

# **A MAGIC LIFE**



**A Sneak Peek of a Novel in Progress by  
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# ALSO BY CHRISTOPHER GRONLUND

*Hell Comes with Wood Paneled Doors*

*Promise*

~ ~ ~

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Why allow others to copy and share a work in progress? Simple: people usually share the things they love with others, and I hope you love this preview enough to share it.

Am I worried about putting my idea out there; after all, someone could *steal* it! No, I'm not worried. *Anyone* is free to write a story about a female magician's rise to fame in the 40s and 50s. For me, or any other writer, to lay claim to an idea is ridiculous. If someone takes these very words and claims them as their own, I'd pity them. We all know who wrote this by me sharing it right now. Even *if* someone claimed these words as their own, anything they'd write following these three chapters would be very different than what I'll write. I'm confident enough in my voice as a writer that anyone who would resort to "stealing" words would not be able sustain the tone beyond this sample. If they took the *idea* and ran with it, more power to them.

With that out of the way, I hope you enjoy what you're about to read. Thank you so much for taking a peek.

— Christopher



# **PART ONE**

# CHAPTER ONE

## *Breath of Life*



**J**une Mangione is born shortly after her mother is cut in half. Her first trick is an escape: slipping free from the soft grasp of her mother's womb like handcuffs, untangling herself from umbilical chains—writhing and contorting as she makes her way through the birth canal as though she were shedding a strait

jacket—she kicks and fights until being delivered two months early into the hands of a waiting clown. Her arrival is a surprising appearance in a world where most things disappear.

“That's not right,” the clown says.

June's mother tries sitting up on the hay bales covered by two horse blankets emblazoned with BARNES BROS. CIRCUS serving as a delivery bed. “What's wrong?”

“She ain't much bigger than a yam, Angie.”

“She? Is she breathing?”

The clown puts his ear to June's face. “Shit!” He rolls June over, cradling her in his large hands, the umbilical cord dangling between his fat fingers. He works his pinky into June's mouth, checking for blockage.

June's mother gets her first look. “She's blue!”

“I'm trying, Angie!” The clown rocks June back and forth in his hands, but she still isn't breathing. “Where's the damn doctor?!”

Angie sits up and grabs her leg. “Ow!”

“What's wrong?” the clown says.

“Leg cramp. Happened in the ring.” She reaches out for June.

Moments before June's arrival, her mother climbed into an illusion cabinet and was sawed in half by her husband before a crowd gathered beneath a circus tent on a hot summer day. The initial tinges of birth came shortly before the show, small contractions that let Angie know the baby was coming sooner than planned. But it's a performer's job to go on no matter what. She had hid June well. She was still able to wear costumes without the crowd noticing from a distance that she carried with her more than just a smile and moves to redirect their attention, but it was clear to those in the know that a backup assistant would soon be needed. Angie could only dance, gesture, and contort into illusion cabinets so long before the weight of her husband's regret grew too big inside her belly to remain concealed.

The cramps came as June's father slid two blades on either side of the cut he'd just made with a large saw. He separated each half of the box to show the audience that he had just cut his wife in half before their eyes. June's mother felt the warm rush of amniotic fluid between her legs as the two pieces of the cabinet were rejoined and the blades removed. When the cabinet was opened, and Angie's husband offered his hand to help her out, she sat up in

the cabinet and waved to the audience, smiling through the pain. It was enough proof that she'd survived, and they burst into applause. Beneath the clapping, Angie said, "The baby's coming." She was wheeled away and taken back stage.

"She's bleeding!" one of the aerialists says. She points to the mess spilling from between Angie's legs.

"Angie, we need to take care of you," Hank the clown says.

"No!"

"We need to cut the cord."

"Not yet," Angie says. She doesn't care that she's bleeding.

"Let me hold her."

"She's still not breathing, Angie."

"I know."

"Angie, listen to Hank," the aerialist says. "We need to stop the bleeding."

"Give me my daughter."

Hank the clown hands June to her mother. Angie lies back, cradling June to her chest. She coos in a reassuring tone as she gently pats and rubs June's back. "Come on, honey. Breathe."

Nothing.

Angie's trembling hands trace the contours of June's back.

“Breathe.”

Nothing.

“Angie?” Hank says. “Let us help you.”

“We need to help *her*,” Angie says.

Hank looks down; a tear falls on one of his oversized, colorful shoes. “There's nothing more we can do.”

Angie shakes her head and pulls June closer. She kisses the top of June's head and whispers something to her; then she closes her eyes, exhales one last time, and loosens her hold on her daughter. Moments later, June's first breath—a cry that can be heard all the way out to the audience—lets the world know that a magic life has just begun.

