

Chapter1

Alone

The tall handsome young man looked extremely lonely as he stood at the top of the open windswept field, facing down the empty cart track. Twenty year old David Sinclair had waited at the open gate of the circus winter quarters on this cold March morning and had watched until the last of the blue and yellow circus vehicles disappeared round the corner into the road at the bottom of their bumpy mud track. He had caught a last glimpse of the wagon tops minutes ago as they passed a gap in the trees, and now they were gone.

As he turned to go back into the empty farmyard he stopped, suddenly misty eyed, as he realised that he was properly on his own for the first time in his life. Whatever had he done, choosing to stay here when his whole family was going abroad?

Looking at things long afterwards, it was obvious to David that his new life had started the year before as Sinclair Brothers Circus pulled in after the last show of their tour. That was at the start of November when the old familiar team started the last steps of the break up that had begun two years back.

Alli the acrobat was abroad already. He'd been working in Denmark and West Germany ever since his daughter Mary had married Paul Williams. They too had gone off, with their old lioness and a new group of bears, to join another show. The Flanagan family, whose father had been their Stablemaster as long as David had known them, were long grown up and were going to be running their own show this year.

Worse still! Tommy Constantine had been David's special friend through their school years, but he had suddenly decided to leave university at last and take a steady job so he could marry his girlfriend.

That had left just David's own family and their fostered sister, Jacky's girlfriend Lee, to run the remains of Circus Sinclair.

David was a hard worker. Things had been pretty good for the last few years since he had taken charge of their horses. Through his efforts the family were known for their acts abroad as well as at home. There was plenty to do and he had been just too happy to coast along for the last four seasons, training and showing their ponies and working at his riding and stilt walking. As it was their father, Commander Sinclair, had left the business side of Sinclair Brothers Circus to the eighteen year olds, Jacky and Lee.

Finally, just after the Christmas Season of three weeks in a local theatre, the boys' father had suggested that they all go to join Alli for a summer season with his show touring Germany. Alli had invited them, often enough. Everyone seemed to agree and Commander Sinclair had phoned to tell him they were coming.

The family had started to plan straight away. They discussed, over and over, which acts they could take and what would have to stay, and David had been as interested as the others.

Then, one Sunday lunch time, he had suddenly announced that he wasn't going tenting at all this year. He explained that he had decided to stay at home and keep working at

the stables that had always employed him during the winters. The others hadn't been particularly surprised and, although he knew inside that they wanted him to come with them, they accepted his decision and got on with their planning.

It certainly seemed a good choice. David was very popular with the stable's riding customers and his boss was more than pleased to be keeping him for the coming summer holiday time. They were busy building up a sideline for the stables, too, by buying young ponies and letting David train them for sale to circuses. They were having a remarkable success so far, and had several orders to work on, so David was sure to have plenty to do.

There had been a lot of extra work for everyone this spring just to arrange for their Circus to travel abroad. With Lee telephoning everywhere and she and Jacky fixing the problems as they arose, they managed to get all the papers and the tickets and the vet's certificates and everything else in time.

For weeks now David had left the others to their planning.

"You can make your own circus if you want to. Daddy has left the tent and the tractor and our wagon and everything!" Elizabeth, their five year old sister, hadn't seemed to be the slightest bit upset at the thought of going abroad and leaving her favourite brother.

"At least promise us that you'll come over for your twenty first birthday in August," Lee had insisted, several times.

"If you get a chance to train three matching ponies, like the ones you did for Paul," His father had suggested. "You could bring them with you."

But there was never a word about changing his mind.

Yet he knew inside, if the others had been keen to have him with them, and planned for it, he would have joined them after all.

They hadn't, and he hadn't. He was proud and a little stubborn too.

So at last, this morning, Father and Elizabeth had driven off with their big old Commer furniture van towing their new modern four wheeled caravan. Jacky and Lee had followed in their specially built motor caravan, with Tessa the elephant riding in her old wagon behind, and now they were gone.

David had returned to the strangely empty farmhouse, still the home of their old Great Aunt, who sympathised with him over a quiet breakfast. He finished the meal, took one more look at the empty practice shed, the locked and secured store and the now dark and empty living wagon where he had been born, and went to get the big Bedford van that was now his.

He drove off to work.

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"Morning Dave! Boss wants us in the office. Bad news, he says!"

David sighed inwardly. His employer was always having problems.

As he got out of his van with its circus signwriting, the other two workers were already dropping their tools and picking up their coats. He followed them to the converted stall where the stable owner kept his desk with the telephone and his filing cabinets.

The old man was holding a letter and seemed to be waiting until the staff were all there before giving them his news.

“Well! It's happened.” He said at last, waving the letter. “I'm going to have to close down. You all know we've been existing from week to week, but this is the end. The estate won't renew our lease after the end of the month.”

He looked round at his workers.

“Don't worry about me,” said the younger of the two. “I'm going back to our family farm.”

“I'll find something. I'll be all right,” said the other.

The boss looked at David.

“I guess you'll be going out with your family circus again, anyway?”

David nodded.

“Something like that.”

It took a week to close down the business, a week of hard work for everyone. David was quite happy as he delivered horses and ponies to buyers around the country. The final journey was to the South of Scotland and he came back to the circus farm around dawn, which meant that after a few hours sleep and a long shower he was very late to work.

“I've got a last job for you, David, but I can't pay you anything until after the sale.”

The old man was waiting as David drove their horse box into the yard and he certainly looked very tired. David stretched his legs and leant backwards with his hands behind his head. He stifled a yawn.

“It's only a short trip. About twenty miles.” Grinned his boss.

“Go on, I'll buy it!” David grinned back.

An hour later, after another strong coffee that had helped David to keep awake, they loaded the last three ponies into the horse box. Three of the stables' best ponies that David had been training as a liberty group in his spare time.

“Where to?” David asked, several times. “They need a bit more work, yet!”

As they pushed up the ramp and wound up the catches, the old man looked over to David, standing at the other corner.

