

The first time Jared falls in love with the circus, he is ten years old.

His parents take him, his brother, and sister to see it when it comes through town. He is enchanted by the whole thing – the animals in brightly-painted wagons, the sideshows, the lion tamer, the high-wire acts, the bareback riders, the clowns, the little performing dogs, the trapeze artists, the ringmaster, the reedy music of the calliope, even the heavy, pungent smells of wild animals and hot straw, and the press of people packed close together. Of course he falls in love with the carnival food – cotton candy, popcorn, peanuts still in the shell, cold bottles of Coca-Cola. It is overwhelming and magical.

That night he and his brother plot to run away and join the circus. They huddle under the blankets on Jeff's bed making their plans.

"I'll be a lion tamer," Jared says, having been impressed by the man's fearlessness and excited by the way he fended off the big cats. "Or the dog trainer."

"I want to be an acrobat," Jeff says, and looks offended when Jared stifles a giggle. Jeff has hit a growth spurt and corresponding clumsy stage as he adjusts to longer legs, longer arms,

and bigger feet, and Jared can't imagine his older brother performing any of the jumps and tumbles and rolls that the acrobats did without falling all over himself.

"You should be a clown."

Jeff punches him in the arm. "Acrobat. It's the circus, you can be anything you want."

"We'll have to sneak onto the train. You can't drive Daddy's car."

Jeff has actually grown tall enough to reach the gas pedal on their father's Model T touring car, but neither of them knows how to drive. Riding the rails is more adventurous, anyway.

"What if we can't catch up to it?" Jeff whispers.

"We will."

They get dressed as quietly as they can, trying to see by the dim light from outside. Jeff trips over his shoes and Jared puts his shirt on inside-out. They throw some extra pairs of socks and undershorts and shirts into a pillowcase, open the bedroom door, and discover their little sister sitting in the hallway.

"Megan!" Jeff hisses. "Why aren't you in bed?"

"Why aren't *you* in bed?" she retorts. She points to the pillowcase in Jared's hand. "You're running away!"

"We're going to join the circus," Jared whispers.

"I knew that." She stands up. "Take me, too."

"No," Jeff says.

"Yes!" She puts her hands on her hips and makes a determined face. She looks silly blocking their way in her long white nightdress. Jared wants to just push her aside, but his parents always told him he should never push a girl, and besides, every time he pushes his sister he gets yelled at. "Take me or I'll tell."

"You're too little," Jared says.

"I am not!"

"Shh!" Jeff hisses.

"Mama! Daddy!" Megan raises her voice in the direction of their parents' bedroom. "Jared and Jeff are running away!"

Jared drops the pillowcase and clamps his hand over her mouth. She manages to lick his palm. Surprised and a little disgusted, he lets go. She runs down the hall and yells "Jared and Jeff are running away to join the circus!" at their parents' door. Jared and Jeff exchange worried looks, Jared grabs the pillowcase again, and they take off towards the stairs.

Their father stops them with a command – "Jared! Jeffrey! You stay right there!" – stomps down the hall and marches them back to their room. Megan shoots the boys a smug look as they pass her. Jared sticks out his tongue.

*No matter*, he thinks, as he climbs into bed under his father's watchful eye. *Next time*.

The second time he falls in love with the circus, he is fifteen.

His high school shuts down for the day because all the students would be skipping class anyway. He and his friends crowd into the stands with the rest of San Antonio. He eats peanuts and clouds of pink cotton candy, sneezes the sawdust out of his nose, and stares transfixed at all the performers, especially a pair of bareback riders, a man and a woman, alike enough to be brother and sister. They are dark-haired and dark-skinned, dressed in red and brown and gold, performing tricks on quarter-horses with tall plumes attached to their bridles. They are beautiful and graceful and strong, and Jared's friend Chad elbows him in the side and laughs at him when he notices Jared gaping in awe.

Chad says he wants to run away and join the circus, and he has Jared half-convinced to go with him until Jared realizes he's joking. As if Chad would ever leave San Antonio, even with Jared trailing behind him.

The last time Jared falls in love with the circus, he is twenty-six years old and he has finally run off to join it.

At the time, he doesn't think he has much choice.

Kenzie, Chad's on-again-off-again girlfriend and his public cover to protect his sexual preferences, is the catalyst that drives Jared to the big top, on the day she discovers him and Chad together in Chad's apartment. Chad does genuinely like her and claims he would eventually like to marry her, someday when the economy is better and he's ready to settle down. But she is bound and determined to claim him sooner rather than later, because as far as she's concerned, he is hers, and only hers, now and forever.

Then one day she sneaks into his apartment to surprise him with food cooked in his own kitchen, and instead she discovers him with his friend, both of them naked and sweaty and hard.

Well, Jared is hard, anyway – his cock is in Chad's mouth and Chad is sucking enthusiastically.

They're so wrapped up in each other that they don't realize Kenzie's there until she screams.

Jared pushes Chad away, Kenzie runs, Chad scrambles to his feet and chases after her. (He doesn't get far, realizing just before he gets to the stairwell that he's naked.)

On Monday Jared is pulled out of his high school classroom in the middle of leading a discussion of *The Scarlet Letter* – which seems oddly appropriate – and is told the principal wants to see him.

The principal fires him with "Some things have come to light about your, er, preferences," and "We can't have you in a classroom with impressionable children," and "Your mother must be so disappointed."

"I don't understand," Jared says, except he thinks he does. Kenzie must have gone to the administration, maybe even the school board. She would never betray Chad like this, and of course she would blame Jared for what she saw.

"I'm sorry, Mr Padalecki," the principal says, not sounding particularly sorry at all. "We've already called a substitute to take over your class."

The principal's secretary escorts him out of the school without a word.

Suddenly he's twenty-six years old and out of a job – a job he hasn't even had for a full school year - worried that half the city now knows he likes sex with men. He could be blackballed from teaching anywhere in western Texas. He was lucky to get that job, lucky his mother's years in front of a classroom had built up enough goodwill for her to successfully recommend her younger son for a teaching position. He doesn't know what he'll do now. He's worked on ranches as seasonal help, he did construction for a bit, but even though it's already eight years since the Crash of '29 and four years since the first of Roosevelt's New Deal programs, jobs are still kind of thin on the ground.

"Maybe you should leave town for a bit," his mom suggests. "Your aunt and uncle in Corpus Christi might let you stay with them."

"Didn't Milo's cousin get a job with the Civilian Conservation Corps?" his sister says.

"You like the outdoors," his dad offers.

But it's Chad, of all people, who gives him the best idea.

"We should've run off and joined the circus when we were kids," he says mournfully.

"You're a genius, Murray," Jared tells him, grabbing his face and kissing him.

A week later Jared's in Florida, in Sarasota, winter headquarters of the K&G Circus, and a week after that, in the middle of April, he's stepping out of a train car in Georgia for his first day of putting up the big top and then taking it down.

Sixteen years ago he wanted to run away and join a traveling circus, and now he finally has.

Life with a railroad circus is hard work, much harder than he was expecting. He sleeps in a train car with other canvassmen – the laborers whose specific job it is to deal with the tents - in a shared berth that's barely big enough for him, never mind him and another roustabout, and in the early morning everyone rolls out of bed, gulps coffee (breakfast comes later), and busts their asses erecting the big top. While they're doing that, elephants and draft horses haul wagons off the flatbed cars, other men erect the menagerie tent, the sideshow tent, the wardrobe and dressing tents, and kids from whatever town they're in try to cadge jobs in exchange for free tickets to the show.

Setting up the big top is called working the haul and it's the most physically demanding thing Jared has ever done – pounding stakes, dragging masses of heavy canvas, pulling ropes, heaving tent poles upright – and while he's a quick learner and can keep up with it, he discovers that his fellow roustabouts start out completely uninterested in helping him. They hide his boots, they steal his socks, they get the waiters to serve him last at mealtimes, they tease him, they ignore him, they make a point to share in-jokes he won't understand. It's always been easy for him to make friends, and at first it hurts to feel so unwanted, but he's been the new man on an old crew before, and he perseveres, and after a week or so they start to thaw and Jared settles more into this new life.

In his free time, between the afternoon and evening shows, he hangs out with his fellow roustabouts, now that they've warmed up to him, and does all those little domestic tasks he doesn't have time for during the rest of the day. He plays chess (Aldis, who was unlucky enough to end up sharing a berth with him in the sleeper car, is a very crafty player), writes home, tries to find something good to read, does his laundry, and attempts to befriend anyone who will talk to him, especially if they work in the cookhouse and are willing to slip him snacks between meals. Gina, one of the sideshow performers – she's one of the Warrior Women of Kilimanjaro, even though she's part Cuban and from New York – has learned not to ask him to help her with a crossword puzzle, because he'll try to finish it for her instead.

After the evening show starts, if he's not responsible for helping with props or tearing down and packing up anything in what he thinks of as backstage - more commonly known as the lot - Jared will sometimes sneak into the big top and watch. He's seen half the performers walking around in street clothes, some of the girls with scarves tied over their hair to protect it before the show, and he's learning the mechanics of a three-ring circus, all the framing propping up the illusions, and yet watching it is still a magical experience. The animal acts and the aerialists are his favorites. The animals are so well-trained and the work involved is still a mystery to him. The trapeze artists perform the most heart-stopping and exhilarating flips, their graceful, gravity-defying tricks the closest a person can come to flying. Even though the routines don't vary significantly from day to day and town to town, he doesn't think he'll ever get tired of watching.

He can hear Chad laughing in his head - *Yeah, and it doesn't have anything to do with how hot the aerialists are.* Especially one of the star trapeze artists, a guy well-known enough to have his own dressing tent. His name is Jensen, and in addition to being good-looking,

athletic, and wildly talented, he's either standoffish or shy, and barely even acknowledges Jared's attempts to befriend him, much less responds to them.

"What's up with the performers?" Jared asks Aldis during his second week working for the circus.

"What do you mean?"

"I wave and say hi and most of them ignore me."

"Oh, that's the hierarchy," Aldis responds.

Jared nods, more in acknowledgement than understanding. Christian, the lion tamer, at least grunted a hello, and the other Warrior Woman of Kilimanjaro – Rachel, who's really Canadian – waved and said hi back (the sideshow performers, Jared has discovered, are slightly more friendly than the big top performers), but overall Jared isn't used to being outright ignored. It isn't as if he needs to prove himself to the performers the way he evidently had to prove himself to the canvasmen.

He, Aldis, and several other roustabouts move from one big wooden stake to the next, driving them in with sledgehammers to anchor the ropes that will help hold up the main tent. As soon as they get the big top up, the riggers will rush in to secure the web of high wires and swings and rings and platforms for the aerialists. Much to his disappointment, Jared has only been able to watch them once.

"You didn't know there was a hierarchy?" Aldis goes on, as the two of them and five other canvasmen arrange themselves around the next stake and start swinging their mallets in turn. Aldis has worked for the circus for several seasons and can talk and pound at the same time, and Jared's impressed. It's a foggy early morning in West Virginia and their shirts are already darkening with sweat. Jared shakes his head to get damp hair out of his face, almost losing his rhythm. "The big acts are at the top, of course," Aldis goes on. "When you get your own tent and a stateroom on the train, that's a sign you're a big marquee name and you can pretty much do what you want. Then it goes down through all the performers, the sideshow acts, the chorus, and finally us."

"Some of them are just rude," comments another roustabout, a guy named Tom. "Some of the clowns? Assholes."

Jared is a little disappointed by this new information. There are some veils that should just not be lifted.

"More tenting, less talking!" someone yells, because their talking is breaking the rhythm of their stake-pounding. The guys get back to their work.

A couple days later Jared is sent on an errand between shows to find the wardrobe mistress and ask about one of the bareback rider's outfits, and walks in on Jensen having a costume

fitted. At least Jensen is clothed, for his modesty and Jared's sanity, although the leotard and tights that aerialists wear leave little to the imagination, especially up close. Jared has just enough time to register the details of slightly mussed brown hair, glasses, and freckles on Jensen's broad shoulders before he stammers an apology and backs out of the tent to the sound of the wardrobe mistress' laughter.

Aldis laughs at him, too, for being embarrassed. There's very little privacy in a traveling circus, with so many people crammed into such close quarters for months at a time. They've seen the big divided dressing tent for the performers, men on one side and women on the other, everyone with a little station for dressing and putting on makeup and storing belongings, but no privacy from anyone else.

But that doesn't mean Jared can't be a little discomfited at suddenly finding himself staring at Jensen's groin, and it doesn't mean Aldis is right to have a laugh at his expense.

Of course, a week later Jared isn't paying attention to where he's walking and smacks right into Jensen and causes him to spill coffee all over himself, which is worse than walking in on him getting dressed. Jared feels his face heat up, mortified. It's the lull between the matinee and evening shows, which means there's a bit of an audience for Jared's inattention. Just what he needs – people watching him make a fool of himself in front of the guy he's interested in.

"Shit, man," he says, embarrassed, trying to wipe coffee off Jensen's shirt with his hands, "I'm so sorry. I wasn't looking."

"It's okay," Jensen says, even though it patently isn't. The coffee's hot, his shirt is – or was – white, and Jared has already heard the wardrobe mistress' assistant, Miss Smith, yelling at someone for getting jam on their costume.

"Miss Connelly's going to give you shit, isn't she."

"It's Miss Smith you really need to watch out for." Jensen grins suddenly, uncharacteristically friendly. He's wearing glasses and his eyes are green and amused behind the lenses. "I could ask them to dye it brown. You might've done me a favor. Thanks." He nods in acknowledgment of Jared's contribution to his closet, and walks back towards the cookhouse, presumably to refill his coffee cup. Jared watches him go, wondering why he ever thought the guy was stuck-up or shy, and coincidentally admiring the view of Jensen's ass.

After that, Jared takes every opportunity to say hi, adding some extra conversation when he can, and Jensen not only returns the hello but responds to the small talk. Jared can't quite figure out why Jensen is suddenly chatty when before he was so distant, but it doesn't really matter as long as Jensen keeps talking to him.

Aldis just shrugs when Jared mentions it over a chess game. "Sometimes they warm up. Guess he likes you."

"Well, I am pretty likable." Jared preens and fluffs his hair like a pretty girl showing off for the object of her affections, and Aldis chuckles.

"You're also about to lose. Check." He moves a chess piece. Jared stares at the board.

"Shit. Where'd you learn to play?"

"Little old men in the park took pity on a poor chess-starved little boy." Aldis just grins wider. "Nah, my granddad. He tried to teach all of us. My brother got pretty good. My mom didn't have any patience with it – Edwin'd be thinking about different moves when he should've been doing his chores – but my granddad would tell her we were learning strategy and how to put ourselves in someone else's head, and those were useful skills to have. So she'd yell at Edwin to pay attention to what he was doing, and then for Christmas she bought us a chess set. Not a lot of chess players in the circus. I was just waiting for you to come along so I could beat your ass." Another grin.

"You gonna move or not?" Tom asks, leaning over Jared's shoulder. He doesn't really know how to play but he likes to watch. Jared elbows him, trying to get him to back off.

"Don't rush the genius," Aldis says. Jared concentrates.

"Hey, Welling!" someone yells. "Give me a hand here!"

Tom pats Jared on the shoulder and says "I got two bucks on you" as he walks off.

"Two bucks on me against who?" Jared asks Aldis, who plasters a look of fake innocence on his face. "*You're* betting against me? For the same game you're playing?"

"It's two bucks more than I had yesterday. Come on. They're gonna start the show and we'll have to get back to work before you make a move."

"Okay, okay." Jared moves his bishop, takes his hand off the piece, sees a better move, realizes he just left his queen open, and mutters "Shit" again as Aldis takes his queen with a triumphant "Checkmate!"

"I used to be good at this," Jared mutters as Aldis collects the pieces and folds up the board. "Next time, man. I'll get you next time."

"It's a good thing we're not keeping track of the wins and losses. Maybe you should ask your friend the trapeze artist if he knows how to play."

Jared knows Aldis is just teasing him, and the fact that there really are no secrets in the circus means he's not surprised Aldis knows he's been trying to befriend the aerialist, but asking Jensen if he'd join Jared in a game of chess is actually not that bad an idea.



It's just Jared's luck that when he finally gets a chance to ask, Jensen isn't in his dressing tent. He's not in the dining tent and he's not in wardrobe either. Fortunately Jared recognizes the girl sitting on a folding chair under the awning of Jensen's tent – his trapeze partner, Danneel. She's wearing a yellow dress with a white collar, reading a book, and idly fanning herself with a folding paper fan, and she looks up when Jared stops in front of her.

"Yes?" she says. She squints at him and he realizes he's blocking the sun so totally she probably can't see his face.

"I'm looking for Jensen," he says. "Do you know where he is?"

"The main tent." She points to the box in his hand, the carrying case for Aldis' chess set. "Is that backgammon?"

"Chess. Do you play?"

"No."

"Do you know if Jensen does?"

"I never asked. He's working on part of our act right now – there's a – you don't need to know all the technical details – but I can ask him later."

"Thanks. Oh, I'm Jared." He holds out his hand and walks closer so she can take it and shake, which she does.

"Danneel. But you probably knew that."

Of course he does – she's as big a marquee name as Jensen. They're a well-known team. In fact, she's a big enough name to have her own dressing tent as well.

"Why aren't you in your own tent?" Jared asks, realizing as soon as the words are out of his mouth that maybe it's a rude question.

"Nosy, aren't we." But she grins to show she's teasing, and gestures to the folding chair she's sitting in. "My chair broke. While they're fixing it I figured I could sit in Jensen's. I know he doesn't mind."

