



Love Has No Boundaries

Heart in a Bottle
Wendy Clements

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An M/M Romance series

HEART IN A BOTTLE

By Wendy Clements

Introduction

The story you are about to read celebrates love, sex and romance between men. It is a product of the *Love Has No Boundaries* promotion sponsored by the *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* and is published as a free gift to you.

What Is Love Has No Boundaries?

The *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* invited members to choose a photo and pen a letter asking for a short M/M romance story inspired by the image; authors from the group were encouraged to select a letter and write an original tale. The result was an outpouring of creativity that shone a spotlight on the special bond between M/M romance writers and the people who love what they do.

A written description of the image that inspired this story is provided along with the original request letter. If you'd like to view the photo, please feel free to join the [Goodreads M/M Romance Group](#) and visit the discussion section: *Love Has No Boundaries*.

Whether you are an avid M/M romance reader or new to the genre, you are in for a delicious treat.

Words of Caution

This story may contain sexually explicit content and is **intended for adult readers**. It may contain content that is disagreeable or distressing to some readers. The *M/M Romance Group* strongly recommends that each reader review the General Information section before each story for story tags as well as for content warnings.

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Photo Description

Shot of man from the pecs down, very nicely toned, wearing nothing but a fairly large, thick snake covering most of his groin area—on further inspection, it is possible to see some dangly bits. Hmm. Is this a man hiding his snake behind his snake, or is it an ultimatum: love me, love my snake? Whatever the case, the man who makes peace with the sideshow performer's snake is one lucky guy!

Story Letter

Dear Author,

The man in this photograph works as a sideshow performer—I leave it up to you whether he's with a travelling circus, a carnival, or simply some kind of amusement park. His snakes are his pets, his companions, and his livelihood. He has never found anyone who understands his love and fascination for them... except maybe the compelling man lurking at the back of the crowd for several performances in a row. No shifters, no vampires, and no angels, please.

A happy ending is a must, although I don't mind if the way there is a little dark. On second thought, I think it would be better if it was a bit dark...

Sincerely,

J.J.

Story Info

Genre: historical

Tags: time travel, sideshow, snakes, magic, psychic ability, non-explicit

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The light was waning into that perfect time photographers love—right before sunset, when everything is bathed in the shade of golden yellow impossible to describe, but most people recognize, as it glows over trees, houses, old hydrangea blooms—turning things that usually wouldn't be considered worth a second glance beautiful.

Conall McGuire gleamed in the light—his honey-blond hair and well-toned body shining. He was nude save for scandalously tight shorts, showing off the definition and lines of his muscles to their best advantage. He looked touchable—in stark contrast with the three large snakes coiled around his torso. Each sported a different color but the same diamondish-square patterning: palest grey with mottled black, light brown with darker chocolate brown, and ivory yellow set off by the deep maroon of her pattern. They hung luxuriantly off Conall, basking in the remaining sunlight.

“And here is the man himself, the Incredible Constrictor,” Henry Sharpe, the sideshow talker standing near Conall on the front stage called out. Conall shot him an annoyed look. He hated being called that.

“I'm afraid that honor goes to my darlings,” he quipped. “Unless you'd like to try out their constrictive capabilities yourself?” he asked innocently, causing the expected laughter from the audience as Henry stepped back, hands up.

“I'll leave that to the professional and stick to my own specialty, gabbing about what I love most, *Gillian O'Flannery's Fascinations and Wonders of the World!* If you'll look here, ladies and gentlemen, to see the fine quality of performers in our show—all the way from Russia, Piotyr the knife thrower and his beautiful assistant Roziska—she puts 'fascination' in the name of the show, folks. I don't know how Piotyr manages to concentrate...” Henry kept talking as he led the crowd into the tent housing the sideshow itself.

Conall chuckled to himself at Henry's spiel—they'd had three full houses today already—this would be the last show of the day. He was tired of standing and his girls were getting heavy. Individually they didn't weigh too much, maybe seventeen pounds at the most, but altogether... He'd swear Sadie was getting heavier, and he wasn't feeding her anything extra. He was going to have to check the cage for escape holes—if she was getting out, Stella and Cleo weren't going with her, and Sadie was always there in the morning.

There had been no children in that group, to his relief. Conall, despite being drop dead gorgeous and the epitome of masculinity, somehow always managed to attract at least a few children each week wanting to know more about his snakes, and he always patiently indulged them. The rest of the camp teased him ceaselessly about it, and he always pointed out that he already tutored Risiki, Ruthanna and Nikolaos' twelve-year-old daughter. Jugglers from Austria, sometimes they included her in their show, which made for an interesting act as they were both presented as midget jugglers and she was mostly "normal" sized. He also included two more of the show's younger performers, Patrick and Liam, when he managed to get them to keep still long enough. He muttered that it was because he was an older brother who had taken care of his siblings, and somehow children just knew that.

Conall shifted his shoulders. What he really wanted was to settle Sadie, Stella, and Cleo for a while and get something to eat. He focused on Henry, who was herding the last group of audience members into the sideshow tent. Conall breathed a sigh of relief.

Cleo saw the man first. That in itself wasn't surprising—she was an attention glutton and loved the crowds, turning her head so her glossy scales would shine perfectly. Conall could forgive her that—she was younger than Stella and Sadie, who had obediently returned to their places the first time he murmured their instructions to them. Stella's thick body curved loosely around his neck and hung on his sun-bronzed chest like an exotic necklace, Sadie wrapped herself around his right arm.

Cleo ignored him, instead rising straight up into the air, waving back and forth slightly as if hypnotized, her muscles thickening to keep her balance. Her

tongue darted in and out of her mouth quickly, her head tilting back and forth slowly.

Conall watched her, puzzled. In all his years with his snakes, none of them had ever done anything quite like this before.

“Cleo,” he whispered, pulling his arm down slightly in the hopes she’d follow. “Down!” She stayed put, her attention fixed on something—outside the gates of the show? Conall looked in the direction her head was pointed toward, the magnolia tree that stood slightly apart from the copse of trees behind it, off to the left of the stands for Circus Maximus.

Stella, becoming bored, was starting to edge her way around his chest, heading downward.

“Oh, no you don’t,” he reprimanded, gently pulling her back up. Stella nudged Cleo, then looked toward the tree herself. “Not *both* of you,” he muttered. Sadie bumped her head against his chin, and Conall finally saw what they were looking at—a man in a black derby hat and black duster stood underneath the tree, staring intently in their direction. At him? He felt a prickle down his spine, unsure if it was unease or interest. Or both. He had a distinct impression of very blue eyes, but in the space of a blink the man was gone.

He walked down the stage stairs, wondering if he’d been in the sun too long. Suddenly, Roshana was at his side, carefully unwinding Cleo from his arm, and he gratefully put an arm around her shoulders.

“Are you all right?” she asked him, with only a slight trace of the native Romani accent she thickened considerably for her customers.

“Just tired and hungry. Thank you for your help. I’m feeling a bit odd,” Conall admitted.

“So are your darlings,” she agreed, briefly touching noses with Cleo. “She says there was a man watching you.”

“I think you saw the man and are putting the blame on Cleo,” Conall protested as they reached his long trailer—he needed space for the snakes’ cages. When he removed his arm from her shoulders, she snorted.

“You are stealing gold dust from the circus girls again,” she accused, brushing off her black lace shawl.

“Not the girls,” he responded with a grin as he left her to put Cleo in her tank while he put Sadie and Stella in theirs.

Roshana had water on for tea by the time he returned.

“Feeding today,” he told her, and she grimaced.

“They are beautiful creatures,” she replied, “and I know it is nature, but still... it unsettles me to see them eat. It is so... violent. And they are normally such gentle girls.”

“I know. That’s why the curtain’s down, so you don’t have to see them.”

“Thank you.”

Conall took a towel and began to wipe the gold dust off, while Roshana considered him thoughtfully.

“You are a beautiful man. Why use that artificial stuff?”

“A moment ago you called my snakes beautiful, and now I’m beautiful. In the same way?” he asked her, smiling mischievously.