“Do you know a circus boss called Andrew Andrews?” He asked.

“Is that where they're going?” David knew and liked the old man and his family show.

“It is. He's looking for someone to show them, too. Know anyone who hasn't got a show to go to and can handle the job?”

David laughed aloud.

“Who put you up to that?” He asked.

“Nobody, but I phoned up last night to see if you were home yet. The old lady told me your family went abroad without you and I know you won't be going begging at anyone's door! No! I know you aren't quite satisfied with the ponies yet and when Andrew phoned to ask if they were sold I thought you could do with some more time with them.”

“And a job too?”

“And a job too!”

David arrived at the circus ground at lunch time. A big two pole tent was built up on a recreation ground and old Andrew was expecting them. Not only expecting the ponies but David as well. Someone else was expecting him, too.

“Are you coming tenting with us?”

He turned round to see Michelle, Andrew’s niece, looking out of a trailer door. She was about his age, and he’d known her for years.

“I might be thinking about it!”

“I hope you do.” She said and went back inside.

“I’d like you to work with us,” invited the circus owner. “I’m sure we could agree on a salary, if you’d like to come with us?”

That was the biggest question. David left the answer until he had returned the horse box to the empty stables and driven his van back to Aldermaston. In the end, it was his great aunt who made the decision for him.

“I just have the farmhouse and the buildings to look after, and Frank looks in every day. If you take your horse with you, and your trailer, the two of us I can keep everything else in order. Either go to your Dad, or go to Andrew. We’ll be all right.”

So David pulled out of the winter quarters, just as his family had done every year since he was twelve years old, but this time he was going to be on his own without their support. Red, his ring horse, was loaded in their old horse box and all his belongings were loaded in Jacky’s old trailer behind it as he pulled out.

Frank, their old tent man, was bringing his van along and taking the horse box home tonight. Then it was up to David.

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Every circus has its own ways, and Andrew’s ways were very different to those of the Sinclair family. The first thing that had surprised David, right from his first visit, was how few people there were working with and around such a large tent. Andrew and the fourteen year old boy who lived with him had an old showman’s wagon. Andrew’s son Brian and his wife Joan lived in a big twin axle caravan, and Michelle had a much smaller trailer of her own. They were the only performers on the show.

There did seem to be two teenage tentmen and an elderly beast man who he’d seen about, but they did very little other than their own jobs.

David had arrived too late for the start of the show, and was just in time to see Michelle on the trapeze. It reminded him of the first time he’d seen her. He was still thinking of those days when Brian picked up the microphone.

“Ladies and gentlemen! Boys and girls! This is your chance to become a circus star. We have recently installed the original American Riding Machine¹ so that you too may demonstrate your skills on horseback.”

As the show’s rather jaded looking ring horse cantered into the ring, Brian lowered the ropes of the *mechanic* from the ridge pole and Michelle adjusted the belt around the first volunteer’s waist.

The first two customers managed to ride, sitting on the horses back, and the second even managed to kneel for a few seconds. Neither of them managed more than two or three rounds of the ring. Even Andrew’s boy, Monty, who came out as a *gee* to keep the act alive and played the fool, wasn’t all that good. He ended up flying about the

¹ The American Riding Machine, also known as a Mechanic, is a length of rope that passes over a pulley above the centre of the ring. One end goes to the rider’s belt, Two or three strong men hold the other end. If the rider falls off, they hold his weight so he doesn’t fall to the ground.

ring as Brian and the tentmen jerked him from the horses back and manipulated the rope to keep him swinging about.

David wasn't really surprised when Brian walked over to his box.

"You look like a likely sort of rider, dressed like that."

David was wearing his usual cowboy jeans and boots with a blue shirt that had embroidered patterns and white fringing so he looked the part as a cowboy rider. He didn't protest too loudly as he jumped over the ring fence and threw his Stetson hat to one of the tentmen, who was working as a ring groom. He let Michelle adjust the belt around his waist as he pulled off his boots.

"I suppose I do have to wear the lunge?" He asked.

"Can you fly without it?" She answered for both of them, with a happy smile.

David managed to do a lot of his normal act, despite the restricting belt and rope, and even managed to jump off and on again before doing a back somersault to the ground. To his relief Brian had let the rope hang quite loose during his ride and Michelle unhooked the lunge as he landed.

"Ladies and gentlemen, boys and girls, especially for you tonight! Our Guest! Mr David Sinclair!"

He left the ring through the curtains and, as he dusted off his socks and pulled his boots on, Brian grabbed his arm.

"You've accepted my offer then? How much were they paying you?" He asked, and promptly burst out laughing.

David couldn't think what he meant, until he suddenly remembered their first meeting nine seasons ago. It was then that he had ridden a ring horse for the very first time in the same act in the same ring. That day, Brian had offered him a job, riding in their show, at twice the wages that he was getting on their own show.

"I'll take the job, and I won't insist on twice the pay." He told Brian. "I want four times!"

"Did you really work for nothing?" Asked Andrew, still laughing.

David suddenly felt at home.

Chapter 2

Feeling Better

David got up very early the first morning on the show, just as he always did. Somehow he felt at home and knew that he was doing the right thing.

It was long before anyone else was about, and he put his three ponies through their routine in the quiet ring. The nearly two weeks break since he had worked them last had helped more than hindered and they were soon performing to his satisfaction. He handed out biscuits all round before leading them back to their stakes.

Even after a break for a cup of tea there was still nobody about. David changed into shorts and a tee shirt before putting the roller harness on to Red's back and riding him into the tent.

He was letting Red canter around the ring when Michelle came in, yawning.

"Can you keep him up, I want to try something?" He asked, and she came over and took over the ring whip so he could practise his usual riding act.

As David finished with his routine with his usual backward somersault to the ground, Michelle stopped Red at the front of the ring and applauded. David bowed back, and grinned.

"I thought I'd better try and work out what I could do." He told her as he went over to his horse. "There's just a chance they might want me to ride again tonight."