"Is it really broken? Maybe I could fix it." It never hurt to be helpful, and he's learned that sometimes you can do little jobs for people for extra money.

"No, Carpentry has it. I sat down too hard." She laughs at herself. "I broke my own chair by sitting in it. You know how much grief I got for that? Katie's still laughing at me."

Katie is one of the other aerialists. She does a trick where she hangs by a rope around her neck and spins in circles. Jared wants to ask her how she does it without strangling herself or

breaking her neck, but at the same time he's not sure if he really wants to see past that particular illusion.

"If you want to talk to Jensen you'll have to catch him right when he's done with practice," Danneel says. "He'll be working until it's time for dinner, and after that we have to get ready. So my suggestion, if you have the time to kill and my guess is you do, is that you go watch him practice, and after he's done you can talk to him. Tell him he looked good at the matinee." Her face and voice are suddenly earnest. "He's worried about his performance, and he doesn't listen to me when I tell him he was fine."

"I can do that. Thanks." He didn't sneak into the matinee show – he ended up talking to Vincent, the strongman, about space travel and colonies on Mars – but it's not hard to compliment any of the performers on their acts.

Because Danneel is right, and he does have time to kill, and Aldis hasn't hunted him down to get the chess set back, Jared heads over to the big top and ducks inside to watch the aerialists practicing. There are a couple of acrobats practicing in one of the side rings, and the dog trainer is putting the performing dogs through their paces on the other side, but Jared is only interested in what's going on over his head.

From down in the seats it looks like Jensen and Katie and another one of the male aerialists up on the trapeze, plus a high-wire walker practicing with a parasol. Jared watches the aerialists swinging back and forth, throwing and catching each other, hurling themselves across the open expanse of the big top, doing flips before catching the trapeze on the other side. His heart skips every time Jensen, hanging from a swinging bar by his knees, flings Katie into the air so she can turn a quick flip and grab the other trapeze, and his heart skips twice when it's Jensen turning flips fifty feet in the air.

Jared thinks he can hear them calling to each other – "Pull your legs in tighter for the roll", "Hold your arms straighter", "Don't fucking drop me" – and when the high-wire walker loses her balance trying to walk on her hands and falls off her wire and into the net, all three aerialists stop moving, stop talking, and wait for her to crawl off the net and swing down to the floor, shaking her head and swearing under her breath.

They take the net down for the performances. When Jared asked why, because it seemed like that was just begging for trouble, Aldis explained that leaving it up is a sign of weakness and insecurity, and only amateurs perform for paying crowds with a net.

"Besides," he added, "it looks better this way."

It's nerve-wracking in the extreme to watch them perform for an audience without a net, although it's also incredibly exhilarating, and Jared can't really argue.

Aside from the high-wire walker, though, no one seems to need the net now. Jared entertains the thought that if he was a performer, and he worked on the trapeze or the high wire, he'd be falling on purpose just to bounce in it. It's probably a good thing he's a roustabout.

He loses his chance to ask Jensen about chess when someone comes into the tent and yells, "Dinner's ready!" and the three trapeze artists, the high-wire walker, the acrobats, and the performing dogs with their trainer, all file out, the performers heading for the cookhouse and the dogs and trainer heading for their own tent. Jared follows the aerialists, finds Aldis, and gives him the chess set back.

"Guess you're stuck losing to me," Aldis says, grinning. "We could teach Tom how to play. You'd have someone to beat."

The next afternoon, between shows, Jared and Aldis attempt to teach Tom how to play chess. They don't make a lot of progress, but it's as good a way to pass the time as any.

It starts to rain that night just as the last wagons are being loaded into the train, and the weather follows them so that the ground in the next town is soggy and muddy where they raise the tents. Some of the performers choose to stay in their train cars where it's dry until the very last minute. The roustabouts lay boards across the wet ground, marking trails from the wardrobe tent to the big top, from the big top to the stables tent where the horses and other performing animals are kept between acts, from the back of the sideshow tent to wardrobe.

Jared and Aldis' boss, Tony, mutters something about France as the boys slog through the mud.

"I thought we were in West Virginia," Jared says.

"He means the front," Aldis tells him. "The western front? The Great War?"

"Yeah?" He looks consideringly at Tony's retreating back. The war was twenty years ago, long enough that Jared barely remembers it. He knows there was an infantry training camp and an aviators' training field in San Antonio, and he knows people whose relatives fought and were killed, and he's heard about some of the horrific things the soldiers had to suffer, but it's not really something that people talk much about. He's read *All Quiet on the Western Front* and *The Sun Also Rises*, but reading about it isn't the same thing as hearing about it, and to be in such close proximity to someone who was there is potentially very interesting.

Townpeople fill the tent that afternoon, bad weather and all, and during the interval between shows, when his fellow laborers are staying dry – if crowded – in their sleeper cars, or sitting in the dining tent playing cards and waiting for dinner, Jared visits the horses. (The dog trainer understandably won't let him play with the dogs.) It smells overwhelmingly – and not entirely pleasantly – of wet horse in the stables tent, but it's soothing being among the animals, although they remind him of earlier days when his and Chad's relationship, such as it is, was just between them and not causing anyone any harm. He wonders how Chad is doing. Jared has written to him but hasn't heard back.

Jared has had very little luck befriending any of the animal handlers, although they do at least

sometimes let him talk to the horses. He has however managed to befriend Alona, one of the bareback riders, who's already in the tent talking to her horse Joanna when he drips inside. She's wearing riding pants tucked into rain boots and her hair is pulled back into a ponytail, and you'd never guess from looking at her that she slogged from the dressing tent to the cookhouse to get some apples and then to the stables tent, all in the rain.

"You look like a drowned rat," she says to Jared, laughing. He pushes his hair out of his face and tries to make his nose twitch like a rodent's. Alona just laughs some more. Her horse looks unimpressed.

"I feel like a fish," he says.

"Why are you here and not looking to beat someone at chess?" She takes a brush to Joanna's mane, trying to untangle it.

"Aldis is the only person who's really worth playing, and right now he'd rather play poker." Jared shrugs. He wonders briefly how she knows that he's been looking for another player. Maybe Danneel told her.

"Aldis?"

"One of the canvasmen. Black guy, couple inches shorter than me." Jared might be the only roustabout Alona knows, by name or otherwise. He certainly seems like the only one who's tried to be friends with other people.

She's smirking a little as she says "I heard you wanted to play against one of the fliers."

Jared knows word travels fast around here, but he didn't think it would be gossip-worthy that he was looking for a chess partner among the performers. Although once he thinks about it, it makes sense – it's gossip-worthy to other roustabouts, so why would performers be any different? By mentioning it to Danneel, he unwittingly brought them into his personal life.

"I didn't get a chance to ask him." May as well be honest about it. Someone will find out eventually anyway. He's standing by the horse's velvety nose, and he reaches out to stroke it as Alona continues to untangle her mane. Joanna stands patiently. She's probably the best-behaved horse Jared has ever seen, but to be fair, she's well-trained to be so.

"Do roustabouts not play chess? Are they checkers people?"

"They're card players, mostly. There's a lot of poker. I watched the show this afternoon," he continues, changing the subject. "You looked good."

"Thanks. I usually do." Alona looks up from combing to grin brightly at him and then changes the subject again in a way Jared wasn't expecting, and in fact was trying to get away from. "How did you end up here?"

"I walked?"

"No, silly, how did you end up in the circus. I can tell you're new to it. Besides, not many roustabouts quote Shakespeare."

That morning he recited the St Crispin's Day speech from *Henry V* to help encourage his fellow canvasmen while they struggled with the big top in the rain. She couldn't have heard him, but word clearly got around.

"I lost my job and had to find another one," he says. It's the simplest answer.

"What did you do?"

"I was a teacher. High school English."

"Well, that explains the Shakespeare." She combs thoughtfully. "Why the circus, though?"

"One came through town when I was ten and my brother and I tried to run away and join it." He smiles to himself, remembering how his sister ratted them out because they wouldn't take her along. "It seemed like a good idea at the time. Not a lot of teaching jobs going begging in western Texas."

"Still economically depressed, huh."

"Still economically depressed." He doesn't feel the need to go into detail. This is an easier explanation than the whole truth.

"You know, it's weird," Alona muses, pausing in her combing to look up at Jared. "We live and work in this little bubble. The whole season, the only way we can gauge the economy is by how big our audience is. And it's a good gauge – ask anyone who worked under the big top ten years ago – but we don't know what it's like in all the towns we pass through. I wouldn't know how hard it is to get a job doing anything else. I wouldn't want to, but I still don't know."

"What do you do in the off-season?"

"Go back to California. My parents have a ranch. Bet you can't guess what I do there." She grins and goes back to her combing.

"Feed the cats and...." He pretends to think. "Stomp grapes. Rope calves. Cause trouble."

"You're cute. We don't grow grapes – that's farther north. I know you'll be surprised to learn that Joanna helps me train horses. The fact that I perform for the circus during the spring and summer is a big draw. I have posters. It's really cool." She looks up at him again, her smile so big that he has to smile back. "It's always such an adjustment, though, not being with the circus. It's not until Christmas that I really feel at home on the ranch, and by March I'm

ready to come back here. Silly, isn't it? I live on a train seven months out of the year, I never get to see my parents, I perform in the rain, and there's nowhere else I'd rather be." She pats Joanna's neck and the horse whickers. "Joanna understands."

Jared is starting to think that he does too.

Two days later he finally manages to catch Jensen to ask if he plays chess, to which the answer is "Not well," although Jensen is smiling as he says it, as if making a joke. During the slowest game in the history of slow games, they instead have a variation of the conversation Jared had with Alona.

"Why do most people join the circus?" Jensen asks, after Jared takes the initiative to bring it up first. "It looked like a world I belonged in." Before Jared can ask exactly what that means, Jensen adds "I saw it when I was young and I was intrigued."

"How young?"

"I was ten." He peers at the chessboard, pushes his glasses up his nose, moves a pawn, moves it back.

"Me too."

Jensen looks at him curiously.

"The first time I went to the circus," Jared clarifies. "My brother and I tried to run away and join it, but our sister tattled and our parents caught us."

"My parents sent me to aerialist school."

"I didn't know there was such a thing."

"It wasn't a very big school and I don't think it was that highly regarded – it certainly wasn't well-known – but I really wanted to swing from a trapeze. I managed to get hired by the Cameron-Egglee Circus – they folded in '32 – it was kind of like an apprenticeship. Hard work, not always with the best people, but totally worth it." They're sitting in Jensen's dressing tent, using his trunk as a table. He gestures around the tent, indicating the rest of the circus and all the things he gained from suffering through his first job. "I did a year with the Millar-Gough Circus, I met Danny in the Mackay Circus, I've been with K&G five years, and I want to do it as long as I can." He smiles. His eyes crinkle at the corners and Jared is struck – and not for the first time – by how incredibly attractive he is. It's hard to concentrate on the game when all he wants to do is watch Jensen's face and listen to his voice.

But Jared is coming to realize that it's not the purely physical that attracts him. It's also the way Jensen talks to him, as if he's the only person around and there's no one Jensen would rather be with. That may be because it's just the two of them in the dressing tent, but Jared still has the feeling that if someone – Danneel, say, or Katie – stuck her head inside to

demand Jensen's attention, he would tell them to leave, he's playing chess and doesn't want to be disturbed.

"What do you do in the off-season?" Jared asks out of curiosity, remembering what Alona said about her winter plans and how out of place she felt back home.

"Golf." Jensen grins at what Jared knows is a surprised expression. "There's a good golf club in Sarasota. Danny and I practice a lot, work on routines, sometimes put on performances and exhibitions. I go back to Texas, see my family."

"Where in Texas?" This is the longest conversation Jared and Jensen have ever had and now Jared wants to know everything. Jensen being from Texas makes him think this friendship was meant to be.

"Dallas." Jensen finally moves his pawn. "Your turn. How'd you end up here? What made you finally decide to run off and join the circus?"

"I lost my job and didn't think I'd find another one close to home, so I just left home."

"Can I ask what happened?"

Jared isn't entirely sure he's comfortable giving out many specifics as to why he left San Antonio, but he wants to trust Jensen and he can be vague.

"I got caught with my pants down. Literally."

Jensen chuckles, as if sharing a joke. "Did the girl have to leave town too?"

"It... it wasn't a girl." Jared looks down at the chessboard and lowers his voice. This isn't something he wants anyone else to know, especially in such a small, closed world where news travels like wind, and now that he's said it he wishes he hadn't. He doesn't know Jensen that well, doesn't know if he really is that trustworthy. Jared can feel his heart racing, suddenly worried and scared.

He looks up to see surprise flash across Jensen's face, followed by something that looks almost like understanding.

"I'm sorry."

"Why are you apologizing? You didn't - " *You didn't pull my pants down and suck me off*, is what he almost says.

Jensen shrugs. "It's a hard thing to have happen, to lose your job because of your private life. What did you used to do?"

"I taught high school. English literature. It was my first year, but I was starting to like it." It

occurs to him as he says it that a month ago he would have been more upset, but his time with the circus has shown him an interesting, occasionally really exciting way to live, and he realizes he doesn't miss teaching as much as he thought he would.

"So where was home?" Jensen asks, considerately changing the subject. "Texas, right? I can hear it in your voice."

"Yeah, San Antonio. Not much there but the Alamo. The most exciting thing to happen in the last five years is that a bunch of gangsters robbed the Frost Bank downtown. They shot an FBI agent and vanished."

"Really?" Jensen looks kind of impressed.

"Really. That was their first robbery. Word was they were locals, but no one ever caught them." He looks at the chessboard, trying to plan his next move. It's early enough in the game that he can do a lot of things. "Don't think it will make the bank as famous as the Alamo, though."

"Yeah, probably not. When I was twelve we took the train out there to see it. One of my dad's great uncles? Great-great? I can't remember. A distant relative. He fought with William Travis and was killed there. My mom's cousin lives in San Antonio so she provided a good excuse to travel. My brother got sick on the train. My mom and her cousin both got food poisoning. It wasn't the best trip."

"But what did you think of the Alamo?" The most important question.

"It's a big fort." Jensen shrugs again. Jared feigns shock at his nonchalance, and Jensen grins at Jared's faked outrage. "It was interesting to see it, after having heard about it my whole life, and once my brother recovered we spent some time playing Texans and Mexicans and pretending to shoot each other. I'd like to go back if I get the chance." He seems to consider what he's just said. "Maybe it wasn't such a bad vacation after all."

Jared moves his bishop, thinking that it's too bad Texas isn't on the circus' route. He could give everyone a tour of San Antonio if they had a free day.

"So is this what you do with your free time?" Jensen asks. "Corner innocent fliers to play chess?" He's teasing, grinning at the board. Jared is more relieved than he has words for that Jensen's attitude towards him hasn't changed after the revelation about Chad.

"Well, I figure I've asked everyone else, and you were next on the list." Jared grins back. "Sometimes I help Gina with the crossword. Play poker. Write home. Nap. Try to cadge snacks from the kitchen." Matt, the waiter most likely to sneak him something between meals – or to give him a little more during meals – has been down with a bad cold the past day or so, and while Jared feels bad for him (and is glad he isn't handling food), he also misses having the ability to sidle up to the cookhouse and whisper "The starving blackbird flies at midnight" and be rewarded with some cookies or an apple or a leftover ham sandwich



or something. "I'm trying to find something good to read that I haven't read twenty times already, but it's hard. I didn't bring a bunch of books with me when I left Texas, and it's not like the circus travels with a library."

Of all the things Jared misses – family and friends, sometimes even his students – although occasionally he wonders if he missed the idea of them more than the fact of them – he misses the ease of going to the library and checking out a pile of books. So he's been wandering through the circus trying to borrow reading material. Vincent has a subscription to *Astounding Stories* so pulp science fiction can follow him around the country, and he's been more than happy to loan them out. Jared wouldn't have thought that would be something he'd like, but it's definitely better than nothing, and he has to admit that some of the stories are pretty good. Besides, Vincent likes having someone to talk to about them.

"You want to borrow a book?" Jensen carefully moves the chessboard off his trunk and flips the lid open. "What are you in the mood for? I have Zane Grey, Jack London, Poe, *The Age of Innocence* – I can't finish it, I'm going to give it to Danny – a bunch of Sherlock Holmes, and Hemingway's *Green Hills of Africa*." Jared must look stunned, because Jensen laughs sheepishly and adds "I like to read. You can borrow any of them. I just started *Riders of the Purple Sage*, so not that one. But anything else."

Jared scoots around next to Jensen and peers into the trunk. There's an actual pile of books inside, among the folded-up costumes and pairs of soft shoes and street clothes and random miscellany that people take with them when they travel. He's impressed and pleased by the variety of literature on offer. He grew up in a house where books were important, and as much as he likes spending time with his fellow roustabouts, they're not really readers. He wishes he'd managed to track Jensen down sooner, so they could have had this conversation sooner, so he could have learned about Jensen's little traveling library sooner.

"Have you read *Green Hills of Africa*?" Jensen asks. "I finished it last week, and it would be nice to have someone to discuss it with."

So when Jared has to leave, because Jensen has to get ready, because the evening show is about to start, and they were too busy talking and not playing chess to pay attention to the passage of time, he leaves with *Green Hills of Africa* and a beat-up copy of *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, which has someone else's name written on the inside front cover and was clearly bought used.

(*The Hound of the Baskervilles* disappears the next afternoon, and later Jared discovers Tony sitting behind the sideshow tent reading it.)

About a week later Jared is on his way to the stables tent to see if Alona is there and if she wants anything for Joanna – his next stop after that is the kitchen tent – when he's accosted by one of the aerialists, a slight English guy named Jamie.