“Do you just use it as an excuse to visit Harek and his brother?” she replied, tilting her head much as Cleo had earlier.

“You know you’re the only one who could get away with asking questions like this,” Conall reprimanded.

“That is why I do. I worry about you, that is all. You do not want to be alone, Con. Visiting Harek and Check is fine as long as you expect the same things from each other. You are not the type of man to sit and wait while you think the right man might show up. What if the right man shows up and you are too busy with the wrong man to notice?”

“I don’t think there *is* a right man,” Conall told her, more sharply than he’d intended. “Sorry. It’s meaningless with Harek—I don’t see Check.” He gave her a pointed look, which she ignored.

“And with him it is satiating but not fulfilling,” she answered. “You cannot let yourself go completely. You don’t fully trust him, or any of the others.”

“Ro, this is downright... wrong to be discussing my intimate life with you. We don’t talk about you and your men.”

“That is because there are no men. There is only Milosh. I love Milosh and have no desire to be with anyone but him. It is a good thing you only like men, though, or he would be in trouble. Except you are too... cavalier.” Roshana raised an eyebrow at him as she brought tea over for both of them. “And I already bring you tea—it is a good thing Milosh is so patient, and knows nothing will happen between us.”

“He’s a good man,” Conall admitted. “Not as handsome as you deserve. Maybe he’d like some gold powder?”

Roshana made a “whuffling” noise remarkably close to that of a horse, and Conall laughed, then grew serious.

“How do you know all this?” he asked her.

“You are admitting it is true, then? And Cleo did see a man who sparked your interest?”

“Wait, wait, wait. You are *not* going to believe Cleo over me?” Conall paused, his mug halfway to his lips.

“Yes. She is a smart one, even if she is young. She listens to Sadie and Stella. I see you during the day between when I give fortunes—your eyes roam the crowd, looking for... something. You want *love*, Conall.”

“Didn’t work so well last time,” Conall muttered.

“*Next* time do not fall for a magician who uses small live animals in his act,” Roshana suggested. “It was doomed from the start, and then the two of you decided to live together. I think it was perfectly natural for Richard to be upset. It was upsetting. A massacre of innocent—”

“I don’t need to relive that, thank you. It was bad enough at the time.” Conall’s lips twitched, though. After a year, it was a little easier to see the humor in it—most likely because it hadn’t been his darlings who’d been eaten.

And Stella had looked awfully funny with the dove feather stuck on top of her head like a showgirl.

Roshana frowned slightly, and Conall sighed. He knew what that particular frown meant. Gillian needed someone or something retrieved from sometime. He drained his mug quickly, waiting for Roshana to finish with Gillian. Roshana shook her head to clear it.

“Gillian needs you to get some medicine for Dr. Tork,” she told him. “She’ll give you the specific instructions. I’m going home. She’s in a mood,” she added, rubbing her temples.

Conall opened the door for her, standing on the top step and looking toward the giant kitchen tent for Milosh, the head chef. He was in luck—Milosh had just stepped out for some air, and Conall waved his arm, catching his attention and pointing at Roshana, then his head, then Gillian’s huge wagon. Milosh nodded and headed toward them, intercepting Roshana as Conall headed to Gillian’s. Conall teased Ro about Milosh, but he really was a good man, and treated her like she was the most precious thing in the world to him. Ro sometimes doubted it, but Conall knew it was the truth.

Gillian’s wagon was actually two wagons attached. It had been quite a while since they’d moved, and they were all growing a little—rooted—here. He knocked on the door before entering.

Gillian called him to the back of the wagon, to the small room only three people, himself included, knew existed. Panels with lights covered the walls around her small desk, and he perched on one of the two stools, waiting for her to finish writing her notes.

The first time he had met Gillian O’Flannery he had kept from laughing with an effort. She was too tall to be a midget, too short, under five feet, to blend in with others of average height. She looked fourteen, with a wild tangle of dark-red curls and deep-green eyes whose expression belied her youthful appearance. She glowed a little, which she said was just the angle of the light. Slender and lithe, she had once been a trapeze artist until she fell one day and developed an extreme fear of heights. Conall wasn’t sure how she’d become the owner of the sideshow, or any of... this. He looked around the room,

scanning the map for any red lights, but all were green. One was flickering, which was odd. He'd never seen one do that before.

“Sorry,” Gillian said in her soft, lilting voice. “Roshana told you about Dr. Tork?”

“Yes. You gave her a headache. What's the matter?”

“I did?” Gillian's brow crinkled. “I didn't mean to. I *am* a little unnerved. You see the light?” She pointed at the one he'd been watching. “I don't know what this means. It's not anything wrong with the light. I checked. It's not showing any sign of changing color—it's been like this all day. Never once a flash to amber or to red.”

“So nothing's *wrong*, something's just off?” Conall asked.

“That's what I'm hoping. But look at the map—it's near us. That's what has me worried. We've been here for so long—we've grown lax. When we moved every year, we could pack up and leave quickly. Now it would take us days.”

“Even with all of your power?” Conall teased, and she tried to smile.

“I wanted us to have a home, and this is the closest we've come. This seems to be a good time for us. The early 1800s weren't such a good idea, but 1903... This seems to be working out all right, don't you think?” She rarely needed reassuring.

“I do think it's a good time for us, and a good place. I wasn't sure when you said Circus Maximus wanted us with them, but you were right. It *is* safer than being on our own, which helps tremendously when I bring someone here,” Conall said firmly.

“I don't know if I'm doing the right thing with that.”

“Why would the map light up and give you the information, and Roshana the details, if you weren't supposed to do something about it? And why would I be here? I only ever used to travel to get myself out of trouble, and was afraid to go too far back or forward for fear of getting lost or stuck. It could still

happen, I suppose. In which case you have to feed the girls, because it would make Ro ill.”

Gillian laughed. “You’re not going to get stuck. You have enough reference points that you won’t. I wouldn’t let you go if I didn’t have enough details. You are all my family now. It’s my duty to protect you.”

“I know they’re grateful,” Conall said quietly. He cleared his throat. “You just want me to get the penicillin tonight?”

“Yes. Dr. Tork is almost out and he came pounding on the door demanding more of the ‘special medicine’ this morning. Betsy’s ill, and she’s his baby. As long as he leaves her on Maximus’ side. The last thing we need over here is an elephant.”

“I’ll go as soon as it’s dark,” he said, rising.

“Thank you, Con,” Gillian replied with a small smile, returning to her notes.

Conall didn’t eat before leaving. Dinner smelled delicious as always, but traveling often made him feel ill, and he didn’t want to risk it. Piotyr and Roziska apparently weren’t in the mood for dinner either, and he almost told them to go to their wagon. There *were* children around. But then Roziska giggled and he didn’t have the heart. They were both so much better than when he’d brought them back, terrified and bloody, from 1918 Russia, where they’d been with a travelling circus in Yekaterinburg. That was their official story, according to Gillian. If Roziska bore a resemblance to anyone from that area, it was pure coincidence.

Conall stepped quietly out of the camp gates. He’d checked earlier to make sure they were well oiled. After giving his eyes a moment to adjust to the dark, he headed toward the copse of trees he always used—there was a small clearing in the center, and the copse was thick enough to hide it. Something felt different, and he paused before he entered. He couldn’t identify what it was, and he headed into the clearing cautiously.

Someone else had been here. He felt the residual traces of another's magic brushing up against his own. It was the same spell he used to travel. It shouldn't be possible, that there would be another traveler here without him knowing, that someone was using magic like his and he hadn't felt it. Thoughts racing, he almost went back to the camp without traveling anywhere. Whoever it was could have set a trap, but the magic felt benign. Now that he'd been standing here for a moment, it actually felt a little pleasant. There was a definite masculine edge to it—a confident, self-assured man whose magic tasted a little like cloves and spices. He breathed it in, determining it had been hours ago, maybe even yesterday, that the magic had been cast. It was safe for him to go, he decided. He was a little heady from the scent—how could it linger so strongly when the magic had almost completely dissipated?

Just go to one of the hospitals he knew—there were ten he rotated through—and come back. He closed his eyes and took a few breaths to calm himself before beginning the spell that would take him traveling. As he felt his weight dissolve, his physical form start to unravel, there was the sudden shock of arms wrapped tightly around him, but it was too late to stop...