"Might!" She exclaimed. "That performance of yours last night was the best I've seen in years, and the best there's ever been on this show. Anyone can see your riding's a top class act! Andrew will insist on it!"

David knew his routine was fairly good, he'd been told it was good often enough by people who wanted him to work for them, but he was never completely satisfied with it himself. If his act was top class then, he wondered what an act would be like in this show if it was just *average*. So far he hadn't been all that impressed by the others!

"Who else is practising?" He asked.

David wasn't surprised to find that no one else was practising this morning. Michelle followed him around as he looked after Red and then stood watching as he went back to his van to put on his shortest stilts. He stood up, took a short length of weighted rope and skipped for fifty turns forward and fifty turns backwards.

"You're fit!" She said, as he sat on the aluminium step-ladder that he used when he wanted to climb on and off. He unbuckled the straps from around his legs and let Michelle take the stilts. She was looking at them with interest and David was about to ask if she would like to try when the older tent man came to fetch her to do the shopping for her uncle.

She dashed off with a quick "see you later."

David was clearing up his trailer after a quiet lunch before he saw anyone else. He'd been sending a steady stream of people over to Brian's trailer and had seen them going away with tickets, so he knew that Joan was at home. Nobody had been near the animals since someone had opened the cages, and that had been earlier while he was having his breakfast.

Andrew knocked at his door and came inside to sit at the table.

“Well Mister Ringmaster. I think you'd better work out the running order for today's show. Here's the one we've used from the start of the season. I'd like you to do your proper job in red coat and trappings, if you will, and add your stilts and riding?”

David took a new sheet of paper from his writing pad and a ball point pen from his writing case and sat at the table. He wrote the numbers 1 to 10 down the left hand side of the paper and added the numbers 21 to 30 to make a second column down the middle.

David looked at Andrew's paper and at the new list and back to Andrew again.

“Cage act after the interval, wire act before it, opening and finale all fixed?” He asked.

There is more than one way to make a program, and none is as simple as they look. David's method was the one that his family had always used, and the one he was used to.

First you have to assume that people are not available during the whole act before their own, because they have to change their costumes. Next, animals have to be fetched and props have to be set by somebody and, last of all, people shouldn't have to change and then change back again unless there is no choice. Of course, there's an interval that you can use to build up the cage for the lions or tigers or whatever you have, but that needs a lot of people too and the audience needs to be able to view animals in the zoo or buy something to fill the time.

Until those things are considered, you can't even start!

Most shows rely on having at least one good clown who does two or three proper entrées, acts of his own, and stays about to fill in gaps between the other performers' spots. The Sinclair family had always seemed to have a horror of leaving the ring empty for more than a few moments. It had made work for Paul and Jacky and it had always paid off, so it was the way that David wanted to run this show too.

It might have been the way he wanted to work but it seemed that he was going to have to make do without that sort of help in this show.

He had never done a running order completely on his own before. Lee was the best programme juggler he knew and he tried to remember her tricks. It wasn't easy though and, because there didn't appear to be any way to fill the spaces without clowns, he wasn't going to get it right on the first try.

He asked Andrew about clowns.

“Well, I think the younger tent man can do a bit, and Brian will at a push. Put them in those two holes in the program there and there”

| | |
|-------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| 1 three ponies | 11 lionesses |
| 2 | 12 clown |
| 3 exotics, camel, llama | 13 dogs |
| 4 | 14 ????? <i>a big clown number?</i> |
| 5 stilts | 15 |
| 6 pedestal pony | 16 trapeze |
| 7 clown | 17 |
| 8 bears | 18 riding machine |
| 9 clown | 19 David riding |
| 10 wire | 20 western |

The whole program looked a bit thin, especially as the clowns were to be left to do their *own thing*. David looked at the big hole between the dogs and the trapeze and counted the acts.

“What have you got? Surely you have something to go in there?”

“Michelle used to have props for rolling globe and rolla-rolla somewhere. She could do *CordeLisse* one time, too, but she hasn't practised for ages.”

“What about you, and Brian, and Joan?” Asked David.

“Well, we do the bears and the western together, and Brian does the Lionesses. We do the ponies and the exotics, too. You've got the rest of our jobs in the show.”

David groaned inside.

“How about if I did the Arab Acrobat routine with some village kids to fill that hole? Someone will help me I suppose?”

“Ask the young tent man. He might. I think he has some idea of acrobatics. I've seen him sort of practising.”

David nodded.

“I will. Has he got a name? Other than *Hey You*?”

Andrew looked puzzled.

“You ask Brian. He speaks like a Londoner, but his name is something Spanish. Hoo-something.”

Could it be? David remembered the one time *Andorra State Circus* with two old people running the show and the small boy he had met a few times. If it was young Julio Carchinella, then his problems could be over. But was it? How come he was here with Andrew? Would the son of one circus family be a tent man for another? Without anyone knowing?

Andrew went to the trailer door and bellowed for the tent man. As he came across, small and dark haired, a boy still, about seventeen perhaps, David tried to remember how he had looked last time they'd seen him as an eleven year old.

“Afternoon, Mr Sinclair!” He said. “It's been a real long time.”

As soon as David heard the almost cockney accent he knew it really was their Julio and he greeted him like a long lost brother.

Andrew left the two together.

Julio's life story was simple and not unusual for a small family circus. The only child of elderly parents, he had been the worker in his families show until two years ago. He had done all the clowning, some juggling and a bit of riding but mostly the labouring work. Last time David had seen him was when Alli and Tommy had told him that he should come to them and learn properly. Julio's father had vetoed it because he couldn't do without him.

It had been a living but, when Julio's father had retired two years ago his son was jobless and only half trained, so he had spent a summer and a winter with another show, practically unpaid and certainly unloved. The hard way, but the most courageous way, to get the experience he lacked.

It was only luck that Andrew had opened his season early and, as the show worked the next village to the winter farm, Julio had run away from one show to another.