"I need your help," Jamie says, grabbing Jared's arm and starting to lead him away before he can even say anything. Jamie doesn't look like much, and he's a good ten inches shorter, but

he's determined enough to drag Jared along. "Come with me."

He leads Jared around the lot to where several baggage wagons are lined up behind the dressing tent. The door to one of them is half open, and Jamie climbs up into the wagon and gestures for Jared to follow. Inside are several bicycles tied together and, pushed in back behind a couple of trunks, a motorcycle.

"I can't move the trunks myself," Jamie explains, "and the bike's too heavy to lift over them. I need you to help me get it out."

"It's not part of your act," Jared says, feeling stupid. As far as he knows, a motorcycle isn't part of anyone's act.

"No, but it's mine. Help me get it out and I'll give you a ride."

The trunks seem to be anchoring the motorcycle against the back of the wagon, but Jared and Jamie heaving together manage to shift them enough to get it out. Jared jumps down from the wagon and has Jamie push the bike out at him so he can guide it down to the ground.

Jamie climbs out of the baggage wagon, straddles his bike, and looks up at Jared. "Well? You coming or not?" He pulls a key out of his pants pocket, slots it into the ignition, turns it with a quick twist of his wrist, and smiles as the engine roars to life.

"Too bad you don't have a sidecar," Jared says.

"Just as well." Jamie laughs. "You wouldn't fit in it anyway." He looks Jared up and down again, considering something, and repeats his question. "Yes or no? I'll give you a ride to town and back." His face is innocent but Jared doesn't believe that he is.

This shouldn't be a question, really. Jared has never been on a motorcycle. He swings a leg over the bike and settles on the seat behind Jamie, arms around his waist, holding on for dear life as Jamie suddenly roars away.

They zoom away from the lot towards town, and Jared lets out a whoop of joy as soon as he can catch his breath. He doesn't feel very secure - Jamie is smaller than he is and there isn't much to hold on to - but he doesn't care. They're flying down the road and into town, traveling several blocks before swinging around to go back to the lot and swoop close enough to the cookhouse for someone to angrily tell them off, and then they're circling the big top and screeching to a halt next to the menagerie. Christian, the lion tamer, comes out to yell at them and Jared finally lets go of Jamie and climbs off the bike. He feels unsteady and windblown and exhilarated.

"Thanks for the hand," Jamie says.

"No problem," Jared tells him. "Thanks for the ride."

He leaves Jamie to talk Christian down from what sounds like an epic rant, and heads over to the stables tent to finish his original quest.

One morning in mid-May, about a month into the circus' run, Jared is crossing a rare patch of grass – most of the ground is churned up and muddy from earlier rain so some of the guys are putting down boards to create paths – when he hears someone yell Tom's name, then his name, but when he turns to see who it is and what they want, he has just enough time to register a wooden plank, probably a two-by-four, coming at his face before it hits him and he hits the ground.

He lands on his ass, which isn't too bad, and he doesn't lose consciousness, which is better, but he's almost immediately surrounded by people, which is a little claustrophobic – Tony, Aldis, Tom (who looks guilty and embarrassed), a couple other canvassmen, and Eric the sword swallower, oddly enough.

"I'm really sorry," Tom apologizes, at the same time Aldis says "You must have a hard head" and Tony tells everyone to move back and give Jared some air.

"Ow," Jared says. His face hurts. "What happened?"

"Thomas hit you in the face with a duckboard," Tony says, sounding exasperated.

"I didn't know you were right behind me," Tom protests. He still looks guilty. "I am so sorry. Does your face hurt really bad?"

"Kinda like I walked into a wall," Jared tells him. He lifts a hand to gingerly prod his nose - where he discovers a ragged cut across the bridge – and feel his cheeks and forehead. Nothing feels broken, other than the skin on his nose, and he doesn't think he has a concussion, although it's hard to tell. His head certainly hurts badly enough. He tries to stand, feels dizzy, sits back down. "How hard did you hit me?"

Tony holds up a couple of fingers in front of his face. "How many fingers?"

"Who's the president?" Aldis asks over Tony's shoulder. "Do you know what day it is? What's the year?"

"Shut up," Tom says. "Let him think."

"Uh," Jared says. "Tuesday? Roosevelt? What was the other question?"

"Who do you love?" Aldis asks, and grins when Jared answers, "You."

"You're good," Tony pronounces. "Everyone move back, let him up."

"I think I'll just stay here another few minutes, if that's okay," Jared says.

"You can't, you're in the way. And you should see the doc. Come on."

They help him up and Tony tells everyone to get back to work before guiding Jared across the lot to the vet's tent – the circus doesn't have a traveling doctor, despite what Tony called the man – but the vet has a small selection of medical supplies for the care of people, having been grumpily pressed into service as a human doctor before. Jared sits on a storage trunk and lets the vet poke him and prod him while Tony goes back to supervise his crew. Jared definitely has a headache now and is still dizzy and nauseous – he's pretty sure the only way he managed to walk here was because he had Tony to lean on – but at least he doesn't feel as if he's going to pass out. The vet cleans the cut on his nose, applies a piece of gauze and some adhesive tape, swabs his forehead which was apparently scraped up from the two-by-four, and gets him some water and a couple of aspirin.

"You wanna sit here, you can," he says. "Take it easy. Be glad I don't have to use the horse tranquilizers on you."

"Yeah, uh, thanks," Jared says.

The vet waves that away and goes inside his tent. A minute later Jared can hear the sounds of a jazz record coming from inside. He climbs off the trunk to sit on the ground with his back against it. The vet's tent is tiny, just a shelter for the vet and his medical supplies (and apparently his record player), and it went up on a random patch of gravel behind the stables tent, so the ground is a pebbly but not muddy. Jared can't see much of the lot from this vantage point, but he can hear circus noise all around him, and if he looks up he can see the flags fluttering from the peaks of the big top, and he realizes that he loves this job. It's hard work, it's uncertain money, it's sharing a bunk in a train car and eating in a tent and washing in a bucket. But it's also sharing crossword puzzles and chess games and books, and it's walking through the lot at six at night and saying hello and stopping to chat and knowing he has friends who like him and tease him and don't judge him.

Jensen has kept his secret. Not a single other person in the circus knows the real reason Jared had to leave home.

If he didn't miss Texas and his family and friends at home, he doesn't think he'd ever leave the circus.

"I heard someone got hit in the head," Jensen says, appearing next to him. Jared looks up, squinting because Jensen is half blocking the sun and there's a glare behind him. "I didn't know it was you. How do you feel?"

Jared shrugs. "Like I got slammed with a two-by-four. Headache, a little nausea. I don't have a concussion, at least."

"That's good." Jensen sits down on the ground. He's wearing khaki pants and a green-and-white open-collared shirt and he looks cool and clean and unrumpled, like he hasn't slogged through mud to get here. Jared wonders if he's had breakfast yet. It should be that time of

morning. Jensen searches Jared's face, eyes concerned behind his glasses.

"How do I look?" Jared asks.

"Like you walked into a board. You've got a nice goose egg coming up already. What happened to your nose?"

Jared touches the gauze taped down over the cut. "I guess I caught the edge of the wood. It's not bad. My first circus injury." He chuckles.

"Do you need anything? Should I ask someone to bring you breakfast?"

Jared tries to shake his head, feels sick, stops. He's too nauseous to even consider eating.

"So that's a no?" Jensen says.

"That's a no."

"I guess you won't be well enough to sneak into the big top to watch us this afternoon either, huh." He pats Jared's leg comfortingly. "It's okay, the show hasn't changed since yesterday."

Jared finds that unaccountably soothing, the gesture as much as the words and the knowledge that Jensen is fully aware that Jared likes to sneak into the main tent to watch him.

They just sit there for a while in companionable silence while the circus goes on about its business around them. Jared's head still hurts, badly enough that he doesn't want to go back to work. He wants to lie down. His ass is getting wet from the gravel, but he figures he can wait until Jensen decides to get ready for practice or for the afternoon show. He's grateful to Jensen for keeping him company, although to be honest he'd enjoy Jensen's company no matter what.

Eric comes by to see how he's doing as well, already dressed for his act in baggy pants and shoes with curled-up toes. Aladdin shoes. Genie-in-the-magic-lamp shoes. Well, if genies wore shoes. All the illustrations Jared's ever seen, the genie in the lamp is smoke from the waist down.

His thoughts are getting away from him. Tom's two-by-four must have scrambled his brains more than he thought.

"You sure you're okay?" Eric asks. "It looked like you got hit pretty hard. You look kind of scattered."

"I think I should lie down," Jared says.

"Do you want to borrow my tent?" Jensen asks. "It's pretty close."

"Yeah. That'd be good. Thanks." He stands up slowly. He's still a little dizzy, and thus a little nauseous, but he thinks he'll be fine for the length of time it takes to make his way to Jensen's dressing tent and lie down. He should really stay here – the vet can keep an eye on him – but he likes the idea of sleeping in Jensen's tent, among Jensen's stuff. He likes that Jensen suggested it, rather than telling Jared to stay where the vet could watch him.

"I'll tell the rest of the freaks that you'll be okay," Eric says cheerfully. "You'll be okay, right?"

"Yeah, I'll be fine. I just need some sleep."

"Good luck finding enough quiet. See you later, yeah?" He tips an imaginary hat at Jared and saunters off towards the sideshow tent.

Jensen guides Jared across to his dressing tent, ushers him in, and gestures to the folding cot along the side. There's a blanket thrown across it and a pillow at one end. Jared sits gingerly on the edge of the cot, takes off his boots, and lies down. The tent spins around him. He closes his eyes. Damn Tom for not paying attention to where he was going.

"I'll change in Danny's tent," Jensen says. Jared opens his eyes and slowly turns his head to watch Jensen gather up some clothes and the shoes he wears during his performance. "I'll be back after the show. You rest."

"Thanks," Jared tells him for the second time, closing his eyes again. He doesn't hear Jensen leave. He doesn't hear Jensen come back either, and only wakes up when he feels someone shaking his shoulder.

It's not Jensen, it's Danneel. She smiles at him. "Hello, darlin'," she says brightly. "Dinner's served if you're hungry. Jensen told me to come get you. I heard what happened. Ouch."

"It wasn't a ball of fun," Jared agrees. He's not as dizzy any more. He sits up, is grateful when nothing hurts or spins, leans down to grab his boots, feels a wave of nausea wash over him, and sits back up again. He doesn't feel as if he's going to throw up, but he isn't that hungry either. It's not like him to not be hungry. Maybe he's not better after all.

But he'll have to get back to work. He's not completely incapacitated, and it will make things easier on everyone to have him pulling down the big top and packing up the circus with the rest of them. And he's starting to feel like an invalid, which annoys him because he's just as able-bodied as anyone here, and fully capable of going back out and doing his job. He's done construction, for Christ's sake, and he's fallen off scaffolding and gone right back to work.

Danneel is looking at him expectantly. "Well? Are you coming or not?"

"I'm coming, I'm coming." He manages to get his boots back on, stands up, and follows her out of the tent.

Eric evidently did tell the rest of the sideshow performers that Jared got whacked in the head with a board, because both Rachel and Gina jump up from their seats, making their way around the waiters who are still serving hungry performers and workers, and come over to him when he follows Danneel into the dining tent.

"Your poor head," Rachel says, reaching up to pat his cheek. She's a foot shorter than he is, so she has to stretch. "Does it hurt a lot?"

"Of course it hurts a lot," Gina snorts. "At least you're up and moving," she tells Jared. "How do you feel?"

"Hey, man," Vincent calls from his spot near the ladies' vacated seats. "How're you doing?"

"Besides kind of hungry?" he answers, realizing that he could eat now that he's actually in close proximity to food. "I've been better."

Even Paul, the fire eater, stops on his way out of the tent (he's carrying a tray, no doubt taking it to his wife in wardrobe) to ask Jared how he's doing.

All the attention is a little disconcerting. It's as if everyone in the circus thought Tom had knocked off Jared's head with the two-by-four, rather than just hitting him with it.

He lets Danneel lead him over to where Jensen is sitting with the other aerialists, which takes them past a long table crowded with some of Jared's fellow canvasmen, carpenters, and a mechanic. Aldis tries to wave Jared over, but Danneel is holding his elbow and guides him away. Jared hopes it's because she didn't see, and not because she's ignoring his friends.

The aerialists pepper him with questions, mostly of the "what happened and how do you feel" variety, and Jared answers until his stomach growls. He flags down Matt the waiter to get some food.

"What was that at dinner?" Aldis demands later, as they're crawling across the downed big top, untying the sections of canvas to make it easier to pack the tent and load it onto the train.

"What was what?" Jared asks. His head still aches, but it's not as bad as it was before dinner, and is definitely an improvement over that morning.

"You ignored us. Your own people." Aldis sighs dramatically, although the effect is lessened a little as he yanks at the canvas.

"Danneel just kept moving me along. Did you want me to push her away? They were all worried about me."

"Man, everyone was worried about you. Roustabouts don't usually stop working in the middle of set-up. Are you throwing us over for performers? Abandoning us for men and women in leotards and tights? First you find someone else to play chess with, now you're

eating with your new friends...." Another melodramatic sigh.

"Fine," Jared grumps. "Next time Tom hits me in the face I'll just tell any well-wishers thanks but no thanks, I have to sit with my own clique in the cafeteria." He's inexplicably irritated and just wants to go back to the roustabouts' train car, lie down on his bunk, and read something ridiculous before going to sleep.

But no. First he has to pack up the big top. They've untied the final sections and now have to roll them up and load them onto the train. At least the ground isn't as muddy as before.

Later, as the roustabouts are filing into the train car, struggling out of their work clothes, and climbing into their beds, Tony squeezes past him in the narrow corridor between berths and says "Guess it's too late to suggest you not fraternize with the performers, huh." He winks and continues on to his tiny compartment at the end of the car. Jared climbs into his berth, wrinkling the copy of *Astounding Stories* that he forgot he borrowed from Vincent, stuffs the magazine under his pillow, makes room for Aldis, and goes to sleep.

Yeah, it's a little late to suggest he not fraternize with performers. He dreams about Jensen and an elaborately decorated Victorian train car and the dry west Texas landscape. He's pretty sure there are some cacti, too, but most importantly, there's him and Jensen. He wakes up hard and aching – his dick, not his head – and with a growing plan to corner Jensen, kiss him, and see what happens.

It doesn't take that long. There are no secrets in the circus, and very little privacy, and everyone knows by now that he and Jensen have become friends – from the speculative looks he sometimes catches Tony giving him, Jared wonders if his boss has realized there's more to it – and it's common knowledge among the roustabouts and the aerialists that if you can't find Jared, and Jensen isn't practicing in the main tent, there's a good chance they're either in Jensen's dressing tent or sometimes the dining tent. And Jared has discovered that the two of them don't even have to be doing anything – it's enough for them to be sitting across from each other – or next to each other - at one of the long tables in the dining tent, each one reading his own book or writing his own letters home.

On a day when the weather is crappy, not long after Jared's close encounter with the duckboard, they're sitting in Jensen's tent before dinner, playing cards. (Aldis is hanging on to his chess set in a determined attempt to teach Tom how to play.) Jared's nose has scabbed over where the board cut into it and now he's worried it might scar. Both Danneel and Aldis have told him it makes him look tough, like he got into a fight with someone, and Rachel thinks it mars his pretty face.

"That's how she phrased it, too," he tells Jensen. "It mars my pretty face."

Jensen smiles to himself.

"You think I have a pretty face?" Jared asks, teasing. Jensen just shrugs.



"I think you should either play a card or call."



The door to the tent is hanging closed, so they have what passes for privacy on the lot, which is the only reason Jared can do what he does next.

Which is to half stand up, lean over the trunk they use as a table, accidentally push cards out of the way, cup Jensen's face with one hand, and kiss him.

It's not a long kiss, or a deep one, because Jensen isn't really returning it, and when Jared pulls away, Jensen just blinks at him. Which isn't the response Jared was hoping for, and he's cursing himself for being an idiot just as Jensen reaches out, grabs the back of Jared's head, pulls him forward, and kisses him back.

Which *is* the response Jared was hoping for.

They're both leaning forward awkwardly, though, the trunk in their way, but this time when they pull apart and sit back they're both smiling.

"You know news of this will have spread around the lot by breakfast tomorrow," Jensen says. "I'm not going to broadcast it but you know people talk."

"Does that bother you?" Jared asks in all sincerity. If he thinks about it too hard, it will start to bother him. Partly because it's his love life and his love life is no one's business – he's heard all about Tom's girlfriend, more than he ever wanted to know, and rumors abound about Christian and Jamie and one of the carpenters and even the vet (all separate rumors, at least), and he doesn't want to be grist for the mill – and partly because he's a little worried that what happened with Chad and Kenzie will happen here.

But at the same time, he's discovered that this particular circus at least is a fairly tolerant place, as long as you do your work and don't run afoul of anyone in town. Considering one of the most persistent rumors about Christian also involves one of the musicians in the orchestra, and neither of them have lost their jobs, Jared might not have that much to worry about. Although Christian is the lion tamer and a big draw, so the chances of him being fired for getting involved with another man are not huge. Roustabouts are much easier to replace.

But in any case, there's nowhere near enough privacy for him and Jensen to do anything more than kiss, and kissing isn't what lost him his last job.

Jensen now seems to be seriously considering the question. "I don't like people discussing my private life," he says, "but it doesn't bother me that they'll be talking about us. Does that make sense?"

"You don't care that people will be whispering that you kissed a canvasman?"