Conall rematerialized in a familiar hall off the main hospital corridor. As usual, it was deserted this time of night... except for the man who had traveled with him, and Conall rounded on him in anger.

“What the hell do you think you were doing? Who are you?” Conall growled, grabbing the man's shirt front and shoving him against the wall. The flash of blue was there again, and Conall realized it was the flash of the man's eyes he'd seen from the stage. They regarded him warily, and Conall narrowed his eyes. He was stronger than the stranger, this other man who smelled of cloves and the odd sharp scent that always came with traveling.

“Me? What are *you* doing? Why are you in a hospital?” The other man was genuinely puzzled.

“Why did you follow me? Attached yourself to me, more like it. You're going to get me caught! And yourself, for that matter.” He heard footsteps in the main corridor, and pressed himself against the man, molding them to the

wall, hearing the man's quick intake of breath. Conall felt a stirring in his groin at the man's response, keeping his own breathing even.

"I wanted to know where you were going," the man confessed in his ear, his voice hoarse. "Today isn't the first day I've watched you, I've been around for nearly a week. Mostly on the circus side."

"Hush," Conall hissed, just keeping himself from covering the man's mouth with his hand until the footsteps died off. He stepped back, breathing a sigh of relief. "*What?*" he asked, the man's words finally sinking in. "A week? Why?"

"I'm, um, a private investigator, a detective. I'm looking for a young woman, and the circus was the last place she was seen. I'd asked all the routine questions. She *had* been there, but she'd left. I thought maybe she'd gone to the sideshow side. I've taken a few tours through. You never noticed."

Conall let up some of the pressure on the man's chest, eyes still narrowed. "And did you find her?"

"No, but your show is rather... interesting, to say the least. I've been to other sideshows. Yours isn't fake, is it? I started to suspect when I realized you were a traveler as well." He was watching Conall closely. "The whole atmosphere in your camp is different than the others I've seen—I haven't been roaming through, don't worry, just walked around the perimeter of the fence—there are distortions there that shouldn't be. You do know you have to be careful, right? Too many things from too many different times can cause complete instability for everything within the boundary."

Conall let go of his shirt. "Who are you really?" he asked quietly.

The man hesitated. "Galen Hereford. I'm from about one hundred fifty years in the future from when you're settled now. There are more travelers in the future. It's more controlled there than it is in your time—we can't just pop off to anywhere we want at a moment's notice. I know my way around, so I manage to keep off their radar for the most part."

"Radar?"

“A way to track things,” Galen replied. “I know how to stabilize the boundaries in your camp before anything bad happens. I knew I had to get you alone to talk to you—you never leave the camp except to go to the circus side,” he added, clearing his throat. “I didn’t think you wanted to be interrupted.”

Conall flushed. “Are you going to start passing judgment on me now?” he asked, remembering Galen’s reaction, with his back to the wall, and how he’d felt against Conall. Galen hadn’t protested. Conall wondered if he would welcome more intimate contact... There was something about Galen that appealed to him—the combination of his scent, his skin, the color of his hair and eyes. He wondered if his lips tasted of cloves.

“No,” Galen said firmly, bringing his mind back where it should be. “You’re the traveler, you’re the only one I could talk to there who would understand. I shouldn’t have even interfered—”

“This isn’t a very good place,” Conall told him. “This hall isn’t used often, but still...”

“Why are you here?” Galen looked around them.

“Penicillin.” Conall decided there was no need to hide the fact. Galen seemed to know much more than he did. Conall eyed Galen impatiently.

“Okay,” Galen said. “But I’m going with you.”

“No, you’re not,” Conall answered, bringing back his fist and driving it forward, knocking Galen out before he saw what was coming.

Feeling guilty, Conall slipped off to the apothecary, although in this time the sign on the door read “Pharmacy.” He dropped bottles of the drug he was seeking into the bag he’d brought with him, freezing when he felt the press of sharp steel on the back of his neck.

“That was completely unnecessary. Now I have blood on my shirt, and this is one of my favorite shirts,” Galen bit out the words. “We were getting along so nicely, too. If this is how you want to play, fine.”

The familiar sensation of traveling took over as Galen held Conall's arms tightly, although he did make sure Conall didn't drop the bag. Galen wasn't completely inconsiderate, after all.

This time they materialized in an alley. From the angle of the sun, Conall guessed it was eight or nine in the morning. Galen took him tightly by the arm and walked him forward, until the alley opened into the street.

"Are those what *automobiles* look like here?" Conall asked, astonished, as one swept by them. He gaped as he examined their surroundings. "Where are we?"

"Oxford," Galen told him, tucking what turned out to be a short knife into his belt before leading Conall to a small café and ordering tea.

"I don't want tea, I want to know why I'm here and what you are doing with me," Conall hissed angrily.

Galen shot him a look obviously intended to silence him. Conall sat back, taking the teacup warily when Galen handed it to him. Galen leaned his forearms on the table, hands cradling his cup of tea as if he were seeking warmth. Conall watched him, taking the time Galen stared into his cup to examine him more closely—long, delicately crafted hands that still looked strong. He emanated strength for someone with such a narrow frame. Black curls framed his light complexion, the perfect foil for those eyes, hair Conall wanted to sink his hands into, lips with a hint of crimson, seductive and full. Conall found himself wondering what they'd feel like under his own, remembering the noise Galen had made in the corridor of the hospital when he had pushed him against the wall. The way it had felt to be pulled against Galen's chest as they'd traveled here, whenever they were.

"More rules have been established now, about traveling, than there are in your time," Galen started out slowly. "The things you've done wouldn't be allowed in my time."

"Why? We save people. What's wrong with that?"

Galen sighed, running his hand through his hair. “Every action you take as a traveler in time effects things at some point later down the line. It is a question of morals, ethics. Many terrible things have happened between your time and mine, so many wars, so many people killed. Travelers thought we could fix things by preventing key events from happening, yet we made things worse.” Galen stopped abruptly. “There were two world wars after your current time—you have seen at least part of one of them, I think, with one of your retrievals. The family of little people and their daughter, from 1914 in Austria. The beginnings of the First World War, supposedly started because of an assassination.” He swallowed hard. “We prevented the assassination. The man was killed by another assassin later we didn’t know about, because we’d altered history. It was a terrible war. But I think the reason you were sent to take people back is because they’re necessary for some reason we don’t know yet.”

“I’ve thought that as well,” Conall said quietly. “There still *is* a world when you live?”

Galen laughed dryly. “Oh, yes, there is. We have technology you can’t even imagine, yet the same technology draws us more and more into ourselves. We can access information on just about anything we want at any time of the day or night. The advances in medicine and science, in so many other things... But we went too far with changing things about twenty years from your time. There was a man in Germany trying to fight his way to power. The things he proposed were terrifying... We had a council that governed travelers by then. They determined this man was enough of a risk that he should be eliminated. They sent a traveler back to take care of him. We were triumphant when our traveler returned, sure that everything would be all right in the future.”

“And was it?” Conall asked.

“Another man took his place, a more... charismatic man, who seemed to hold people under a spell. His name was Adolf Hitler, and he was far, far worse than the first man, who history doesn’t even remember. Under Hitler, people like those in your sideshow, were sought out and killed. Jewish

people—so many I don't even want to think on it—the Romany, Roshana and Milosh's people, all killed. Anyone who opposed him, killed. People like us, killed. Unspeakable atrocities were committed in his name." Galen took a deep breath. "And the world is always filled with conflict. I wanted to warn you. I know from the magic around your camp you are strong enough to keep all of you there, if not indefinitely, then for a very long time. I can tell it's not just yours, though. Who is responsible?"

"How do I know I can trust you? You come to me and tell me of all the terrible things that will come to pass, warn me to keep the entire camp from moving forward in time—do you have any idea how hard that is? I don't know if I have the strength for that," Conall burst out. "I am responsible for the safety of my family," he added, "They expect that from me."

