

THE  
MAGPIE'S  
SISTER

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## Chapter One

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It was the easiest thing in the world to take someone else's identity for her own. What was harder was trying to prevent all her lies from catching up with her.

Looking back, Maggie supposed it all began with the death of the elephants. The Braun Brothers' Royal Circus—which had no brothers, nor anything royal about it—was in Parramatta for its annual winter camp. The circus never performed during the cold months. No circus did. If audiences had been willing to sit on hard benches and shiver through a show, the ringmasters and managers would have said to hell with the difficulties and gone through with it. But in July and August, patrons preferred solid buildings to tents whose joins let in sharp slaps of cold air.

Maggie didn't like these winter months. The days were kept pleasantly busy with breaking in new acts, training the horses, repainting the carts, and sewing new costumes, or repairing split seams, frayed hems and lost spangles on old ones. The ringmaster and manager of the Braun Brothers' Royal Circus, Rafferty Braun—a falsified showman's name if Maggie had ever heard one—maintained a watchful eye over them all, pushing, berating

and encouraging so that, come showtime next spring, they'd be able to compete with Hyland's, Wirth's, FitzGerald Brothers and all the best circuses.

If she found herself at a loose end, Maggie volunteered to walk the children the short distance to the few months' official schooling they'd have that year. She was always surprised their parents allowed her this task, and kept a mindful distance so as not to frighten the little ones. Even so, she could hear their grumbles and complaints about having to sit still in a classroom for so long. Most would never receive their Sufficiency Certificate. Unlike Maggie, most would never miss it, or question what else life might have brought them if they'd had that bit of paper. For these children were born to the circus, and it was said that once you'd experienced circus life, the sawdust from the ring got in your veins and you were never rid of it.

Maggie was distracted enough during these daylight hours; yet the winter nights eased themselves in earlier and earlier, and when all went quiet and dark, she would lie on her back and stare at the unfamiliar blank slate of a real ceiling above her, unsettled. Without the endless evening tasks of the performing season—the after-show rituals of taking off and sponging costumes, brushing down the animals and putting them away, wiping skin free of make-up and combing snarls out of slicked-back hair—the thoughts she held at bay for most of the year suddenly deafened her. She didn't want to hear them; she forced her lips to move, a repetitious reminder that she was lucky.

'Be grateful. You know how much worse matters could be.'

The less prosperous circuses disbanded for winter, and their performers could never be sure there'd be a position waiting for them come spring. But the Braun Brothers' Royal Circus had elephants, which made all the difference.

And then Ida died.

They should have seen it coming. The elephant had been lacking her usual vivacity. Her movements were heavy, not just

with her own weight, but with a weariness that spoke of a spirit ready to give up. Why hadn't they taken notice of it? Perhaps it was because they were readying for their spring move back to the Haymarket in nearby Sydney. Whatever the reason, when Ida lay on her side on the hard-packed earth during a last, easy rehearsal, those who watched—idly leaning against a paddock fence that would have been useless against Ida and Hercules' bulk if they'd tried to escape—still didn't understand what they were witnessing. Her wrinkled grey skin heaved, gentle eyes streaming as they blinked once, twice, and then no more. Shock rippled through the circus folk. A silence followed, unusual for them. One onlooker climbed over the fence, then paused, uncertain. He was joined by a few others. Those who hadn't seen the elephant's final breath caught the air of something having gone wrong, and neared the enclosure, seeking to understand where the laughter and noise had gone. When they saw, they too climbed inside, gathering some near distance from Ida. Even Maggie drew close, shoulder-to-shoulder with performers and crew. No one registered her presence; all eyes were on the still elephant, and the bull who paced back and forth near her body, not letting them come closer.

It was unlike Hercules to be so aggressive. When anyone tried to step forward—even the most trusted performers, whom he usually allowed to straddle his neck as he lumbered around the ring—he raised his front feet in the air and waved his trunk in a wild motion that was unmistakably a warning. The crowd stepped back, and he resumed his stance, turning to face Ida. He stretched his trunk until the tip of it caressed her side gently, then did the same to her feet; it was as though he knew what had happened but still couldn't resist trying to wake her.