"I care that they'll be whispering but I don't care who they're whispering about. Besides, you kissed me first. I've been with other guys before, Jared. Danny knows and she doesn't care. She'll probably tell you that if you hurt me she'll kill you in your sleep, though." He chuckles, and then, as if he can read Jared's mind, adds "You won't lose your job just for kissing me. Eric and Sera" – the K and G of K&G – "don't care either."

But the owners aren't Jared's concern. Tony is. Word will come to him before it comes to them, and if he wants Jared out, Jared's gone.

But if he really was honestly worried about losing his job, he wouldn't have done anything. It's a measure of how secure he now feels in the circus that he did.

He leans over the trunk so he can kiss Jensen again, but Jensen stops him. "If we're going to do this, we should do it somewhere more comfortable." So they move to the cot, which isn't the most comfortable place but is better than the ground.

They're sharing a long, slow, exploratory kiss – and Jared is just starting to get frustrated that they can't do more - when Danneel walks in on them, starting to say "I hate to break up your – " and concluding with "Well it's about time!"

Jared and Jensen jerk away from each other as if they've been zapped by electricity. Danneel giggles.

"Shit, Danny," Jensen grumps, "you should knock."

"On what, Jensen? Canvas?" She's grinning hugely. "You're so cute. Katie owes me five bucks now."

"Did you want something?"

"Dinner's on. I thought you might want to eat."

"I should go," Jared says, remembering how annoyed Aldis was the last time he ate with performers. He stands up.

"If you hurt him, I'll kill you in your sleep," Danneel says, on cue. Jared can't help but grin. She raises an eyebrow at him.

"I told him you'd say that," Jensen tells her. He stands up as well and very surreptitiously adjusts himself. Jared notices and allows himself a little private pride that kissing him could get Jensen excited. He's a little hard himself, so it's only fair.

"We'll have to finish our game tomorrow," he says, winking at Jensen.

"Oh god," Danneel says, "don't make me picture him having sex." She grabs Jared's arm and pushes him out of the tent. "I meant it," she calls out to him as he walks away.

Jared isn't worried. He has no plans to hurt anyone. The kissing is too good.

Word spreads even before the show has packed up, though, and as the roustabouts are pulling down the big top Aldis teases Jared about fraternizing and Tom asks innocently if Jensen's a good kisser and Tony yells at them to shut up and move faster, they can't fall behind schedule. He doesn't say anything to Jared about getting involved with a performer or another man, but he does suggest that Jared maybe think about how and where he plans to spend the off-season.

It's a little startling for everyone to be so sanguine about him and Jensen, although maybe it shouldn't be – he was just thinking that the circus in its little traveling bubble is a fairly accepting place – and Jared is relieved.

But he can't think as far ahead as the end of the season. It's only May – he has months yet

with the circus, months yet to figure out how he really feels about Jensen, how Jensen really feels about him, and what they can do about it.

In the beginning of June a new aerialist joins the K&G Circus, a cheerful Russian émigré who is billed as the Daring and Dazzling Dimitrios – sold as Greek rather than Russian, no doubt due to rising unease about communism and communist countries – but who tells people to call him Misha. He and his things arrive at the site by taxi as the matinee show is coming to a close. and Jared is told to help him carry his stuff to Jensen's dressing tent. Jared somehow became Alona's errand boy after a mere two weeks on the road, so for him to be pressed into service as luggage porter doesn't bother him. Besides, everything's been set up, nothing needs to be taken down or moved yet, and Misha is a new person to get to know.

Jared learns that Misha was trained at the Moscow State College for Circus and Variety Arts, he's only been in the United States for about a year and a half, he's technically a trapeze artist (which is why he's in Jensen's tent and not with the high-wire performers) but prefers to call himself an aerial acrobat, and that he tells terrible, incomprehensible jokes.

"Your English is really good," Jared comments, heaving one end of Misha's trunk over a low-lying folding chair someone left sitting around.

"My mother is American," Misha says. "She took me to Russia when I was small, to join the Great Revolution." Jared can hear the capitalization in the phrase. "But she was, how do you say – " he makes an exaggerated thinking face – "disillusioned. So she came back here, and a few years later I followed."

"So you're really American?"

"Only by birth. I was raised in Russia as a – you would call me a communist, socialist perhaps." He glances around, suddenly looking a bit worried. He lowers his voice. "These are bad words here, yes? I am not supposed to say. My mother is still, I think, an American. But me, no. But I like it here."

"Circus here or America here?"

"Both!" Misha grins at him, an excited grin full of white teeth. If all communists are like this, Jared thinks, the United States has nothing to fear from them. "America has the most amazing candy."

"You'll get no argument from me. Here's your tent. Did they tell you you're sharing with another trapeze artist?" Misha nods at the other end of the trunk. "His name's Jensen, he's a good guy. I guess you're both headliners now."

The two of them wrestle the trunk into the tent and find a place to set it down. It's very crowded in there now - Jared notices that someone brought over a folding chair and a mirror stand, both probably from the wardrobe tent. Jared wonders if one of the clowns or a chorus performer gave up their seat and their space for Misha the aerial acrobat.

By now the matinee performance has ended and through the tent doorway Jared can see people wandering around, some of the performers already out of their costumes and into their street clothes. He's halfway through asking if Misha wants a tour, or does he need to be introduced around, or what does he want to do, when Jensen comes in.

"You must be Dimitri – " he starts to say, but Misha interrupts him.

"Please, call me Misha." He holds out his hand, which Jensen shakes. "It is good to meet you."

"Same here. Did you get the tour?"

"A bit. I am to perform starting tomorrow, so I would like to see the main tent where I will be. I would like to practice, if I may."

"We only have the one big top. Let me change my clothes and I'll show you the ropes. Literally. Dinner's at five-thirty but you should have enough time for a few practice runs to get to know the rigging and the space. Do you need to change?" He indicates Misha's clothes, his pants and oxford shirt and Mexican-looking leather sandals.

"Oh, no, this is fine," Misha says. "Thank you for helping me with my things," he tells Jared. "Perhaps I will see you later."

"I'll be around," Jared says. "You can watch the show tonight, if you want. Sometimes I can sneak in and stand in the back. The sideshow acts are pretty good too."

"I think I would like that, thank you."

"You guys have fun. I'll see you later."

As he's walking out of the tent, Jared hears Misha sharing what could be another unintelligible joke or what could just be juvenile humor – "A hedgehog learned how to breathe out of his ass, but when he sat down, he suffocated!" He laughs at his own joke, and Jared snickers to himself and heads over to the sideshow performers' dressing tent, in the hopes that Gina has a spare crossword puzzle he can do.

Later that night, he and Aldis rush through dinner so they have enough time to introduce Misha to the K&G Circus from the spectator's point of view. Misha has been in the United States and has worked with a circus long enough to have educated himself on circus food, so Jared can skip the glowing praise of the cotton candy and go right to the sideshow.

"What kind of freaks do they have in the Russian circus?" Aldis asks.

"We do not have these types of acts," Misha says, gesturing to the banners hung in front of the sideshow tent. "We have wild animals, clowns and acrobats, artistic performances, and

bears that juggle with their feet." He looks very proud of that last fact. Jared would like to see juggling bears, actually.

"No sword swallows? You're missing out."

Eric, the sword swallower in question, emerges from the tent with what Jared knows is one of his shorter swords, to do a quick teaser swallow to get the audience interested. The K&G Circus only charges once for admission, as a concession to people still suffering from the country's economic troubles, so no one has to pay extra for the sideshow acts, but no performer likes to play to a half-empty tent when there are crowds of people milling around outside.

Mark, the sideshow barker, starts his spiel to get people's attention, describing dangerous feats of sword-swallowing and fire-breathing, unbelievable feats of strength, and the fierce beauty of the Warrior Women of Kilimanjaro and their flying knives.

"One of them is half Cuban and the other is from Canada," Aldis whispers to Misha, getting Jared's elbow in his side for breaking the illusion.

The crowd starts to murmur its interest, and by the time Mark finishes up, people are ready to push into the tent to check out the shows.

The sideshow tent is divided in four sections along a narrow corridor so all the acts can run at the same time, and for longer than five or ten minutes. Jared and Aldis let Misha choose - to one side of the entrance are Eric and Vincent, and since Misha has seen strongmen before, and Eric evidently did a good job warming up his interest along with the rest of the crowd, they follow the people going to see the sword swallower. They stand in the back, trying to be unobtrusive (this isn't too difficult, even though Jared is taller than everyone there), and watch Eric's show.

Jared has seen this act before, not to mention several practice runs, but it never stops being awesome. The weather has been hot and humid the past few days, and it tends to be warm inside the sideshow tent anyway (the big top has flaps and vents to help keep it cool, but the sideshow performers and audience aren't so lucky), so tonight Eric is performing shirtless in just his baggy pants. Jared is sure this is also for the benefit of the ladies in the audience.

"He's very fit, is he not," Misha whispers.

"Shh," Aldis hisses.

Eric calls for silence so he can concentrate, and tilts his head back and prepares to swallow his first sword. He explained to Jared once that his training involved learning how to suppress his gag reflex so he wouldn't choke on his swords, and Jared can't help but think of that every time he watches the act.

The first sword turns out to be the same one he swallowed outside – it's a relatively short one,

about a foot for the blade, but it elicits gasps of surprise and at least one noise of disgust as it goes down. Eric pulls it out carefully, bows, and takes the next one from a little table sitting to the side of the performance space. The second one, Jared knows, is seventeen inches, and the one after that is two feet.

"I am very impressed," Misha whispers, as Eric slowly slides the last sword down his throat. The tent is utterly silent, although they can hear noise from next door, where Jared guesses Vincent has gotten to the part of his act where he lifts a couple members of the audience over his head. He does some very impressive heavy lifting, but for Jared's money, the sword swallowing is better entertainment.

When the sword is as far down as it's going to go, Eric very carefully slides the first one back in, so now he has two blades down his throat. He turns in a slow circle so everyone can see him and the sword hilts sticking out of his mouth from all angles. When he's facing the audience again he slowly takes a bow, bending straight from the waist, his head tilted back at a painful-looking angle, and spreads his arms dramatically. There are scattered "ooh"s from the audience. Jared glances at Misha, who is staring wide-eyed. Eric stands back up, slowly extricates the swords, and bows with a flourish to excited applause.

"Good, huh?" Jared asks, and Misha nods.

"Worth the price of admission," Aldis adds.

"We did not have to pay admission," Misha says.

"It's a joke. You have jokes in Russia, right?" Aldis sounds like he's teasing and Misha doesn't look offended.

"They're all about hedgehogs," Jared comments. Eric announces that he has commemorative postcards for sale if anyone's interested, and people drift towards the front of the space to check them out.

"I do not know what it is about hedgehogs that is so funny," Misha says. "But there are some very funny jokes." He looks around. "Who shall we watch next?"

"Paul the fire eater."

"Warrior Women," Aldis says.

"He breathes fire."

"They juggle knives."

"Misha?"

Misha takes only a minute to agree with Jared that he'd like to watch Paul eat fire.

The three of them push their way down the narrow canvas corridor to the far end of the tent where Paul, like Eric, is performing shirtless. Jared wonders how many ladies in the audience would be disappointed to know that he's very happily married, and that his wife works for the circus too. On the other hand, they can still look.

They stand in the back of the space as Paul gestures for silence, and when the audience is more or less quiet he holds out a long ceramic wand with what looks like a bit of dark fabric wrapped around one end, and flicks open a lighter to light it with a flourish. He waves the ball of fire in a slow circle, tilts his head back, and slowly lowers the burning thing into his open mouth.

The audience hushes. Paul's lips close around the burning end of his wand until the flames go out. The audience bursts into applause.

"That was very interesting," Misha whispers to Jared.

"Just wait," Jared whispers back.

Paul is about to swallow the flaming end of a second long wand when a boy sitting near the front calls out "That ain't real!"

Paul lowers the burning wand and raises an eyebrow at the kid. "Would you like to come up here and test that theory?" he asks, his plummy English accent dripping annoyance.

"Yeah!" The kid jumps up and trots to the front of the space, where Paul waits patiently for him to prove himself wrong. Paul holds out the wand, yellow and orange flames licking up from the end, and suggests the boy try not to burn his whole hand.

The boy reaches for the flames, swears, and jerks his hand back. "Albert!" a woman's voice snaps, probably his mother reprimanding him for cursing. Aldis snickers.

"Satisfied?" Paul asks sarcastically. "May I continue with the show?" The boy nods meekly and sits back down.

A couple more swallowed flames and then he's gesturing for the kids sitting up front to scoot back and Aldis is whispering "This is good, you'll like this" to Misha.

Jared has seen Paul's act several times and has watched him practice before shows – he's seen all the sideshow acts – and just as with the sword swallowing, the fire breathing never gets any less exciting. Paul lights a torch with a flourish and waves a few eager kids back with his free hand. He takes a sip from a cup sitting on the little table to the side that holds his wands and lighter. He holds up the torch and Jared knows he has to spit kerosene at the flames for the proper effect, but it happens so fast it looks as if he's breathing fire.

The audience gasps. Misha gasps. Jared can't help but grin. Paul makes a slightly smaller



flame, then a bigger one, the fire turning him into a human flamethrower with a hot whoosh.

Then the show is over and he's bowing to the audience. People stand and file out, chattering to each other about the show. Some members of the audience want to talk to Paul, no doubt to find out how he does it and if his entire act really is real, but he gently encourages those folks to leave. He has no postcards to sell and the illusion of his act must be maintained.

Jared, Misha, and Aldis follow the crowd out of the sideshow tent and down to the big top, where the ushers direct them to a spot on the ground right inside the tent entrance. The sight-lines aren't the best – the stands block some of the view to the left and right – but if they look up they can see all of the aerial performances, and the lion cage is right in front of them, and once it's moved they'll have an excellent view of the equestrians, and those are all Jared's favorite acts and the ones he most wants Misha to see.

"You'll have to tell us how this is different from your circus," Aldis says, as animals and costumed people proceed into the tent for the first act - the spectacle, or "spec", a cross between a parade and a really short drama. As far as Jared can tell, pretty much every performer is in it, even some of the clowns. This particular spec is a show about the Wild West, complete with cowboys, Indians, honest settlers, banditos, and a few damsels in distress. It devolves into a fairly ridiculous showdown between bandits and the Sheriff's men, and when it's over, Misha applauds enthusiastically. Jared keeps his mouth shut about the spec's astonishing lack of historical accuracy. He doesn't want to ruin the fantasy.

The show progresses with acrobats, clowns, dancing horses, music, more clowns, performing dogs, Christian's lion act, the bareback riders - Jared points out Alona as she passes by standing on Joanna's back - and of course the aerial acts. Misha watches very intently as the high-wire walkers cross the open air on a wire strung fifty feet up, as they balance on one foot or on their hands, as one of the girls hops very carefully in place and then, once stationary again, swings her leg forward and back until she's leaning down with one hand on the wire.

He watches Katie as she hangs by her neck and spins in circles, as she and Jensen each perform acrobatic feats on the rings and both the stationary and swinging bars, as Danneel throws herself from trapeze to trapeze and hangs upside-down by her knees and then her ankles, as they all spin and flip and turn somersaults in the air, as first Jamie and then Danneel fling themselves off one trapeze so Jensen can catch them on another.

Jared wants to ask Misha if this is anything like the aerial acts in a Russian circus, but Misha is so intent on the performance going on over their heads that he decides he can wait until later to ask. There's professional interest on Misha's face as well as the pure pleasure that Jared has always felt. Misha doesn't look quite as awed as he did in the sideshow tent, but Jared guesses that he's more used to these kinds of acts, and since he'll be part of the show starting tomorrow, he might need to know how he fits into it.

The three of them sneak out of the tent before the end of the show, as Jared and Aldis have work to do and Jared wants to make sure Misha gets back to Jensen's tent ok. It's not as if the

lot is so big that a newcomer could get lost, but Jared feels a little responsible for the guy.

"What did you think?" Aldis asks as they make their way back to the dressing tents. They can dimly hear the noise of an excited audience leaving the big top and heading back to their cars and their homes, that babble nearly drowned out by the sounds of the circus being pulled down and packed up where they can't see.

"The Russian circus is more... collaborative," Misha says. "More emphasis on the story, less emphasis on the individual performer. We do not have headliners so much."

"I thought you were headlining."

"I am. This is not a complaint, you understand, about the difference in performance. It takes all kinds, is that not an American saying? And I have already performed as an individual as well as part of a troupe. I can do both. I enjoy both. I can peacock as well as anyone." He pauses on the grass and strikes a pose, as if he were preening for cameras. Aldis snickers.

"Oh, you'll fit right in."

And Misha does, in fact, fit right in, at least as much as Jared can tell. He sits with the other aerialists during meals, and sometimes, during the free time between shows, Jared will stick his head into Jensen's dressing tent to find a (necessarily small) group of people talking shop or playing cards or suffering through one of Misha's incomprehensible jokes. "It's funnier in Russian" becomes his own personal tag line.

The only problem with Misha, in fact, is that he's very social, and his presence in Jensen's tent cuts down on the time Jensen and Jared can have together.

"I'll talk to him," Jensen promises one day, maybe a week after Misha joins the circus. "In the meantime, come with me. I need your help with something." He walks off towards the train, clearly expecting Jared to follow.

Jared flashes back to Jamie asking for help getting his motorcycle out of the baggage wagon, and wonders what Jensen could possibly be hiding on the train. Jamie has taken to riding his motorcycle around the lot and into and back from whatever town they've settled near, an action that seems to have won him friends, enemies, and envy in equal measure. He hasn't asked Jared if he wants another ride, though.

