



*by Rhonda Dragomir*

*Previously in Chapter One...*

*Hank Webb, a roustabout from the Ringling Brothers & Barnum and Bailey Circus, hastened with his team to erect the big top after arriving late in Hartford, Connecticut on July 5, 1944. The beastly hot weather had caused tempers to flare, and the matinee performance that day had been cancelled because of the delay.*

*Hank, chief of the crew that deployed an animal chute for lions to enter the ring, had been scarred by the aggression of Spartacus, the largest and fiercest of Ringling's felines. His natural fear had led to his being costumed by the clowns and dubbed "Fraidy Freddie," his makeup giving him an appearance of perpetual fright.*

*Ordered to town on a goodwill tour, Hank and three other Ringling clowns visit Charlie's Diner, where their antics entertain disappointed patrons. They are accompanied by an unstable, surly teenager, Robert, who caused an incident earlier in the day which might have proved fatal to Hank. This excerpt is from their encounter at the diner with Evelyn, our heroine.*



“Evelyn, the boss says you can take care of those clowns at table six.” Darla’s guffaw teased Evelyn’s lips to smile. They almost did, and would have, except today had already served up challenges faster than Charlie plated corned beef hash.

Before she left for work, Evelyn had been assailed by her weeping niece and nephew, who’d just learned about the cancellation of today’s circus matinee. Bill—Evelyn’s brother and the children’s father—had exchanged his tickets for tomorrow’s two o’clock show, but it made no difference to the children.

Then, Evelyn’s fingernail had punctured her last precious pair of real hosiery. A huge run started right below her hem and traveled all the way into her shoe. A gravy stain hadn’t washed out of her apron, and the five-block hike to work in the oppressive heat wasted all the time she had spent sleeping on her pin-curls.

Not even Bob Hope could have brought a genuine smile to Evelyn’s face today. She loaded glasses of ice and a pitcher of water on her serving tray and headed to the circular corner booth. Darla would have loved to serve them. But no, the clowns—real ones—had chosen seats in Evelyn’s section.

Four Ringling clowns occupied the curved, red-vinyl bench accompanied by an enthusiastic young man who reveled in all the attention. When Evelyn drew near, perspiration trickled down her back. The diners fixed their eyes on her as she set a glass in front of each man. Ice tinkled as she poured water without spilling a drop. One clown made his eyebrows dance, another mimed the shape of an hourglass, and a third emitted a wolf whistle. The fourth merely stared. His white-rimmed eyes and his crimson, o-shaped mouth made him look perpetually terrified.

Evelyn summoned the authoritative voice she’d learned when babysitting the Johnson twins. “That’s quite enough.” The offenders straightened their bow ties and sat at attention, much to the delight of the nearby children.

“I’m Evelyn, and I’ll be your waitress today.” One clown offered a snappy salute, and two others waved with exaggerated enthusiasm. On a different day, it might have been funny.

The brawny teenager appointed himself an unofficial translator. “They are mimes, so I’ll have to give their orders. I’m Russell.”

The youth had turned his back to the clowns, so he didn’t see their gestures. One put his thumb to his nose and wiggled his fingers, another rolled his eyes and slumped, and the third scrubbed his hands through his fiery hair until it stood on end. The fourth sat as still as a boulder, but he blinked.

Charlie bellowed through the kitchen window, “Did they come to eat or put on a show? I’m running a diner here.”

Everyone sobered up. The adults resumed eating, and only the children kept up their stares and giggles.

The first clown fanned his face with a handkerchief while beckoning Evelyn to guess the meaning of his charade.

She played along. “Hot.”

The second clown honked an ear-splitting horn, and Evelyn’s empty tray clattered to the floor. Thank goodness, she’d set the pitcher on the table already. Everyone seemed amused except Charlie. The fourth clown deftly retrieved her tray, gave it to her, and brushed her hand with his. Was that intentional? Something in his summer-blue eyes banished the tension from her shoulders.

Evelyn guessed “dog” when clown number one lolled his tongue and panted. Being a waitress didn’t mean you were dumb or stuck-up. When she asked if he wanted fries, the clown answered with exaggerated claps of his gloved, padded fingers, prompting more horn honking from his partner in crime.

