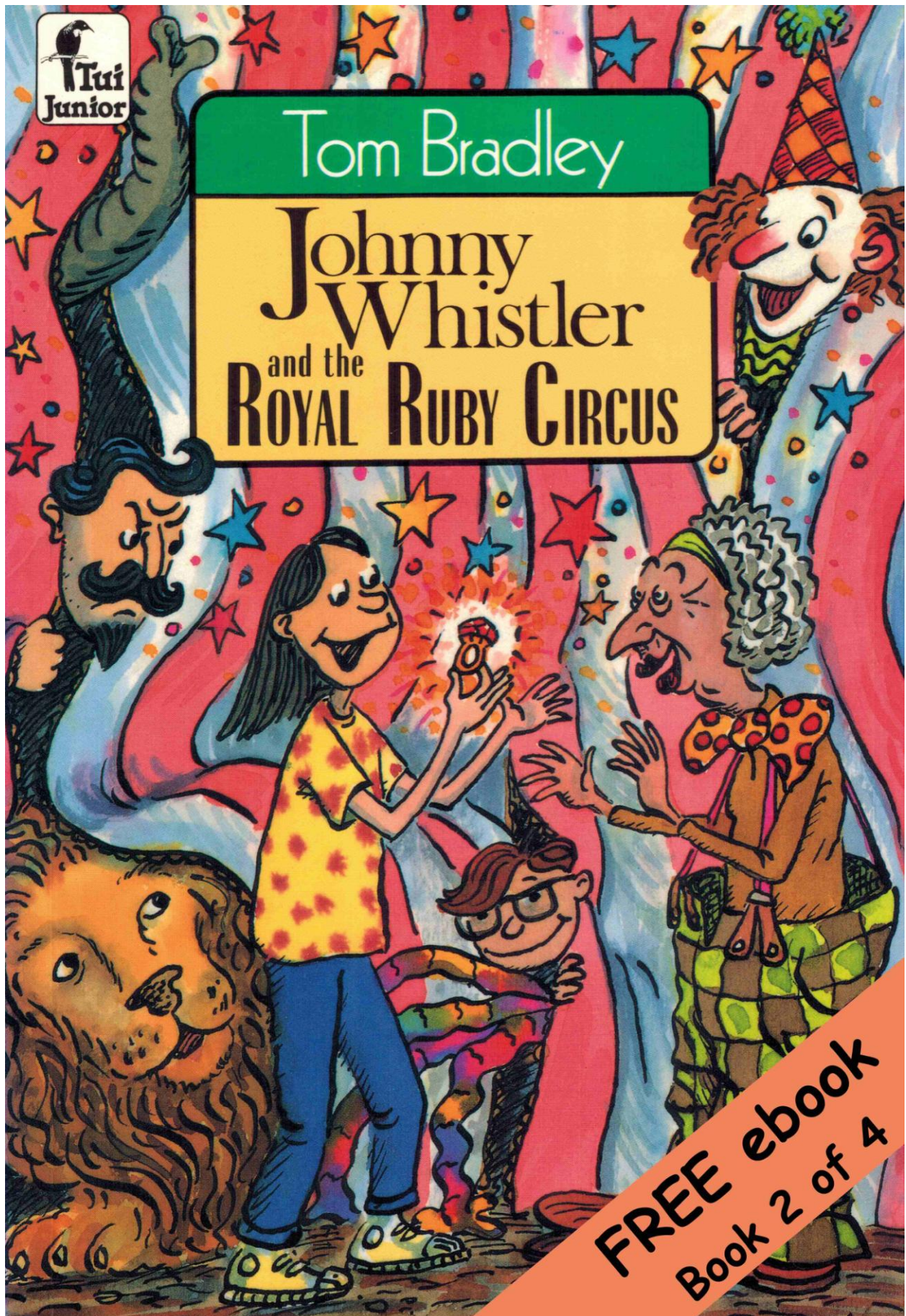




Tom Bradley

Johnny Whistler and the ROYAL RUBY CIRCUS



FREE ebook
Book 2 of 4

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What the critics said about the ‘Johnny Whistler’ series

