. No one else seemed to be around.

"To apologize," he said. "I never wanted to hurt you, but I did. I'm sorry."

I dropped my trumpet case on his bunk, and sat at the end, my fingers caressing the patchwork quilt. The same one as then. "What were the last twelve years like for you?" I said quietly.

He paced the short length of the bunk before me. "The circus wasn't as strong-going there these last few years. I think we have television to thank for that." He glanced at me, swallowed, and continued, "Competition is getting stiffer too. Crowds want more acrobatics. The Russians really have something there. It's going to be a big thing."

I rested my elbows on my thighs and clasped my hands together. "You know that wasn't what I meant."

He stopped pacing and plunked himself on his trunk. "I thought I could fly anywhere, and for a moment, I really could."

I looked at his arm, the one he'd cradled in the ring. "What happened?"

"Someone set off a firecracker during my act. My horse is used to a lot of sounds, but that one came too close. Spooked him out. I was in mid-somersault, and my ride wasn't there when I landed. Broke my shoulder." He massaged it as he spoke.

"Must've been tough."

He dropped his hand and rubbed his thighs. "What about you?"

"I'm fine. It's been a tough few years with my mom getting worse, but she's in a better place now. We buried her last week."

"Oh, Nathan." He rose, as if to come over and embrace me, and then changed his mind. "I'm sorry."

A short silence followed, and then he glanced pointedly at my trumpet case. "How about your dream?"

"Well cooked, I'd say."

"Would you"—he cleared his throat—"play for me?"

"Why?"

"Curiosity. Among other reasons."

I opened my case and assembled my trumpet. The sound exploded around us, alive, full of energy; a reminder of what we once were. I played the piece through, my gaze on him the entire time, until the last note ended.

He let out a breath, as if he'd been holding it. "You're quite excellent."

"Curiosity satisfied," I said, packing the instrument away again. "What were your other reasons?"

Stardust had changed too, in the last years, from dreaming large to something more focused. He spoke plainly. "I wanted to see if you'd look at me the same way you did when you played back then."

I slunk out from behind his drapes, and moved toward the car door. Stardust followed and when he was close enough behind me that his breath stirred my hair, I twisted, grabbed him by the waist, and pressed him hard against me. My mouth met his in an urgent kiss. A surprised moan, and then Stardust wrapped his legs around me. I twisted him around and shoved him up against the door. His cock hardened, nudging mine, just as stiff.

I pulled back an inch. "I looked at you the same way." I cupped his cheeks and kissed him again. Hard and deep, until we were both in need of catching our breath. Stardust rested the side of his face against my neck, his eyelashes tickling my skin.

I unwrapped his legs from my waist, and carefully set him down. "When it comes to wanting you, Jean, that never was nor ever will be the problem." I pushed back his hair, and brushed my thumb over his cheek.

"Problem," he said softly, gaze unfocused.

"Yeah," I said, and his attention sharpened on me, a twitch in his jaw telling me he heard. "You're still a bird. I'm still the cage."

~*~

A WEEK LATER, during a jamming session in my basement.

"He wants to see you again," Danny said.

I blew in the trumpet, the note off-key. The vibration stretched from where I played under the stairs to where Danny lounged on the orange couch in front of me. Lowering my instrument to the back of the couch near his head, I cleared my throat. "I don't know who you're talking about."

He blew a bubbly little vignette into his flute. "Of course you do."

Of course I did.

"You met him?"

"Bumped into him in town, outside Smith's Antiques."

In town? I'd never seen him outside of the circus before; how would he have looked, strolling across the main square? Just as graceful as on a horse? Did his smile shine, did he merge comfortably with the townsfolk? I wanted to

know what he wore, what he looked like. Were his eyes darkly shadowed? Did he smoke his sparkling cigar? "Oh. Right."

Danny rested his head on the back of the couch and looked at me. There were a few seconds where we didn't speak. And then Danny sighed. "Written on your face," he mumbled. "Is this going to be a repeat of '49?"

The doorbell rang, saving me from having to answer. Danny raced upstairs and answered the door; I followed behind, slowly.