Maggie tried to blink her tears away. Hercules had always been protective of Ida. Looking at him now, she wondered if finding one special someone and then losing them might be worse than being alone. She sniffed, then pulled out a crumpled linen handkerchief

and wiped her nose, breathing in the animal scent left on the fabric from her own hands, then shoved it back up the cuff of her sleeve. She wasn't the only one who felt the bull elephant's pain; all around her, tears tracked down the dusty cheeks of circus folk who'd only hours before been caught in the hustle and excitement of packing up.

Rafferty took a step toward Hercules. 'Come now,' he said. 'I know you're suffering. I know you're going to miss her. But we can't just let her lie here.' He spoke in a low, reassuring tone, not at all the commanding one he usually used as their trainer. Maggie stepped away from the crowd, circling behind to get a better view.

Hercules reared up again. This time, Rafferty didn't move back; he took a tentative step forward instead, his arms raised in an 'easy, there' motion. Hercules fell back to his feet. Maggie breathed in sharply; the others were making appreciative noises, seeming to believe Rafferty had won this battle, but she knew otherwise. She could see the elephant's eyes from where she stood. No other animal had eyes as human as an elephant's; she could read the sadness, the despair in them. She wasn't surprised when he lifted his trunk and struck out.

It wasn't much of a blow, just a gentle push to keep Rafferty away. But even a gentle push from an elephant has a deal of force behind it, and the ringmaster went sprawling. Hercules turned back to Ida.

For hours Rafferty tried to get Hercules to move. He sent most of the circus folk back to their work—there wasn't much else they could do—but Maggie was drawn to the stand-off again and again, each time experiencing a stab in the left side of her chest when she saw Hercules keeping guard over Ida's still form.

Four years ago, the Braun Brothers' Royal Circus had been the Braun Brothers' Travelling Circus. They'd travelled the south and east coasts of Australia, sometimes making just enough money to keep them going until the next town. But when the American circus that owned Hercules and Ida went bust, having—like so

many international circuses before them—underestimated the difficulty and expense of bringing their endeavour to Australian shores, Rafferty had declared they were looking at a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to expand their small menagerie of horses, a couple of donkeys and one young Jack Russell. They'd all heard tales that elephants and other exotic animals such as tigers and lions were common in overseas circuses, but that was not the case here. Elephants were rare—so rare they were the kind of attraction that would allow a circus to station itself in a single city for an entire season, attracting crowds for three evening performances a week, plus a matinee on Saturdays. The ringmaster attended the auction, having begged and borrowed from every connection he had, even his own employees. While other owners or managers were unable to resist bidding on monkeys, fresh new carts and the horses to go with them, or sturdy trapeze equipment, Rafferty Braun stood silent and still. And when everyone else had diluted their savings, he became the lucky owner of not just one, but both elephants—for the American ringmaster had refused, even in his dire circumstances, to allow the elephants to be separated. They were a couple and needed to remain that way.

So the Braun Brothers' Travelling Circus became the Braun Brothers' Royal Circus, reflecting their new grandeur, and they'd performed to near-sellout audiences ever since. The Haymarket—which had been home to all the best circuses at one point or another—became their permanent home for nine months of every year, and Rafferty was able to pay his debtors back in full in eighteen months. Every winter was spent in the hired pavilion in the Parramatta township, and every spring saw them make the half-day's journey to return to the Haymarket in Sydney, with thrilling new acts to excite the city crowds. Ida and Hercules mounted pedestals, waltzed around the circus ring, paraded with men and women in sparkling costumes riding on their backs. For four years, the elephant couple had turned the Braun Brothers' circus's fortune around.

Now Hercules guarded the body of his lost Ida, keeping all human company away. Rafferty thought perhaps it was some kind of elephant ritual and that all the bull needed was a bit of time. He instructed them to leave Hercules alone, delaying their departure for another night. But the next day Hercules still refused to let anyone come near. Blowflies were landing on Ida's face and sides, and on the untouched apples and lettuce the ringmaster had scattered nearby for Hercules.

'One more night,' Rafferty said. He sounded confident, but it was his showman's voice. Maggie had known him long enough to be able to tell the difference.

One more night made no change. A smell was beginning to come from Ida, and no one had seen Hercules eat or sleep.

Once again most of the performers and crew gathered just inside the paddock fence. 'We can't let him go on like this,' muttered Itsuo, an acrobat and foot juggler. 'He'll fret himself to death. It's cruel just to watch and let it happen.'