David showed him the running order.

“From what I remember, you were a pretty good clown as a kid. What do you do now?”

“In this show? Not much. There's no props for a start, and nobody to work against. Have you tried to do *Reprise* without an *Animateur*?”

David hadn't. Jacky was the *Auguste*, but David and Lee competed as straight man to the clowning, as the so called *Animateur*, and it made a heap of difference compared to working on their own.

David had loaded all of their last few clown props, those he could find before leaving home, the ones that Lee hadn't found to take abroad. They'd have to make do with these props and what others they could make.

It was half an hour before show time when Julio went to change, and they met again in the ring doors as David arrived with his immaculate red coat and black trousers, top hat and white gloves.

Julio looked at the perfect costume and went red as he looked down at his darned red tights and worn oversize boots. He was wearing a large yellowing white jacket with black threads through it, and the whole rig looked as if it had been washed a thousand times and then slept in, and it probably was!

“Sorry, Mr Sinclair!”

“Just do half a job, and we can tidy you up later. Let's do something about starting this show!” Answered David, and took out his whistle.

The whole show was disappointing, now that David could watch it. It was nothing like as good as he had remembered it from previous years, but at least he was able to see that Julio was better than ever and had plenty of potential.

Most surprising were the performances of the show's owner and his family. Joan did nothing at all while Andrew and Brian were at least second rate, and their costumes were nearly as bad as Julio's.

Michelle was the high point for David. Her self made costumes were perfect and her acts, wire and trapeze, were acceptable.

David's old friend Julio didn't disappoint him at all. They had fun, throwing the corniest of clown jokes back and forth and then, as clowns together, working in the Arab Acrobat routine. They did simple acrobatics with three children from the audience, who enjoyed every minute and went back to their seats glowing with pride. At least the show was rescued for now, and David knew what he had to work with.

Michelle couldn't find David after the show and she walked around the tent looking for him. She discovered him at last, out in the field. She stood by the tent walling, watching as he went up to each horse in turn with a short stick in his hand. He was walking around and talking to each of them turn and seemed to be tickling them with his stick.

“What ever are you doing?” She asked, walking up as he reached the last pony, still puzzled by his extraordinary actions.

At that moment, David had found what he was looking for.

“Does she know what I'm doing?” He asked the pony, an aged greyish white animal, and it shook its head emphatically from side to side.

“Shall I tell her?”

The pony nodded its head up and down, and David pointed to its front leg.

“Okay. We'll show her.”

Michelle was interested.

“What's twice two?” He asked the horse, and it pawed the ground four times.

“The educated Pony?” Michelle asked. “I didn't know that Silver was trained for it.”

“Maybe she isn't!” He answered. “But we need another horse in the ring. I'll look for a fire pony in the morning, then we'll have two more spots.”

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David was as good as his word, and spent most of the morning with Julio in the ring, leading horses past a wooden gate that they had made from broken pieces of two others. They had nailed asbestos string along the top rail and soaked it with paraffin. Once lit with a match it had bright smoky flames on top.

Most of the ponies had shied away as David walked them past it, keeping himself between the pony and the flames, but two of Andrews oldest ponies trusted him enough. Even when he stood on the other side and led them past from the inside they seemed unperturbed.

He rewarded the ponies and with Michelle helping them they took them back to the horse tent.

“A couple of days, perhaps.” He told her.

Somehow, between times, he had organised that Julio would take the second tent man and the beast man down to the barbers in the afternoon. By the time that the show started, again just one performance at six o'clock, he'd got them dressed in clean jeans and red shirts that he'd bought with his own money. Much more important, Julio had new tights and had used small pots of Woolworth's red and yellow enamel to brighten up his boots.

“We'll go and look for a *chovey* as soon as we can. That jacket could do with retiring!” David promised him.

The educated pony went in during the first half of the show, and the village children liked it immensely.

David worked the same routine that his mother had done, as Jacky did now with Lee, but on his own. The pony did simple sums with numbers shouted out by the children, guessed the ages of three children and made the inevitable joke.

“How many days of the week do you work? How many days would you like to work?” David asked.

The answers to the questions are always greeted by laughter as the horse appears to say he works seven days and then makes no movement at all for the days he'd like to work.

Julio had been working with the contents of the show's junk boxes and had made more props. The *bat and bottle* and a *butterfly* were ready now, so there were three more clown gags tonight. He even surprised David by coming in with a carrier bag and a bottle of water, but David picked up the cue and they went into the *Water of Truth* gag without a hitch.

“I feel as though you're getting on top!” Said Michelle as the three of them drank his cocoa after the performance. “The show might be worth seeing soon. Can you teach me to ride?”

David looked at her in surprise, as much at the statement as the question. He hadn't realised that she cared!

“Are you on my side, Michelle?” He asked.

“A hundred per cent, David. I only work here because they're family. I thought of asking your dad for a job last year, but I funk'd it at the last minute. They'd have just carried on here without me, anyway. So I stayed.”

David thought how useful she would have been last year, when they had been without Mary and Paul, but that made him think how much he could use his family to make this show. So he put it out of his mind and thought about this year.

“There's enough potential here. With us three working together we can get this show out of the villages and into towns. Big towns too!”

Michelle agreed, and they settled down to discuss what else they could do to improve the show.

Chapter 3

Teamwork

On Saturday morning, a pull down day and an early show, the weather was quite fine. David Michelle and Julio went down to the village at twelve o'clock to buy a few small things and try and encourage a few more customers, David was on his street stilts, Michelle was riding Red, and Julio was dressed as a clown and carrying a book of tickets in a money apron.

To their surprise the villagers were happy to talk to them and even to buy tickets for the show.

“Your Circus has been coming here for years, and I've never been to see it.” Confided the bartender at the Queens Arms. “Give me a couple of tickets for my children and one for my wife, and I'll come as well if I can.”

They were back in time to eat sandwiches and drink tea in Michelle's trailer before getting ready for the show.