Jensen leads him to the string of sleeper cars for the performers, and steps up into the third one. Jared follows him into a much nicer car than the roustabouts have. A narrow corridor runs the length of it, with a small lounge at the end and a few doors spread along a wood-paneled wall. Each door has a little plate with the performer's name and a number painted on it in delicate black script. Jensen stops in front of the door with his name on it, opens it, and ushers Jared in with a flourish.

It's a very nice compartment, with plush carpet, a bed big enough for two, a little table under

one of the windows with two upholstered chairs, a small closet, and a sink set in a white-painted wooden cabinet. The bed is made. The shades are drawn. So this is the kind of traveling accommodation that a marquee performer can claim. Jared is impressed, and he wonders what kind of privacy a person might have here.

"This is much nicer than the quarters I had with Cameron-Egglee or Mackay," Jensen comments. "I don't have to share."

So that answers one question.

It occurs to Jared that this is a perfect place for him and Jensen to hide out, now that Jensen's dressing tent is compromised, and he wonders why Jensen didn't think of it sooner. It's only been a couple of weeks since the kiss, and in those weeks they haven't done anything else, but Jared isn't complaining. He's never been the kind of guy to rush right into a relationship with someone, and this particular relationship has the added issue of playing itself out practically in public. He's still not entirely convinced that he won't ultimately get fired again.

"We don't have a lot of time before someone goes looking for one of us," Jensen says, pushing Jared back against the door, cupping his face in one hand, and kissing him. Jared naturally kisses back.

It's a good kiss, as they've all been good kisses, and then he feels Jensen fumbling with the buttons of his pants, trying to get them undone. Before Jared can ask what he's doing, Jensen has gotten his pants open enough to push a hand down inside them and squeeze Jared's cock. Jared sucks in a surprised breath as Jensen rubs the base with the heel of his hand and then starts to stroke. He's gotten used to making out in a tent where anyone walking by could hear them, so he's gotten used to being quiet, so he doesn't make a sound as Jensen drops to his knees, dragging Jared's pants and undershorts with him, and takes Jared's stiffening cock in his mouth.

Jensen looks up at Jared's no doubt surprised face, eyes bright behind his glasses, and Jared's pretty sure he's grinning. He goes to it with gusto, lips a tight seal, mouth warm, tongue adding some extra pressure and points of sensation to concentrate on. Jared bites his lip – probably unnecessarily – to keep from making noise.

It's good but quick, and after Jared's climax, Jensen stands and kisses him deeply on the mouth. Jared can taste himself, which is always an odd – if not unwelcome – sensation.

"Shit," he breathes, and now Jensen is grinning, and the only thing left is for Jared to go to his knees and return the favor. Jensen tastes exactly like he imagined – warm and musky and sweat-salty – and Jared's tongue explores the ridges of Jensen's shaft until Jensen is gasping for breath and clenching his hands in Jared's hair. Jared can feel Jensen's pulse on his tongue, but he's calm and relaxed and when he swipes his tongue across the head of Jensen's cock, Jensen bites off a moan and comes hard down his throat.

"I should have thought of this place sooner," Jensen murmurs after Jared has licked him clean

and stood back up. He tucks himself back into his pants.

"You were too overcome by my pretty face to think clearly," Jared says.

"I guess that's one way to put it."

Jared realizes they're both smiling. Who would have thought that he'd run away from home to escape being caught with a guy, only to find himself caught by another one? He cups the back of Jensen's head and pulls him close for a kiss.

"We should get back," Jensen says eventually, although he makes no move to push Jared away. "I don't want Danny to think we eloped to Cuba." He brushes his thumb across Jared's bottom lip, and Jared flicks his tongue out to lick at it. "Stop that." But Jensen is grinning, his fingers moving to thread themselves in Jared's hair, his mouth closing the gap between them for another deep, slow, intense kiss.

Jared can feel himself getting hard again. Jesus, what is he *doing*? This is the exact same thing that sent him running from home not three months ago.

It takes an extreme effort, but he manages to break away and gently push Jensen back. "We should go," he repeats.

"I know, I know," Jensen sighs. A swift kiss and he's reaching for the door, unlocking it, and nudging it open. He gestures with a flourish for Jared to go first, but then seems to change his mind, grabs Jared's arm, and kisses him again, quick and hard.

"I don't know how often we'll get to do this," he says. "But I'll see what I can do."

It isn't quite what Jared wants right now, but it will have to suffice. He doesn't think about what will happen when word of this gets around. He wants to savor the memory of Jensen's mouth on his dick, his own lips wrapped around Jensen in return, and how it feels to have a few minutes of blissful privacy behind an actual solid door.

They head out of the train car and back towards the camp and Jensen's dressing tent, which is empty. But no sooner has Jensen flipped open the trunk to look for his performing shoes than Alona sticks her head inside and tells Jared that his boss is looking for him.

"How did I become your errand girl?" she asks him, teasing. "Joanna misses you. I have to exercise her but you should come say hi. When you can tear yourself away from your new man, that is." She winks at him and ducks back out.

"I think she already has us picking out china patterns," Jared comments, to lighten his own mood. Her glee over his new relationship is a little disconcerting, and now he's curious how many details she actually knows.

"I'm going to see if I can get some practice in," Jensen says, either ignoring him or not having

heard. "I'm pretty sure that's where Misha is. If you want, you can come watch us."

"I have to see what Tony needs. I might catch some of your show tonight – I'm on prop duty."

"It won't have changed since yesterday. But a cheering section is always nice." He steps up close to Jared, soft shoes in one hand, and whispers "I've been wondering what your dick tastes like, and how I could find out. I'm glad I worked out a way." Then a quick kiss on Jared's lips, and he's ducking out of the tent and away.

And Jared just stands there for a minute, the memory of Jensen's lips on his, wondering how the hell he's ever going to concentrate on his work now.

A revised rumor about them now travels around the circus – if you can't find either one of them, and they're not in Jensen's dressing tent, they're hiding in his stateroom on the train. The two of them try not to make themselves that scarce that often, because neither one of them likes being the subject of rumor and speculation. They know they can't stop the whispering, but they don't have to encourage it.

At least there's always something else for people to talk about, and their intimate activities aren't the only subject of gossip.

So life continues in the K&G Circus. Jared puts up and pulls down tents in rain and wind and beautiful clear days, in heat and chill and fog. He writes home, borrows books from Jensen and copies of *Astounding Stories* from Vincent, sneaks food out of the cookhouse, plays chess, loses money at poker. They acquire a new canvasman towards the end of June, a skinny kid named Jake who's much stronger than he looks and who apparently likes to whistle during set-up, although he only starts once before Tom smacks him across the back of the head and tells him to cut it out, it's bad luck.

One afternoon Alona lets Jared ride Joanna around the lot, which turns out to be just as exciting as riding into town on the back of Jamie's motorcycle, but less likely to earn Jared a dirty look and a lecture. Joanna is resistant at first, shifting her feet a little after Jared mounts up but refusing to go anywhere no matter how he cajoles her or nudges her in the side.

"I don't think she likes me after all," he says mournfully.

"I think you're too big for her," Alona explains, giggling. Jared's legs are too long for the stirrups and size-wise he's at least two – possibly three – of Alona. "She's not used to carrying a giant in a saddle."

"I feel like Paul Bunyan on a kid's pony."

"You're much cuter. Let me think." Alona purses her lips thoughtfully while a couple of the clowns come over to offer advice and what seems like the rest of the bareback riders show up to make their own suggestions, most of which boil down to "Get that man off that horse".

"I think it's the saddle," Alona finally says. "She's not used to anyone but me sitting on one. Get off." So Jared slides off the horse, Alona pulls off the saddle, and Jared climbs back on. Joanna takes a few steps sideways. Jared wraps the reins around his hands, just in case she decides to take off.

"You look ridiculous," one of the clowns comments. "Like a moose riding a dog."

Jared ignores him. When he first started working for K&G, Tom told him that some of the clowns were assholes, and Jared has never seen a reason to argue with that.

He nudges Joanna with his knees again and flaps the reins against her neck. When she still doesn't move, Alona smacks her on the rump and she takes off.

The sudden movement nearly jerks Jared off her back. Joanna trots alongside the stables tent before apparently realizing that the man on her back doesn't have a good grip on her. She breaks into a gallop. Jared hangs on for dear life, knees and thighs pressed tight to her ribs, reins and some of her mane clenched in his hands as she makes a circuit of the big top and veers off towards the sideshow tent. Rachel is sitting in a folding chair behind the tent, knitting, and she waves at Jared when he goes by. He's gotten some control over himself and the horse, and he whoops like a Comanche in a raiding party as Joanna carries him around the lot at top speed. He can feel the muscles in her back and legs and haunches bunching and stretching. He leans over her neck, encouraging her, feeling the wind hard against his face and hearing the quick thudding of her hooves on the dry ground.

They even cross paths with Jamie coming back from somewhere on his motorcycle. Joanna shies away from the noise, almost dumping Jared onto the ground, but he manages to steer her back to where Alona and the rest of the bareback riders are waiting by the stables tent.

Joanna slows and stops, and Jared slides off her back to stand wobbly-kneed next to her. He hasn't ridden a horse bareback since he was six and his dad lifted him onto one of the horses at his grandparents' ranch, and he certainly didn't get to ride that one with any speed. He feels windblown and exhilarated, and he can feel himself grinning to split his face.

"Jesus," is all he says, which doesn't quite encompass how much fun he just had – or how worried he was at first that he'd fall off – but is all he can manage.

"Paul Bunyan on a pony," Alona repeats, grinning. "Too bad I don't have a camera. I could've taken a picture for you to send home to your folks."

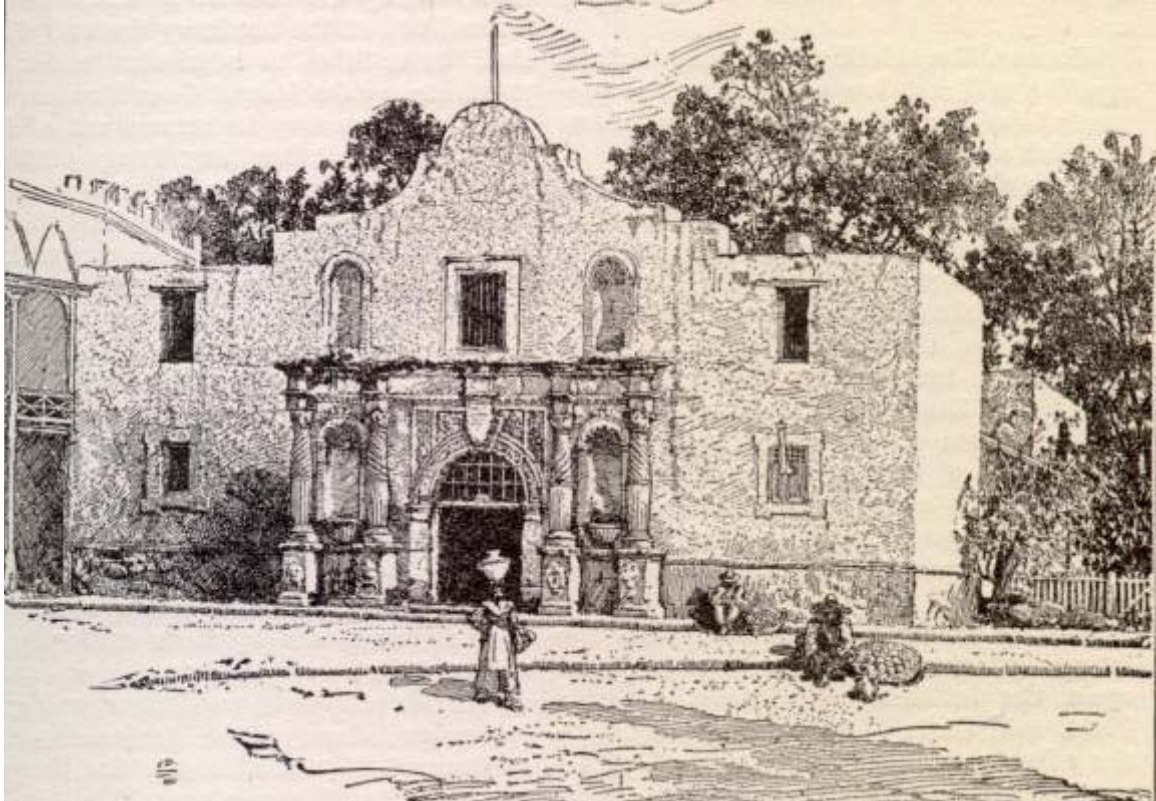
"You think I'm ready for the center ring?"

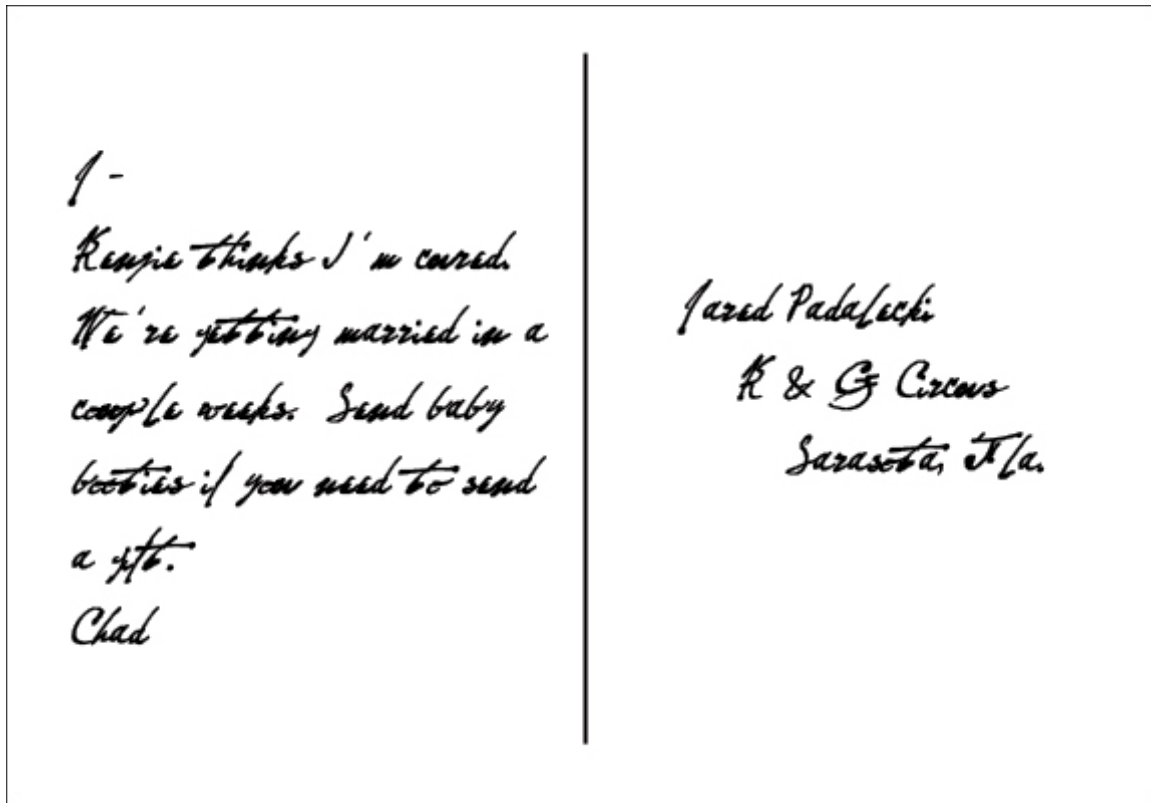
"Maybe on a bigger horse. I'm sure we could find you a performing draft horse." Joanna tosses her head and whinnies, as if agreeing that Jared was too heavy for her, and he laughs.

The circus spends July Fourth in Maine, with a special patriotic spec for the audiences of

both shows, and barbecue for dinner and fireworks after the evening show for the performers and workers. Several bottles of scotch make the rounds of the canvasmen's sleeper cars, courtesy of their Scottish boss. Jensen later reports to Jared that Misha treated the aerialists to a thankfully short but unsurprisingly only half-comprehensible discourse on the nature of freedom, the role of the people in acquiring same, and the purpose of fireworks in any celebration.

Halfway through July, Jared finally hears from Chad. He gets a postcard with a drawing of the Alamo on the front and Chad's mostly-legible scrawl on the back:





J—

*Kenzie thinks I'm cured. We're getting married in a couple weeks. Send baby booties if you need to send a gift.*

*Chad*

Jared counts back to when Kenzie caught them together and realizes Chad must have taken up with her right away. Well, he probably had to, to stop people talking. Jared can't find it in himself to be anything other than relieved. Marriage and fatherhood might settle Chad down. But he hopes Kenzie isn't banking on a true "cure" – he believes that he and Chad are as God made them, attraction to each other and all, and he doesn't think it's the kind of thing that can be cured. Trying to think about women never stopped him from thinking about men. Jensen is proof of that.

But from the postcard Jared can guess why Kenzie thinks that Chad has been cured of what she no doubt thinks of as his perversion. The postmark is only dated a week ago. Jared should send them a card.

He hopes Chad is happy, and he hopes that happiness lasts. On reflection he's not sure it will – Chad probably feels coerced, but he is, if nothing else, extremely loyal, and he will take his wedding vows seriously. But all the same, Jared now wishes Chad had run off to join the circus with him.



Although if Chad had come with him, he never would have been able to have this thing, whatever it is, with Jensen.

Jared is starting to wonder if they'll be able to escalate the thing, and if so, where and when, and will it survive the off-season, and will both of them want it to, when Jensen unknowingly answers at least the first questions for him.