'Take the children to Sydney,' Rafferty answered, his voice loud enough to carry even to those few pretending to get on with their work, as though their attention weren't solely fixed on the two elephants. 'I don't want any of the young ones seeing this.'

'Seeing what?' asked the band leader's boy.

Rafferty didn't answer. 'If you have children, go now. The rest of you can stay and help me,' he said. 'Those who are leaving should begin setting up when you get there. I want everything ready by nightfall. The rest of us will join you either late tonight, or tomorrow.' He turned sharply and stalked off toward the cabin that had served as his accommodation for the last three months.

Noise lifted around them, a buzzing of curious voices asking questions no one had the answers to. Maggie, as always, stayed apart from it. She watched as mothers and fathers forced their children's feet into shoes they didn't want to wear, as the ring horses were rugged and tethered to the wagons, and the spare workhorses let free to trot alongside or behind them. She watched

as Judge, the Jack Russell, leapt onto the back of one of the donkeys, his tongue lolling out the side of his mouth in the only expression of joy on all the assorted faces. She watched as even the grooms, who had learned to care for the elephants alongside their horses and donkeys, turned away from Ida and Hercules.

Slowly, the wagon wheels turned, and the circus disappeared down the road, leaving behind a few crew and even fewer performers. Itsuo remained, standing to the left of Maggie, while on her right Greta the sword dancer chewed an already ragged thumbnail.

Rafferty finally reappeared. He was holding an old Snider rifle he occasionally brought out to ward off would-be thieves. Maggie's eyes followed him as he walked toward Hercules; she heard the gasps of those who registered what he was about to do. Everything inside her felt as though it had gone impossibly still; Maggie's heart was no longer beating, her blood not tracking its way through her veins, her breath not gently whispering against her lips. Rafferty stopped in front of Hercules, who turned a wary eye on him.

Rafferty raised the gun a little; not high enough to shoot, but not pointing at the ground as it had been. He hesitated, then lowered it again.

'I can't do it while he's looking at me,' he said. In all her years by Rafferty's side, Maggie had never once heard him sound so uncertain.

'You shouldn't be doing it at all,' said Greta. Maggie had always admired her bravery—only someone who didn't fear pain could do handstands on the points of swords—but her voice trembled now in a way that her hands never did.

'What do you suggest then?' Rafferty was so quiet that had the breeze turned in another direction, they wouldn't have heard him. 'Do I leave Hercules here to starve himself while Ida rots at his feet? What kind of an end is that for him? For anyone?'

No one said anything. Maggie knew they all wanted to argue,

to say that Hercules just needed a little more time. But it was hopeless; the bull was loyal to Ida even in her death and would never leave her. They couldn't abandon him to a long-drawn-out, miserable death of his own. Nor could they leave Ida there, without dignity, spreading who-knew-what manner of diseases.

'Audiences in Sydney are expecting two elephants,' Maggie said quietly. She noticed Greta glance at her, then look away. No one ever wanted to keep their eyes on her for long. 'One elephant, we might get away with. But none . . . We'll be just like every other circus then.' She was saying the words no one else was game to, the words they all knew were true. The elephants had been their drawcard. Without them, they wouldn't last more than a few weeks in Sydney. They would all lose their jobs.

'One problem at a time.' Unlike the others, Rafferty hadn't turned his gaze from Maggie. He never did. His eyes bored into hers, trying to tell her something she couldn't understand. Maggie supposed he was instructing her to shut up. 'Now, who's going to help me?'

There was silence, then Maggie said, 'I will.' She hadn't planned to, but her feet were already moving her forward. She didn't look at anyone's reactions; her eyes were on Hercules and Rafferty, who seemed to be getting bigger as she neared them.

'Are you sure?' Rafferty asked.

At this, a spark of irritation took some of Maggie's numbness. Why were people always doubting her? But she knew why. She set her jaw and nodded her assent. The ringmaster didn't ask again. Instead, he said, 'Get him to look at you, and stay looking at you.'

'Righto.' Maggie stepped closer to Hercules, so she was nearer to him even than Rafferty. She took her handkerchief out from her sleeve once again, gave it a shake or two, then fluttered it in the air as high as she could reach. When she'd caught the bull's attention, she waved her free arm toward Rafferty.

'I suggest those of you not helping us turn away or leave right now,' Rafferty said. Most scattered, some stopping halfway

and turning back, as though they couldn't decide if it was more respectful to leave or stay.

