



**THE CIRCUS TRAIN
CONSPIRACY**

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CHAPTER ONE

1860

During its stay in Carlisle, the circus had made a vast number of friends and many of them had turned up at the railway station to bid farewell to their visitors. The crowd consisted largely of cheering women, grateful for the thrilling entertainment they and their families had enjoyed, and tearful children, overwhelmed by a sense of loss and fearing that it might be an eternity before a circus of such size and quality visited the area again. While they were diverted by the sight of the animals being loaded – sometimes with great difficulty – into wagons, they were disappointed to see no sign of the clowns who'd brought so much merriment to Cumberland. Without realising it, however, they'd already rubbed shoulders with them on the platform as the men, without their make-up and garish costumes, boarded the train.

The noise was deafening. The hiss of steam, the slamming of carriage doors and the continuous hubbub of well-wishers were amplified by the cacophony set up by protesting horses and mutinous lions. When the whistle blew to signal departure, there was a scornful reply from Rosie the elephant, trumpeting her displeasure at being

forced to leave the comfort of the compound they'd built for her. Waved off by the crowd, the first of the two trains pulled away with a rising chorus of dissent from the stock wagons. It was going to be an ear-splitting journey.

Mauro Moscardi, the owner of Moscardi's Magnificent Circus, sat back in a first-class compartment and pulled on a cigar. He was a short, portly, still handsome man of middle years with a swarthy complexion and a twirling moustache. When he was acting as ringmaster, he seemed to grow in stature and had a booming voice that could reach everyone in the audience, no matter how large it might be. Having been born and brought up in England, he could speak the language perfectly. Yet when he was among strangers, he preferred to use a bogus Italian accent supplemented by expressive gesticulations. Alone with his wife, no pretence was needed.

'I still can't get used to travelling by train,' he said, peevishly.

'Railways have been a blessing to us,' she argued. 'When your father was on tour with the circus, he was lucky if they made seven or eight miles a day. Bad weather slowed them down even more.'

'But he was carrying on a *tradition*, my love, and tradition is everything in the world of circus.'

'Would you rather ride to Newcastle in our caravan? It's about sixty miles away. This train will get us there by noon.'

'What's the rush? We're going through beautiful countryside. We'd enjoy it much more if we took our time.'

'And you'd never stop complaining how slowly we moved,' she said with a smile. 'You must learn to accept progress, Mauro.'

‘Tradition is more important.’

‘Your father would’ve loved railways – God rest his soul!’

But her husband was no longer listening because he’d just glanced out of the window and been captivated by the glorious landscape on view. It was quite stunning. Anne gave his arm an affectionate squeeze. Now approaching fifty, she’d somehow preserved the startling prettiness that had caught his eye when he’d first seen her. She was a promising young acrobat in those days and the subject of constant male attention. To the consternation of her other suitors, Mauro Moscardi had wooed and won her with the promise that they would one day run the circus together. She had never, for a moment, regretted marrying him.

The only other occupant of the compartment was her dog, the Princess of Pomerania, a small poodle with eyes that sparkled with intelligence and with a fluffy white mane around her neck thrown into relief by the well-clipped body. Anne and the Princess were amongst the most popular performers. In a circus dominated by equestrian acts, they were also a welcome variation from the general fare. Nestling against her mistress, the dog gave an elaborate yawn before closing her eyes. While the animal was her most prized possession, Anne Moscardi was also travelling with her jewellery. It was locked away securely in the large strongbox standing on the floor. After a long and profitable visit to Carlisle, it also contained a substantial amount of money.

Moscardi eventually turned his head away from the window.

‘Gianni is to blame,’ he decided.

‘Your brother is a genius.’

‘We should never have let him go to America.’

‘The months he spent there with a circus was a revelation,’ she said. ‘They not only travelled everywhere by train, they performed in a marquee that was easy to transport. Most of our rivals only visit towns that have a big hall or amphitheatre they can use, so there’s a limit to the places where they can perform. Since we are now under canvas, Moscardi’s Magnificent Circus can go *anywhere*. All we need is an open patch of land.’

‘The marquee flaps in a high wind.’

‘It’s safe and secure.’

‘I preferred the wooden structure we used to put up ourselves.’

‘It had its virtues,’ she conceded, ‘but it took an age to erect. Also, it was too similar to the one used by Pablo Fanque’s Circus and look what happened to that. The timber balcony collapsed during a performance in Leeds, killing his wife and causing serious injuries to hundreds of people.’

‘That was a freak accident.’

‘It was also a warning to others. Canvas is best, Mauro.’

‘That’s a matter of opinion,’ he murmured.

‘The marquee has brought us luck. Since we started using it, we’ve never had the slightest trouble.’

‘Don’t tempt Providence.’

‘You always say that.’

‘I can’t help being superstitious, Anne. It’s in my blood.’

She leant across to give him a peck on the cheek then turned her attention to the scenery outside. At their request, the hired train was travelling at a moderate pace out of consideration for their precious livestock. In earlier days, cattle, sheep, pigs and poultry were taken to market in open pens but roofs had

now been added to many of the wagons. The circus horses therefore travelled in relative comfort, with straw at their feet and hay nets to keep them well fed during the journey. Locked in their cages, the lions were also under cover.

Rosie the elephant was the only animal in an open wagon. It was at the rear of the train next to the brake van. The sight of such a large and rare creature caused great interest in every station they passed through. Everyone on the platforms stared in wonder and waved. Labourers in the fields stopped to gape open-mouthed. At one point, when Rosie lifted her trunk and bellowed aloud, she frightened a herd of sheep so much that they scampered over the hillside to escape being trampled to death by the fearsome monster rolling towards them.

The train went on through open countryside filled with scenic delights. Fells, crags, streams, woodland, castles, churches, quaint cottages and sumptuous manor houses went past and the vestiges of Hadrian's Wall came frequently into view. One by one, stations of varying sizes popped up – Scotby, Wetheral, How Mill, Milton, Low Row, Rose Hill, Greenhead, Haltwhistle, Bardon Mill and Haydon Bridge where they crossed the South Tyne river. Moscardi and his wife were now in Northumberland.

Anne eventually broke the long silence.

'This is the way to travel,' she said, expansively. 'We don't have to ride along bad roads the way we used to and camp overnight like Gypsies. That's all in the past. We can travel in style now.'

'It's too expensive.'

'I think it's worth every penny.'

'Well, I don't.'

'Sit back and relax, Mauro. We worked hard in Carlisle.'

We're entitled to a rest and that's exactly what the railway gives us.' She spread her hands. 'This is sheer bliss to me.'

Anne spoke too soon. The moment the words left her mouth, there was an ominous screeching sound as the engine driver suddenly tried to slow the train down for an emergency stop. It juddered, swayed and sent up showers of sparks from the line. Fear spread like wildfire. Something was amiss. Driver and fireman were patently struggling to control the train. After another series of convulsions, there was an awesome thud as the locomotive hit an obstruction.

Mauro, his wife and the dog were thrown across the compartment.

Two timber sleepers wreaked havoc. Laid across the rails, they made the engine pitch off the line. Miraculously remaining upright, it continued on its way along a grass verge, its wheels digging deep into soft earth that helped it to slow more dramatically. Carriages and wagons were dragged along behind it, rocking precariously as they parted company with the rails yet somehow regaining enough balance to avoid being overturned. It was terrifying. People yelled out, animals became hysterical and, when it finally came to a halt against the trunk of a tree, the locomotive hissed angrily. Behind it, zigzagging its way along the grass, was the rolling stock, most of it perched at crazy angles. It was a scene of chaos.

Moscardi's Magnificent Circus had lost its magnificence.