"So you really do more than stand around looking gorgeous and holding snakes?" Galen smiled slightly. He held up his hand as Conall started to protest. "The snakes have a purpose, did you know?"

"How can you know so much more about this than I do?" Conall asked in annoyance. "I've just always liked snakes, ever since I was a boy—"

"When *were* you a boy?" Galen asked, and Conall blinked, then furrowed his brow in concentration.

"The 1760s," he replied quietly. "I was born here, wasn't I? In Oxford." He looked around. "When are we now?"

"1921." Galen pulled a pendant out from under his shirt, showing it to Conall. The design was a complicated Celtic knot consisting of three intertwined snakes, their heads meeting in the center. Conall leaned forward, taking the silver pendant in his hand, still warm from lying against Galen's chest. Galen moved forward himself. "It's still attached, you know," he whispered, and Conall looked up, startled, loosening his hold on the pendant. His eyes were inches from Galen's, close enough to feel his breath on his cheek. Galen's eyes were a deep blue right now—Conall had realized they changed color. He closed his eyes, dropping the pendant and sitting back quickly.

“Why snakes?” Conall asked hoarsely.

“Symbols of immortality, rebirth, wisdom, sexuality, fertility... depending on which culture you look at. And we *are* immortal.”

“I was beginning to wonder about that,” Conall admitted.

“A hundred and thirty-six-years-old and you *start* to wonder,” Galen said, trying not to laugh. “I’m *trying* not to overwhelm you. You’re young yet for a traveler.”

“*Oh*,” Conall snapped, “and how old are you?”

“Five hundred and seventy-seven.”

“*Oh*.” Conall crossed his arms and leaned back in his chair, looking anywhere but Galen. “So basically I don’t know anything?”

“I didn’t say that. No one taught you?”

“No. Gillian helped some, when I met her. She’s not a traveler, but she... knows about them. She’s in charge. If you want to know anything, you have to ask her. I learned through trial and error. And my snakes. They... speak... to me. There are only a couple of other people who can hear them. One of them seemed quite taken with you—it’s unusual for her to single someone out she doesn’t know.”

Galen looked uncomfortable. “I’m terrified of snakes,” he confessed, clutching his pendant. “I used to even be afraid of images of snakes. This,” he said, waving the hand holding the pendant, “doesn’t bother me anymore. I feel odd not wearing it now. I watched you, on stage with your snakes. They teased me for being afraid, said they’ll only squeeze a little.”

“They talked to *you*?” Conall tried not to gasp. “All of them?”

“Sometimes. Mostly the youngest one. Cleo?” Galen took a sip of his tea.

“She was the one most interested in you, who *knows* what she told my friend Roshana about you. Sadie and Stella are older, better behaved, but Cleo’s a minx sometimes.”

“They have different personalities?”

“Of course they do.” Conall was surprised at Galen’s question. “All animals have different personalities, what makes snakes any different?”

“I suppose I just thought of them being reptiles—not really thinking creatures,” Galen admitted.

“These are a traveler’s snakes,” Conall countered. “But even on a larger scale, they’re different.” He smirked at Galen’s expression of mingled disgust and fear. “How do I know I can trust you?” he asked again. He let out a sigh. “My girls talked to you.”

Galen searched his face. “Let’s just say I have a vested interested. One that’s very close to me. And another who *might* be?” he asked hesitantly, and Conall raised his eyebrows.

“You’re very forward. More than I’m used to.”

“More than you’re used to?” Galen laughed. “Says the man who covers himself in gold powder, then stands on a stage wearing nothing but shorts leaving very little to the imagination and three snakes?”

Conall squirmed in his chair. “When you put it like *that*... That’s my outside personality—my stage persona. The one Henry calls *The Incredible Constrictor*. I hate it, but once he’s stuck on something, it’s very hard to shake him. I could have strangled him. You’d think I was the one doing the constricting.”

“Do you?” Galen asked with a half smile. Conall blushed, his tan hiding some of it, but not all.

“Only when encouraged,” he finally muttered back, and Galen laughed. “Gillian is going to worry. This doesn’t usually take me very long.”

“I can adjust for the difference,” Galen told him. “When I take us back.”

“Who said *you* were going to be the one to take us back?” Conall raised his eyebrows. Galen smiled slowly.

“I did,” he answered, watching Conall intently.

“You don’t trust me, yet you want me to trust you?”

“I never said that. I do trust you. More than I should,” Galen added, taking a sip of his tea and catching a drip down the side of the cup with his tongue. Conall quickly averted his eyes when Galen glanced at him. “You are a shy one, not what I expected at all, given your public display.”

“That’s not me,” Conall repeated. “You assume everything. And I’m not necessarily shy in public, maybe it’s just you.”

Galen smiled more openly. “I don’t need to assume what your body tells me. We’ve already figured out about each other, no need to be embarrassed by it now.”

“It’s not something I discuss from the stage,” Conall retorted.

“I’m sure people in the camp know. Would it make a difference if they did? They seem to accept everything else,” Galen asked him softly.

“You’re right. They know. They’ve seen me with other men. They know I go to the circus at night...” Conall traced circles in the drop of tea on the table with his finger.

“Have you ever been in love?”

“Love?” Conall smiled briefly. “I don’t know. I’ve rarely been with someone long enough to form a meaningful relationship. And before you ask, I’ve been the one who’s managed to end them. Why are you asking all these questions? Usually the only one who interrogates me is Roshana.”

“You’re afraid to,” Galen stated with certainty. “You have the capacity to, you simply won’t. How ironic. You’re surrounded by people who know you’re gay, who love and trust you, yet you hide. Amazing. Do you realize how lucky you are?”

“That I’m happy?” Conall asked in confusion.

Galen stared at him for a moment, just as confused. His face cleared as he realized their misunderstanding. “The meaning of the word changes,” he explained. “In my time, gay means a man who prefers to be with other men, has relationships with men instead of women.”

“I see,” Conall replied, nodding, before he grinned a little mischievously. “And are they happy in your time?”

Galen shook his head at him. “You’re ridiculous. You do realize that?” he asked, but he found himself smiling. Conall was unselfconsciously attractive when not on stage. It made him even more alluring. Galen wasn’t immune to the effects, which surprised him a little. Usually he managed to keep his mind strictly on the business at hand, but he was distracted now in his interest in Conall and this strange protection he and the others had cast over their camp. *Right, his mind told him. And that’s a banana in your pocket that just happens to perk up every time he meets your gaze, smiles, looks your way, breathes... you’re five hundred and seventy-seven, and this young man is going to make a fool of you.*

“I’ve been told. Too impetuous, too impulsive, I could do better... Roshana has a whole litany she goes through.”

“Is she right?”

Conall sighed. “Unfortunately. But she usually is. She truly does have the Sight.”

Galen dropped a bill and some change on the table. “So do I, to an extent,” he said, rising. “Let’s go.”

They returned to the alley Galen had first brought them to, Galen indicating that Conall should step up into the doorway first and turn with his back to him. Galen’s arms weren’t as tight this time, and Conall relaxed, leaning into him and noticing Galen was a little taller than he was. Galen’s scent surrounded him, and he felt Galen’s hardness pressing against him. Conall reached around, holding the bag with one hand, pulling Galen against him more tightly. Galen moaned softly as Conall reached between them, stroking the bulge in Galen’s trousers. Galen leaned his head forward and kissed the back of Conall’s neck.

Conall dropped the bag and turned to face him, cupping the taller man’s face in his and tracing his lips with his thumbs. Galen’s lips parted, leaving

Conall to watch him as he turned his head into Conall's hand, kissing his palm. Pleasure sparked through him.

“You have the Sight,” Conall groaned. “Is this a good idea?”

“I have no idea. Yes,” Galen amended, the vibrations of his chuckle passing through Conall's chest.

“Take us somewhere else,” Conall gasped as Galen fluttered little kisses on his lips.

“Bag,” Galen reminded him, and Conall snatched it up before they dissolved.