After one quick glance back at them, Maggie returned her attention to Hercules. She refused to look to where Rafferty stood nearby. She imagined him pointing his gun, high and steady this time.

Hercules lifted his trunk. Was he going to push her away? Maggie almost hoped he would. She wanted him to fight back, to prove that he wouldn't just waste away here in mourning, so they wouldn't have to do this. She didn't want mercy to be so ugly.

But the elephant, with those so-human eyes looking straight into her own, simply curled the tip of his trunk around Maggie's raised wrist, running it up her forearm. The sensation was a shock; no one ever touched Maggie.

She looked in those eyes, her own swimming with tears, and mouthed, 'I'm sorry.' She was sure she saw understanding. Was it real, or only what she wanted to see? She held his gaze; held it as his trunk released her arm; held it as he took one step back from her and closer to Ida; held it until she heard the bang and squeezed her eyelids shut.

## Chapter Two

Maggie stood behind the flapping curtain, obscured from the audience, the familiar raw scent of sweat and animal dung tickling her nostrils. She could also make out the waft of buttered popcorn, and when she stepped through the curtain and her slippers crushed the sawdust covering the floor of the ring—half-pulped already by the feet that had come before her—she'd be able to smell that too. But then it would all become lost in the spell of performance, when she ceased being Maggie and became the Lagoon Creature.

The band's blast—was it her imagination, or were they louder than usual tonight, trying to make up for the missing pachyderms with sheer enthusiasm?—was beginning to drop to a lower register. At first, the tone sounded mellow, almost as though they were attempting to lull the audience. But then the beat of a drum rolled, undeniably ominous. That was Maggie's cue. She straightened her costume, nothing more than ragged, uneven squares of brown, green and grey, sewn together to resemble seaweed. There were no sequins or spangles for her. They'd be a waste.

Behind her, she could hear the hushed swearing of the workmen, who knew they'd be fined if the ringmaster heard

them. She lowered her head, jutting her chin forward, then scrunched her shoulders high and a little behind her neck. She moved through the curtain and forward into the ring, dragging one leg behind her, giving the impression it was numb. She hated this moment most of all. When, despite her best efforts to escape into a character that had been made for her, she was still Maggie.

There it was: that audible ripple of fear, a sharp intake of breath that united the audience every single night.

Maggie believed the gasps weren't for the costume or strange, uneven movements. They were gasping at her face. Her true face.

For Maggie did not paint her features, as the others did. She didn't even know if the hibiscus petals they crushed to stain their lips and cheeks would work on her skin. It might just draw more attention to the soft, pink lumps that covered most of her face. Either way, no amount of stain could distract from how her jaw swelled on one side, joining a large fold of neck in one even cascade, nor the protruding right brow that made one eye appear recessed.

Maggie had not even been able to form full sentences yet when this condition of hers began to make itself known. It had started mildly enough, with coffee-coloured patches appearing suddenly on her face, and freckles scattering the skin of her armpits. Her father had thought it a darling little aberration, blowing raspberries in her armpits and telling her that his scratchy stubble had left the marks there. But then the first tumour appeared. They couldn't have known then that the fleshy, pea-sized lump on her cheekbone had anything to do with the unusual patches and freckles. Just as they couldn't have known how much Maggie's life was about to change.

Maggie wasn't sure how her father had paid for the doctor's visit. Stolen something and sold it off, probably. Her mother certainly wouldn't have had anything to do with it.

The doctor, efficient and brusque but with a kindly manner, hadn't known what to make of Maggie's new lump. He hadn't

even uttered the word 'tumour' that first visit. But he was a curious man and asked questions of others and read widely until he had a name for what he thought it likely to be. Von Recklinghausen's disease. A diagnosis that didn't come with relief, for there was no cure or treatment. In fact, Maggie and her father were assured it would worsen as she grew older, only finally stagnating sometime in the third decade of her life.

The doctor was correct. Maggie had watched as the face she'd once known—plain, but at least similar to everyone else's—had changed beyond recognition. And then she'd stopped looking.

Maggie steeled herself now against the audience's noise. The dummies, non-speaking clowns who nonetheless ably conveyed horror, went into hiding, ducking behind barrels or other performers. One even dived beneath the undercarriage of a horse. *Traitors*, Maggie thought. She'd always considered herself and her role in the circus as being most like the clowns.