"I have an idea," he tells Jared one Thursday at the end of July. "You'll share my hotel room Saturday night." The circus generally gets Sundays off, and most of the performers and sometimes some of the roustabouts take advantage of that to stay overnight in hotels. Jared hasn't done it – he's been saving his money - and it never occurred to him that this could be an option for him and Jensen. Now Jensen's face is resolute but his voice is almost shy, as if he knows this is what he wants but is worried that Jared will say no.

"Can we do that?" Jared asks, then realizes that of course they can, or Jensen wouldn't have mentioned it. "Of course I will," he adds. "I want to. I really, really want to."

Because he remembers Jensen going down on him on the trains, and as much as he likes putting his hands and mouth on Jensen, and as much as he likes Jensen's hands and mouth on him, he really does want to take it farther. And for that, they need somewhere more private than Jensen's stateroom.

Knowing they'll have that privacy, and thinking about what they could do with it, keeps Jared frustratingly distracted for the next couple of days. He doesn't get much time with Jensen, certainly not enough for Jensen's mouth or hands to ease the ache he wakes with every morning, and he can't get away from everyone for long enough to take care of it himself.

On Saturday night after the evening show, most of the performers and roustabouts head into town for some carousing. The circus won't pack up and move on until Sunday. The bars and late-night restaurants are glad to have them, and Jared is happy to be out and about with his friends – he buys Tom a beer to make up for Tom having lost more money betting on his chess playing, and Jake buys him a beer in exchange for Jared forgiving half his poker debt – but a part of him just wants to break off from the pack and disappear with Jensen into a hotel.

Although once they're both finally behind a locked door together, safe and secure in the privacy of an actual room, Jared has doubts.

"Are you sure this is a good idea?" he asks.

"The room's paid for," Jensen tells him, "the bed's a queen, we're off tomorrow, you don't have to sleep on the train –"

"I meant –" But he isn't sure what he means. He knows it isn't a problem that he's going to sleep with a performer, or that a performer is going to sleep with him. His time is free until the circus moves out tomorrow night, and he knows no one really cares what he does tonight, as long as it doesn't land him in jail.

But this could land him in jail. Sleeping with another man on a circus train is one thing – the circus has its own rules and its own concerns, and it survives in a permissive bubble. But they've stepped out of that world into a world of attorneys and shopkeepers and tailors and normal people, and out here he and Jensen could go to jail if they're caught.

Part of him wishes he'd thought of that sooner, and another part of him, he realizes, doesn't care. They'll just have to be very quiet and very discreet.

He'll worry later. He has Jensen and they have a door with a lock. They need to be taking advantage of that.

"Don't worry about it," Jensen says, stepping up to Jared and stroking his bottom lip with a thumb. "We'll be fine. Better than fine. We'll be glorious." He laughs. "Glorious" is Misha's new favorite word and he uses it to describe everything from a particularly impressive aerial trick to the apple pies the cookhouse served up two days ago.

"You'll be glorious." Jared leans in and kisses him. Jensen's hand cups the back of Jared's head as he kisses back.

It's a long, deep kiss, and even though Jared moved in first, Jensen takes control, directing intensity and length, nipping at Jared's lips and sucking on his tongue. Jared can feel his heart racing, his cock filling. Somehow this is better, hotter, more intense than any of their previous kisses. Maybe it's the fact that they have all night to do what they want with each other. Maybe it's the fact that they have a door they can shut. Maybe it's the fact that they could get caught.

And maybe it's just the fact that Jared really, really wants this. Wants Jensen.

Jensen's hands move over Jared's shoulders and around his chest to the buttons of his shirt. Jensen pulls back just a little so he can pop those buttons one by one.

"Do you know," he murmurs, Jared's shirt half open by now, "I sometimes get out of bed early just to walk to the lot to watch you put up the tent?"

"Really?" Jared says, flushing a little to imagine Jensen's clandestine eyes on him.

"Really." Jensen mouths at his jaw, then his throat. His fingers undo another button. "It's pretty amazing, watching your rhythm." He pulls Jared's shirttails out of his pants, pushes the shirt off his shoulders. Jared shrugs it all the way off. Jensen runs his hands down Jared's chest, over his undershirt. Jared can feel his skin shiver even with the cotton between him and Jensen's palms. He wants to do something but isn't sure what. He isn't really used to this kind of foreplay. Chad wasn't especially patient and didn't want to take the time. But then again, they didn't always have the time. Jensen has made sure that they do.

Now he rubs Jared's nipples through his undershirt and Jared stifles a moan. "Hmm," Jensen

says, mostly to himself, and then tugs at the undershirt to get it off.

"Why am I the only one who's half-naked?" Jared asks, trying to joke to distract himself from the sense that something very big is happening, something major. Something more than just the two of them finally getting to fuck.

"Because I want to see you all naked." Jensen grins, guides Jared's hands to his own buttons. Jared wills his hands to not shake, not with anticipation or nerves.

He can't take the same care with Jensen's clothes that Jensen is apparently trying to take with his, and besides, he's getting harder with every passing minute. He remembers that he made the first move, back when he kissed Jensen in the dressing tent, so why is Jensen doing all the leading now? He pulls at Jensen's shirt, his belt, his pants, until Jensen grabs his hands.

"Patience," he says. "We have all night."

"I don't want to wait all night."

Jensen cups Jared's dick through his pants and grins again. "I can tell." He steps back, strips out of the rest of his clothes, and sits on the bed. He looks absurdly calm, but Jared can guess from the flush creeping across his face and the quick rise and fall of his chest that he's more worked up than he seems. Jensen pats the mattress next to him and beckons to Jared. "Get over here."

Jared doesn't need to be told twice. He struggles out of his pants, forgets for a second that he's still wearing his boots, struggles out of those, and jumps on the bed. He lands half on Jensen, who grunts at Jared's sudden weight and then laughs. Jared rolls off him, suddenly embarrassed. This is a serious moment and he's acting like a five-year-old.

"Maybe a little too heavy to be glorious," Jensen murmurs, chuckling. Their faces are so close Jared can count all his freckles. Jensen's tongue flicks out at Jared's lips, but when his mouth moves across Jared's jaw to his throat and then his collarbone, Jared pulls his head back up. "What?" Jensen asks.

"I don't – can we – I can't wait. I can't." He shifts his hips, trying to rub his stiffening cock against Jensen's thigh.

"I see," Jensen murmurs, reaching for him. Jared breathes out – a soft "Aaahh" – as Jensen starts to stroke. Jared's hips push a little against his hand.

"I'm going to stroke you until you're good and hard," Jensen murmurs. "And then I want you to fuck me. I want to ride you. I want us to wear each other out, go to sleep, and do it all again in the morning."

And now Jared understands why he was unsure, and what the momentous feeling is. The part of him that could have an on-and-off-again casual thing with Chad for four years is

completely in favor of himself and Jensen messing up the bed and exhausting each other with vigorous, mutually-orgasmic sex. But the part of him that does genuinely love Chad – even if he's not *in* love with him – that thinks he's falling in love with Jensen, realizes that tonight is probably a step down a more committed path.

This isn't grabbing some time between shows to sit in Jensen's tent and make out. It isn't disappearing into his stateroom on the train for a quick blowjob. It isn't Jensen's hand down his pants stroking him off. This is something Jensen planned, something he wants, something he's clearly given thought to, if the way he's been directing the action is anything to go by. This is coupling – not just in the sexual sense, but in the sense that it's forming them – marking them – as a couple. Jared and Chad only slept over when it would be more suspicious for one of them to go home. Jared is pretty sure that in this case it would be more suspicious for him not to.

"Jared," Jensen says. "What are you thinking? *Why* are you thinking?"

He's thinking because he can't help it. Because he's figuring out what Jensen wants, what he wants, what it means for the end of the season. Does it mean Jared won't be going home for the winter? Does it mean he'll stay in Sarasota, be with Jensen, find temporary work until the circus takes to the train again? He hasn't thought that far. He hasn't had to.

But right now he needs to stop over-thinking. He needs to stop *thinking*. He wants Jensen, and Jensen is right here, wanting him. He's pretty sure Jensen feels the same way he does – they're probably (hopefully) turning the exact same emotional corner together. There's really only one way to know.

"It's nothing," Jared says. He can't ask what Jensen wants or expects, other than orgasms and lots of them. He doesn't know how he'd phrase it anyway.

Jensen grins, his hand still moving up and down Jared's cock. "Well, it certainly feels like something."

And now Jared reaches for him. Jensen grows harder in Jared's hand, his breathing quickening, and Jared is breathless with anticipation and nerves and immensely turned on by Jensen's arousal.

"I want to fuck you too," he practically whispers. He's still a little afraid to make too much noise, still worried someone will hear them and interrupt them and drag them off to jail for disturbing good people's peaceful slumber.

"I thought that's why we were here," Jensen answers. He grins, pulls Jared's head down with his free hand, and kisses him, hard and demanding, tongue pushing past teeth to claim Jared's mouth. Jared rolls on top of him, shoves a knee between Jensen's thighs, rubs against him. They moan into each other's mouths. Then Jensen suddenly pushes Jared off him, falls out of the bed, and stumbles over to his overnight bag.

"What – " Jared starts to ask, but Jensen grabs something and comes right back, holding out a little jar with a triumphant grin as he climbs onto the bed. "Oh. Heh." Jared takes, it opens it, swipes a finger through it, and works that finger into Jensen's ass. Jensen idly strokes himself as he watches Jared finger him, but he doesn't say anything, so Jared adds a second finger.

"That's better," Jensen murmurs, spreading his thighs wider. Jared works his ass, pushing and probing and stretching and watching Jensen's face, his chest, his hand on his cock. Jared wonders briefly if he could get Jensen off like this, just his fingers and Jensen's own hand. It's an arousing, intriguing thought. He wants to reach for his own cock, stroke himself in time with the press of his fingers, the motion of Jensen's hand. He wants to take the time to learn Jensen's body, to figure out what turns him on, what makes him cry out, what every part of him feels like and tastes like and how it responds to Jared's fingers and tongue. He wants the chance to do that, he wants the privacy to explore.

But maybe not right now. Jensen leans forward suddenly and grabs at Jared's shoulder. "I could come like this. Get up here and fuck me."

And who is Jared to say no? He pulls his hand away, settles himself between better between Jensen's thighs, guides himself into Jensen's waiting body, leans forward, and starts to thrust. He tries to keep quiet even though the temptation to fuck Jensen hard enough to knock the bedframe against the wall is very strong. He pushes deep into Jensen's body, feeling him tense and relax, listening to him pant and moan, stretching and straining and overcome with the force of his own desire.

"Harder," Jensen pants. "Come on, I – I – "

"Uhn... fuck," Jared groans. Jensen grabs his head and pulls him in for a sloppy, distracted kiss, too many teeth and not enough tongue. Jared's hips pump in and out of Jensen's ass, Jensen's legs tighten around his waist, and suddenly Jared is coming, gasping out his orgasm into Jensen's hair.

"Okay, okay," Jensen murmurs, sounding like he's talking to someone else, or to himself. Jared is still shuddering through his own orgasm but can feel the slight shift in his body as Jensen reaches between them to pull his own cock, starting to climax just as Jared is coming down.

Jared fucks him through his orgasm anyway and then flops on top of him. Jensen tangles his hands in Jared's hair and their mouths meet as if by accident so they can share a slow, lazy kiss.

"Okay?" Jensen repeats eventually. Jared nods. "We should do that again."

Jared laughs, a breathless, amused, thoroughly sated laugh. "Maybe in a couple minutes."

"It was glorious." In the dim light Jared can see Jensen's smile and the crinkles at the corners

of his eyes.

"You were glorious."

"Yeah, I was." If Jensen could move, Jared knows he'd be preening. Jared laughs again and shifts his weight so he can pull out and roll off Jensen to lie next to him on the mattress. Jensen turns towards him, brushes a hand across his face. "I've wanted you to do that to me for quite a while now. I also want you to know it's my turn next."

"Your turn to what? Roll me over and fuck me into the mattress?" It's actually kind of an exciting thought.

"I was thinking I'd stroke your dick – " Jensen reaches down and cups Jared's cock " – maybe suck it, and when you were hard, I'd straddle you and ride you like a bronco buster at a rodeo." By now his voice has dropped to a lower register, and his face is so close that Jared can feel the breath of those words against his lips. Jared can't think of any words adequate enough for a response, but his lips part so his tongue can snake out and lick at Jensen's mouth.

Jensen is more than happy to respond to that, and they just lie there for a while doing nothing more than kissing each other.

Jensen is a really good kisser, licking and nibbling and alternating force with gentleness, pushing his tongue deep as if trying to devour Jared, and then pulling back to nibble at his lips and lick around his mouth and behind his teeth. Jensen is a dominant kisser, but when Jared finally tries to direct the length and pressure of their kisses, trying to get some control over at least part of this situation, Jensen seems perfectly happy to follow his lead.

It's quiet in the hotel room – there isn't even any noise from outside – and after a while Jensen starts sliding down Jared's body, not exactly hurrying but not really taking his time either. He takes Jared's stiffening cock in his mouth, sucking strongly and making Jared bite his lip so as not to moan out loud.

Jared strokes Jensen's soft, sex-mussed hair, trying not to breathe too loudly, and then Jensen lifts his head, smiles at him, and crawls back up his body.

"Jesus," Jared breathes.

Jensen straddles Jared's waist, grabs the jar of lotion, dips his fingers in it, and reaches behind himself to slick up Jared's cock before sliding two fingers in his own ass. That in itself is enough to turn Jared on, and he can feel his heart racing with anticipation and the desire to watch Jensen finger himself longer, but instead Jensen sits up on his knees and then, his eyes on Jared's face, sinks down onto his cock.

Jared tries to remember how to breathe. Jensen puts his hands flat on Jared's chest for leverage, leans down, and starts to move, sliding back and forth, back and forth, fucking

himself on Jared's dick.

"Jesus," Jared says again, and he's pretty sure he can hear Jensen chuckle.

"Jesus isn't – isn't here."

Jared has never been particularly religiously observant, and he knows the church he only sporadically attended would consign him to hell for this, but there has to be some divine being at work here. Nothing this good, nothing that binds two people together like this, can be anything other than divine. Why would God allow him this response – the flush he can feel across his own skin and can see on Jensen's, their quiet moans of mutual pleasure, the tightness of Jensen's ass riding him, the beat of his heart, the incongruous peace in his head and the barely-felt surety that this is exactly where he belongs right now, that this is what their bodies were made for, that fucking Jensen is *right* – why would God grant him this if it wasn't sacred in some way?

And in the meantime, Jensen is moving up and down, Jared's cock almost sliding out of his ass before being enveloped by it again, and Jensen is panting and groaning against his lips and the only thing that matters is how good it feels to have Jensen ride him.

It somehow feels more intimate like this, with Jensen's hands on his chest and body curved over him, Jared's hands stroking over his back and shoulders, the both of them breathing into each other's mouths and licking at each other's lips. They're taking more time than they did before. They smell like sweat and desire, like salt and musk, the air of the room close and heavy even under the ceiling fan. The sheet fitted over the mattress is sticking to Jared's back, and he can feel his hair sticking to his face. Jensen is flushed, breathing heavily, hair twisting around Jared's fingers when Jared makes a fist in it to hold Jensen's face still so they can see each other.

Jensen rests his forehead against Jared's. Jared's heart swells with love and affection and a desire deeper than the ocean and endless like train tracks leading to a distant horizon. He feels like he's in a romance novel. A very explicit, very queer romance novel.

He doesn't see a problem with that.

The only problem, if you can call it that, is that he's going to come sooner rather than later, and then it will be over. He can tell that Jensen's close from the way his breathing is heavy with exertion and arousal, and from the pressure of his hands on Jared's chest.

There's less desperation in their fucking this time, but all the same, Jared knows they're both very close to climax.

This time Jensen comes first, helped along by Jared's fingers around his dick. He keeps moving, rolling back and forth and rubbing Jared's nipples until Jared bucks up with his climax and bites his lip to keep from crying out.

"Shit," he pants, after he finally catches his breath. Jensen is leaning over him, their faces very close together. "I think that was better than the first time."

"You think so?" Jared can feel Jensen's warm breath on his face. He tilts his head back, trying to reach Jensen's mouth, and Jensen takes the hint and kisses him.

Jared is suddenly acutely exhausted, and as much as he loves just lying here with Jensen holding his head and kissing his mouth, he wouldn't mind going to sleep. He manages to push Jensen away just long enough to say that, and Jensen chuckles softly, amused for some reason, and climbs off him before going over to his bag, extricating a pair of pajama bottoms, and pulling them on. Jared props himself up on an elbow to watch, even though there isn't much light in the room and Jensen spends most of it in shadow.

Jared figures he should do the same, but he's sweaty and would really like a bath. Which gives him an idea.

"Jensen," he says thoughtfully "would you join me in the bath?"

Jensen stares at him for a minute and then laughs. "We wouldn't both fit," he says. "Have you seen it?" He gestures towards the closed bathroom door. Jared climbs out of bed, pads across the room, opens the door, and flips on the light. The bathtub does indeed look too small for both of them. Too bad – he's never taken a bath with another person. And after the intimacy of Jensen riding his cock, he doesn't think a shared bath would be a problem.

He does take the opportunity to splash water on his face, though, before putting his boxer shorts and undershirt on. It doesn't seem proper to sleep naked, even with someone he just fucked twice and will no doubt fuck again in the morning.

They arrange themselves back on the bed, facing each other under a sheet. They're still both too overheated for covers. Jensen reaches up and brushes Jared's sweaty hair back from his face. Jared just smiles at him.

"How did you know?" Jensen asks.

"How did I know what?"

"When you kissed me. How did you know I wouldn't push you off? How did you know I'd kiss you back?"

