

# LOVE IN THE ELEPHANT TENT

*How Running Away with the Circus  
Brought Me Home*

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PROLOGUE

# NOMADS

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*Spain, 1988*

“Come,” he said, reaching for my hand as we ducked under the wall of canvas.

Sunlight penetrated the white roof of the elephant tent, illuminating the interior with a warm, peaceful glow. Down the line of swinging trunks and bobbing heads, animals shifted their weight from foot to foot, swaying rhythmically as if dream-marching in place. I inhaled the musky animal scent and felt far away from the chaotic realm of the traveling circus.

The tip of an elephant trunk, pink and moist as a pig’s snout, appeared in front of my eyes. With the finger-like protrusion on the end of her trunk, the elephant studied me. She inhaled, and it felt like someone turned a vacuum cleaner on in my face. She exhaled. Wet fermented air whooshed past me. Her trunk brushed over my ear and tickled its way along

my neck, leaving a wake of goosebumps. I giggled and stepped into her touch. The elephant sniffed my clothing, paused at my waist, and then continued on to my shoes before swinging her trunk away.

Stefano, the handsome Italian elephant keeper I'd met just hours earlier, towed me along as he worked his way down the line greeting each animal in a deep, gentle voice. "*Ciao*, Raya. Hello, Mary. You been good girl today, Lola? And how about you, Gooli? *Hola*, Bambi. Yes, and hello to you too, Kama. How my beautiful girls are doing?"

A flap of pink-edged ears, a tractor-like grumble, a mousy squeal, the lowering of a knobby head—each of the six animals returned his greeting in her own way. The troupe of Asian elephants loosely filled one long side of the tent; their presence overwhelmed the entire space.

I stood wide-eyed, transfixed by their swaying. "Why do they all move that way," I asked, "rocking back and forth?"

"Elephants are nomads. They supposed to keep moving. To roam free. Get what they need and move on, not be chained to a circus." Stefano's green eyes revealed his distress. "Whether I am here or not, these animals will be, so I do what I can to see they are cared for," he said, stepping toward an elephant.

Mary, her head the size of an armchair, towered eight feet in the air. Her eyes were pools of mahogany, her skin cracked, desert earth. I touched it. Stiff whiskers raked my palm as I stroked her jaw. Next to Mary's ear, coarse gray skin softened to a freckled pink. Stefano watched from over my shoulder as the elephant sniffed my clothing, my hair. Her huge pupil followed me while I caressed her jowl and traced the furrows beneath her eye. When I let my hand fall to my side, Mary looped her trunk under my wrist. I stiffened. Stefano, his hands on my hips, his warm breath on my neck, reassured me from behind.

My bracelets tinkled as Mary raised my arm to her eye. From behind thick-lashed lids, she stared not at my hand, but at my face. I heard her whooshing breath, smelled her animal scent, felt her craggy skin against my own. Mary held onto my wrist, moving with me as I drew my fingertip up past her eye and then down to her mouth. I leaned back against Stefano. His touch aroused me. Hers thrilled me. Between the two, I could barely breathe.

❧ CHAPTER ONE ❧

# OUT THE DOOR

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I grew up in the wing of an old motel. Rooms five, six, seven, and eight had been lifted from their foundation in Eugene, Oregon, transplanted into the nearby woods, and modified barely enough to be called a house. The previous owners had turned one bathroom into a kitchen, leaving the plastic-curtained shower stall intact to serve as the pantry, and walled over a second bathroom to hide the toilet in the living room. I can still see the little red plaque nailed to my parents' bedroom door. *Checkout time is 12 noon. Please be sure to remove all belongings.*

There are times when I wonder if spending my teenage years within walls that had once rattled with thousands of comings and goings contributed to the transience that consumed my young adult life. In a home with four front doors, how could a family plant roots and allow them to grow?

My father checked out first, in some ways years before he actually packed his cigarettes and his tools and walked out the door.

My siblings didn't last long, either. At seventeen, my sister began her trek up and down the West Coast, seeking stability in a handful of boyfriends and husbands. One of my brothers abandoned college to travel the Midwest, living out of a car, selling Bibles to believers, earning meals by memorizing random excerpts of a book he'd never read. My other brother spread his twenties across the world's military bases. He found home in a helmet and a gun.

Brothers and sister gone, father remarried, mother working—by my senior year in high school, our motel-home felt hollow, and I spent 1983 filling that void. More. Farther. Wilder. Higher. Fast paces and far-flung places. I chased the anticipation of *what comes next?* And each exercise in excess took me another step further away from everything I'd ever known.