Maggie half-limbed, half-crawled around the edge of the ring. A gas-powered spotlight waited in the centre for her, but she would change direction only at the very last moment. She took her time, keeping close to the audience. Rafferty wanted them to see her face and know this was no trick.

But she had her own reasons for getting so close.

She scanned the tiered rows, eyes skipping past women in white hats with curls spilling from beneath their brims; past men in smart jackets and tightly buttoned waistcoats; past children whose wide eyes might make her lose her resolve. Waiting until she found what she was looking for. It happened in every show, and tonight was no different. Maggie's eyes connected with those of a man in a flat-topped hat with a dark band around it. His gaze didn't dart away and she leered at him, stepping closer, nearly breaching the barrier between performer and audience. Those who were game to meet her nightly challenge always had the long-distance look of someone searching for something. She could see it in this man's eyes now as they moved the tiniest bit side to side: the search for

a hint of a soul inside Maggie. That's how much they believed her to truly be a monster.

Maggie screwed up her posture even more; the man didn't believe he'd find what he was looking for. They never did. So she met his expectation, and instead of giving him something human, she radiated hate. It was part of the act, a part not for the audience, but for herself. If Maggie hated them hard enough, she could almost fool herself into believing she didn't long to be one of them, pointing and hiding frightened giggles behind their raised hands as they marvelled at the freak.

The audience was restless that night—it had been months since they were last treated to an evening at the circus and they were simultaneously drunk on the excitement and impatient to see the elephants, who were always the stars of the show. But they quietened now, watching Maggie's act. There was never silence in a circus—even if the band stopped playing, there would still be the cracking of a tooth on an un-popped corn kernel, the low clearing of a ticklish throat, the shuffle of hooves from impatient horses backstage—but Maggie's act was the closest it came.

She made her way into the spotlight, where every year Rafferty had her jeer at the audience and threaten one of the more admired performers. This season it was Greta, who performed her sword dance with Maggie hissing and swiping at her, until the sword dancer finally lunged forward to thrust her weapon through Maggie's side, defeating her. A parry timed with precision; the sharp blade slid between Maggie's arm and ribcage making it look as though she'd been stuck through. The moment, although quick and well-practised, left Maggie a little breathless, as always. She knew the blade was real and could slip between her ribs without much difficulty. But the key to any circus act was to trust the person you performed with. Hesitation—even the tiniest flinch—could be deadly. Maggie never knew if Greta was as nervous as she, for they didn't speak beyond what was necessary, but the sword dancer's gaze was unblinking as she made the final thrust.

She didn't look her in the eye, but that, Maggie told herself, was because she was watching where the sword was going.

Vanquished, Maggie fell to the sawdust, careful not to land on the sword's blade. The audience erupted in cheers. Their feet were a triumphant rumble of thunder on the stands, only increasing in volume when Smith, the strong man—whose costume was filled with balled-up scrap fabric to make him look even more muscular—shoved his hands beneath Maggie's back and lifted her above his head to show off her limp form, still staked with the sword.

Maggie's arm was beginning to ache with the strain of keeping the weapon pinned to her side, but she barely noticed it. Her attention was on Smith's palms, warm on her back, even through the fabric of her costume, and she was reminded of Hercules's strong yet gentle trunk meeting her skin. She usually kept her eyes closed in the final death throes of her performance, not wanting to disrupt—or witness—the audience's celebration of her demise. But she cracked her eyelids open a fraction, for tears had gathered and needed an escape. She allowed them to trickle slowly down her cheeks, safe in the knowledge they were too small to be noticed by anyone.

Smith carried her toward the edge of the ring. Maggie could feel the audience's attention shift. They were no longer looking at the Lagoon Creature; she'd been conquered. Itsuo, who came cartwheeling into the ring, caused awed gasps, and with that sound she knew she was forgotten.

Smith pushed through the canvas curtain between the ring and backstage, then put her down with a jolt. Maggie didn't think he meant to hurt her; it was just that he'd never considered she might feel anything. She was nothing more than a sack of potatoes to be carried around.