Hank passes the bottle to June's father, Joseph. Joseph stares at it for a moment and takes a long pull, letting the whiskey burn its way down his throat and settle into his belly like a cigar ember. He stares off across the field where the BARNES BROTHERS CIRCUS has set up, watching the evening settle in over the trees.



Joseph holds the bottle by its neck and rocks it back and forth on his knee.

“What the hell am I going to do?” he says.

“You're gonna get through this is what you're gonna do,” says Hank.

“I suppose.” Joseph hands the bottle of whiskey back to Hank, who sets it aside. “What do I do with her is what I wonder.”

“Who?”

“My daughter. Do I let somebody else raise her? Do I bring her up, here?” he says, gesturing toward the colorful big top that's taken up residence in a field in a town Joseph has never even heard of. “And what do we do with Angie?”

“You don't need to know the answers to all these things right now. Right now you should just rest.”

“You know something, Hank? When you're not wearing makeup, you're quite a respectable looking guy.”

“And when you're not drunk and piling a ton of problems on your shoulders, you look like you can own the world.”

“That was always the goal,” Joseph says. “Did I tell you Angie and I were about to get some parlor shows when we found out she was pregnant?”

“You've mentioned that more than a couple times when we've been drinking, yes.”

Joseph points to the field before the tree line in the distance.

“What?” Hank says.

“There. It's one of the few things I like about the circus.”

As if on cue, Joseph bobs his finger up and down, and a firefly dips and glows for a moment. Soon, others follow—Joseph bobbing his fingers up and down like a conductor of light.

“When I was a kid, I used to think I made them appear.”

“Kids think funny things,” Hank says.

“Yes.” He continues pretending he is directing the light show. Beneath the sound of a breeze rocking the distant trees, crickets join in—a natural symphony just for Joseph, his dead wife, and his new-born daughter. Joseph stops moving his hands; he looks at Hank and says, “I wonder what kind of funny things she'll think as she grows older?”

“There's only one way to know for certain,” Hank says.

“She wouldn't be the first kid to be raised by the circus.”

\* \* \*

June's earliest memories come in flashes, storms etched forever in her mind by chemical lightning bolts that never stop burning where they strike. She lives in a world of sound and color, lulled to sleep by the growling of tigers and the trumpeting of elephants. In the morning, the squawks of large birds pull her from dreams of faraway places. By breakfast, the calls of roustabouts and singers practicing become background noise that would seem louder than thunder if everything suddenly stopped and gave way to silence. Wherever she turns, a kaleidoscope: the tent, yellow and red, taking over a field of grass as though it were spilled from a bucket. The peeling paint from the train cars gathering on the ground like brittle flakes of colorful snow. Costumes sparkle, the world blurs before her—she will never know what it is to be bored.

It doesn't stop with just sound and sight—all of June's senses join in the dance. The stench of dung and damp straw bales is oddly soothing, something always there at the bottom of it all, reminding her she lives in a world of extremes. Not many children

her age know the scent of grease paint and spirit gum. The feel of summer grass beneath her feet as dancers chase fireflies with her in the gloaming will never get old. In contrast, there is cold steel: tent poles, cages, and heavy tools. She's long learned that the rough wood sides of the train car she calls home leave behind splinters if she tries tracing the garish images painted on its outer walls. It's a world as dangerous as it is magical. Finally, there are flavors: cotton candy melting on her tongue, stuffed cabbage and soups cooked by the Hungarians from the horse show, the ever-present taste of sawdust at the back of her throat.

If she lives to be 100, her mind crammed full of a lifetime of thoughts and memories waiting to be forgotten, these days will be the last to go.

## CHAPTER TWO

### *Early Memories*

As the world slips from blue to black and the lamps in the sleeping car are lit, a knock on the door near the coupling signals the arrival of Hank and *the book*. June, huddled in her bedding and surrounded by blankets, watches Hank approach, the peaks of the rounded landscape of his face glowing in the lamplight. Each night before chatting with Joseph, Hank reads June's favorite story from the book, the one about white horses and blue winds. But tonight Hank reads a different story; this one, about a brother and sister who are given five long-legged jackrabbits by a man in exchange

for them helping free him from the gallows. It's not the story June expected, but she gives it a chance, her interest growing at the mention of the rabbits. She loves the descriptions of the jackrabbits, all striped and spotted—nothing like the plain, white rabbit June's father uses in his act. At the end of the story, as the brother and sister jump the rabbits over a tall building in a city, she loves how Hank practically shouts *Zingo!* and *Zango!* as each rabbit takes off. But most of all, she loves the part about the last rabbit leaping over the building, into the sky, and going on and on and up and up, never to be seen from again.