If I met Stardust again, I wouldn't be able to stop myself from touching him. I knew that.

Which was why I was avoiding the circus. I might have been older, might have been more in control of my emotions, but Stardust held a special part of my heart. He always would, and I didn't want to risk him having more of it.

Or did I?

Rosa stood at the door, crowned in morning light. She looked younger than she had in years, hair pinned up, and maybe, maybe the beginnings of a smile on her lips. She folded her arms and then dropped them to her sides again. Glancing down, she shook her head. "The other day, when you came by..."

I paused at the end of the hall. Danny had visited her the other day? I inched back, but my curiosity was too great to keep me out of earshot.

"Rosa..." Danny said. My sister raised a hand, stopping him.

Her voice broke. "Please, don't say it again."

"Why not?"

"Because I'll cry." She sniffed. "I... Danny, I don't deserve you. You've only ever offered me smiles and I've only ever shaken my head at them. I'm so sorry."

"Please, Rosa, may I speak?"

Again, she shook her head. "Is... what you said, is that what you really want?"

"I'd give up my smile for you, if that's what it took."

"No," she said firmly, and then again, softly. "No. I need to make up for the past, Danny. I need to find a way of showing you how wonderful you've been. My kids light up when you're around, and... it's been a long time where I've felt the same way."

“What are you saying, Rosa?” The hopefulness in Danny’s voice froze me to the spot; how much I wished for this. How much I wanted to hear my sister say it. How much I wanted Danny happy.

“I’m saying... just give me a little time to prove I’m worthy.”

That’s when she glanced over Danny’s shoulder and spotted me, down at the other end of the hall. “I’m going now. But soon, okay?”

She twisted on her raised heel and left.

Danny ran a hand through his hair and leaned against the doorjamb, watching her go.

When he turned around, he said, “I know you’re there, Nate. The house was too quiet.”

I moved toward him and took up the other side of the doorway. Danny pulled out a cigarette from his pocket and lit it up. His hand was shaking, and his gaze was shiny, full of dreams—like Stardust’s once had been.

“What if it is a repeat of ’49?” I said.

Smoke stretched down the path my sister had taken. “I just don’t want to see you get hurt.”

We stared at the way the breezes played with the smoke, making it dance over lavender and the rosebush by the picket fence.

“When did you fall for my sister?”

He laughed. “You won’t believe me.”

“When?”

“The first moment I saw her. She held herself so confidently, dressed so proper.” His grin twisted naughtily. “I just had to make myself fall over her.”

All the way back then? I shook my head. So he’d fallen for her quite literally.

“What can I say?” He shrugged. “It was love at first sight.”

I believed him. Because that magic had been there from the first moment I’d seen Stardust, and now, twelve years later, the spark still remained. “I believe you.”

He blew out another breath of smoke. “You’re going to see him again, aren’t you?”

I nabbed his cigarette and sucked in deeply. "Let's get ready. We have a party to get to."

~*~

THAT NIGHT I knocked on Stardust's sleeping car.

Topsy opened, with his painted eyebrows and bowler cap. He didn't seem to recognize me.

"I'm looking for Jean," I said.

A chorused rumble of laughter came from the car, along with the heady scent of alcohol and smoke.

"He's off with his horse somewhere," he said, and snapped the door shut.

Jamming my hands in my pockets, I trudged down a line of cars toward the smell and chatter of animals. I kept to the shadows, out of sight of the circus folk. The night was navy blue, a silvery moonshine glittering on the tops of the cars and the train tracks in the distance.

I found Stardust outside a car with his horse. I slowed my step, watching him comb his fingers through the animal's mane. He murmured something, and then as graceful as a dance, he mounted.

I stopped suddenly, the abruptness of it catching his attention. He glanced through the night.

And then it was his turn to still. "Nathan?"

Composing myself, I moved out from the shadows toward him.

His stare penetrated me. Made my skin pebble with goose bumps. A molasses-scented breeze ruffled his hair and the horse's mane.

And then he steered a few steps until he was looking down on me. He reached out a hand, his good one. "Come."