Andrew came along as David and Julio went off to change.

“So we're going to get a good audience this afternoon! Joan showed me the advance bookings.” He said. “We haven't done well here for years. It'll make a change.”

David didn't say that he wasn't surprised.

“If you'll excuse me? I need to change.”

A quarter of an hour before the start of the show, as Paul and Michelle were in the ring doors making some minor adjustments to the running order, Julio put his head around the wallings.

“You've got visitors!”

As he stood back outside, the visitors came in. His great aunt, followed by Frank, their one time tentman.

“Come in, Aunt. I'll find you a seat.”

As they walked round to the box seats, he heard the latest news.

“I've put the letter on your table.”

The show was their best so far. The audience was enthusiastic and Michelle joined in David's acts as he did in hers, which improved the look if not the quality. Even Andrew had found a newer looking costume for his acts.

At the end of the performance, as everyone started to pack the show away and pull down the tent, Andrew looked very pleased.

“I wonder if we could manage to do a week in Swindon?” He asked as he helped David roll up some ropes. “We'd have to do two shows a day to cover the rent. But do you think we're good enough?”

“It's worth a try. Let's go for it!” David answered.

“We'll do it then!” decided his boss. “It'll make a change from these little places!”

Both Frank and the old lady were enthusiastic about the show. She complimented Michelle and Julio, both of whom she remembered from other years, and they all

spent a couple of interesting hours in Andrew's wagon reminiscing. As David and Julio watched the visitors drive out of the gate, long after midnight, Julio suddenly grabbed David's hand and squeezed it.

"Thanks, *Col*, I never thought I'd be sitting at Andrews table as an equal. I hope I never let you down!"

He started to walk off toward the lorry where he slept.

"Come in for a drink, Julio." Michelle invited, but he shook his head.

"Up early in the morning. Thanks all the same."

David remembered the letter from home so they went to look for it. Michelle put the kettle on as David took out the letter. It was typed on both sides of a sheet of the circuses headed note paper but on Lee's portable typewriter, the one she liked because of its small print, and it was full of news.

She wrote about their journeys around the country and the new show. It was full of little things that made David wish several times that he was there. It was so full of detail that, if you hadn't known that Lee was blind, the letter wouldn't have given you a clue.

He was reading about the house acts of the german show, the ones done by the owner and his family, when the kettle boiled.

Michelle started to read the letter, too, as they drank a good night drink.

She yawned.

"Julio's right. We'd better get some sleep. Andrew wants an early start."

As David lay in bed, he finished the letter. The biggest news was at the very end and they'd both missed it the first time through.

"Love from home, we're all missing you. Your Lee!" She had written, and then the next line read, "P.S. Jacky has asked me to marry him at last. We thought of having the wedding when you come over in August."

So his brother had managed to ask her, after all this time! It had been a certainty for years, but they'd always talked about David getting a nice wife and several children first.

He switched off the light and fell asleep dreaming about circus girls he'd known.

Chapter 4

The first big town

The show was built up ready to open in the middle of Swindon, two whole weeks after the family visit and after performing profitably in several more big villages. David had tried his two ponies with a fire jump several times and had selected the young Palomino that seemed to have no fear at all. It had been a long job, but at last he felt that he was ready to add it to the programme.

Andrew was surprised to see David at a final practice on the Monday morning.

“I always thought that pony was useless. Brian bought it because it looked good, but it never would work with the others. I was ready to sell it.”

David grinned at his boss as Julio led the pony out through the ring door curtains.

“I’ll take it off your hands?” He offered. “I’ll give you what you paid for it!”

There was a real *packer* at the quarter to five show. David had been paid well again and he and Michelle had co-ordinated her costumes with his so that they looked as if they really belonged together. Julio had been practising balancing, something he’d always been good at, and David had coached him so that he was ready to try the *Chinese Chair Pyramid* for the first time in several years.

Michelle had rigged the rope beside her trapeze and was ready to put the vertical rope, the *Corde Lisse*, back into the program.

The show was getting better than ever.

They had adjusted the running order to fit, added another clown entrée, and were ready to go.

“Are you enjoying yourself?”

Michelle was looking after the tape recorder as Julio came out of the ring after doing the Arab Acrobats with David and because he looked so happy she had asked him the obvious question.

“Sure thing! But if it goes on like this, I’ll want to be paid as an Artiste instead of as a tentman!”

David looked up in surprise.

“Say that again, Julio. Aren’t they paying you?”

Julio shook his head.

“Food and cigarette money, and they’ll teach me something to do in the ring. But they are supposed to keep me in clothes.”

Michelle looked amazed.

“David! That’s not fair! What should we do?”

David looked at Julio.

“You work for me now, not for them. Don’t think about it any more. Let’s get on with the show.”

David and Michelle went to Andrew’s wagon between the shows. The old man was happy until he saw the look on their faces.

“You’ve come to spoil my pleasure at the best business we’ve done for years?”

“Not really! We'd like you to share your pleasure with Julio.” Michelle answered. “I think you're cheating him out of the money he should have. He's always been an artiste, and you knew it.”

The old man raged for a while. He had realised at last that he wasn't running the show any more and didn't like the idea.

Michelle raged back, telling him that he shouldn't take on someone to run the show and complain when they did it.

“I'm not paying anyone more money, unless they earn it!” He grumbled.

“David and I are doing more than half the show with Julio. We should get at least half the money for it!”

“Then take half the money after expenses, and divide it among the three of you!” He shouted.

“That sounds fair enough to me,” said David, joining in for the first time. “We can live with that.”

Andrew stopped, and looked at David. His anger evaporated and he started to chuckle and then to laugh.

“They warned me about you Sinclair's.” He said at last. “They said you'd get the better of me if I let you run things. I didn't believe them! But I'll overlook it if you want to work on those terms. Boy! You've got a new contract as of now. You run the show and provide half the acts for half the profits. We run the transport and the tent and our acts for the other half. I warn you, though, Julio and Michelle are your responsibility, not mine any more.”