"I didn't, really." Jared shrugs a shoulder. "But I saw the way you looked at Danneel and I knew it meant you didn't want her – "

"Maybe she's just not my type. Or working with her for so many years burned the desire out of me." Jensen grins.

"You don't look at any of the girls that way. I made an educated guess, and I was right."



"You're very observant."

"Back home I'd get my ass kicked if a guy thought I was looking at him sideways. I'm a big guy, but I don't want to take on five cowboys defending their friend's heterosexuality. They could string me up outside town and no one would say anything against them. And I used to teach teenagers – I had to know when someone was going to make trouble before they made it. I had to learn how to read faces and body language."

Alona told him that circus people live in a bubble, and he figured out that the bubble protected them from the outside world's opinions on sex and attraction. He knew he could try to kiss Jensen without having to worry about getting beaten up, and aside from becoming the subject of incessant gossip and speculation, his only real worry was whether or not Jensen would kiss back.

"Huh," Jensen says noncommittally. "I still say you're very observant. Just take the compliment." His tone is gentle and he's smiling.

"What time is it?"

"I don't know. Late. Why?"

"Just curious." Jared rolls over onto his other side, grabbing Jensen's arm and pulling it across himself as he does so. He feels Jensen scooting closer and spooning up against him. "What time do we have to be out of here tomorrow?"

"Ten. We should be back on the lot by noon."

"So we'll have time for a nice leisurely morning screw."

"Oh, of course." Jared can feel Jensen grinning into his neck. "I wasn't planning on letting you out of the room until you'd made me come at least once more."

"I think I can handle that." He laces their fingers together and falls asleep.

Jensen wakes up first, which Jared realizes when he slowly rises out of sleep to feel a warm hand inside his shorts, stroking his dick.

"Morning," he mumbles.

"I was wondering how long I'd have to do that," Jensen says in his ear. "I thought you roustabouts were used to getting up before the sun." Jared rolls over, requiring Jensen to shift out of the way and temporarily still his hand. "Sleep well?"

"Yeah. Really well." It's been a long time since Jared has slept with someone – actually slept in a bed next to them – and he didn't realize how much he missed it. He slept harder

and better than he has since he left San Antonio. "It's too bad we can't sleep together every night."

"It's nice, isn't it." Jensen looks wide awake, eyes bright and freckled skin faintly sun-kissed. His hair is a mess. His hand starts moving again. Jared leans in and kisses him, and after he pulls back Jensen licks his own lips and teeth, grimacing.

"Should I go brush my teeth?" Jared asks.

"Not yet."

Another kiss, this one deeper and slower. Jared's hips move almost unconsciously, trying to push into Jensen's hand. He reaches into Jensen's pajama bottoms.

It's not long before Jared is fully erect – he was already half hard when he woke up – and pulls Jensen's hand away just long enough to struggle out of his shorts. Jensen takes the opportunity to slide out of his pajamas and then pull at Jared's undershirt so they're both naked.

"Just a sec," Jensen says, propping himself up on one elbow so he can look over Jared's shoulder at the little clock on the bedside table. "Almost nine. We have an hour before we have to check out."

"You think it will take me an hour?" Jared grabs Jensen's hand and guides it back to his dick. "If you breathe on me just right I'll probably come right now."

"Oh, we can't have that." Jensen pulls his hand away, but whatever he was planning to do is interrupted by Jared's stomach growling. They both laugh.

"If that doesn't kill the mood, nothing will," Jared says, chuckling.

But it doesn't. Maybe ten minutes later Jared is guiding himself into Jensen's body, slowly seating himself as deep as he can, and then just as slowly starting to move. He pulls almost all the way out before pushing all the way back in, moving steadily but leisurely, taking his time and drinking in the sound of his and Jensen's breathing, their quiet moans, the creak of the bed. He watches Jensen's face, lets himself get lost in the heat and closeness of Jensen's body, tries to commit everything to memory in case they don't get another chance to do this again for a while.

He has no idea how long he and Jensen rock together. He wraps his arms around Jensen's head as he fucks him, bends down for a kiss, breathes in the scent of sweat and skin and want.

Neither of them says anything. Jared can't imagine what either of them would say.

Jensen comes first, reaching between them to stroke his cock as Jared's thrusts finally pick up

speed. Jared fucks him through his orgasm, immensely turned on by the stifled noises Jensen makes before he goes quiet and his mouth falls open when he comes. And then Jensen watches him with an expression that's both encouraging and peaceful, and Jared lets himself go with something that feels a lot like relief.

"That was even better than it was last night," Jensen says, after Jared pulls out and sprawls on his back next to him.

"I don't know," Jared says, "last night was pretty amazing. I don't think I've ever come that hard before, not to mention twice in one night."

"We should do it again some time."

"I think we should."

"Should we tell Misha it was glorious?" Jared glances at Jensen and he's grinning.

"You can if you want. Make some hedgehog noises for extra excitement."

Jensen chuckles. "I hate to ruin the moment, but we should consider getting up, getting dressed, and getting gone."

Disappointing, but true. They heave themselves out of bed, wash quickly, dress, and check out of the hotel. They find a place for breakfast and then walk back to the lot not quite holding hands, although a part of Jared wants to. He feels very content in his life, with his job and his friends and his... Jensen. He is content with his Jensen. He starts whistling, and by the time they get close to the lot Jensen is whistling as well. They both stop, superstitious, and Jensen starts singing under his breath, a song Jared doesn't know. He has a nice voice. He sounds happy.

The tents are still up from yesterday and there are a few kids from town milling around, released early from church or not having gone, and every so often someone will try to shoo them off the lot with a "No show today, kids." Jared and Jensen part in front of Jensen's dressing tent, and Jared goes back to the roustabouts' train car to change his clothes into something a little more labor-appropriate.

There are circus people sitting around everywhere, lounging in folding chairs or getting some sun or writing letters or playing cards or mending and washing clothes or (in Rachel's case) knitting. Jared loves this tiny movable city, and he loves everyone in it.

"You're happy," Tom comments, when Jared wanders into the dining tent to find his fellow roustabouts drinking coffee and playing poker. The cookhouse makes and serves breakfast even on Sundays.

"He had a good night," Aldis says, snickering.

"Where'd you go?" Jake asks. "I was gonna buy you another beer but you'd gone."

"He had things to do."

"Were you with – "

"Yeah," Jared says, cutting him off. He loves these guys, but even though he knows there are no secrets between them, he doesn't really want to discuss his glorious evening with anyone.

"Pull up some bench," Tom says, and "Deal him in," to Jake.

But Jared's only gotten to play half a hand before Tony shows up, puts a commanding hand on his shoulder, and says "Take a break, I want to show you something." Jared sighs and stands up, and Tony leads him back to the train cars and along the tracks until they get to the sleepers. They duck inside the canvasmen's car and into Tony's tiny compartment, where he retrieves a book, flips it open, and hands Jared a photograph. It's a sepia-toned picture of Tony and another man, both in uniform, looking twenty years younger. It was taken in a studio – Jared can tell from the obviously painted backdrop showing a hilly pastoral scene behind a hedge.

"Who's this with you?" he asks.

"His name's Jason. We served in the same platoon. That was taken when we were on leave."

Jared looks at the back of the photo and notes the faded ink scribble: *Tommies on leave, Edinburgh May '17.*

"Jason wanted to see the castle," Tony explains.

Jared turns the photo over again and peers at it more closely. Jason and Tony have their arms around each other's shoulders. They're grinning. They look happy. They look young.

Well, of course they look young. They were teenagers.

"After the war," Tony continues, "work was scarce, so we came to New York. It had never been bombed and it was the most incredible place either of us had ever seen, even more than Paris or London. Even during Prohibition." He flips more pages in the book and pulls out another photo, this one a snapshot of the two of them sitting in what was probably a restaurant or a speakeasy. They're in civilian clothes and they look older than in the first picture, and in this one Tony is kissing Jason's cheek and Jason is laughing. "Nine years we were there, but Jason got homesick and went back to London. He asked me to go with him. I didn't."

"Why not?"

"I loved New York too much. I thought I'd have time to be with him later. But after the

Crash I didn't have the money to go home even if I wanted to." Jared hands the photos back and Tony glances at them before folding them back into the book. "Don't make the same mistake I did. Okay?"

"I won't." But a mistake hasn't presented itself to be made. He doesn't think what he and Jensen did last night counts as such, and he has the feeling Tony doesn't think so either.

"Okay, enough maudlin nostalgia," Tony says, pushing Jared out of the compartment and then out of the train car. "Back to work with you."

"I was in the middle of not doing very much."

"Poker's very hard work, I've been told." He winks and heads off in one direction while Jared goes back to the dining tent to finish his game.

A few Saturdays later he and Jensen get another night together, which is just as good as the first even if the bed isn't quite as comfortable. Jared is pretty sure that whatever happens after the season is over, he'll be going back to Sarasota with Jensen, to find whatever work he can until next spring. But Jensen hasn't said anything yet, so they haven't had a conversation about it, so Jared can only make his plans in his head and hope Jensen is doing the same.

He knows they should probably talk about it, but what would he say? How can he bring it up without sounding like a lovestruck teenager? And what if he's wrong? What if Jensen really doesn't want to stay together after the season is over? Jared knows there isn't anyone in Sarasota, but what if this is the way of circus folk? What if this is just something that performers sometimes do – have a fling just for the length of the season? Jensen has never mentioned any previous long-term lovers, and neither has Danneel, but that doesn't mean he hasn't had previous short-term lovers either. It doesn't mean he's going to want to spend the off-season – or the next traveling season – with Jared.

But it's only August. The season runs until the beginning of November. They have some time.

Except it turns out that they don't. Jared is watching the aerialists practice the day that Jensen misses a catch and Jamie falls into the net, and while this has happened before, and not just to Jensen, the more important thing is that Jared is watching the show the night that Jensen barely catches Danneel, grabbing one hand at the last second and only just preventing her from plummeting fifty feet to the dirt below.

Jensen doesn't finish out that show. He doesn't perform the next day either, and as soon as Jared gets a chance in the interval between shows, he goes by Jensen's dressing tent to see how he is. All of the trapeze artists are crammed into the tent, as well as two of the high-wire walkers, but they shuffle out of the way so Jared can duck inside as well.

"I said no," Jensen is telling Katie, who looks personally offended about something. "Not tonight."

"What's going on?" Jared asks. "What happened last night?"

"He couldn't see me," Danneel explains. She sounds angry, and no wonder – her performing partner almost dropped her. She's sitting next to Jensen on his cot and now she jabs her finger in his thigh. "I *told you*, wear your fucking glasses. Miss Connelly said she'd make you a strap for them so they don't fall off. You're not vain about a single thing but that, but your vanity could get any of us killed."

"And *that's* why I'm not going on," he tells Katie.

"How bad – " Jared starts to ask, and then "Are you leaving?"

"I don't – yeah, I think I am. I have to. I can't see the trapeze to grab it, and I can't see anyone else to grab them. There's no reason for me to stay."

*No reason but me*, Jared thinks, even though he knows that's unfair. Jensen's an aerialist, and if he can't perform, what is he going to do? Every single person traveling with K&G is doing so for a specific reason, to fill a specific role and perform a specific function. Jensen's function is to fly through the air. And if he can't do that, if he won't, there's no way he can stay.

"I'm sorry," he says, and Jared knows that's meant purely for him.

Jared doesn't want to have the conversation he knows is coming in front of all these people. He knows them, he likes them, they're his friends – they're Jensen's family – but this is personal, and they're not the person he wants.

"Everyone out," Jensen says abruptly, as if he can read Jared's mind. He pushes Danneel off the cot and makes shooing motions at everyone else. "Leave us alone." Danneel is the last to leave, glaring at Jensen over her shoulder and then shooting Jared a look that reads surprisingly like compassion.

Jared sits on Jensen's trunk, feels it creak under his weight, and stands back up. He sits on the cot next to Jensen instead. "You're really going to leave?"

"I'm really going to leave. I already called Eric and Sera to tell them what happened and let them know my decision. I can't go back up there, Jared. I can't see anything in focus until it's too late. I was faking it pretty well – we count beats a lot of the time – but I can't do that any more. I could've missed Danny completely. I can't keep working knowing I could get her killed. I could miscalculate where the bar is and drop myself."

"When are you...." He can't finish the sentence. His heart stops.

"Tomorrow. I, uh, I talked to Tony, about you getting the night off. So we could spend it together. He said it was okay."

"Spend it where? We can't just bug out for a hotel. We have a show tomorrow – we're on the road tonight."

"You'll sleep in my stateroom. We'll have to be really quiet, though. If that's what you want." Jensen looks miserable. Jared wants to shake him and demand to know why he insisted on performing if his eyesight was so bad, why couldn't he get a strap to keep his glasses on, he could color-coordinate it to his costumes or get a brown one to match his hair, what was he thinking, how can he leave?

*Don't make the same mistake I did,* Tony said.

"I'll go with you," Jared says.

"What? No. Finish out the season here. I don't know what I'm going to do or where I'm going to do it, and it's not fair to drag you around with me while I figure my life out." He takes a breath. "I can't waste too much time spinning my wheels, and when I settle down someplace I'll let you know. I promise it won't be too long. Will you wait for me?"

"If you don't tell me where you are, I'll come find you. I'm not just going to let you go." Jared's heart kicks back into gear. Plan or no plan, he'd leave with Jensen tomorrow just so they could be together, but Jensen is so upset that Jared can do this one thing for him and wait. And if Jensen hasn't sent word by the end of the season, Jared will find him anyway.

"I don't want to lose you either," Jensen says. "Someday we'll be together, wherever we are." His voice is tight, like he's trying to stay in control of himself. Jared holds on to his own determination to keep them together. "We can sleep in the same bed every night." He tries to grin. Jared reaches out to cup his face in one hand.

"Don't forget me."

"As if I could." Jensen grabs Jared's face with both hands and kisses him hard. "I want to watch the show one last time," he says after they separate. "Are you working props?"

"No. I can watch it with you."

So they spend their last night together watching the show, starting with the sideshow acts which Jensen has never seen, and standing just inside the doorway of the big top to watch the main performances.

Afterward they go back to Jensen's stateroom, locking the door behind them, pulling off their clothes, and climbing into bed without a word. Jensen leaves the light on.

It hurts Jared to know this is the last night they'll have together until at least November, and Jensen must feel it too because there's something about the way they move tonight, as if they're going slowly so as to commit each other to memory. Jensen takes his time with

Jared's body, dragging lips and tongue and fingers across Jared's shoulders and chest and belly and thighs, sucking his cock almost leisurely, consenting to be licked and touched all over in return. And when neither of them can stand the anticipation any more and Jared eases himself into Jensen's body, he goes slowly then too.

They're both quiet, even their breathing and their sighs and moans. Neither of them says anything. They touch each other's faces. Jared puts his hand on Jensen's chest. Jensen holds on to Jared's shoulders, slides his hands down to cup Jared's ass. They rock with the motion of the train underneath them. Jared has never felt so intimate with anyone, so wildly in love, and so far away. He tries not think about anything besides Jensen underneath him, Jensen's hands on him, Jensen's heavy breathing and flushed face, the stain on his skin and the darkness of his eyes, Jared's cock deep inside Jensen's body. Their shared pleasure, their occasional kisses. the scent of Jensen's skin when Jared buries his head in his shoulder for his own climax.

"I love you," Jared whispers into Jensen's neck, thinking as he does so that it's an absurd sentiment considering the short time they've known each other. "So, so much." It comes as a bit of a surprise to him, even though he doesn't think it should, when he hears Jensen whisper "I love you too."

They curl up together, arms and legs tangled, Jared's hair getting in Jensen's face, and let the motion of the train and the exhaustion of their lovemaking put them to sleep. Jared wouldn't have expected he could sleep as soundly as he does.

He has to get up ridiculously early to put up the big top, or at least it's ridiculously early when all he wants to do is lie next to Jensen for a little while longer. Jensen packs his things, and while the acrobats are tumbling across the center ring during the matinee performance, Jared helps him load up the taxi that will take him into town where he plans to catch a bus and then a train to Sarasota, and from there he has no idea.

"Write to me," Jared tells him.

"It might be a while before I have anything to say."

"I don't care. Send me a blank postcard with nothing but your name on it."

"Promise you'll wait for me."

The cabbie isn't paying attention so Jared plants a quick kiss on Jensen's lips as a response, and then Jensen climbs into the taxi and it pulls away.

Jared spends the next couple of weeks missing Jensen with an ache like he lost a limb. He does his job, tries and fails to concentrate on numerous games of chess, lets Gina coax him into doing the crossword for her, ignores Danneel because she's unhappy too – he has to remind himself that she's known Jensen longer than he has - and he doesn't know what to say to her.



Misha catches him in the dining tent one day and tries to cheer him up with a hedgehog joke.

"A herd of hedgehogs is galloping through the woods," he starts, jogging in place next to the table in what Jared assumes is an imitation of a running hedgehog. "Ahead of them is the commander hedgehog, and he cries, 'Hedgehogs!'" Misha's voice takes on a growl to indicate the commander. "'Aaaaah!'" The herd gets a slightly higher-pitched, more excited voice. "'Do we run?' 'Ooooh!' 'Does the earth shake?' 'Wooooo!' 'Well, aren't we just like horses?'"

It doesn't make any sense to Jared because like the rest of Misha's jokes it's probably only funny in Russian, but at least Misha pretending to be a galloping hedgehog is entertaining enough on its own. Later Jared repeats it to Tom and Aldis, and watching Aldis repeat it to Jake – complete with running hedgehog imitation – makes Jared laugh more than the original joke did.