\* \* \*

The clouds build in the afternoon, and June can't help but notice the anticipation of something bigger all around. The sideshow strong man points at the towering thunderheads rising high above the trees and fields, and says, "Looks like we're in for a rough one." The animals sense it, too; their keepers do all they can to calm the menagerie that June has learned to use to gauge the severity of things. If the animals are restless, there's cause for worry. Bosses bark orders, and roustabouts do as they're told,

ensuring that everything is as tight as can be. All that's left to do is hope they're spared.

The humidity weighs on June's chest as Hank reads to her. Like many nights, lately, her father is away. She's grown used to it, but she still doesn't like knowing he's somewhere else. No matter how quietly Hank and Joseph speak when her father returns, June always stirs, watching the changing of the guard through half-opened eyes. Her father usually smells like whiskey and perfume when he comes in. Some nights he counts money before finally fading away to sleep, a fistful of cash still in his hands. Other nights, June gets the feeling her father's lost something; those nights, he's left empty handed, looking lost and worried before falling asleep.

The storm announces its arrival with blasts of wind that rock the car. June opens her eyes, happy to see Hank stirring in the wingback chair nestled in the corner. Their eyes meet and Hank says, "It's okay." But it doesn't sound okay to June. Outside, the sky opens, releasing its fury on the circus. Animals cry out from their cages, and even Hank looks uneasy, despite raising his index finger to his lips hoping to calm her. The wind shifts without warning,

sucking the humidity from the car. Down goes the tent and up go cries for help. Hank stands and tells her, “I’ll be right back. You’ll be okay.” His eyes don’t lie—at least Hank *believes* all will be well. Still, June is on edge. She hugs the blankets to her chest as Hank heads into a storm that sounds like a train.

June is fine until something big slams against the side of the car. She listens to trees cracking and even more yelling from outside. She hears Hank shouting orders. As long as she hears Hank, she’s safe, but just to be sure, she gets up and crosses the interior of the car. She opens the wardrobe where her father still keeps her mother’s old outfits and clothes. She steps in, losing herself in the caress of fabric. As the car shakes and rattles, she presses her face into a long, fur coat that June imagines made her mother look like a queen in winter.

\* \* \*

It’s a cool, spring day; the sun shines through the openings where the tent fastens to the king poles, high up above it all. Standing in a shaft of light, June’s father looks like an important man as he works with a new assistant, going over the routine. June watches from a distance, knowing that Joseph does not like to be



interrupted during these times. June doesn't understand why the woman who once flew through the air on a trapeze would exchange temporary flight for being crammed into boxes and sawed in half, but there are many things about adults that make no sense to her. When practice is over, June steps into the ring.

As Joseph and his new assistant wheel away crates and cabinets that are as everyday to June as toys and a stable home are to other children her age, she says, "Can I help?"

Her father says, "No."

As he turns back to stowing his gear, June wanders toward the items still in the ring and picks up her father's wand. While things disappearing and reappearing is all June has ever known, it's still magic—just not as astonishing to her as is to others who pay to see the circus. She is surprised the wand isn't as heavy as expected; it is, after all, where the magic comes from. She waves it around, hoping for something to happen, but nothing disappears or reappears. She sees her father's top hat and picks it up.

She closes her eyes tight and thinks about the stripped and spotted jackrabbit in the story Hank reads to her that she's come to love almost as much as "The White Horse Girl and the Blue Wind

Boy.” She can almost see the rabbit materializing as she concentrates, her father’s top hat in her right hand and the wand in her left. As she tries to decide which makes a better magic word—*Zingo!* or *Zango!*—her father snatches the wand from her hand.

“Be careful with that!” he says as June reaches for the wand in panic. The rabbit is trapped, somewhere between here and there, and it’s all June’s fault. She cries out as the hat is pulled from her other hand.

“Papa!” she shouts.

“What?”

“The jackrabbit!”

Joseph looks at the hat and then the wand, finally getting it. Then he says the four words that change June’s life: “Girls don’t do magic!”

As he puts the hat and wand with his other gear and wheels it away, June refuses to cry; instead, she decides from that moment forward, she will do everything she can to prove her father wrong.

\* \* \*

For June's sixth birthday, Hank gives her a blank notebook and a Waterman fountain pen. Joseph shakes his head and says, "Children use pencils, not ink."

Hank says, "There's nothing to spill, Joseph. Everything's in the pen."

"Those things can still make a mess." Joseph looks at his daughter.

Hank looks at him. "It's her birthday..."

"All right." Joseph turns toward June. "Promise me you won't use that anywhere but at the desk? And only when I'm here or Hank is here?"

"I promise."

"And if you make a mess or need help, you tell us?"

"I will."