I did. Though, granted, with much less elegance.

My body slid behind his, jammed close enough for me to feel him through my clothes, against my chest, my thighs, my crotch.

I slipped my hands to his thighs as he moved us forward. His breath whistled and I bathed in his shiver.

We said nothing as we moved into a vast field. Said nothing as we continued to the next one after that. The trickling of water and clomping of the

horse's hooves were loud enough. And the little jolts between us as we moved, my cock rubbing against his backside, louder.

He stopped his horse in the middle of a field and looked up at the night sky. This time it was his head coming down on my shoulder. I drifted my hands from his thighs to his chest and held him closer to me.

"I'm a broken bird," he said. "I've nothing much left to dazzle you with anymore."

I pressed my nose against the side of his head. "Turn around, Jean. Look at me."

He swung a leg over until he sat sideways on the horse; then, with a glance at me, he slowly lifted the other leg, pointing it straight like he would in an act, arching it between us. I held my breath, my cock throbbing at the sight. The back of my hand brushed against his thigh, and he stopped. He bent his knee and settled his calf on my shoulder.

"You don't have to do that to dazzle me," I said.

He curled his leg around my neck, urging me closer. "I want to though. I want that heat in your eyes. I want you to want me so badly, you'd just take me."

I grabbed him by the waist and something in my enthusiasm had the horse moving forward. Stardust's leg slipped over my shoulder until we faced one another. He laughed, bringing his hands to the sides of the horse. "Whoa, there, Floss. Whoa."

"I'm confused," I said after a laugh. "Are you talking to me? Because it sounded like you meant it for the horse?"

We stopped moving again. Stardust blinked down at the diamond of horseback between us. "I missed you," he said.

It was enough. I understood.

I cupped the back of his neck and drew him into a long kiss. "Shuffle down a bit," he murmured. I did, and he moved with me; he kissed me again, slowly leaning back against Floss, pulling me with him.

"I don't have balance like you do," I murmured at his throat and bit lightly, making my way to the curve of his bad shoulder. His cock pressed hard against my stomach, and mine desperately wanted to be nearer to it.

His words stirred my hair. "It would need a lot of practice, too."

I shuffled down the horse, carefully, breathing hard through the light material of his clothes as I got to the top of his tights. He was firm and the fabric clung to him. God, I just wanted to taste—

“You know all that training you do?” I said. “Now you’re really going to have to use it. No sudden movements.”

“Nathan—”

I peeled back his tights, exposing the head of his cock; gently bent down and touched my tongue to him.

He hissed, and I locked my lips around him and sucked. He moaned, hands finding my head and gripping the ends of my hair. I pulled back and let the night air kiss him too. “Would this work? If I’m careful—”

He answered with the firm press of his fingers and the slight arch of his body, lifting his cock to my mouth once more. His tights were difficult to pull down, giving only an inch more. My fingers skated over the thin material, tracing the crease of his ass.

I swallowed him as far as I could and he carefully flexed his ass, bucking in and out no more than an inch. His back, abdominals and thighs supported him so his thrusts didn’t set Floss off into a trot.

Stardust moaned again. “Not enough support.” He urged me off his cock and sat up, locking me into a kiss. “And I want more.” He slid off the horse, and then beckoned me with his finger as he pumped himself with his other hand. I slipped off Floss and moved after him, to a patch of thick grass close to the stream.

“The horse—”

“He knows not to leave without me.” Stardust shoved off his clothes, one piece at a time. I ripped mine off after him.

Breezes drifted warmly over us, and the grass massaged underfoot and tickled at our calves. Stardust stretched himself out in the grass. He crooked one knee, spat onto his finger and reached to fondle his entrance. His gaze held mine, and he bit his lip as he breached himself. “You like to watch,” he said.

I sank to my knees between his legs. “You like to give a show.”

I removed his hand, laced my own finger with spit and drew it over his balls and right to his ring. When my finger entered him, he arched, pushing down further. Wanting more. It was clear he was experienced—as much as I was—and for a moment that fact came with a little melancholy.