And life goes on. Jared doesn't miss Jensen any less, but he gets used to being without him. Jensen sends postcards and letters, some of which Jared can share and some of which he needs time alone to read. And he does have friends in the circus, and he does love them and enjoy their company, and having other people around makes the waiting easier.

And then a mail call towards the end of October finally delivers the letter he's been waiting for.

The envelope is stiff like there's a piece of card in it, and there's no return address. Jared looks at the postmark – *Los Angeles, Calif.* The last postcard had a picture of the elaborate and exotic-looking Grauman's Chinese Theater on it. This must be where Jensen has decided to stop. Maybe he wants to be a movie star.

Jared finds a relatively quiet place to open the envelope, which contains a sheet of notepaper folded around two photos and a little watercolor painting on a postcard-sized piece of stiff paper. The watercolor shows a sandy beach, a blue ocean, and what look like people in bathingsuits. On the back is written "My next-door neighbor painted this. He's pretty good. The ocean really is that color." One of the photos shows Jensen wearing sunglasses and standing on a pier with what must be the ocean behind him, and on the back it says "Me at the beach" in pencil. The other photo shows a little girl in a leotard walking along a balance beam, Jensen walking next to her with an arm out to guide her, or catch her in case she falls. There are a few more little girls standing around watching, and on the back of this photo Jensen has written "Me at work! These girls are easier to catch than Danny."

Jared unfolds the piece of paper.

Jared.

You can probably guess that I'm going to stay in Los Angeles. I found a job teaching little kids to be acrobats and gymnasts. There are a lot of circus folks around here and someone suggested I could consult for the movies, if they need an expert or someone to correct their idea of what it's really like to swing from a trapeze.

I might get to work on a circus picture. That could be fun.

I don't know what kind of future the traveling circus has, but there will always be a place for fliers and acrobats, in the movies if not under a tent. My days on the trapeze are over, but I can still train the next generation. I think I'll be good at it!

It's strange to be standing still, knowing I'll be in the exact same place this time next week. It's an adjustment but I'm getting used to it.

I still miss the big top. I miss you.

I bought a chess set. I think I might buy a car. I want to get a dog.

I think about you all the time. I want to start our future together. Come to California and be with me.

J.



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*I still miss the big top. I miss you.*

*I bought a chess set. I think I might buy a car. I want to get a dog.*

*I think about you all the time. I want to start our future together. Come to California and be with me.*

*J.*

Under that is a street address and a phone number.

*I will, Jared thinks. As soon as I can. Yes.*

\* \* \* \*

The train ride to Los Angeles is scenic but very long – especially since he has to change trains twice - and even though Jared can stand and walk up and down the aisles and through the cars, having to sit for so long makes him feel cramped in a way that sharing a berth in the roustabouts' sleeper car never did. So he is relieved when this train finally reaches its destination, and even more so when he follows the other passengers off the tracks and into the terminal where Jensen is waiting for him.

Jensen is tanned and freckled and smiling and wearing a garish, ridiculous-looking shirt covered with brilliant tropical flowers. Jared has never seen anything so beautiful in his life.

The first thing he says, however, is "Where did you get that shirt?"

Jensen laughs.

"I wanted you to be able to see me," he says. "I didn't want you to miss me."

The train station is crowded and Jensen certainly isn't Jared's height, but how could he think

Jared could miss him? He's the reason Jared crossed the country on the cheapest train ticket ever. He's the reason Jared didn't even finish out the season with the K&G Circus. He's the reason Jared has a seven-page letter to his parents folded in a book in his jacket pocket, a letter explaining everything that happened to him over the summer, the man he met and the life he wants to live – things he was afraid to write about when they were actually happening – and that he'll write from California and he loves them and misses them but he knows they'll understand.

He grabs Jensen in a hug and holds him tightly. Jensen is still laughing into his shoulder and Jared wants to kiss him, wants to bite his lips and suck on his tongue and squeeze his ass and drag him into a men's room and –

"People are staring," Jensen manages to say, and Jared lets go.

"Sorry." And then, "I missed you so fucking much."

"It was no picnic for me either. Come on, let's go home."

Home.

It's late afternoon and the weather is warm and sunny and beautiful, and Jared has been sitting for days on a rolling train and doesn't relish the idea of crowding onto a streetcar for the ride to Jensen's apartment. Jensen explains that it's too far to walk, and this way he can tell Jared about the buildings they pass and the neighborhoods they travel through, and start to acclimate him to Los Angeles.

Despite his words, Jensen is not the best tour guide, and after about ten minutes of not being able to identify many landmarks by name, he laughs and admits this was perhaps not a great idea.

"I don't mind," Jared says, because they're sitting close to each other, shoulders and hips and thighs touching, and every so often Jensen will lean into him to point something out. It's a physical closeness Jared has sorely missed, and on a crowded streetcar it is perfectly acceptable – and sometimes expected – to squish against the person sitting beside you. "That girl is smiling at you," he goes on, lowering his voice and nodding slightly at the pretty girl in the navy dress and hat who is sitting across from them.

"I didn't even notice," Jensen admits, his voice quiet as well, so as not to be overheard.

"Danny always said I was blind to other people's attention."

"You weren't blind to mine."

"That's because you kissed me. That's a little hard to ignore." He nudges Jared's leg with his knee.

"Are we there yet? Sorry, that was whiny." Jared is eager to get Jensen into a room, behind

a door, so he can kiss him breathless, just for starters.

"Another fifteen minutes. We should have taken a taxi. I think we're in West Hollywood now." He points out the window. "Some of *My Man Godfrey* was filmed down that street."

Jared knows that's a lie, because the movie is set in New York City and there is no way that this part of Los Angeles can pass for New York. Jensen's tour guide comments get wilder and wilder and more and more ridiculous the closer they get to his apartment building. But he tells a good story, and Jared hasn't heard his voice in over two months, and it isn't any hardship to listen.

They finally get off the streetcar a block from Jensen's building, which is square and stucco and new-looking. His apartment is on the second floor. It's a studio with a wide closet set in the long wall, an alcove at one end leading to the bathroom, and another alcove at the other end which leads to the kitchen. There's a tiny balcony – "I'm afraid to stand on it," Jensen admits – a couple of geometrically-patterned rugs on the hardwood floor, a radio in a polished walnut case. A chess board is set up on the table against the far wall. Some of the windows are open to catch the breeze. It's small and cool and sparsely furnished and like nowhere Jared has ever lived. He knows he can be happy here.

"Put down your suitcase and I'll give you the grand tour," Jensen says. He points to the alcove leading to the bathroom – "That's the dressing room" – the alcove leading to the kitchen, which is more of a small room and has a desk and chair in it – "That's my office" – and the wide closet doors which apparently hide a Murphy bed – "That's the bedroom" – and then "Are you hungry? Do you want to wash up? Unpack? What?" He sounds nervous and excited but fortunately Jared knows exactly what he wants, now that they have the privacy for it.

He grabs Jensen's face and kisses him hard, like he wanted to do in the train station and on the streetcar but couldn't. Jensen kisses back, just as desperate, pushing against him in a way that makes Jared want to pull them both down and fuck Jensen into the floor.

They stand there devouring each other's mouths and grabbing at each other until Jared's stomach growls loud enough to break the spell of their desire, and they both laugh.

"Welcome home," Jensen says, grinning. This close his eyes are very bright and very green behind his glasses, and his freckles are a cinnamon spatter across his nose. He's beautiful and he wants Jared here as badly as Jared wants to be here.

"I'm so lucky," Jared murmurs, not even aware he's said it out loud until Jensen chuckles and brushes a finger across his lips.

"I told you I'd write you as soon as I was settled," he says. "I told you I wanted you to be with me."

"I know. I didn't doubt that. I just mean – I don't know what I mean. You're beautiful.

You're mine."

"I am, aren't I." He's grinning, the corners of his eyes crinkling with amusement. "I feel very lucky too, that you waited for me to get my life together."

Jared moves in for another kiss, thinking that maybe now is a good time to get naked and sweaty, but his stomach growls again. Jensen laughs, and Jared admits temporary defeat.

"I think I need to eat," he says, realizing that he is in fact starving. He hadn't been paying attention to the needs of his stomach because he was so overwhelmed by the needs of his dick.

"I think I can accommodate you. There's a decent steakhouse not too far away. We passed it on the streetcar, but it's close enough to walk."

So they head out and down the street a few blocks to the steakhouse, which is dimly lit and moderately crowded. Jared orders a giant steak and ignores Jensen's exclamation that there's no way he'll ever be able to finish it. Of course he'll be able to finish it. He just crossed the country on trains with inadequate dining cars, and not much money to spend on them anyway.

It occurs to him as he's scarfing down his steak that he didn't even look at the prices on the menu, and he should consider saving his money until he has a steady job again.

"I've thought some about what you could do for money now that you're here," Jensen says, as if looking right into his brain.

Jared swallows his mouthful of steak. "I, uh, I hadn't given it a lot of consideration," he admits. He tried to think about it on the train, what Los Angeles would be like and what he would do and how he and Jensen would live, but his imagination deserted him because he couldn't get past the fact that they'd be together, that they'd be able to stay together.

"Then it's good that I have." Jensen grins. "I asked around about teaching jobs. If that's what you wanted to do. I figured construction might be the closest to what you did at K&G, but I didn't know if you'd want to go back to that, and you said you were starting to like teaching. Unless you want to build sets for movie studios." He smiles brighter, a quick flash of pleasure. "We could be a teaching couple."

And Jared has to smile at that, at the thought of them being an actual couple, like any other pair of people in love.

"I don't know if what happened to you in Texas would have reached the Los Angeles school district," Jensen goes on. "I don't think it would have. I got a name for you, if you decided that you did want to teach. From one of my students. Her aunt teaches middle school."

"Thank you. She's not expecting to hear from me right away, is she? Because I kind of, um,

now that I'm here, with you, I want to spend all my time with you. And I have a letter for my parents that I need to send."

Jensen grins almost shyly. "I wanted to take you sight-seeing," he says. "Look for movie stars. Go to the beach. Take you up to Griffith Observatory for the view. We'll go to the post office tomorrow. I found someone to take over my classes for a week so I could devote all my time to you." He nudges Jared's foot under the table and lowers his voice. "We could spend whole days in bed if you wanted. I think my bathtub is big enough for two."

Jared's dick twitches at the thought.

"Finish your steak," Jensen goes on, his voice back to a normal level as if he wasn't teasing Jared just a second ago. "Order a slice of pie. The cherry pie here is very good. We'll have some coffee before going home."

"I can't wait for pie." Jared stuffs the last of his steak into his mouth. He wonders where this new attitude of Jensen's is coming from. Jensen was never much of a tease, not like this.

"Don't talk with your mouth full." Jensen grins. His eyes twinkle with merriment.

"Don't tease me."

Jensen signals for the waiter, pays their bill – Jared takes note, reminding himself to buy dinner next time – and they head back to the apartment. Jensen has no sooner locked the door behind them than Jared is on him, attacking his mouth, shoving his jacket off his shoulders, grabbing at his ass.

"Wait, stop," Jensen pants, shoving Jared away long enough to draw the curtains across the French doors leading to the tiny balcony. "Neighbors." And then he's grabbing at Jared as well, fighting for dominance over Jared's lips and tongue, pushing him back towards the doors hiding the Murphy bed. Jared's foot drags over the edge of the rug and he stumbles, catching himself just in time. Jensen chuckles into his mouth.

"I'm going to fuck you into the floor," Jared practically growls. "I waited for you long enough."

Both of their jackets are off by now, two piles by the front door, and now they're pulling at each other's shirts – Jared is trying not to just yank Jensen's ridiculous flowered shirt off him, popping the buttons and scattering them across the floor – attempting to kick off their shoes, mouths attached as if sewn together, hands roaming over each other's bodies plucking at clothes and reaching for skin.

They're half-naked when Jensen pulls Jared down to the floor. They struggle out of their pants, their undershorts, and when Jared has to stop and unlace his boots to get them off, Jensen tells him to hurry in a voice thick with want.

Jensen's glasses have come off but he's still wearing his undershirt, which is rucked up over his heaving chest when Jared spreads his thighs and pushes himself in.

"Aah – fuck - yes, yes," Jensen pants as Jared starts to thrust, driving himself deep with barely-stifled grunts and groans. "Jared – uhn – hard – harder – "

Jensen's body is hot and welcoming, and Jared is so full of pent-up need and desire that he fucks him with almost no control, hips pounding and breath short until he climaxes in what seems like no time at all.

"Shit, shit," he pants into Jensen's shoulder. He suddenly feels selfish and careless and Jensen didn't even have a chance to come. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I'm – "

"Shut up," Jensen answers breathlessly. He's still squeezing Jared's ass as if encouraging him and Jared realizes his own hips are still making small, shallow thrusts. Jensen takes his hand and guides it between them so Jared can wrap his fingers around Jensen's swollen cock and stroke him to climax.

"Much better," Jensen says, after he finishes. He grins, lifts his head, and licks his way into Jared's mouth. "Next time maybe we'll actually make it to the bed first. The floor's a little hard."

Jared finds that he has enough breath left to laugh. "I couldn't wait. I just... I waited months for you. I dreamed about you so often and I couldn't – there's no privacy in the circus, you know that."

"I know." Now it's Jensen's turn to chuckle. "Did your friends give you a hard time?"

"No, just the thought of you." Another laugh. "God, I missed you."

Jensen cups the back of Jared's head, licks at his mouth until Jared's lips part and his tongue snakes out to meet Jensen's. He's still buried inside Jensen's body, but he manages to pull out without breaking the kiss.

They lie on the rug for a little while, catching their breath, recovering, lazily exploring each other's mouths as if for the first time. Jared is calm, at peace, comforted by the nearness of Jensen's body and the welcome in his words and actions.

"Do you think you'll miss it?" Jensen asks after a while, after their hearts have slowed to a normal rhythm.

"Miss what?"

"The circus. You won't have to wake at dawn to put up the big top any more."

Jared hadn't thought about it. "I don't know," he admits. They're still lying very close



together on the rug, and now that Jared has recovered from his exertions, he's starting to feel a little cold. Jensen closed most of his windows before they went to dinner, but one is still open, and the night breeze carries a slight chill. They should either get dressed again, pull out the bed, or run themselves a hot bath.

"I do. I miss Danny. I miss Misha and his terrible jokes. I even sometimes miss the smell of the big top, if you can believe that. Sawdust and straw and rigging and canvas. The animals. All the people."

"Alona's parents have a ranch out here. I think they're north of Los Angeles, or east somewhere. She gave me their phone number before I left and said I should call the place or write after the season is over, and we can go out and see her. She said we can ride the horses."

"I've never been on a horse," Jensen muses. "That might be fun."

"I know I'll miss it," Jared goes on. "It was a hard life but I made a lot of friends. They were good people. I always wanted to join the circus, and I finally got to, and most of the time I didn't regret it. But when you told me to come out here I didn't even wait for the end of the season. I just packed up and left. I couldn't stay there without you. I don't want to do anything without you." He brushes a hand across Jensen's cheek. In the faint light from outside Jensen looks very serious, and a little wistful. "You miss it a lot, don't you."

"It was all I thought about – all I did – for twenty years. K&G became my family in a way that Cameron-Egglee and Mackay and Millar-Gough never were. But it doesn't matter – I can't do it any more. My eyesight's too bad. The best I can do is train the fliers who will come after me." His breath hitches disconcertingly. "I told you this in my letter. I don't want to repeat it."

"I'm sorry," Jared says gently, brushing his lips across Jensen's jaw. "I didn't mean to upset you. We'll get someone to send us the route for next year and we can go out and see the show and say hi to everyone. Maybe we can go to Sarasota over the winter so you can see Danneel, or we'll ask her to come visit us." He knows how far away Florida is, how difficult it would be for her to come out to California, but his presence here is proof that where there's a will – where there's love – there's a way.

"She'll make us put her up in a hotel so she doesn't have to listen to us. I can hear her now – 'Don't make me listen to you two having sex!'" He chuckles at his own imitation of Danneel's indignant voice. "I'll be okay. Not everything lasts. I have years of experiences and good memories. And now I have you." He twists his fingers in Jared's hair. "I should pull out the bed and we should get in it. We have a lot to do in the near future."

"I have you to do."

Jensen laughs, bright and surprised, grabs Jared's face with both hands, and kisses him soundly.

"There are not enough words in any language to express how much I love you," he says, laughter still in his voice. "We can make a life now that we couldn't have with K&G. We won't have to resort to hiding in my stateroom. And every night we can sleep next to each other without worrying about being caught."

"Can we take a bath first?" Jared asks. "I could use a good scrubbing." He reaches down to cup Jensen's cock. "And by 'scrubbing' I mean – "

"I know what you mean." Jensen kisses him quick, rolls away, and gets to his feet. Jared watches his back as he heads into the bathroom, admiring the tight ass and strong thighs and broad shoulders that he now gets to live with, the man he hopes he can grow old and silly with.

His life is good, better than he expected, and certainly more than he ever could have imagined back in April. He still has to find a job and he'll still be far from his parents and his brother and sister, and he doesn't know when he'll get to see Chad again – after Kenzie's baby is born, at least – but he has opportunities and the memory of his months with the circus, the people he met and the things he did and all the performances he was privileged enough to see, the illusions he was able to share. He can make a home here in Los Angeles just as he made a home on the lot among trained animals and canvas tents and performers and workers of all stripes. He has Jensen. He can do anything. *They* can do anything. He knows it.

"The water's warm!" Jensen calls from the bathroom. "Are you coming or not?"

"No, I'm just breathing heavily," Jared calls back, and hears laughter floating through the doorway of the dressing room alcove. He stands up and follows that laughter to the man he loves and their unknown but no doubt glorious future together.



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