David looked at Michelle, who had triggered the whole argument, and then at her uncle. He held out his hand toward Andrew.

“Okay then. It's agreed!” He said.

They were about to go into the tent for the afternoon show when Andrew came round the outside with two distinguished looking men whom Michelle recognised as the owner and manager of one of the largest shows in the country.

“This is Mr Sinclair,” Andrew introduced the men, and went back to prepare for the show.

“We would like to ask you to train a liberty act for us. We're getting twelve new animals at the end of September and we need the best trainer this winter. We've seen some of your work and your reputation is growing.”

David promised to talk about it later and led them round to the royal box.

They watched critically as David did his three spots with his ponies, then the fire pony and then the *educated pony*. They laughed and applauded with the audience through the rest of the show including his riding act and the *pony that won't jump*.

They were waiting for him after the show.

“Well young man, We can see why you have such a good reputation!” Said the older man, giving him a visiting card with a flourish. “We won't push you now, but I'm sure you are the only one for us. Give me a call before the end of August. The job is yours!”

David thanked them, and saw them to their car.

His face was radiant as he returned to his trailer to change.

After the evening show, David had what turned out to be a friendly discussion with Andrew and then gathered his little group together.

“Well, you two. It's fixed. For better or worse, we're partners. We've got the small horse box and my van to draw our two trailers, and Julio can use the lorry he's got until we can fetch him a trailer of his own. I take fifty per cent of our share of the money, Michelle thirty, and Julio twenty. If we do badly, I guarantee you food, fuel and gas for your cooking. How's that?”

Michelle agreed, unreservedly.

“How am I going to afford a trailer of my own?” Asked Julio. “They're expensive at this time of the year. Everybody wants them for the holidays!”

David smiled.

“You'll have it in two days, and it won't cost you a cent. But you'll have to clean it up, it's been a bit neglected.”

Chapter 5

Summer Season

The first weekend in June was quite eventful for the three young partners. It was exceptional because it was the first seven day week as they toured along the seaside resorts and were opening on Sundays.

Firstly, Andrew's niece came to visit. Her name was Susan, she was a bit younger than Julio and an out and out *flattie* who immediately became a circus fan after watching the Saturday evening show.

"It's so much better watching a circus when you know the people," she said enthusiastically as she helped Julio brush one of David's horses after the show.

"It's nice having someone in the audience who knows you, too." He told her.

They were still talking happily together as they finished and went back to his trailer. Michelle, on her way to see David, smiled and wished that David would look at her in the way that Julio was looking at her cousin.

Sunday brought a new experience for Julio. Brian had been having a little bit of trouble with one of his two lionesses for a couple of weeks and David had been pushing him to sort it out in practice. Naturally he chose the least convenient time to insist that the cage should be built up, early that morning just as everyone wanted to have a well earned lie in.

All the men of the show helped build the cage and waited around giving helpful advice as Brian put the two cats through their routine.

"That's got it," he said at last, after repeating the routine faultlessly for the second time. "I bet you couldn't do a thing with them, David?"

"I never tried," David admitted. "I suppose I could, if I had to. But they're like all group animals, aren't they? They just need to know you and trust you. I'd try and do the act if nobody else would!"

Brian pointed at the man door.

"Come and meet them, David?"

"No thanks. I'll stick to horses and camels and llamas, or the occasional bear."

"Could I try?" Asked Julio.

Brian laughed.

"Of course you can. And don't worry. I'll be behind you so nothing can go wrong."

Julio surprised everyone when Brian let him into the cage and handed him the whips and the reward stick. He seemed to grow six inches in height and looked at the cats as if he had been their master for always. The two of them went through their routine for a third time without hesitation and Julio managed to move the props for them without Brian's help.

As the lionesses went back into the tunnel and to their cages, Julio handed back the whips.

"Thanks," he said, "I liked working with them. They're so beautiful."

"But remember," Brian warned, "they only behaved because I was in the cage."

Michelle nudged David, and whispered in his ear.

“Don't you believe it! Brian's not all that good. Those cats only had eyes for Julio. I bet he could show them, anytime, just as well as Brian can. Maybe better.”

The pull down was over by nine that evening, the shows being at three and six o'clock, and Julio went off with Susan to the town. Michelle sat with David and prompted him as he wrote a letter to Lee.

“You forgot to tell her about Julio and the lions!” She said as he read it out to her.

He dutifully wrote the extra paragraph.

They drank cocoa and listened to music on the radio and at last she went home to her own trailer.

“Goodnight, David. See you early for the move.

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Brian had a stomach ache on Monday morning and didn't do very much to help until the lorries started on their way. He looked pretty awful as he went back with his wife in the show's van to fetch their horse box and the last two trailers, Michelle's and Julio's.

The others set to work to build up the show and get ready for the afternoon performance.

It was starting to drizzle as the canvas rose from the ground and they were pleased to be able to work in the dry inside the tent. By three o'clock they were finished, but there was no sign of Brian or Joan.

It was a quarter to four when a police car stopped at the gate and a uniformed officer walked over to Andrew's wagon and knocked.

Andrew came out, spoke to the man and shouted for David.

“Brian's in hospital. Not an accident. Appendicitis!” He told him. “But he ran off the road. Joan's waiting a couple of miles back with the loads. The lorries are okay, but something's wrong with Michelle's trailer. Do you think you can get there and back before the show?”

David took his horse box, and Michelle, and they found the two trailers and the tow vehicles just three miles outside the town. The AA breakdown vehicle had just dragged Michelle's trailer out of the ditch, and it was a sorry sight with its roof off and one side crushed right in. She unlocked the door and put her head inside.

Everything that was breakable was broken and food was mingling with bedclothes on the floor. She stepped back, shocked.

David and the AA driver threw the remains of the roof into the empty horse box, pushed up the ramp and hooked the trailer back on to the horse box from which it had uncoupled. Joan was explaining to Michelle what she thought had happened.