As if he read my mind, he curled a finger. *Closer*. Our chests met, hairs tangling in a kiss of their own as I swept my tongue against his. "I don't... kiss, Nathan."

"You're kissing me."

"Yeah. You."

I lifted his ass, positioned myself at his entrance and pushed into him. His body gripped my cock, pulsing around me. I groaned and stilled a moment, and Stardust jerked his cock and clenched around me.

"That's good," he said, then lightly scratched his fingers up my arm and dug into my shoulder. "You can move. I like it."

I gripped handfuls of grass on either side of him as I pulled my hips back and thrust forward. The jolts between us intensified each time I slid back into him and Stardust gave a soft moan.

"To the left a bit," he bit out on a groan. I swiveled my hips and angled where he asked. "Yes!"

The overwhelming urge to move harder and faster came over me, and I plunged in and out of him, deep, deeper—

I took hold of his cock. Stray bits of grass, stuck against my hand, tickled at his head every time I pumped him. He curled his legs around me, intensifying the pressure on my cock. His legs pressed against my back, urging for more.

He arched hard, stretching his arms above his head and lengthening his body. A heady cry ripped out of him as his release hit my chest.

His grip around me tightened with his orgasm and milked me to a bright edge.

My toes curled in the grass as I thrust forward one more time. I released hard and it kept coming and coming. I shuddered with the last of it and collapsed onto him.

He laughed and urged me closer, his kiss soft against my chin. "I've been dreaming of that since '49."

My cock slowly slipped out of him, hitting cool grass and the inside of his thigh. I murmured and tasted his lips. "So have I."

I CAME BACK the next day.

We made love in the fields, over and over, exploring our bodies; jolting until we couldn't possibly jolt anymore. But it lingered between us, a giant ticking clock. Eventually the circus would leave.

And then what?

~*~

IN THE GRASS, after a long and languid union...

"I once promised you magic, and this Sunday I'm going to deliver."

He told me what it was. "It was a child's dream," I said, twisting on my side to look at him. "I've moved on."

"Moved on," he murmured, staring up at the sky. "I get it."

He sat up and I sat with him. I traced over the creases the grass had left on his skin. "Actually, I changed my mind. I want this." I wanted it because he wished to give it so much, and who said no to magic? "But... not without Danny."

He looked up at me, leaned in and teased our raw lips together. "Then him too."

I fell back to the grass, and Stardust came too, rolling his naked body on top of me.

"Just one thing," I said as he pressed his feet against the top of mine.

He raised an inquisitive brow.

"You'll have to perform a small miracle first."

"What's that?" he asked against my lips.

"Make Spotty apologize."

~*~

SPOTTY APOLOGIZED—reluctantly—and Sunday starred our performance.

What I didn't know until I arrived was the day's performance was dedicated to Stardust. That this was his farewell act.

I wanted to find him and demand answers. Why hadn't he told me? But Danny and I were ushered into the ring. We were on.

At least a thousand people sat in the stands curving around the ring. I swallowed a nervous laugh and nodded to Danny. Let the act begin.

I played the lonely trumpet player on a park bench, he the energetic clown doing everything he could to cheer me up. He stood on his head, pulled out a never-ending rainbow from his sleeve, tried to lift the bench and me up even, but still I was sad. And the sadness vibrated around me.

Danny shook his head, shrugged, and then stretched the waistband of his pants. To the roar of a shocked crowd, he drew out a long, fine flute. He fumbled, nearly dropping it—at the last moment, snatching it up. I blew more sadness into the trumpet and he copied me on his flute. Music became a conversation.

Why are you standing there, looking so sadly at the stars?

—Because I want one to fall, to make a wish.

Make a wish? Oh, how I should like to make a wish. Maybe we could wait and stare up at the sky together?

I moved to the side and shared my bench with him. We both played toward the sky, still conversing.

You play so nicely.

—Thank you. You're... well, you're not shabby yourself. Rather lively, in fact.

It's quite a tricky melody. Dare you to try it?