"Okay," Joseph says. He shakes his head and looks at Hank, who shrugs as if to say, "*Sorry—a mess never crossed my mind.*"

That night while Joseph is away and Hank sits in the corner, reading, June sits at her father's desk staring at a blank page. When Hank says, "What are you writing?" she feels the need to tell him something; after all, it was a gift from him.

“It's a story about a girl who is a magician,” she says.

She waits for Hank to tell her that girls can't be magicians; instead he says, “That sounds like a great story.”

The next day, while June is away playing, Joseph comes across the notebook. He opens it and reads: “*This is a story about a girl magician named June. June was the best magician ever. She was better than any boy magician.*”

Joseph shakes his head and laughs.

“*Her papa told her she could not be a magician, but she wanted to be one. She told him she was going to be a magician and he asked her how she knew.*”

Joseph stops laughing when he reads: “*So she said, 'Because, Papa, there are places where your eyes don't go—places only magicians know—where everything goes away and then comes back...'*”

\* \* \*

June doesn't understand what, “Your father has company tonight,” has to do with her spending the night in Hank's car, but she doesn't mind: she likes all the books and records Hank has. Sometimes the car she shares with her father is too crowded,

especially when traveling, when her father insists all the gear necessary for his show rides with them. Hank has just enough: a bed, a small desk, and crates full of books. He's one of a handful who are enough of a fixture in the circus to have his own quarters. The other reason June likes spending the night in Hank's car: there is always music. Not the raucous sounds of the circus band and calliope, but instead, music that fills the car with a sense of magic and wonder not even summoned during her father's act in the big tent.

The music comes from a portable player that looks like a wooden suitcase to June. Once the crank is inserted in the hole in the front and the player wound, the clicking and clacking of the winding music in its own right, Hank places a record on the turntable. What comes next is anyone's guess. There are guitars and horns that cause June to tap her foot to the beat. There are operas filled with the sounds of deep-voiced men June can feel in her chest and the sustained, high notes of women that hang in the air like ghosts on a tightrope. June's favorite sounds come from violins and cellos—woody sounds that beat back the stresses of the day and

leave all who listen a little more connected to the things that matter in life than they were before.

This night, as June adds to the stories in her notebook and Hank reads, the music stops her. Two violins, a viola, and a cello gallop through Hank's car. In her mind, she can see the hooves of horses slapping through leaves and a woman looking back in fear as something chases her. Soon, the sawing sound of a violin rises up above it all, calling like a bird in the night until the rest of the quartet joins in, sending chills through her entire being. She thinks back to the night when the tornado came through the circus, how scared she was thinking it would be the last time she ever saw Hank or her father. The frenzy of the four instruments builds until the sky in June's mind opens with sorrow and spills onto the land all its blood. She thinks about her mother and fights back tears. All June knows about her is in the wardrobe her father refuses to empty; from a photo her father keeps tucked away in a drawer; through the occasional stories she hears Hank and her father share about when her mother was still alive.

This piece of music reminds June of a death she does not remember. She fights the urge to see if she can break her Waterman

pen and rip her notebook in half; to go through Hank's crates, scattering books and records all about the car in a rage she's never felt before. All at once, she realizes she's been robbed.

And then...

The music changes.

The thundering of hooves gives way to the sun breaking through clouds after a storm—or night giving way to day. She turns to Hank, wanting to ask him everything he remembers about her mother. In the dim glow from the oil lamp near his chair, he sits with his eyes closed, but not asleep; somehow June knows this. And she also knows she's not the only one in the car who's missing a very important piece of their life.

\* \* \*

June's favorite season is autumn, when late blossoms scatter like snow on breezes before giving way to colorful leaves that fall like fires from treetops. She charges through the blanket of leaves outside the circus grounds, laughing and leaving a green trail cutting through it all in her wake. She spins and rolls, covering herself in the season's decay. Eventually she tires and stands in the

clearing with her arms stretched toward the sky, wishing the wind would carry her away like a leaf.

High above her at the edge of the clearing, from the top of a bright maple, she watches a leaf break free from a branch. Circling and flopping, it tumbles down. With only a couple steps this way and that, June positions herself beneath the leaf, catching it in her fingertips as though it were a rehearsed act.

Later that evening, her father sees the ends of the red leaf poking out from the notebook June slowly works to fill with stories about her young magician. Joseph opens the book and picks up the leaf. “What's this?”

“That's a maple leaf.”

“I know,” Joseph says. “Why do you have it?”

“Because maple leaves are my favorite.”

“Why is that?”

June thinks about it a moment—she's never given it any thought. Finally she says, “Because maple leaves always shine the brightest before they die.”