- “*Wacky fun and larger-than-life adventures*” ([Quote Unquote](#))
- “*... light entertainment with flair ... fast pace and ongoing action. These books are fun*” ([Otago Daily Times](#))
- “*The best idea would be to buy the first of four titles ... upon observance of reader rapture, spring for the series*” ([Nelson Evening Mail](#))

What this story is about

(Second book in the Johnny Whistler series)

When Johnny, his best friend Bouncer, and sister Debbie, step into the ring to try and save Aunt Elsie’s struggling circus, the battle is on.

Under the big top, Johnny and his famous giant, rubbery friends, the Spiders - Rainbow, Sunshine, and Sky - tackle the baddies who are trying to close down the circus.

But why is it called the *Royal Ruby Circus*? And why is one of its stars trying to sabotage the show?

Adventure follows adventure as Johnny and his friends try to unravel the mystery before it’s too late.

Chapter One

'Shoot, Debbie, shoot!'

Bouncer's voice rang out across the Whistlers' backyard.

'Stop shouting at me!'

'Then shoot!' yelled Johnny.

As her brother spoke, Debbie stumbled, and the soccer ball slid off her foot.

Quickly bringing it back under control, she stopped and glared at the two boys.

'You're trying to put me off my game.'

'What game?' asked Johnny. 'It's more talk than football.'

'My audience is loving it.' Debbie resumed the advance on her brother's goal and launched into an excited running commentary as she went.

'The crowd's going wild!' she cried. 'Debbie Whistler has them on their feet.'

'Feet?' said Johnny. 'The crowd's got feet? Then give them the ball. One of them might kick it.'

'I can't see any crowd,' said Bouncer.

'Millions of TV viewers,' said Debbie.

'In that case, Bouncer should be doing the commentary,' said Johnny. 'He's the professional.'

Bouncer was resident compere at the Bayside Entertainment Centre where Johnny performed.

'What's the telecast, Johnny?' asked Bouncer. 'Big Match Of The Day?'

'With my sister, it's more like Big *Mouth* Of The Day,' said Johnny.

Bouncer waved his arms in the air and jumped up and down. 'Point the cameras over here, Debbie. I want to say hello to Mum.'

Debbie glared at Bouncer, but continued. 'The crowd realise they're watching the greatest woman soccer player the world's ever seen.'

Johnny Whistler crossed his arms and yawned. 'You're dreaming, sis. You haven't scored a goal yet.'

'I keep giving her the ball, Johnny,' said Bouncer. 'What more does she want?'

'Talent!' said Johnny.

Debbie Whistler stopped again. 'I want you both to stop this.'

'Stop what?'

'Bossing me around.'

'Makes a nice change,' said Johnny. 'You're always doing it to me.'

'I'll shoot when I'm ready.'

'This year, I hope.'

'I refuse to rush. This is the game of the century.'

'It's going to take that long,' said Bouncer.

The backyard game of soccer had been going for almost thirty minutes and Debbie was making yet another attempt to get the ball past her brother.

Nine times, Bouncer had passed her the ball, and nine times Johnny had saved the shot.

Debbie was hoping for tenth time lucky. 'Debbie Whistler is sensational,' she cried in her commentator's voice. 'The first woman ever to play in a men's World Cup Final.'

'Girls don't play in the men's world cup.'

'Listen to the commentary, Johnny. I said I was the first. And the best. And anyway, I'm not a girl, I'm a woman.'

'You're 14,' said Bouncer.

'Two years older than both of you,' she said. 'And smarter.'

She swerved to one side. 'Debbie Whistler dodges one player, she side-steps another. She's unstoppable.'

'Only her mouth,' said Johnny.

'One more smart comment like that, little brother, and you'll get sent off.'