And so I copied him, our music morphing into something sweet and happy. By the end of it, I was playing my own fun tunes, twisting cheerfully with Danny's.

So what will you wish for when a star falls?

—Something that would make me happy.

Happy? You mean, like a friend.

—Yes, I'd wish for a friend.

Danny lowered his flute, frowning at it. He looked from me to him and back again. Then he blew in his instrument again.

I don't know what your definition of friend is. But if a star falls, I shall wish it to knock some sense into you.

Then he mimed knocking me over the head with his flute instead. The crowd laughed.

And when I finished my last bit, a clear “*Oh!*” ringing out around us, I jumped off the bench—all bounce and excitement—and gestured him to follow me.

Cheers filled the arena, and I clapped Danny on the shoulder as we reentered the ring to take a bow.

His gaze skated over the crowd, and I followed it to my sister sitting in the front with her kids.

Still clapping, she stood up and marched forward. And then with a leap over the ring fence, she flung her arms around Danny. In front of a full house, she kissed him. Greasepaint smudged over her face and still she kept kissing him. “Never get rid of that smile.”

Danny lifted her and swung her around, stopping only to look at the crowd, shrug, and mouth “Who is this?” and smooched her again.

I looked past them, searching for Stardust. He was clapping the hardest, cheering the loudest. *Thank you for this high. For the magic. But why didn't you tell me it was your last show?*

~*~

AFTERWARDS, I found Stardust in the horse car.

He brushed Floss, telling him it was better they didn't go for a ride tonight. That the skies were cloudy and the sharp wind promised a storm. I leaned against the doorframe and smiled.

Glancing over his shoulder, he winked at me. “Thought I felt you there.”

Hearing the tenderness in his voice ached. I wanted this. Wanted this all the time, not just another summer to remember.

Again, just like the other days, he bit his lip and quickly turned away. It was like he knew what I wanted, but didn't know how to acknowledge it—how to tell me not to get my hopes up.

“It was a farewell show for you,” I said. “You never told me...”

Stardust continued brushing his horse.

“It's... hard for me to say goodbye,” he said quietly, and a lump in my throat made it hard to swallow. “But I'm broken.” He touched the horse brush to his bad shoulder. “It hurts. I can't keep... flying like this.”

I didn't move, didn't breathe but to ask, "What are you saying?"

He didn't meet my gaze. He stroked Floss again, rested his forehead against the horse's neck. "I want a home."

"A cage," I said, because I was caught on a need to grab him—turn him and kiss him—and I wasn't thinking clearly. Somehow *cage* seemed to make sense. Because it was me. And I wanted to be the one that protected him; I wanted to be his home.

Stardust sighed. "I've known for a while now that this summer would see my last act. I held out until now because I might see you here again. And it seems the stars are lined for me right, because"—he turned his head and looked at me—"here you are."

I stepped to his side, patting Floss as I drew nearer. "Here I am."

He smiled; and it was the smile of twelve years ago. Full of hope and new dreams. "You don't have to say anything now," he said.

And I didn't.

I showed him.

~*~

I RENTED A stable for Floss, and took Stardust home.

His life slung in a pack over his shoulder, he stopped at the threshold, a bird at the door of a cage.

"Will you come in, Stardust?"

He looked up slowly. "I don't have any magic left. I'm just Jean now."

I reached out and touched his chest with the tips of my fingers. He swallowed as I traced a path up his neck to his lips. I kissed them.

"Will you come in, Stardust?"

His lips curved; with a smile, he kissed me and stepped inside.

The End

Author Bio

A born and raised New Zealander, Anyta Sunday has been exploring the literary world since she started reading Roald Dahl as a kid. Inspired, stories have been piling up in her head ever since. Fast forward to her mid-twenties and jump a few countries (Germany, America, and back again), and she started putting pen to paper. When she's not writing or chasing her kid around, she's reading, hiking, watching a Joss Whedon series, attempting pilates, or curling up with her two cats. Updates on her projects can be found at Anyta's website.

Contact & Media Info

Feel free to contact her at

[Email](#) | [Website](#) | [Facebook](#)