College in California saved me from small-town Oregon, but school sufficed only until I discovered Grateful Dead-style emancipation. Hopscotching across the States in my Volkswagen bus, I followed the music, followed the fun. The kaleidoscope of the Dead was as much about becoming one with the music and one with each other as it was about being different from everyone else. Tour after tour, we traveled thousands of miles by bus, car, plane, or thumb until we reached the next concert and let out one big home-again sigh. Home, where everything we needed—meals, tickets to the show, customers to purchase our goods—seemed to be ready and waiting, and a few hours of selling my hand-woven beaded jewelry usually provided enough for me to live on and travel.

Within days, we'd be back on the road, like some psychedelic gumball rally, prodding our jalopies toward the next town.

Seeing the same faces over and over around the country built a sense of community that drew me into the Grateful Dead experience; it is also what pushed me away. After eighteen months, tie-dyed dreadlocks and glow-in-the-dark leggings became predictable and ordinary, satiated became saturated, marvelous became monotonous. I had to move on. So I traded my fringed leather vest and paisley silk gauchos for a button-down blouse and navy linen skirt to earn traveling money working at a bank. These weren't blind costume changes. I was running as if my future depended on it. Underneath that button-down blouse, I was giddy. Intoxicated with possibility, intoxicated with life. And then, in the fall of 1988, I loaded my backpack, bought an open-ended plane ticket to Amsterdam, and lit out in search of destiny and a damn good time.

Strange languages, blue money, ornate buildings, and tight, steep staircases. For two weeks, I explored Amsterdam, the land where prostitutes fill windows and marijuana fills menus. I followed narrow streets and canals through mazes of tall skinny houses, and in the world-famous red light district, where pastel hues spill onto the sidewalk through plate-glass windows, I giggled and grimaced past displays of rubbery sex toys, Long Dong Silver videos, and colorful brothels. The gussied-up, showcased women made me think of Barbie dolls lined up in a toy store display—except these dollies struck lewd poses and had nipples poking through their brassieres.

I felt like Dorothy in Oz. Amsterdam's confluence of long-hairs, skinheads, and everything in between was as close as I could get to being on the road without going anywhere, but I was a weathervane subject to the prevailing wind. By late

October, the prevailing wind was a cold and rainy gale from the north.

The only person I knew on the entire continent was Beth, a woman from home who had a soft spot for musicians. Last I'd heard, she was in Amsterdam—though with no phone and no address. I was lucky enough to learn from some street musicians that she frequented a particular bar. When we finally connected, her freckled cheeks and smiling blue eyes warmed me like a mug of tea. Beth's "home" was a squat called The Island, a cluster of old warehouses and bohemian shelters that housed both temporary and career travelers, as well as the homeless.

It was there at The Island where I met Colin, the street performer who would spur me into my southbound journey when he looked down at me from under the rain-soaked rim of his blue woolen hat and asked in a haughty English accent, "Well, Yankee, can you bang a tambourine and ask for money?"

Studying the juggling clubs that poked through the ripped seam of Colin's rucksack, I realized that nothing about this man ignited a romantic spark or even intrigued me. In fact, his winning quality was that he seemed perfectly harmless. Besides, traveling with him and his fellow buskers could open doors. I knew my \$1,200 in savings would never last a year in Europe, and eventually I would have to work. But not any job would do. After four months of strangling myself in respectable clothing in San Francisco's financial district, I'd had enough dress codes and alarm clocks to last a long time. Between baton-twirling, cheerleading, school plays, and community theater, I'd been hauling myself onto stages since I was six, when my siblings and I sang "This Land is My Land" for a school talent show. Joining a performing troupe was right up my alley.

Colin and I, plus his mandolin-playing best friend and an



Irish woman, set our sights on Perpignan, France—the place Salvador Dalí once called the center of the universe. During the weeks the four of us traveled together, we busked only twice and earned but a few dollars each time. Colin ended up \$100 in my debt and had no way to repay it. Perhaps that's why his idea of hooking up with a group of English gypsies following the orange harvest through northeastern Spain sounded like a good plan. My father would call trading hard labor for five bucks a day character building. Not me. An entire continent lay in wait, and I wanted to be on the road. But I needed the money Colin had borrowed, so I moved into a converted Bella Vega bus to pick oranges with my fellow buskers, a few English travelers, and the lovely Jennifer.