Bouncer sprang to his friend's defence. 'All the big sports broadcasters have someone else doing comments. That's what Johnny's doing.'

'Tell him to stick to what's happening on the field,' said Debbie.

'That's the problem,' said Johnny. 'Not much *is* happening on the field.'

'Then I'll do my own comments, thank you very much.'

Bouncer started to protest. 'You can't do everything...'

'I can, too,' said Debbie.

'Don't argue with her, Bouncer, or we'll be here all week.'

'Look Debbie,' said Johnny. 'If you're going to shoot for goal, then shoot. If you're only going to talk, go somewhere else. You're driving me crazy.'

Debbie was winding up for a big finish. 'The greatest woman soccer player the world's ever seen is about to score the goal that will win the men's World Cup. She draws back her foot, steadies herself and...'

Debbie didn't get a chance to finish. One minute she was poised, ready to shoot. The next she was flat on her face.

'Foul!' she screamed, lifting her face out of the grass. 'Bouncer, I'll get you for this!'

'It wasn't me!'

'Then who...?'

Debbie rolled over and looked up into the bright yellow face of her tackler.

Bouncer picked up the commentary. 'A spectator has run onto the field and flattened Debbie Whistler. A great tackle. Let's watch the replay on the big video screen. Yes, there it is. The best move of the game. The crowd loves it.'

'Well, I don't,' protested Debbie, jumping to her feet and pointing to the culprit. 'That was a deliberate foul. Sunshine should be sent off. Red card!'

'Don't be silly, sis. How can you give a red card to a yellow spider?'

Sunshine was not only bright yellow, he was huge, with a body as big as a truck tyre and legs to match. Two equally enormous spiders, Rainbow and Sky, sat on the sideline, squeaking.

Debbie pointed at them. 'They're making those spider noises again. They're laughing at me.'

'I wonder why?' asked Johnny.

'It's not funny.'

'Maybe spiders have a different sense of humour.'

'I know they're laughing at me,' said Debbie.

'Since when did you speak their language?' demanded Bouncer. 'Only Johnny can talk spider-ese. What *are* they saying, Johnny?'

Johnny cocked his head to one side and listened intently. 'Apart from saying Debbie is the biggest twit who ever kicked a football...'

Debbie raised her fist. 'Careful, little brother...'

'...apart from that, they're challenging us to a game.'

'What?' Bouncer's mouth dropped open, which had the effect of sending his heavy black glasses sliding to the tip of his nose.

'That's ridiculous.' Debbie dusted herself off. 'Spiders can't play soccer.'

'These ones could do anything with a bit of practice,' said Johnny. 'I could teach them. We all know how strong they are. They'd be dynamite to tackle.'

'Sounds fun. Let's do it,' said Bouncer who wasn't built for speed. 'I'll be goalie.'

Johnny Whistler was well named. As well as whistling in his famous busking act, he'd discovered he could imitate the spiders' language, which was a squeaky, high pitched sound.

One blast from his lips and the three spiders gave him their immediate attention.

With more whistles, and some waving of his arms, Johnny moved them into position, like a shepherd controlling sheep dogs.

'Which one should I put in goal?' said Johnny.

'Rainbow,' said Debbie. 'He looks like a goalie.'

Johnny agreed. 'He's certainly not going to be confused with any other player.'

In fact all three spiders looked very different. Their distinctive colouring and huge, rubbery bodies were the result of being caught in a spill of toxic sludge from two local factories.

One of the factories made candy and the by-products from the food dyes had left Rainbow multi-coloured. Only Sunshine was yellow. Sky was bright blue.

Debbie placed the ball on the imaginary halfway line and started a new commentary.

'It's a lovely day in beautiful Bayside as the Whistler All-Stars prepare for their crucial game against the... against the... what do I call them?'

'How about Spiders United?' suggested Bouncer.

'Call them anything you like, Debs,' said Johnny. 'Just stop talking, and kick the ball.'