They reappeared in the copse of trees near the sideshow camp, lying on the grass. Galen had one leg looped over Conall's, and one of Conall's hands pressed against the small of Galen's back, pulling him in closer for a kiss. His other hand sank into Galen's curls, marveling at how soft they felt between his fingers. Their kisses had started almost chastely—now they were hungry, open-mouthed and fierce. Murmurs of pleasure turned to moans as lips slipped to the hollow of a throat or to nuzzle behind an ear. Conall felt exhilarated and half-mad with desire, desperate for the feel of Galen's skin against his. Galen's thoughts echoed his, as Galen began to undo Conall's buttons with trembling fingers, and they sank into the cool grass.

Conall made sure his buttons were straight, then looked up to watch Galen, who returned his gaze, his expression warm. He held out his hand to Conall and they made sure they were both appropriately foliage free. Galen pulled Conall into a lingering kiss before Conall picked up the bag and they headed back to the camp.

Gillian's narrowed eyes went from Conall to Galen and back. “I asked for medicine, and you return with a new lover as well. Another traveler. I find this extremely disconcerting, Conall. You've let someone else know about the camp.”

“In his defense,” Galen argued, “I already knew, Miss O’Flannery. It was the reason I wanted to talk to him. To tell him it can’t continue. The more points in time intersect, the more unstable the node where they meet. Conall and whoever has helped him have done a good job with the protection spells, but they need fixing. I can help, if I know how many lines cross.”

Gillian stood with her hands on her hips. “Conall? You’re being awfully quiet. You brought him here. You’re the only one he has to vouch for him.”

“Cleo likes him. Stella and Sadie are neutral, Roshana told me.”

“We need Roshana here as well,” Gillian muttered, sending her a quick mental message. “I tried not to give her a headache this time,” she added for Conall’s benefit. “Now.” She turned to address Galen. “You want to meet the people involved? You’ll need Conall with you. They trust him. Roshana should go with you, and Conall, you should take at least Cleo with you. Pick her up on the way over.”

Gillian watched them closely, her attention finally distracted by Roshana’s entrance.

“Ro, this man Conall has returned with would like a tour of the sideshow. Specifically, who Conall has brought here. Mr. Hereford believes our protection spells are lacking.”

“I didn’t say they were *lacking*, I said they needed repair,” Galen said quietly, and Roshana glanced at him in amusement.

“I’ll go with them, Gilly. See what’s going on.” Roshana patted Gillian’s shoulder and led them out of her wagon, walking straight to Conall’s trailer. “You need Cleo?” she asked him innocently. Conall nodded, opening the door and disappearing inside. Roshana put her hand on Galen’s arm, startling him. “Do not hurt him,” she told him fiercely.

“How—there’s nothing yet, just—”

“You mean more to each other than either of you realize.” She moved her hand to his heart. “It may take you awhile to admit it.” She paused. “And why *don’t* you like snakes?”

“It isn’t that I don’t like snakes, I’m terrified of them,” Galen whispered as the door opened and Conall returned, Cleo wrapped happily around his chest and right arm. She glided out toward Roshana, who let Cleo flick her tongue against her fingers, then went to Galen, who kept himself from stepping back with great effort. Roshana raised an eyebrow at him and he lifted a tentative hand, holding it toward Cleo. She flicked her tongue across his fingers, then made an odd noise that almost sounded like purring.

Conall looked at her. “What are you so satisfied about?” he asked her as they headed toward the entrance of the sideshow. She raised herself up and put her head against his cheek, then settled down. Roshana laughed quietly as she pulled back the curtains to the sideshow. Every person from every act was there, waiting.

“You’re all here. Why are you here?” Roshana asked, looking around the long, wide tent. All of the performers were gathered in chairs in a semi-circle, waiting.

“We don’t know,” Wren, the bearded lady, said, squinting at Galen. “I forgot my spectacles. Come forward, you there with the embarrassed look.”

Galen did as she asked after casting a look at Conall. Conall just shrugged. Galen walked up to her, and she leaned forward. As she did, the dog-faced boy joined her.

“Liam,” she scolded lightly, but Galen was looking at him intently. “You’ve been through here, what, three or four times now?” Wren asked.

Galen blushed. “Yes. How did you remember me out of all those people?”

“You felt like Conall, which I thought was plenty odd. That smell that he gets when he’s been out. I’m Wren, and this is Liam.”

They both shook his hand, and Galen hesitated, putting a hand on each side of Liam’s.

“It’s very soft,” he commented. “You’re one of them, aren’t you?” he asked Liam, who turned a wide-eyed look to Conall.

“It’s all right, you can tell him,” Conall reassured him.

“You sure your blood hasn’t all moved south?” Liam asked him, and Wren tapped him lightly on the top of his head. Liam grinned. “I’m from Ireland, about what, Conall? 1845?”

“That sounds about right,” Conall confirmed, and Galen looked Liam squarely in the eye.

“The Irish Famine?” he asked, and Liam nodded.

Piotyr stood to the side with a protective arm around Roziska, and Galen turned to them next. “And you, both of you?”

“Russia, Yekaterina—1918. I was in the White Army. I’m Piotyr, and this is Roziska,” Piotyr said firmly, daring Galen to say otherwise. Galen looked at Roziska for a long moment, before nodding his head slowly and turning away thoughtfully.

A woman wearing a long, slinky black dress, legs crossed, cleared her throat. “Might we know why you are doing this?” she asked, her voice sultry. Galen judged from the expression on the face of the man standing behind her, one hand possessively on her shoulder, that he didn’t appreciate her overt attempt at seduction. Not that she wasn’t gorgeous—long, black curling hair, skin the color of creamy tea, kohl-lined eyes...

“Sananda, he’s here to try to help us,” Roshana interjected. “He’s another traveler, like Conall. He’s noticed some problems and is just trying to find out how many timelines Conall has crossed, that’s all.”

“That’s all?” another woman asked. She was one of a pair of midgets, holding on tightly to the arm of the man standing next to her. He stroked her hair reassuringly. She looked up at a girl sitting in a small wagon. “Now someone else knows all about us, he could expose us, he could *destroy* us.”

“Mama,” the girl said quietly, rubbing her mother’s back gently. “It’s going to be fine.”

Galen hesitated for a moment—their daughter was of normal size. On the small side, yes, but still nowhere near the size of her parents.

“I have no intention of destroying you. Anything but. I want to help you. I want to keep you safe. I’m from the future—you don’t know what happens to sideshows. People outside—” He pointed toward the gate. “Decide that you’re being taken advantage of, being treated with no respect, less than human, by the people running the shows. Do you feel that way here?”

There was silence.

“From some of the people who come in, sometimes,” a boy covered with spots said, moving to sit next to the girl in the wagon. “It’s why Ruthanna and Nikolaos try to keep Risiki out of the performances,” he added, taking Risiki’s hand.

“Patrick,” Nikolaos murmured, and Patrick dropped Risiki’s hand with a sigh. “Another two months and she’ll be sixteen. You will survive.”

“I won’t,” Risiki declared. “If the world is coming to an end why shouldn’t he be able to hold my hand now?” she asked her father, who let out an exasperated sigh and gave Galen an annoyed look.

“Do you have children?” he asked Galen, who shook his head. “Unfortunate. I was hoping you would have to deal with this someday.”

Patrick had snuck his hand to touch the side of Risiki’s arm, and Galen noticed Conall smiling slightly, trying to remain serious.

“The world isn’t coming to an end,” Galen declared, ignoring the look Risiki gave him. “Not this moment. I need to know how many of you came from different times, so I know how many lines are crossed.” He listened to the litany, not sure if he should be proud of Conall or dismayed. India, 1857; Austria, 1914; France, 1798; Massachusetts, 1862. “And that’s *all*?” he asked, looking around the room. He rubbed his eyes, and Roshana patted his shoulder.

“There is the one last thing,” she reminded Conall, who sighed. Everyone stirred with excitement, starting to talk at once. Cleo looked pleased, if a snake *could* look pleased.

“You’re so fickle,” Conall whispered to her. “No, you may not. Not right now, and you know why. Her parents are afraid of you. I would be if I was their size as well. I’ll take you to lessons.”

Everyone parted to let him lead the way, Galen and Roshana behind him, the rest following at a polite distance.