“Brian was driving very fast, I think he wanted to get home and go to the doctors, and the trailer was waving about a bit. Then it went really wild and flew off the road on its own. It was horrific. And he didn't get out to look, he was in so much pain.”

The three loads were soon back at the show. With David towing the damaged trailer at slow speed he was the last to arrive, and Julio and the tentman were told to throw a length of walling over the top while Michelle and David transferred her valuable

costumes and her possessions to his trailer. He cleared a complete wardrobe and helped stow her things.

They got ready for the show.

“I can't afford a new trailer. You found one for Julio. Do you have another one hidden up your sleeve?” She asked.

David shook his head.

“That was just luck. But you can stay here with me, until we repair yours or find another,” he offered.

To his surprise, Michelle accepted.

It was a rush getting ready for the first show, but everything ran perfectly without a hitch. David and Michelle showed the bears and Julio repeated his performance with the lionesses to prove Michelle right. They worked superbly for him.

Michelle went into the western act with Joan and her uncle, and it was all done.

“That was quite good!

It was almost as if Julio had been preparing for today. In a way he had, because David and Michelle had found someone who had the same approach to the job as their own and were only too pleased to push him along with them. Susan thought he was marvellous as well as handsome and said so. Michelle watched her go off with him after the show, and then watched them again after the evening show as she followed David to their trailer.

“Is she good for him?” She asked.

“Who? Susan? Good for Julio? Every good man needs a woman behind him!”

“Is there a woman behind you?” She asked.

“I hope so!” He said, waiting and putting his arm around her. “I think I might be holding her!”

Chapter 6

A Flight

“Dear Michelle and David,” said the letter from Lee. “I’m glad that Andrew has arranged to do a gala without you so that you can come to the wedding. Dad has borrowed a trailer for you to sleep in and we’ll be picking you up at the airport.”

It was mid August, the Thursday night before they were due to fly to Bremen, and they were working round the West of London so that Andrew could do a Gala, an arena show, every weekend. Usually, Andrew Brian and Joan took the remaining tentman with them, leaving the others to run the Saturday shows on their own. Tomorrow and Saturday there would no performance and the show would be in the care of Julio, and of Susan who had turned up the previous weekend with her bags for a month’s stay and had moved in with him.

“Ready for tomorrow?” Asked David as they prepared for bed.

“As ready as I’ll ever be!”

It was an early flight but crossed a time zone so that the one hour and half hours flight arrived only half a hour after takeoff by the clocks on the arrival gates. Jacky was waiting for them outside the customs, looking his usual happy self, and greeted his brother as if they’d been separated for five years instead of five months.

“Hi Michelle! Lee sends her love. She sent Elizabeth over as I was going off the *tober*. Come on. You’ll want to get cleaned up and change.”

He grabbed their cases and led the way through the exit doors to where a black Mercedes 300 saloon car stood in a no parking area. He opened the doors for them and threw the cases into the boot as they climbed in and sank into the comfortable seats.

A policeman in green and khaki uniform walked past and Jacky waved a hand in salute as he started up and drove away.

“It’s not ours,” commented Jacky as they drove off toward the next town where the show was built up. “Dad hired it to take Lee to the church. We’re as broke as usual”

David could see a big grin reflected in the driving mirror and knew his brother was exaggerating again.

“How is it really?”

Jacky became serious.

“You missed your chance, David. It’s marvellous, and they love our part of the show. Did you know, they’ve never seen our sort of clowning before?”

Michelle said she didn’t believe it.

“We’ve changed our acts a bit to suit their ways, but they’re still ours. We had to translate the best jokes, but they prefer visual gags and music anyway, but that’s all we had to do.”

“Does it pay?” Asked David.

“Thought you’d ask that,” answered Jacky. “And how! We make our fortunes with one show a day. The ground rents are ridiculous and we only have to move short

distances. Alli wants us to start here on our own next year, but Dad says he wants to talk to you first.”

Commander Sinclair was waiting at the gate as the car turned into the circus ground and walked alongside the car with its open windows.

“Lee and Veronique and Elizabeth have done a salad for lunch. I kept telling them I could do it, so Lee shut me out. It's set out in my trailer for us and she's having hers with her mother. Come and eat now and hear all about it. Then we'll have to get ready.”

Jacky transferred the cases from the car to the borrowed trailer and joined the others where his father was confirming that business was good.

“Of course it helped immensely that Lee can speak the language. Jacky's picking it up quite fast too and Elizabeth is the best of us all.” He hugged his youngest daughter to him and asked her “*nicht wahr?*”, “that's right?”, in his tenderest voice.

Elizabeth answered him with a stream of fluent German, Michelle responded and Jacky joined in.

David looked at them in surprise and Commander Sinclair burst out laughing.

“Shut up you three, you'll give David an inferiority complex! But seriously, David, it's not all that difficult to learn languages. You learnt French didn't you?”

“All the little children in Kindergarten speak German,” commented Elizabeth, with a grin as wide as any of her brothers'. “So it must be easy!”

“I can see where the next generation of Sinclair's Circus is coming from!” Exclaimed Michelle.

“Actually,” Jacky reminded her, sitting back and putting his empty plate on the draining board behind him. “She's our generation, Michelle! Dad seems to be expecting us four to provide the next one!”

Both Michelle and David flushed red.

+ + +

There had been a short and unimpressive civil ceremony in German in the local government office where David and the Circus proprietor had been asked to sign the register and some other papers. It was strange to hear Lee called Elisabeth Mary again, a name that she never used and the family had almost forgotten.

Then they had repeated the whole procedure in English in the cool white interior of the local seaman's mission church. It was a reunion for the old team. Everyone was there.

“Half the circuses in England and Wales must be having a day off today,” said Bill Williams as he stood back to let his wife through to greet David and Michelle.

Paul was already busy as Jacky's Best Man. Mary had taken Roberta, Tommy's fiancée to meet Lee, and the Flanagan family was waiting to meet her after they had spoken to their old friends.