Maggie dusted off the pale handprints Smith had left on her costume—his hands were covered in fake, a rosin powder mostly used by the equestrians in their bareback riding acts—then she moved to the curtain and pulled it back a fraction. She rarely

watched the show after her act was done, except for the finale—which she alone wasn't part of, for it would have ruined the illusion of her death—for the audience's response to the finale told her whether the show had been a success or not, so she never missed it. After her act, she usually changed out of her costume right away, stepping with relief back into her worn and faded blouse and skirt, cut unfashionably high, just above the ankle, to make it easier to move around and help out wherever help was needed. Sometimes that meant brushing the horses down and bedding them, a job the grooms never thanked her for even though they would be fined if the task wasn't promptly attended to. But then, they didn't thank the children whose chore it was to assist them in this job, either. On other nights, she'd be needed to quickly stitch back together a torn seam, or talk over a problem in the show with Rafferty, who seemed to like using her as a sounding-board. Probably because she never tried to find ways of promoting herself as a solution, as most other performers did.

But tonight she was uneasy, and stayed put. Rafferty had not let the audience know there would be no elephants. There'd been no time; disposing of Ida and Hercules's remains had taken them to their very first performance. Their posters still depicted the two grey beasts standing proudly either side of the circus's name. Maggie couldn't help but fear the audience might feel short-changed.

Greta emerged from the ring, and Maggie held out the sword that had dealt her death-blow. Greta took it without a word. She was moving fast, stripping off layers of her costume to don a new one. Sensing her tension—Greta had enough time to make the quick change, but the first performance always felt like a gathering of every doubt and uncertainty possible—Maggie silently picked up the short, spangle-covered skirt that was waiting, held it out so Greta could step into it, then bent over to do up the buttons on the back, a task made difficult due to Greta moving as she sheathed her swords. With a whistle through her teeth, Greta

summoned Judge. He danced at her feet, then paused, his energy tightly controlled, proud chest jutting forward. Maggie held the curtain back, and Judge shot into the ring, Greta following him with a bright smile and a wave. She hadn't said a single word the whole time; Maggie wasn't even sure the sword dancer had noticed who it was that was helping her.

Maggie let the curtain fall, leaving just enough of a gap to see Judge pose as a living statue. It made the audience laugh, and their amusement grew as he turned somersaults in the air at Greta's command, his little brown and white body tumbling over and over, tail wagging after each successful landing. Maggie stepped aside again, making way for two donkeys with kerchiefs tied around their necks to amble out into the ring. Judge sprang onto the back of the first donkey, then they trotted in circles around the barrier while he leapt back and forth between them. Maggie thought she could hear the audience getting restless. The act was going on too long, and when the donkeys climbed up onto the high edge of the ring for one final parade, their applause had the hollow sound of politeness.

It was time for the finale. Rafferty had carefully choreographed it for sheer spectacle: the funambulist posing overhead on her tightrope, clowns cavorting beneath her, the horses circling the ring, the feathers protruding from their headpieces bobbing. The riders standing on the horses' backs held their arms up high as Rafferty, on his podium at the centre of it all, cracked his whip.

Maggie could tell a good show by the way the audience began clapping or cheering before the final flourishes had even been completed. Tonight, there was nothing but quiet.

After several seconds, one or two indistinct shouts emerged from the crowd. Then, very clearly, one man's voice called, 'Oy, what do you think you're doing? Where's the elephants?' His words seemed to bounce around the canvas. There were sounds of agreement from those nearest him. Heads further afield turned

to see who had voiced what they'd all been thinking, and some men got to their feet.

'We paid for elephants!' another shouted. Maggie saw a young boy in the front row burst into tears.

'Mama, I want to see the elephants. You said we would!' he shrieked, enjoying being part of the noise. His mother pulled him to her bosom with one hand, the wide brim of her hat dancing with indignation.

The band struck up once more, an attempt to drown out the audience's upset. They shouldn't have. The crowd only shouted louder still, standing and raising their fists. Some women ushered their children out, afraid the crowd would turn violent.

'Give us our money back!' The words turned into a chant. Fistfuls of popcorn went flying. Maggie stepped back, taking the curtain with her so it stood open, hoping someone in the ring would see it and know it was time to leave.

A few did, mostly those with animals who were becoming unnerved, their senses picking up that this was not the usual noise at the end of a performance. Maggie saw the flaring nostrils of the horses as they went by, the raised fur on Judge's neck.