Past the last exhibit there was a cordoned-off room. The curtains were blue velvet with silver stars. Conall hesitated, then turned to face Galen.

“This is the blowoff, the extra attraction you get to see if you pay more. Henry is generally successful in convincing people.”

“Is it worth seeing?” Galen asked. He had been through it before, but hadn’t paid it a great deal of attention. It was the one thing that had seemed out of place when everything else had seemed real.

Conall paused. “That’s up to you to decide.” He pushed the curtain aside and let Galen in first. Conall and Roshana followed him quietly.

Galen’s eyes adjusted to the light, which was centered on a heavy, circular bottle, surrounded by small animals made of stone, wood, and crystal. He moved closer, until his nose was nearly against the glass. “A heart. You have a preserved heart. And here I was thinking that everything you had was real. What on earth are you doing with a heart—eeeyaa!” he shrieked as it beat twice, jumping back toward Conall and making a small noise when Cleo put her face up to his, as if inquiring if he were all right. His heart pounded against his chest, and Roshana unwound Cleo and took her from Conall so Conall’s arms were free. He circled them around Galen, murmuring softly in his ear until his heart slowed. Conall didn’t laugh at him—Galen had expected he would.

“It still gives me the willies if I’m not expecting it,” he told Galen. “I don’t come in here too often. Mostly just to make sure it’s all right. I have to be in the proper mood. Read the sign behind it.”

Galen hadn’t even noticed the sign. He’d been concentrating too hard on the heart. “Heart of St. Francis of Assisi.” He looked at the animals around the

bottle again. Some were crudely made, other so fine in detail you could see claws on cats and whiskers on mice.

“None of us put them there,” Roshana said softly, touching one of them with a fingertip. She stroked Cleo’s head. “Someone will put a snake there someday,” she murmured consolingly.

“I need air,” Galen said suddenly, stumbling toward the exit. Roshana and Conall exchanged glances, and she nodded for Conall to follow him. Galen hadn’t gone far—he was leaning against one of the huge trees, head back against the trunk, taking deep breaths.

“Are you all right?” Conall asked him.

“You know I’m not. How could you—how could you have a saint’s heart? I’m not a particularly religious man, but that just seems... wrong.” He didn’t lower his head to look at Conall, who sighed.

“He wasn’t a saint when I took it. No, I didn’t kill him,” he added quickly as Galen did look at him. “It was when they were preparing the body. They didn’t make him a saint until two years later. I just had to go back—”

“Oh dear gods,” Galen breathed. “You went back—how far?”

“Twelfth century. If it’s any consolation, I was sick for a week, and I’m never doing it again.”

“No, you’re not,” Galen snapped. “You could have been lost so easily.”

“I chose,” Conall replied. “Gillian let me choose who I wanted. I was against the whole idea from the start, and the only way I’d agree was if I got to choose whose heart we got. I’ve always liked St. Francis, always liked animals.”

“You couldn’t have picked someone a little closer? A little less... religious?”

Conall smiled. “I was younger then, more impetuous. What’s done is done, Galen. Tell me, though, what did you feel when you saw it?”

“Love,” Galen replied without thinking. He tilted his head. “Everyone leaves feeling that, don’t they?”

“Or something like it.”

“You think you’re a pretty clever bastard, don’t you?” Galen asked him, and Conall grinned.

“Sometimes. Let’s go back to my trailer, you can think there. Roshana will just be leaving.”

“You don’t—you don’t *sleep* with them, do you?” Galen asked anxiously.

“I was a little afraid they might wake up and mistake parts of me for breakfast.” He leaned forward and kissed Galen lightly, about to step back when Galen caught his shirt in both fists and pulled him closer, tracing Conall’s lips with his tongue. Conall welcomed him in as one of Galen’s hands moved to the back of his head, pulling him even closer. Conall leaned against Galen, legs feeling a little weak. Galen held him firmly, keeping him upright. “How do you do this to me?” Conall whispered. “I’m not this... easy.”

Galen laughed quietly. “Neither am I, trust me. It’s a joke at work that I’m celibate. No one stirs me the way you do. I don’t just mean there,” he added as he strained against his trousers. “You make me *feel*, and I haven’t felt anything but detached for years. I thought I’d just lost the ability to experience it anymore. I’d given up, honestly.”

They stumbled back to Conall’s trailer, locking the door behind them. Galen pushed Conall to the bed, straddling him and holding him down, their fingers interlaced as he raised Conall’s arms above his head, leaning in for a light kiss. Conall bit his lower lip gently.

“This is *my* bed,” he murmured as Galen nuzzled his neck behind his left ear. Conall closed his eyes and let out a soft moan.

“So? Is that supposed to mean something?” Galen replied breathily in Conall’s ear, sending shivers down his spine.

“It did at the time. You took over,” he remembered. Galen lowered himself on Conall, bracing some of his weight on his elbows.

“You want to be on top?” he asked Conall, briefly touching his nose to Conall’s. “You don’t like it when I take over? I’m older, that’s why I’m on top?”

“That’s not fair, you know I can’t remember all of that when you have my brain reeling,” Conall muttered, and Galen smiled and kissed him. “It’s new. It doesn’t matter that you’re older. Quite a lot older. Are you sure you have the energy to be up there?”

“It depends on whether you wear me out talking first, when there are very clearly other things I’d rather be doing with my tongue,” Galen replied, touching Conall’s lips lightly with the tip of his tongue. “Do you always talk so much? I don’t believe you did before.” He rocked his body back and forth slightly on Conall’s, and he half moaned, half sighed.

“I’m used to being in charge.”

“I know. I’m curious to see what you’re like when you’re not. When you just let go. I don’t think you ever just let someone else take care of you. Relax, Con. Do you trust me?” Galen stared into Conall’s green eyes, watching the conflict there as Conall searched his face.

“Yes.”

“Good. I trust you. May I continue now?”

Conall smiled crookedly and moved against Galen in response. “Clothes,” he said, and Galen released his hands. Conall began to unbutton Galen’s shirt as Galen reciprocated. There was no more talking as they slowly learned each other.

For several days now, Conall and Galen had been working on the protection spells. They had walked the circumference of the camp with Gillian and Roshana the first day, learning where all the rips, tears, and holes were.

They were used to having an audience now as they worked. It unsettled Galen but Conall was used to it. The camp adults wandered by at times, but it was the children who stayed. Galen thought it was one of the funniest things

he'd seen when Nikolaos lectured Conall about keeping an eye on Risiki and not letting Patrick get away with anything "unbecoming for a young woman." Even Risiki tried not to laugh. Conall assured him a close eye would be kept on Patrick, which, to Patrick's disappointment, was.

"I'm not having Nikolaos come after me. You know the rules he's set out, Patrick. When she turns sixteen," Conall told him. "Liam, you're going to have to help me, since I'll be a bit occupied."

Liam had smiled, disturbing Galen with the fact that he really did have canines like a dog, a feeling heightened when he growled and let out a short bark. Conall rolled his eyes.

"*Without* teasing," Conall added. "Ro will be coming by to check."

The other discovery Galen had made was that Risiki had no legs. She was perfectly formed down to her hips, it appeared, and then—nothing. Everyone else was used to it, and by the end of the day, he was as well.

He and Conall took turns feeding lines of energy to each other. Mending the holes was just like sewing them with a tight thread of time, then smoothing them out and blending them into the rest of the spell until it wasn't even noticeable there had been a hole.

"You couldn't have done this yourself," Galen said. "You're exceptionally gifted, but these protective spells are so strong it truly does take two. Was that never taken into consideration?" he asked as they took a break for lunch, separated from the children by the large mesh cage Conall had brought out for his snakes. There was a large branch inside, and they draped themselves indolently over it. Galen watched them cautiously. Conall caught where his gaze went.

He wished Galen wasn't so afraid of them. He was coming to find, even over this short period of time, that he was growing very fond of Galen. So far, he was everything Conall had ever wanted in a partner. He was accepting the occupants of the camp—they were accepting him. There had been a few titters when Conall had first put his arm around Galen, but it was mostly from the children, who seemed amused by anything having to do with being fond of

anyone. A few days later, no one said anything, and even the children had tired of making fun of Conall having a new boyfriend, as they called Galen.