Jennifer wasn't her real name, and Jennifer wasn't really a her. The morning she found us at a labor cooperative, Jennifer was dressed like a normal Spanish teenage boy—tight jeans, tight shirt, and slicked back hair. I saw him migrating toward our eccentric entourage from the far side of the crowd. Each step Jennifer took became more effeminate, as if he sauntered through a sex-warp. When Jennifer reached us, he was a she. By dusk, she'd moved onto the bus with her few clothes, a makeup bag, and her gaff—the handy little panty that makes clothed male genitalia indistinguishable from female. Jennifer's hot temper, outlandish behavior, and wacky sense of humor kept me laughing, and I admired her sense of self. Together we picked oranges, cooked communal meals, and grew weary of our crowded living conditions.

Things changed when Colin's new girlfriend and his mandolin-playing buddy from our busking crew were arrested for indecent exposure. Though his unpaid debt had alienated Colin from me over the past weeks, I still wished I could have said something to ease his pain, but no such words existed.

His best friend was caught screwing his girl in the middle of town, and that was that.

This cuckolding set Colin and me on a parallel path once more—both determined to get off the bus. One afternoon in early December, he ran into camp with the rest of the money he owed me in his outstretched hand. “Yank. Yank. Couldn’t wait—” He bent over, trying to catch his breath as he pushed a wad of *pesetas* at me. “Circus,” he finally said. “There’s a circus in town, and we’re joining up. I’m going to juggle, and you’re going to . . . to . . .”

I looked down at the map spread in front of me and tapped my finger on Portugal. I’d been planning my departure for over a week and had no intention of including Colin. “Not a chance.”

“But it’s such a *brilliant* idea.”

Brilliant? Colin had not turned out to be harmless after all. Was this circus idea as brilliant as when he’d stranded me in Belgium with a groping truck driver who mistook himself for Casanova? As brilliant as when we’d joined these bus-living, ragtag misfits to pick oranges in the Catalonian groves? Or as brilliant as when he had deserted me in a Spanish bar after I’d passed out on my birthday?

Colin pleaded, said he couldn’t speak the language worth a damn and that if I didn’t use what Spanish I knew to translate for him, he’d end up cleaning bathrooms instead of juggling in the ring. Acting as though foreign soil weakened my footing, I had tagged along with others’ harebrained plans since I left Amsterdam. Why not peek behind the velvet curtains? As with everything in life, I could always walk—or run—away. I asked Jennifer to come too, but she said her life already felt like a freak show and saw no reason to make it her profession.

And so, on a warm evening in Villarreal, Spain, Colin and I

followed trumpets, whoops, and hollers down a dirt road. Rings of twirling lights and shimmering flags crowned the big top, and the words *Super Circo Magico* radiated garish pink light.

Colin beamed like a man who'd finally found a place worthy of his talents. "It's beautiful, Kathleen, don't you think?"

"*Magico*," I said, observing the burnt out bulbs on the light strands cascading from the tent's peaks to its tethers. "Just *magico*."

"Come on, Yank. Haven't you always wanted to be a part of this?"

I couldn't recall ever seeing a circus before, much less wanting to be a part of one.

A teenager standing at the entrance to the big top greeted us. His ill-fitting red jacket with its rows of tarnished brass buttons reminded me of a high school band uniform—passed down for generations, mistreated by all who'd worn it. When I told him in Spanish that we wanted work, the boy hollered toward the ticket booth. Inside, a slick-looking man cocked his head, smoothed his gelled-in-place ponytail, straightened his black suit, and strolled over. His gaze traveled down my paisley hippie dress, paused on the silver bangles decorating my wrists, paused even longer on the toe rings peeking out of my well-worn Birkenstock sandals. Colin lifted his shoulders until he reached his full six-foot-two while the ticket man took inventory of the worn-through knees of Colin's jeans, his torn and stained T-shirt, and the tattered collection of woven bracelets on his wrists. The show was in progress, and we couldn't talk to the boss until intermission, Slick explained, shooing us into the tent with a promise to find us at the right time.

Inside the big top, four massive steel columns stretched up past the trapeze swings to the peaks of the tent. Odors of perfume, popcorn, and animal mingled in the humid air.

Two clowns pretending to perform acrobatic feats skipped around the ring wearing gigantic shoes, oversized pants, and red suspenders. Comical hats, ten sizes too small, balanced precariously on their bright wigs. The bleachers bounced with laughter as Colin and I climbed to a couple of empty seats.

Eyes fused to the show, Colin clapped and whistled and stomped his feet to the big band music. Images flashed in my mind. *Kathleen in a clown costume*. I wondered if working here might even be fun. *Kathleen on the trapeze*. Be realistic. *Kathleen in an old band uniform*.