The shenanigans stole the spotlight from Russell, and he thumped the table with an oversized fist. “That’s enough, you—”

He stopped himself, but everyone mentally completed Russell’s sentence.

*Clowns.*

A belly laugh escaped before Evelyn could restrain it. She covered her mouth, but a refreshing lightness infused her soul. She steadied the upset teen with a gentle hand on his shoulder. “It’s all right. This world needs all the laughter we can get.”

A red flush climbed the young man’s neck and settled in his cheeks. He remained silent but spoke volumes with his scowl. Someone should keep a close watch on that one.

The clowns completed their orders with a flair for entertainment. The fourth man simply pointed on the menu to today’s special—meatloaf on toast points and mashed potatoes, smothered in gravy, with a side of applesauce. His even, white teeth glistened when he smiled, and laugh lines creased his makeup.

Warmth crept into Evelyn’s cheeks until their color matched Russell’s. If she didn’t leave the table soon, she might go up in flames. “I’ll place your orders now, gentlemen.”

Evelyn headed for the kitchen, but the men’s gazes weighed heavily on her back. She could almost see them—three gleeful clowns, a hot-headed teenager with a chip on his shoulder, and an intriguing fraidy-cat she’d like to see without his makeup.

But wasn’t that against the clown code of conduct?

Evelyn didn’t care.

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Hank rubbed his jaw, and his hand came away black. Clown makeup wasn’t conducive to public dining. Evelyn waited on other tables, but he couldn’t stop admiring her female perfection. Not only was she a beauty—with her heart-shaped face and startling green eyes—but she was a good sport. Not many women could handle themselves with so much grace under the onslaught of this

Ringling trio. Charlie Bell, Blinko, and Happy Kellems often turned intelligent, articulate women into blathering nincompoops.

His guise meant he couldn't talk, but Hank would wrangle more information from Evelyn somehow. He was no skirt chaser, but something about Evelyn stirred him. Perhaps he longed for a connection to a woman not tainted by circus life, but this was more than simple admiration. For the first time in two years, Hank entertained the idea of settling down. Hartford was far enough away from Speigletown. No one should recognize him even without his makeup.

The rattle of dishes and happy hoots from his companions, all except Russell, announced Evelyn's return. Blinko made a show of sloppy eating, Happy spurted water on his plate like he was the Trevi Fountain, and Charlie Bell watched with mock revulsion. Russell didn't comment, leaning over his plate and shoveling food into his mouth.

Hank pointed at Evelyn and made signs he hoped she'd understand. *You come tomorrow?*

The other clowns nodded *yes* and clapped.

"Yes. I'll be at the matinee." Evelyn's smile was that of an indulgent teacher with a classroom of hooligans, but her answer was the one Hank had hoped for.

The pointed collar of Evelyn's white blouse sported a round lapel pin with a gold star against a purple background. Not mere jewelry. Evelyn was a war widow. He should be ashamed for thinking it was good news. Pointing to the pin, Hank mimed a trail of tears down his cheeks with both index fingers.

The other clowns stilled.

Evelyn's lower lip trembled.

Hank wrapped himself in a hug and rocked side to side, slowly shaking his head. Then he shrugged and extended upraised hands to her while arching his eyebrows.

"George. My husband. He died in the Bataan Death March."

The fact pierced Hank's chest like a bayonet. What an awful way for a man to die, and what a horror for the survivors. Hank might have been in Bataan, if only. . . Nope. Spilled milk. No crying.

Hank removed his red beret, folded his hands, and bowed his head. His companions joined him, and it wasn't an act. He said a brief, silent prayer for Evelyn and all the women who had been deprived of husbands, fathers, or sons. Even now, good men died under German fire in Europe as they marched beside Sherman tanks through the French countryside.

And Hank wore clown makeup traveling with the circus in Hartford, Connecticut. His throat constricted so much he couldn't have voiced words even if he'd been allowed to.

Russell emerged from his funk. "We're sorry for your loss, ma'am."

Clowning in town was over for the day. The troupers ate their meal in silence like true mimes. After they wrapped up the remnants of their meal, they left payment and a generous tip for Evelyn before scooting out of the diner. Halfway back to the tents, Hank halted like a soldier under orders from a drill sergeant. Blinko ran into him, feigned anger, and knocked his beret off while bystanders snickered.

He'd forgotten to ask for Evelyn's phone number.