'Yeah, let's start,' cried Bouncer.

'We can't,' said Debbie. 'You've both forgotten something. We have to toss a coin to see who kicks off.'

'Who says?'

'I do, little brother.'

'Don't call me that. I'm taller than you.'

'But I'm going to be a lawyer one day, and I know the rules. The referee has to toss a coin.'

'We haven't got a referee,' said Bouncer.

'I'm the referee,' said Debbie.

Bouncer protested. 'You can't be a player *and* the referee,'

'Well, I can.'

'It's against the rules.'

'I've just invented a new rule.'

'You're going to make a great lawyer,' said Johnny.

'I intend to.' Debbie pulled a coin out of her jeans and got ready to flip it into the air. 'Now, call.'

'Not so fast.' Johnny pointed to the spiders. 'They're the visitors. They should call.'

'You know I don't speak their language.'

'I'll translate,' offered Johnny.

'You might trick me.'

'Debbie! We're on the same team, remember?'

'Will you two stop it?' pleaded Bouncer. 'I've got to go home soon. It's almost dinner time.'

'Bouncer's right, Debs. If we leave it much later, we'll need floodlights to see the ball, and we haven't got any. Why don't we forget the toss and just get on with the game?'

And with that, Johnny gave the ball a hard kick towards the spiders' goal.

Johnny Whistler was strong and well coordinated. Anyone who'd seen his busking act knew that. It took strength and skill to hit the bass drum on his back while clashing the cymbals between his knees.

At the same time, he played the piano accordion and the harmonica. But nothing had prepared him for a game of soccer with the spiders.

For a start, Spiders United could call on a combined total of 24 legs to the Whistler All-Stars' six.

'It's not fair,' yelled Debbie, within seconds of the kick off.

'You're right,' cried Johnny, 'but we should have thought about it before we started.'

When Sunshine or Sky had the ball, they were not only able to switch it quickly from leg, to leg, to leg, to leg, they always had seven limbs spare to trip up would-be tacklers.

'Go for his legs, Johnny!' yelled Bouncer.

'Which ones?' cried Johnny.

Spiders United soon had the Whistler All-Stars running in circles. Even when Johnny or Debbie did manage to get the ball, any attack on the spiders' goal was doomed.

'Here it comes, Debbie.' Johnny executed a perfect pass, right to his sister's feet. 'Shoot!'

Debbie hit it with all her power, and the ball took off like a rocket towards its target.

Unfortunately, the shot rebounded straight off Rainbow's rubbery body and came back twice as fast, past Debbie, past Johnny and past Bouncer and into the All-Stars' goal.

'Sorry, team,' said Bouncer.

'It's all right,' said Johnny. 'Lucky bounce.'

Try as they might, Johnny and Debbie couldn't get through the spiders' defence.

And unlike Bouncer at the other end, who was short, Rainbow already filled half his goal, so didn't have far to reach to pluck even the best shot out of the air.

After only ten minutes, with the spiders in the lead, Debbie collapsed in a heap, gasping for breath.

'So much for *teaching* them to play soccer,' she hissed at her brother.

'I can't help it if they're quick learners!'

'Full time!' shouted Debbie. 'All over. Ref says end of the game.'

Johnny flopped down beside her on the grass. 'That's the smartest thing you've said all day. I was right about one thing, though. Those spiders can do anything. They're dynamite.'

'And incredibly strong.' Bouncer trotted up to join his teammates. 'Sorry, team, I tried, I really tried, but Sunshine and Sky kicked the ball so hard I didn't even see it.'

'Don't worry about it,' said Johnny.

'I lost count of how many they scored,' said Bouncer.' Maths was not the All-Star goalie's strong point.

'It was 15-nil,' said Johnny. 'The good news is, I don't think they were even trying. If they hadn't spent so much time fooling around, they could have scored twice as many.'

Bouncer was shocked at the thought. 'Forty-nil?'