The lights dimmed, and a man with sparkling red coat-tails announced the next number. Exotic flute music floated out of the darkness. Beams of light revealed gyrating girls in Egyptian headdresses, gold brassieres, and miniskirts. Catcalls and whistles sailed through the tent until the girls ran out and the lights rose to show a menagerie of metal crates. To the rhythm of tribal drums, a gray-haired man sporting a stretchy gold jumpsuit opened the cages that filled the ring. Two snakes slithered from one enclosure onto the dirt floor; a small crocodile crawled from another. Young children hid behind mothers. Older ones edged in for closer looks. Don Serpiente prowled the ring, parading his reptiles for the captivated audience and spiraling a snake as thick as his thigh around his body until he nearly disappeared behind its scales.

*Kathleen in a boa constrictor?*

Workers hauled cages away as the lights faded. A drum rolled in the dark, and the crowd simmered with expectation. Women struggled to keep screeching children seated. Colin was perched so far forward, a nudge would have toppled him. Six girls rushed in for a quick dance until blaring horns drowned out their music. Spotlights swirled, the drapes flew open, and six elephants burst in. The audience exploded. The

passive zoo elephants I'd seen in my youth did not prepare me for the raw energy blasting from the ring.

A baton-waving man at the edge of the ring barked commands, his silver suspenders stretched over his belly to hold up sparkling trousers. Another man—young, dark-haired, and handsome in his blue dress shirt—swiveled his broad shoulders between elephants, urging one forward, directing another back. Royal blue flared from the sequined seams of his black pants as he twisted and turned in a fearless dance among the beasts. The elephants, as if oblivious of their own weight, performed headstands and danced a two-step. They balanced on one foot and marched on their hind legs. Trumpeters blew their hearts out, and spectators *oohed* and *aahed* during the fifteen-minute show. I spied on the boy in blue.

*Kathleen in the elephant keeper's arms?*

"Yank—" Colin pointed to the ticket man who was waving us down from the bleachers.

As the animals exited the ring, Slick led us under the stands and out through a split in the side of the tent. His jutting hand stopped Colin and me in our tracks as the six elephants hurtled toward us. A gust of animal-scented air tickled my cheeks while the creatures surged past.

We wove through a maze of tired trucks and scruffy campers before stopping in front of a shiny white trailer as long as a school bus. When Slick rapped on the door, a window curtain parted, and a chubby-faced man stared out. His gaze wandered past Colin and landed on me. I looked away, down the row of trailers with their racks of drying laundry and clog-cluttered door mats.

"That goon still looking?"

Colin nodded. "Right at your bum."

Chubby Cheeks was still peering from the window when the

older man from the elephant act finally came to the door. Silver suspenders hung at his sides. Flesh-toned greasepaint settled in his wrinkles and stained the towel cloaking his shoulders. His smirk, plastic and practiced, looked drawn onto his face.

He studied me with the same vigilance. When he spoke, Colin interrupted.

"*Sí, sí, sí.*" Colin pointed to himself, repeating one of the few Spanish words he knew. "*Sí, sí, sí,*" he said again before asking, "What's he saying, Yank?"

"You just told him you can dance in high heels on dirt."

Colin gasped. "Did you tell him I juggle?"

"*Mi amigo es un . . . un . . .*" High school Spanish hadn't taught me the word for juggler. "*Quiere trabajar como un . . .*" I pointed to Colin, who'd launched into miming his juggling act.

"*Sí, sí, sí.*" Colin mimed his act again. "Me good juggler. Me make you lots of money. M-O-N-E-Y."

The man at the window and the few circus people who'd wandered over laughed. Colin laughed too, not realizing, perhaps, that the joke was on him.

The boss's painted face grew stern. "I have a *malabarista*. If he comes back in the morning, your friend will work as all my men do. You," he said, "will be a dancing girl."

*A dancing girl? A cleavage-flashing, pelvis-gyrating, mini-skirt-wearing dancing girl?*

Colin tugged on my arm. "He wants me to juggle, right?"

"Wrong." I translated everything except the part about Colin being welcome only if I came too.

"Wait 'til he sees me perform," Colin said. "So what if they make me work for a few days?"

I shuffled through the tawdry faces of the show folks in bathrobes, cummerbunds, and sequined bustiers that had gathered

around us at the camper door, halfway looking for a bearded woman or a serpent-skinned man. Maybe a boy in blue.

What did I know about the circus? Joining would be impulsive. Reckless. Any prudent person would balk at the idea, but at twenty-three, I had no such inhibitions.

When I look at pictures from those times, I see a girl whose gaze pierces the camera from behind an untamed curl. Her eyes say, *Why* wouldn't *I run away with the circus?*

I wonder if running away was the prize or the price of her freedom.