It was almost a shame they had to break off and go into the church.

It was just like a wedding in an English church, but strangely different as well. Lee came down the aisle on the arm of her stepfather, and attended by Elizabeth and another even smaller girl from the German circus family where they worked. The three were all in impressive white with blue trimmings. David barely recognised the bride, she looked so radiant as she almost floated by to join his brother who looked

strange today. David realised that it was the first time he had ever seen him in a formal suit!

Michelle held David's hand tightly throughout the ceremony and as they left to greet the newlyweds at the door.

"You're supposed to throw your bouquet!" Called someone standing behind Michelle, and Lee threw it toward the voice. Michelle grabbed it as it nearly hit her face.

"Well done!" Called the same voice as David took it from her and put it properly into her arm. "Will we be invited?"

Passers by stared as the group formed and reformed on the steps for the photographer.

"They think it's weird," Lee told David as they stood together with Tommy and Jacky, the original four children of Sinclair Brothers Circus, for one last picture. "The Germans all stream off after the wedding, in a convoy to the photographers shop for horrible posed pictures!"

They streamed off, too, but back to the ground and the big four pole tent where the circus workers had set up trestle tables in the ring and where the airline caterers had laid out an impressive buffet under the bright lights.

At last the party came to an end. Jacky received the key of the Mercedes car from his father and with a final warning to "be back in time for Wednesdays show, or else," drove off with Lee sat beside him for a few days in the mountains.

Commander Sinclair and the circus owner ferried more than a few slightly inebriated people to local hotels in their cars and finally the family met for a goodnight in Commander Sinclair's trailer.

Michelle came back into the living room after kissing a still excited Elizabeth to find David in earnest conversation with his father.

They broke off and smiled at her.

"You know, I sometimes wish I liked alcohol when I see them enjoying themselves at a party," said Commander Sinclair, drinking orange juice and putting another glass and the big bottle in front of Michelle. "Help yourself. There's plenty of everything left!"

Michelle heard the real family history for the very first time. How Commander Sinclair's family gave up circus in 1939, when he was only three years old. How he and his wife to be worked together until they were eighteen and then married. How he was conscripted into the navy after Janine, David and Jacky's mother, had disappeared with baby David during their second winter.

She was surprised to hear that Alli and Commander Sinclair had been friends for years before that and that it had been Paul's father, Bill Williams, who was one of the original managers of Sinclair Brothers.

"Dad was invalided out of the navy, and he thought the best way of finding mother and me was to join the circus again." David explained. "He joined the show where Alli was working, and then bought it, and they looked everywhere. But they couldn't find us."

Michelle hugged David to her, as if to say 'but I found you.'

"Jacky found me in the end," said David's father. "Leastways, David always blames him...."

“Yes, when I was nearly twelve and Jacky only ten. I was just along for the ride at first. We accidentally got locked in the canvas wagon when the show moved on and Paul Williams helped us to pretend to be local kids. Dad swallowed it hook line and sinker until the law came to look for us!”

David pointed to two pictures, side by side in a frame, both showing a small boy with a horse. Different horses and different tents but apparently the same boy.

“Which one is the original?”

Michelle looked at the two pictures. One of a very small boy wearing jodhpurs and the second of a boy about eleven years old in very short shorts. She looked at Commander Sinclair and back to David, and tried to see Jacky as he might have been.

“The bigger one must be Jacky, if he was ten when you found the circus. The other one is too young. But they look the same to me.”

“Right! The six year old is Dad, visiting his uncle's circus in the wartime. The other one is Jacky when we made the film in Pinewood Studios. The police at Brackelsham Bay saw Dad's picture and thought it was Jacky, and Dad knew we'd found him. But he kept it secret until Mother came and told him it was all right.”

Next came the picture albums. First Commander Sinclair's old pictures with his family,. then his wife's childhood pictures in a special book with a worn leather cover. Then the real family albums showing the good and bad years of the Sinclair family circus.

It was nearly three in the morning before Michelle started to nod off and drop her head on David's shoulder.

“Long day!” Commented Commander Sinclair. “You'd better go and get some sleep. We've got two shows to do tomorrow and Sunday!”

As they undressed ready for bed, David and Michelle stopped and looked at each other. He hung his best suit next to her dress in the wardrobe and sat beside her on the bed.

“Could you ever leave circus?” He asked.

She looked at him, partly knowing what he was going to say. After all, she had become close to him in the last months.

“If it meant so much to my husband, I would.”

David took a deep breath.

“Michelle. You are good with horses, I know now, but I love horses and I really want to spend more time training them than I can get on the road. I've asked about taking the lease on our old stables, they're still empty, and I can pay the rent. I can have the lease when the season ends. I'm going to train that group of twelve for next year.”

“I like the idea!” She said. “It will be a change for me to stay in one place. I've been travelling since I was born. I'd like to be your partner, if that's what you want.”

They gave Commander Sinclair the news in the morning, and he didn't seem the slightest bit surprised.

“David. You are our horse expert. There's money in it, and you've got the right touch.” He turned to Michelle.

“And you are what David needs. He's been itching to run those stables since he started working there, but he needs someone to support him. I'd like it to be you, we've known you for so many years.”

They went off to tell Alli, who was painting some props at his trailer door.

David and Michelle had been invited to stay for the whole weekend and Commander Sinclair had pressed David into helping him ferry the other visitors to the airport in the shows two cars. By the time he'd made the third journey he was used to driving on the wrong side of the road and changing gear with his right hand. He bumped the car back on to the grass and parked it beside his father's trailer.

"Perhaps we can settle down now, and be audience," he remarked to Michelle who came over as he locked the door.

"No such luck," she smiled. "Who do you think are doing Jacky and Lee's spots in the show?"

"You didn't?" He asked.

"Your Dad said we wouldn't mind. I don't, and he told the boss you wouldn't, so you'd better not!"

David didn't really mind, he was at home and he was on holiday too.