Gillian had determined long ago that the children be educated and taught them herself when she could. She'd taken ill and, to Conall's surprise, Galen volunteered to take her place so Conall could continue to work. He knew the original protective spells better than Galen did, and could fix some of the smaller holes on his own. The original magic would fill in the holes more smoothly.

The children studied on their own while Galen and Conall worked, with Galen and Conall taking a few extra breaks each day when it became obvious Galen was in no hurry to rush away from the camp. He told Conall it gave him more time to work with the children. When Conall took a rest, though, the children knew it was more likely they'd get a respite themselves rather than more studying.

Today, Risiki sat with her head in her hands, Patrick and Liam already finished and talking around her.

"You two, go off and find something to do while I help Risiki," Galen told them, waving them away. They hooted and ran off while Galen shook his head. "Look at me," he said softly to Risiki, and gradually she lowered her arms. There were tears in her eyes, and Galen frowned. Conall restrained his instinct to go comfort Risiki, curious to see what Galen would do. "What's wrong, love?" he asked her. She shrugged. "I doubt very much it has to do with your shoulders, which look perfectly fine to me today. I *know* you know how to do this." He looked down at her page of division. "You haven't even started. Why?"

"What's the point?" Risiki burst out. "What's the point of any of this? I keep telling my parents that we aren't in Austria anymore, it's not necessary that I marry someone when I turn sixteen like Mama did. They want to look outside of here, outside of *my* home, to find a young man for me, when I have a young man right here. They mentioned the circus."

At this, Conall did move to sit next to Risiki. "Your father hasn't mentioned any of this, Ri. Why all of a sudden?"

“He thinks Patrick is below me,” she muttered, stroking Cleo as she glided down Conall’s shoulder to Risiki’s, trailing around her neck and flicking her tongue at Risiki’s nose. She smiled a little, stroking Cleo and cuddling her to her face. Galen paled, but didn’t move away. “They think Patrick is stupid. He’s not stupid. He said there are chairs with big wheels—I could push myself around instead of being dependent on everyone else. Including him! See, he’s thinking of what’s best for me, even more than Mama and Papa. They want to push me down, he wants to pull me up. I have two perfectly fine arms. They would be strong enough! I can make more animals—” she cut herself off quickly.

“*You’re* the one putting the animals in the blowoff,” Conall mused, surprised. “You made those?”

“I made six, and asked Patrick to put them in for me. How many are there now?”

“Dozens,” Galen replied, and Risiki smiled.

“More came.”

“Which did you make?” Conall pursued.

“There was a mouse, a cat, a bear... I don’t remember the others exactly. I make them out of the stones Patrick and Liam find at the creek. They’re just right for carving.”

“They’re beautiful,” Conall told her. “You do know you could sell those?”

She scrunched up her nose. “No, not yet. I’ll know if the time comes.”

While they’d been talking, no one had been paying attention to Cleo, who had crossed the table to Galen and curled up in front up him, looking up at him. Conall saw her and tried not to smile.

“Galen,” Conall said calmly. “Look down slowly.”

“Oh, you think Patrick and Liam haven’t tried that one enough on me?” Galen asked, and Risiki giggled.

Conall sighed, closing his eyes and shaking his head. “Do I resemble either one of them? Would I pull the same prank a teenager would?”

“Yes,” Galen and Risiki responded simultaneously.

“Thank you,” Conall muttered. “Would you please just do as I asked? Remember, I’m right here, and so is Risiki,” he added with a slight grin.

Galen looked down slowly, turning so pale Conall briefly feared he might suffer lack of oxygen to his brain. His mouth moved but no sounds came out. Cleo was perfectly still, and he started to relax a little, some color returning to his face.

“Cleo,” Galen finally managed. “How unexpected. I had a feeling you’d be the one to eventually provoke the attack on my heart.” He paused, then frowned. “Yes, you’re right, I haven’t had one yet. It’s just a matter of minutes. Maybe even seconds. Don’t mock me! I was once told I would die of murder by snake.”

“Murder by snake?” Risiki snorted. “That’s one of the silliest things I’ve heard. Cleo wouldn’t hurt you. Neither would Stella or Sadie. So now you still have to worry, because there’s another snake out there with your name on it.”

Conall burst out laughing, and Galen glared at him.

“If you love me in any way, shape, or form, you will come and take the most beautiful Miss Cleo to somewhere her charm can be more fully appreciated,” Galen said quietly. Conall rose, walking around the table and scooping her up, but not before she got in a tongue flicking at Galen’s nose. “Thank you,” he told Conall, who sat next to him a little further down the bench.

In bed that night, their breathing evening out, Conall’s head rested on Galen’s chest, Conall’s arm around him. Galen’s arm pulled him closer, and Galen kissed Conall’s hair contentedly.

“I didn’t mean for it to sound like I was forcing you to do something because you loved me,” he told Conall awkwardly. Conall laughed quietly, turning his head and moving to circle Galen’s nipple with his tongue. Galen gasped. “I’m trying,” he whispered, “to have a serious conversation with you.

Please.” Conall innocently blew on the wetness he’d left behind, smiling in satisfaction as Galen’s skin immediately shivered into goosebumps.

“I’m listening,” Conall told him, raising himself up on his elbow and looking intently at Galen’s face. “I wasn’t going to torture you with Cleo. I’m impressed with how well you did, after I was fairly certain you weren’t going to lose consciousness.” He lowered his voice. “I didn’t think I’d get to know you, I thought you were just passing through, checking on this girl, and you were going to leave. But you didn’t. You stayed. It’s been a little over a week now, and you’ve managed to insinuate yourself into our camp almost by magic. As soon as the children trusted you, and the adults passed through... They’ve told Gillian you’re all right. It’s not just because of me. They wouldn’t hesitate to tell her if they thought someone was with me that might hurt me.” He ran his free hand up and down Galen’s chest. “I don’t know what you’re going to do. You said you didn’t find who you were looking for. I love this, us, here, like this, but I don’t know when you’re just going to leave.”

Galen put up a hand to touch Conall’s face. “I did find who I was looking for,” he finally said. “She wasn’t in the circus side, she was here. By the time I put everything together I was already drawn to you. I liked your camp, and I didn’t understand why I would have been given orders to kill such a pretty, innocent young woman.” Conall started, but Galen dropped his hand to Conall’s shoulder. “Listen to me. I’m an agent from the future, not a private investigator. It does take investigative work, I suppose. I serve in a very small force that goes back to fix mistakes in time. Before I even found her I argued that the chances of eliminating her here would most likely have absolutely no change on the outcome in the future. If you stay here, now, especially, there’s no chance she’ll ever end up where she is in the future. Talking about this makes my head ache. I need to tell the agency I won’t do it, and then I’ll need to leave the future, quickly. I need someplace safe to stay. I hate to ask this of you—I came here to kill one of the people you protect. I lied to you about that. You probably don’t want me near you.” He sighed. “I’ve lived a long life, and to have found you at the end of it has made it so much better. Being here has given me a little redemption, I hope. There’s one last thing I want to do before I leave for good, though.”

“You would leave?” Conall asked quietly, his heart plummeting. “I thought you were just saying—you felt something for me?” He rushed on before Galen could answer. “Who is it you were supposed to kill? I should know so I can protect her better in case someone else comes.”

Galen lay an arm over his eyes. “Roziska. I would have probably ended up having to kill Piotyr as well. Her father—he did some heartless things, cruel, to his people. The people had a revolution, captured her father, a tsar, and the rest of the family. They were all killed on hastily given orders. Except for her, because she had disappeared. You have been in so many dangerous places. Did you even know that?”

“No,” Conall admitted. “I didn’t know anything except that she was the one I was supposed to bring. Piotyr wouldn’t leave her side, so I ended up bringing both of them. But you’re truly going to leave them alone?”

“I have no heart for that work anymore. My life had been lonely until I was sent here on this mission, when I saw you for the first time and started to meet the people around you. I don’t want to go back to my old life.”