And then the band stopped. It wasn't the neat, sudden silence of most nights, but a dwindling of instruments, one by one, as though no one was really sure of their place in the music and they were slowly giving up. Maggie peered around the curtain and saw Rafferty waving his hands at the band, shushing them; their white-helmeted heads turned to one another, a small, jostling sea of confusion. She clenched her hands so tight her nails dug into the calluses—earned from years of handling circus equipment—on her palms.

What was Rafferty doing?

He raised his voice. Maggie made out a faint sound, but it was nothing more than a mosquito hum beneath a storm. Finally, enough people elbowed their neighbours quiet so that he could be heard.

'I know you love and appreciate our elephants as much as we do, and for that we've always been grateful. It is therefore with utmost sadness that I have to announce the recent passing of both Ida and Hercules.'

A roar went through the crowd. Was it disappointment? Shock? The thrill of knowing that their anger could continue unabated? Maggie didn't know. She licked lips that had gone dry, the taste of sweat and sawdust on them.

'You swindler!' shouted a man who'd taken his hat off and was waving it furiously in the air. Others jeered. Maggie could see the whites of Rafferty's eyes as he glanced back at the band, his hands flapping so fast they were almost a blur.

And with a burst, the band began playing 'God Save the King'.

The audience's shouts were cut off in a strangled noise as they groped for the appropriate words. She could see fury settling over their features; they knew they'd been bested by the ringmaster, at least until the end of the song. Even the angriest among them would not disrupt the national anthem.

By the time the final note died away, it was as though someone had extinguished the lit fuse. Many screwed up their popcorn bags and threw them at the ring in disgust as they left. They would not be telling their friends and families about the joy of the circus. The spectacles they'd seen that night, all the marvels they'd ooh'ed and aah'ed over, that the performers had sweated over, injured themselves practising, worked at until their muscles ached and their bodies could do the impossible, would be forgotten. All they'd remember was that there'd been no elephants.

Maggie watched the performers' faces as they filed through the curtain. Did they understand what this meant? Some appeared to. Others just looked tired. A few, the silliest of the lot, tried to laugh about it and make jokes.

Finally, out came Rafferty. His face was pale underneath the rosy paint on his cheeks. He took off his black top hat, exposing the strands of hair that sweat had slicked across his scalp. Maggie

could see that his fingers trembled against the hat brim. Performers went up to him, crowding around, piling one question on top of another.

‘How are we going to replace Ida and Hercules?’

‘Should we leave all the animal acts until the finale? Would that make a difference?’

‘What do we do if it happens again tomorrow?’

‘Not right now,’ Rafferty sighed, holding one hand up. His palm was red from swinging his whip so ferociously. ‘You all have jobs to do. Come on, no slacking off just because we had a bad night. Tomorrow’s a new day.’

They all moved away quickly. Only Maggie, with no official after-show duties, remained behind. She watched as Rafferty balanced his hat back on his head and ran his hands over his face. She was still, waiting; she knew that he knew she was there.

‘We’ll have to go,’ he said finally, dropping his hands to meet her gaze. There was a bleak look in his tobacco-coloured eyes, disappointment and perhaps the tiniest touch of fear. That should’ve frightened Maggie too. For Rafferty was a blustery kind of person, always seeing the next opportunity to be taken advantage of, the next fortune to be made. He reminded her a little of her father in that way—only Rafferty had much more success with his endeavours and kept them strictly legal.

But instead of being frightened, Maggie’s backbone straightened. The thing had already happened; she wasn’t going to waste time being bothered over something that couldn’t be changed. That was a lesson she’d learned long ago, living with a face like hers.

‘I know,’ she said, the simple words flat and devoid of any emotion. She was reminding Rafferty that he couldn’t show his fear or break down. There were too many people relying on him. Hearing this silent message, Rafferty also straightened a little. ‘How long have we got?’ Maggie asked.

‘We’ll have to make it quick. There’s nothing much for us here now. Our bridge is ruined. Tonight’s show proved that.’ Maggie

nodded—the bridge was the circus's outward image, and theirs had always been immaculate until then. 'We should go within the week, if we can manage it.'

The next few days would be busy. There were supplies to purchase, a tracker to be retained. Their horsemanship and tumbling licences would need to be renewed and extended for as long as possible, so they could keep performing. Accounts with their local Sydney suppliers must be paid up and closed. Not to mention packing everything they'd only just brought to the Haymarket.

The Braun Brothers' Royal Circus was about to become a travelling circus once more.