\* \* \*



No sooner than they arrive in a new town one evening, Hank arrives with a handful of books and Joseph heads out for the evening. The rail car is crowded with Joseph's gear; as Hank sits reading, June opens a crate and pulls out her father's magic wand. She waves it about, shouting *Zingo!* and *Zango!* as she points at things. Hank laughs and sets his book down. He rummages through a crate, steps over to the desk, and says, "Come here."

June wanders over, still holding the wand.

Hank says, "You can't tell your father I showed you this." He opens his hand; in his palm is a rubber ball.

He closes his fingers around it and it reappears in his other hand. He places it back in his other hand; when he opens it, the ball is gone. He reaches behind June's ear, producing the ball. June laughs as Hank seemingly passes the ball through the desk, makes it disappear and reappear from pockets, and even come out of his mouth. June waves the wand over Hank's hand.

Hank laughs and says, "It's a trick, sweetheart."

He shows her how when he places the ball in his left hand from his right, he pulls it back into his right hand while making it look like he's wrapping the fingers of his left hand around it. He

shows her fake drops and real drops; how he keeps it all moving quickly to misdirect the person watching; how he can hold the ball with his palms while making it seem like his hands are open when viewed from above.

June stops waving the wand around and says, “That’s not real magic.”

“Of course,” Hank says. “It’s all a trick.”

“No it isn’t,” June says.

“Sure it is.”

June shakes her head *no*. She points to Hanks left hand with the wand. “Put the ball there.”

Hank does as he’s told.

“Put your other hand behind your back.”

Hank does.

“Close your hand.”

Hank closes his fingers around the ball in his left hand. June waves the wand above it and shouts, “*Zingo!*” Then she says, “Open your hand.”

Hank does, and the ball is gone.

“*Zango!*”

“How did you do that?” Hank says. He almost looks frightened.

June sets the wand on the desk and smiles. “Papa says a good magician never tells how they do their tricks.”

\* \* \*

June charges through a field of soft grass as the sun goes down. There are always fields on the outskirts of towns where the big top goes up, but it’s a coin toss whether the field will be inviting to bare feet or not. This is the softest grass June has ever felt. There’s something magical about the evening: the temperature neither warm nor cool; the air neither thick with humidity nor empty and dry. As she rushes about, June feels a connection to it all that she’s never felt before—every atom seems to crackle with life and glow. It almost seems familiar.

The grass is so soft beneath her feet that she can barely feel it, as though she’s gliding above it all, the tips of each blade tickling the soles of her feet as they hold her aloft. Looking back over her shoulder as she races toward a tree line in the distance, the circus seems distorted, like she’s looking at it through a bottle. Everything else is seen with a clarity that goes much deeper than vision. She

can feel it, sensing things in ways she's never felt before. Somewhere in her mind, every firefly—every grain of pollen—is cataloged. Everything is in its right place...except the woman in white standing before the trees.

June is not afraid; she continues running toward the trees—now running toward the woman glowing in the last bit of sunlight this day will see. She stops several feet before the woman, squishing the grass between her toes before raising her head. Looking at the woman is like staring into a mirror showing the future.

“Hello,” June says, and the woman in white smiles. “My name is June.”

A single tear trickles down the woman's cheek.

“Are you lost?”

The smile returns, and the woman leans forward, kissing the top of June's head. Then she whispers the first words June ever heard.

June looks up, and the woman is gone. The trees are dark, and the fireflies have all gone away. A cold breeze comes across the grass, its chill caressing the tops of June's feet. She turns back and

races toward the light of the circus in the distance. As she enters its glow—the familiar scents of the circus at night welcoming her home—she doesn't dare look back at the trees. Not for fear of seeing something she doesn't understand, but for fear of seeing nothing at all.



## CHAPTER THREE

### *An Afternoon in Louisville*

**J**une doesn't understand why her father is so excited when the circus arrives in Kentucky in May. It's a Saturday, and that means an afternoon show; instead, half the circus packs into trucks and heads away, confusing June.

"Where is everyone going, Papa?"

"Louisville," is all he says.

"But...the show..."

"Trust me, honey; nobody around these parts will be coming to see the show today."

They watch the bosses climb into the cabs of trucks while roustabouts, the Hungarian horse team, and the lion tamer all find space riding in the beds. They race off like a stampede, leaving a cloud of dust behind. Before the dust settles, June makes out a car coming their way. Her father presses his hand to her back and takes a step forward. It's one of the nicest cars June has ever seen, rivaling anything she's seen on the rare big city stop in Chicago or New York City. A big, bald man in a fine suit stops the car and waits for the dust to settle. When it finally does, he opens the door and steps out.

“Joseph!”

June's father extends his hand; a smacking sound startles June as he takes Joseph's hand in his. Joseph's entire body jostles about as the big man shakes his hand. “Randall, it's good to see you.”

“Likewise.”