“Then don’t.” Conall found the words coming out in a rush. “Stay here with me. Help us. I don’t want you to go. The important thing is that you found your better nature and you didn’t kill Roziska. And you told me, and I know you won’t. *Stay here*, Galen. Even if my snakes make you nervous, scare you—you’ll get used to them, over time. They need to get used to you as well, you know. They have to learn to share again.”

Galen found Conall’s hand and squeezed it. “Doesn’t Gillian get the final say?” He paused. “And you’d forgive the reason for my being here so easily?”

“You’re not that man. It’s in your eyes. You don’t want to do it anymore. You want to belong. You want to belong *here*.” Conall spoke with such fierce intensity Galen couldn’t help but smile. “Here, come to bed. Enough of this tonight.” Conall pulled Galen under the blankets with him, curling up with him tightly and falling asleep more quickly than he’d thought he would.

Galen slipped carefully out of the bed once he was sure Conall was truly asleep, gathering his clothes and dressing quietly. He stood and watched

Conall for a moment, drinking in the sight of him, before opening the door, stepping down, and closing it behind him gently.

A few minutes later, there was a flash of blue from the copse of trees beyond the gates of the sideshow.

Conall woke with Gillian on one side of the bed, Roshana on the other, and Milosh at the foot, looking apologetic but still upset. The women were both berating him soundly *and* simultaneously. Milosh remained quiet and went to fix some tea.

“You could let him wake up a little,” he interjected from the stove, and Conall shot him a grateful look.

“I don’t know what’s going on,” Conall told them, feeling the absence of Galen keenly, wondering where he’d gone. “Could *one* of you please tell me what is happening?”

Gillian threw her hands in the air. “Cleo talked to you. You tell him.”

Roshana glared at Conall. “Cleo told me about your conversation last night with Galen. She was worried. She didn’t think he was lying about not going through with what he was supposed to do. She... likes him. She is worried for you. She heard him leave last night, and from your conversation, I have no idea where he could have gone based on what the two of you talked about. Is he coming back?” Roshana asked Conall, who was still letting her words sink in, a sharp pain starting in his chest. He put his hand where it hurt, pressing against it in the hope the pain would lessen.

Milosh brought him some tea, and Conall murmured his thanks. Milosh considered him critically, then Roshana and Gillian, who still had their arms crossed angrily.

“Both of you, out,” he ordered firmly, and they both looked surprised.

“But we don’t know—” Gillian started to say.

“And you won’t. Go. Now!” Milosh opened the door for them, making a sweeping motion with his hand.

They were too surprised at Milosh's actions to do anything but what he asked, and Milosh closed and locked the door after them, muttering. He returned to Conall's side, sitting on the bed next to him.

"Roziska is one of Roshana's best friends," he told Conall. "Roshana was horrified. She was also furious to find out how much danger you'd been in. She loves you like a brother. All of hers are gone."

"All this time and I never knew she had any," Conall said quietly.

"Now you know. She likes Galen, Conall. She thinks he's been good for you. So do I. You've been smiling more. Acting more alive. He's not even comparable to Richard. He deserved to get his animals eaten as snacks. You were never this happy with Richard. Is it because Galen is a traveler as well?"

"I don't know. Maybe. He's sort of like a burr that gets stuck on your sock. It's annoying at first, but you get used to it—that's not a very good analogy. You don't fall in love with the burr."

Milosh put his arm around Conall's shoulders, laughing softly. "All right?" he asked, and Conall nodded. "*Is he coming back?*" he asked, and Conall could tell from his tone that this wasn't Milosh trying to get the answer for Roshana and Gillian—this was Milosh asking because he knew Conall was in pain. Milosh didn't advertise the fact, but he was extremely empathetic, and Conall realized he must be causing Milosh quite a bit of suffering to be so close to him. "Don't worry about that," Milosh told him. Oh, and the mind-reading. Milosh didn't let many know about that either. To most he was just the head chef in the kitchens.

"I honestly don't know. He said there was one more thing he needed to do before he went back, but he sounded like after he went back to... I don't know, tell his employer he couldn't find her... he wasn't expecting to live. That's horrible. He really likes it here, Mil. And yes, I think I am falling in love with him. I don't know for sure. I've never been in love before. It can't be like this. I hurt inside, and I know it's his fault, but all I want right now is to see him, ask him what the hell does he think he's doing. We're not finished fixing the rips, for one thing. How dare he leave me to do this alone? How dare he come in here with his blue eyes and make me want him?"

“The absolute nerve,” Milosh agreed. “And be kind and gentle as well, I suppose, and a good lover, I imagine. He talks tough sometimes, but he’s a kitten underneath, isn’t he?”

“Not always,” Conall said, blushing, and Milosh laughed again.

“They’re calming down,” Milosh told him. “Galen’s back. He’s brought something that has them a little flustered because it looks too much from the future. Pull on some trousers and let’s go out.”

Conall did, nervously. What could Galen have done to raise Gillian and Roshana’s ire? Milosh didn’t seem upset. When Conall opened the door and left the trailer, pulling on a shirt, Galen didn’t seem overly upset either.

He was standing with his head tilted, hands on something in front of him. “And just how many people do you have around here who are geniuses at finding a way to fix that?” he was asking Gillian. Conall looked down at what Galen’s hands rested on—the handlebars of a chair, sleek with black metal tubing, cushions to make a seat, a straight back, also cushioned, enormous wheels—he looked up at Galen, heart near to bursting. He had taken Risiki seriously. How would they explain this to her parents?

“He thinks it will just *blend in*, Conall.” Gillian turned to him in protest, frowning when she saw the expression on his face.

“It will, by the time Patrick and Liam are finished with it,” Conall assured her, walking up to examine it more closely. “This is amazing, Galen.”

“She may be frustrated at first, she’s going to have to build up the strength in her arms, but she certainly has motivation enough to do it,” Galen told him, smiling a little. Conall set a hand on one of the handles, just touching Galen’s hand. He looked up, returning Conall’s probing gaze.

“Are you going back?” Conall asked him, more sharply than he’d intended.

“No. I obliterated the path here and when behind me so they can’t follow. It’s safe here now. I think they’ll find other things to distract them and keep them busy. I crashed their computers with a pretty nasty virus before I left. It’s too hard to explain, but they’ll be busy a good long while.” He chuckled to himself. “And I permanently deleted all their agent files.”

Conall shook his head. Whatever it was Galen had done, he seemed awfully pleased with himself.

“Miss O’Flannery?” Galen asked Gillian, who regarded him skeptically. “I wondered if I could beg a favor of you?”

“Begging might do it,” Roshana snapped.

“Cleo reported our conversation to Roshana,” Conall told him. “She likes you,” he added hastily. “She was afraid you were going to hurt me.”

“That’s absolutely the furthest possible thing on my mind, unless Conall has other ideas?” He looked at Conall with a questioning expression.

“Just stop,” Conall muttered.

“I would plead that you allow me to stay here—I have many talents, I know there are things I could help with.”

“You helped tremendously with the protection spells. They’re the best they’ve ever been. I never thought having two travelers would be anything other than a headache. It turns out you’re good for something after all. But tell me, what’s the *real* reason you came back?” Gillian asked him, her green eyes snapping.

“I promised Risiki I’d bring her a wheeled chair?” Galen responded uncertainly.

“The *real* reason you came back,” Gillian asked him again. “I swear, you’re more annoying than Conall.”

Galen covered Conall’s hand with his own. “You stated the obvious yourself. Travelers are better in pairs.”

THE END

Author Bio

Wendy Clements is in a state of transition at the moment (which translates to: doesn't have a job but is working on finding one that fits her and vice versa). She lives in Oregon, in a generally pleasant city that has grown on her. She is very interested in advocating for individuals with disabilities and anyone being suppressed for any reason. She has wanted to be a writer since the age of nine, when she wrote a very sad poem about a swan (unfortunately [cough] lost to the ravages of time). She has written many things since then, none containing swans, and only one mentioning her earlier childhood desire to be a pig. She self-published one novel, Aithin, and believes it is in serious need of revision, but is torn by the ethical dilemma that it should be left alone (much like a certain trilogy of movies), and the fact that it really needs a good edit.

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