Randall surveys Joseph, nodding approval at his suit; the two look like they should be smoking cigars in celebration of closing a big business deal, not standing on the side of a dusty road

on the outskirts of town. Randall catches sight of June. “And who is this precious little gem in the pretty white dress?”

Joseph’s hand returns to June’s back, guiding her to take a step forward. “This is June. June, this is Randall Smyth.”

Randall Smyth extends his hand, but June does not shake it. Randall laughs and then gestures to his car. “Shall we be on our way, then?”

June has the entire backseat to herself. She imagines herself a princess in a carriage, out for a ride in the country, surveying her kingdom. When dirt road gives way to pavement, Randall rolls his window down. Joseph follows his lead. June slides across the big, leather seat and does all she can to catch the breeze coming through her father’s window on her face. She’s used to riding in train cars, not normal cars. On the train, the scent of earth and all it offers up runs second to the steam and grease put off by the locomotive. Riding in Mr. Smyth’s car, each hill and turn brings with it new flowers and the bright smell of grass. June closes her eyes, savoring it all as though it were burned onto a plate of film in her mind only she can see.



When she opens her eyes, they are in a city. Houses and stores and people line the streets, but on the edges of it all, there are still hints they are in the middle of spring in a very green place. As the car begins to slow, foot traffic increases—suited men in straw boater hats walk arm in arm with women dressed like they are on their way to church on Sunday. There's an excitement in the air made physical by so many smiles. Mr. Smyth's car comes to a stop, parked in a sea of others. The three step out and join the crowd.

June takes her father's hand in hers and says, "Where are we, Papa?"

He points to a sign and says, "Churchill Downs."

The commotion of it all is both frightening and exciting to June, the crowd passing through gates like livestock, into a white building that seems little more than rafters holding up a roof high above it all. Despite the simplicity of the structure, June can't help but feel she's entered into a territory beyond her standing. She would not be surprised to be forced to stop and wait for royalty to pass by.

Mr. Smyth looks at his watch and says, "This way."

June grips her father's hand as she's led through the crowd, into an open space, and finally into a larger structure that's a jewel to behold, white and polished so bright, it's almost blinding. As they enter the grandstand, June struggles to take it all in: the track before her; the crowd and flags and stands in the infield; all the people dressed up and taking their seats. When they join them, they are seated in the shade of all the overhangs, right there on the track.

"Told you I'd get us good seats," Mr. Smyth says.

As more people settle in, the crowd's attention turns to a parade of horses. They trot by under the crowd's scrutiny, Joseph craning his neck to get a good look. When the horses trot back the other way, Joseph takes June by the hand and heads off, back into the throngs of people, all rushing to a myriad lines. When it's their turn at the wagering window, Joseph hands over \$10 and says, "Ten to win on number three." In exchange for the money, Joseph is given a ticket. They head back to their seats and wait for the first race of the day.

A voice comes over speakers mounted on tall poles all around the track. Everybody stands for a better look. Far down to June's left, she sees the gates; she can barely make out the horses

being shoved in, ready for the start. Then, all at once, the crowd goes wild as the horses break free. June hopes there's a white horse in the crowd as they charge by, but she has to settle for a brown and black blur running so hard, she can feel their hoof beats through her feet. The horses make their first turn, and moments later, June can see them on the backstretch. Her father yells as the order is called by a frantic man over the speakers. Coming down the homestretch, the crowd is in a frenzy, cheering and waving their hands in the air. When the horses cross the post, there are whoops and sighs. Joseph is one of the people sighing; Mr. Smyth, one of those whooping.

“Tough break, Joseph,” Mr. Smyth says as he smacks June's father on his back. “I'll be back in a bit.” Joseph throws his ticket to the ground as Mr. Smyth heads off to claim his money.

The same routine plays out several more times: horses are paraded before the crowd, everybody rushes to the wagering windows, and Mr. Smyth wins while June's father loses. During one of Mr. Smyth's trips to collect his winnings, June says, “Papa, who is that man?”

“His name is Randall Smyth,” Joseph says. “He's a promoter.”

“What’s that?”

“It means he helps people...get better at what they do. He helps them get noticed. He might be able to help me get bigger and better shows. He might be able to help us leave the circus.”

“But I don’t want to leave the circus.”

Joseph crouches down to June’s level. “Don’t you want to live in a house instead of a railcar, honey? Imagine having your own bedroom. He can help us with that.”

June considers this; it *is* a fine thought. She rolls it around in her mind and says, “But what about Hank?”

“We’ll figure it all out when it happens. Don’t worry, good things are coming our way.”

As much as June likes watching the horses race by, she also likes all that goes on between races: the music, the flags blowing in the breeze, and the wagon that looks like a big barrel spraying water on the track—followed up by tractors dragging behind them large square frames made out of boards with nails driven into them, breaking everything up and smoothing the course. Between the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> race, an autogyro takes off from the infield. June has seen all kinds of remarkable things growing up in the circus, but the

autogyro—with its rotor blades thumping a beat as they cut through the air—is even better than horses. To fly through the sky would be such a thing, June thinks.

After the fourth race of the day, Joseph losing again, Mr. Smyth says, “I told you, Joseph, you should just follow my lead. You’ve never been good at cards or picking horses. As a magician, I’d think you’d *at least* be good at cards.”

June senses her father’s anger when he says, “I can’t risk cheating at cards, Randall. And I can pick horses; apparently, just not today.”

“Well, the big race is coming up—your chance to prove me wrong.”

As the horses are paraded before the fifth race, Joseph looks down at June and says, “Which horse do you like best, honey?”

“That one.”

“Number one?”

“Yes.”

“Why do you like that one?” Joseph says.

“Because it’s the best one.”

Mr. Smyth points to another horse—#8—and says, “*That’s* the best one, darling.”

“No it isn’t,” June says.

As Mr. Smyth turns to head off for the wagering windows, he says, “Well it’s the one I’m betting on to win.”

Joseph takes June by the hand and makes their way through the crowd. When it’s their turn at the window, Joseph says to June, “Are you sure?”

She smiles. “Yes, papa.”

“Sir,” the window attendant says, “please place your wager or step aside.”

Joseph slides the most money June has ever seen, one hundred dollars, to the man on the other side and says, “Everything on Sweep All to win.”

Back in their seats, June can tell there’s something special about the race they are about to watch. Instead of a voice crackling to life over the speakers, the race is announced by the sound of a trumpet before the voice over the speaker announces the 57th running of the Kentucky Derby.

There's a sudden hush right before the horses break free from the gate, the grandstand's occupants sharing the same sudden intake of breath. It's like time has stopped and June is the only one able to move. Then comes a wave of sound unlike anything June has ever heard: the hopes of every person holding a ticket and those along just to watch and be seen echoed in cheering so loud, June would not be surprised to see the roof come crashing down. This time as the horses charge by, June has a horse to keep her eye on. Number one isn't in the front as the pack races past, but when the horse makes its move on the back turn, the piercing cry of Joseph's hope rises high above the thick crowd like a single note demanding attention in an orchestra. The sound turns to outright cheering when the announcer says Sweep All is gaining ground on the backstretch. Sweep All takes the lead! Joseph is so happy that he pokes fun at Mr. Smyth. "How's your horse doing, Randall?!"

That's when Mr. Smyth's horse, Twenty Grand, makes its move. The horse surges like an arrow from the back part of the pack. On the homestretch, Twenty Grand overtakes Sweep All; by the time Twenty Grand crosses the post, Sweep All is several lengths behind, in second place.

Mr. Smyth laughs and says, "I'd say my horse is doing good, Joseph. How 'bout yours?"

Joseph throws his ticket to the ground; he looks like he's about to cry.

June picks it up. "Aren't you going to go get your money, Papa?"

"We didn't win, honey."

"But that was the best horse," she says.

Mr. Smyth shakes his head. "The best horse won, darling. And has made me a very happy man! Come with me to the windows; I'll at least buy you a drink, Joseph."

Joseph takes June by the hand and follows Mr. Smyth to collect his winnings. June is young, but can tell by the way Mr. Smyth counts his money that he's teasing her father.

"Mr. Smyth—you're a real crumb!"

"June!" Joseph says.

Mr. Smyth laughs. "I've been called much worse things in my time, Joseph—it's okay." He bends down to June's level. "I'm sorry I've been razzing your father, darling."

"Stop calling me that. My name is June!"



Mr. Smyth looks up at Joseph and smiles; then back to matters at hand. “All right, June. I’m sorry I’ve been teasing your father. Better?”

“Yes. Thank you.”

Mr. Smyth stands up and says to Joseph, “I’ll be back in a few...all this excitement is going right through me.” He heads off toward the bathrooms.

June hands her father the ticket and says, “Go get your money, Papa.”

“I told you, honey—we didn’t win.”

“But the horse did good.”

Joseph rubs his temples and says, “It’s hard to explain. Even though the horse did good, it didn’t do good enough for us today.”

June thrusts the ticket into Joseph’s hand.

Joseph takes it and says, “I’ll try to explain. There are all kinds of ways you can bet on horses. I bet on that horse to win. Let me show you...”

His eyes widen when he looks at the ticket. “What the hell—“

“Papa!”

“I’m sorry—what the heck!”

“What?”

Joseph pauses for a moment, and then looks at June. “You were right. That horse did good. *Really* good!”

He takes June’s hand and gets back in line. At the window, the attendant says, “Well ain’t you a lucky guy on those odds—Sweep All to place.”

He takes the ticket and starts counting. The money keeps coming...over \$1,500. Joseph quickly shoves the roll deep into his pocket.

He steps aside and says to June, “We need to be quiet about this, okay?”

“Okay, papa. I told you he was the best horse.”

“You’re right, honey—he really was.”

“Then why don’t you look happy?”

“I looked at that ticket over and over. It was Sweep All to win, just like I picked.”

“Maybe the man in the window wrote down the wrong thing, or you just read it wrong,” June says. “You told me magic

isn't hard to do because the mind is an easy to trick when it wants something to be a certain way.”

“Maybe that's it,” Joseph says, but something on his face tells June he doesn't believe it.

When Mr. Smyth returns, he says, “So, Joseph...two more races.”

“I think I'd like to call it a day.”

Mr. Smyth pats June's father on the back. “I can spot you a few sawbucks if you need a loan?”

“No, thank you. I think I'll just cut my loses and call it quits.”

“Gotcha, pal. At least let me buy you and June an early dinner.”

\* \* \*

At dinner, drinks and trays of food keep coming. By the time the entrees arrive, even Mr. Smyth looks like he's questioning whether or not he can make room in his ample belly for steak and lobster. June pokes the shell with her fork; she's never seen anything like lobster before—she's used to the stews and simple breads of the circus.

Mr. Smyth says, “June, you’re in for a real treat. You normally can’t get this, here. Brought in special, just for the Derby.”

Mr. Smyth shows June how to get to the meat of the lobster, twisting off the claws and then cracking them open with something that looks like a nutcracker. The tail meat comes right out with a little coaxing and digging with the sharp, pointed end of the cracker. June contemplates the pieces on the plate before her and takes a bite. It’s not what she expected, the sweetness and texture coating the inside of her mouth like the fried fish she’s had at the circus, but without the strong, fishy flavor. She decides she likes lobster and slowly works at picking through the meal, leaving the steak alone—leaving her father and Mr. Smyth to talk business.

“I think I’ve rustled up something for you out west,” Mr. Smyth says. He has Joseph’s interest.

“Los Angeles?” Joseph says.

“Nope. Las Vegas.”

June isn’t familiar with either place; something on her father’s face tells her he’s not excited about the prospect.

“Hear me out, Joseph. They just legalized gambling out there. I know you were hoping for something out east, but it’s a good opportunity, a chance to get in from the very start. May not be as easy in the beginning, but it puts you—us—in a good place. I get you something in Atlantic City...hell, I get you something traveling and, wherever you go, you’re the little fish. You’re good, Joseph, but so are a lot of other magicians who are in a lot deeper in the places you want.

“But Las Vegas? It’s a chance to become the big fish. The place is set to boom. Legalized gambling...they’re building a huge damn out there that’s going to bring in a lot of people from all over the place. It’s a good opportunity. What do you say?”

“I think I need some time to think about it.”

“Understand, understand. You think about it—give me a ring later this week and let me know.”

“That’s a plan.”

Mr. Smyth smiles wide and says, “Excellent,” dragging the word out longer than June’s ever heard it stretched.

\* \* \*

After Mr. Smyth drops Joseph and June off at the circus, on their short walk back to their railcar, Joseph says, “We need to be quiet about what Mr. Smyth said tonight, okay?”

“Okay, papa.”

“This can be a big deal for us, but we can’t tell people about it. Even Hank.”

June says nothing.

“Even Hank?” Joseph says while forcing a smile.

“Okay...”

He takes June by the hand, leading her home.

“If we do this,” Joseph says, “We can have lobster every week. It will be a better life.”

As they make their way through the circus grounds, the smells of stews simmering in pots, cigar smoke curling through the air, and animals settling in for the evening, June can’t imagine a better life than this.

Later, in their dark car, just before bed, June listens to the quiet sounds of the circus at night: the occasional movement of people she finds comforting, knowing she’s never alone; rustling straw and the deep sounds of animals sleeping coming from the

menagerie. June stares at the ceiling and cries, doing all she can to keep it from becoming sobs drawing her father's attention. This is where she belongs; she doesn't want to ever leave.



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Christopher Gronlund helps and entertains people by moving words around pages and screens. His writing has appeared in newspapers, magazines, comic books, and the Web. Christopher blogs at [The Juggling Writer](#). You can listen to him read *Hell Comes with Wood Paneled Doors* for free at [roadtripfromhell.com](#). His personal website can be found loitering at [christophergronlund.com](#). If you like Twitter, check out [@cgronlund](#).