'Thirty,' said Johnny.

'Next time I'll be manager,' said Bouncer. 'A non-playing manager.'

'No, you won't,' Debbie interrupted. 'If anyone's going to manage this team, it'll be me.'

Bouncer looked at his watch. 'I'm going to be late for dinner.' He ran for the front gate, almost colliding with Kate Whistler as he did.

'Hello, Mrs Whistler.'

'Hello, Bouncer.'

'Goodbye, Mrs Whistler.'

'Goodbye?'

'I'm late. See you,' and Bouncer took off down the road.

Kate turned to Johnny. 'For a boy with such a big voice, that was a very short conversation.'

'He's saving himself,' said Johnny. 'We've still got two more shows at the Entertainment Centre before we break for the school holidays.'

'Did you have a good day, Mum?' asked Debbie.

'Busy, as always. I just wish I had more time to spend on my mayoral duties.'

Kate Whistler, as well as running her own hairdressing salon, *Kate's Kuts*, was mayor of Bayside. 'But we can't stand around wasting time. We've got visitors coming for dinner.'

'Who?' asked Johnny.

Instead of replying, Kate pulled a rolled-up piece of paper from under her arm and let it uncurl. It was a poster.

'Wow,' Johnny's eyes lit up.

'A circus!' said Debbie.

'Not just any circus,' said Kate. 'Look at the name.'

'The *Royal Ruby Circus*!' said Johnny and Debbie together.

And it was about to open for a season in the nearby town of Castleton.

'We've got to see it,' said Johnny. 'I love the circus.'

'Then you'll love this one. It's owned by your Aunt Elsie.'

'Aunt who?'

'Aunt Elsie. She's coming tonight. I'll explain everything while we get dinner started.'

Chapter Two

'She did what?' asked Johnny, slipping the casserole into the oven.

'Aunt Elsie was a human cannonball,' called Kate, from the dining room where she was setting the table.

Johnny's eyes sparkled. 'She was fired out of a cannon? Sounds like more fun than busking.'

Kate came back into the kitchen. 'Don't get any silly ideas, young man.'

'Did you ever see the act?' asked Johnny.

'Once,' said Kate, 'years ago. Elsie would slide down inside the barrel of this huge cannon. Then there'd be a big drum roll and a crash of cymbals. Elsie would fly out the barrel in a puff of smoke, right across the ring, and land in the safety net.'

'What did they use?' asked Johnny. 'Gunpowder?'

'I think it was all done with a big spring inside the barrel. But it was very dangerous.'

'Doesn't she do it anymore?'

'Johnny, your Aunt Elsie's too old for that sort of thing. In fact, I'm trying hard to remember how old she is.'

'If she's our Aunt Elsie,' said Debbie, putting a pot of potatoes on the stove, 'how come Johnny and I have never heard of her?'

'Well,' said Kate, 'that's because she's more like an aunt of an aunt of an aunt, several times removed.'

'Are we even related?'

'Of course we are, Debbie... I think. At least she's always been Aunt Elsie to me. I only saw her occasionally while I was growing up, but she's a lovely old soul. Sad really.'

'What's sad?' asked Johnny.

'Uncle Harry dying.'

'Uncle Harry?'

'Her husband. Another distant relation you haven't heard of. He and Elsie built that circus into something special. He was the ringmaster. Ran it for nearly forty years. Elsie's been doing most of it herself since he died. But things have been tough for her lately.'

Kate was interrupted by a knock on the door. 'If either of you have any other questions, you can ask her yourselves. That'll be Aunt Elsie now.'

Johnny flew to the door and flung it open. 'Aunt Elsie?'

In the doorway stood an elderly woman. Johnny's first impression was that she looked incredibly old. But then she smiled, and the smile was young.

'You must be Johnny Whistler, the famous Bayside Busker.' She held out her hand.

Johnny took it. The grip was strong. 'And you must be my Aunt Elsie, the famous human

cannonball.'

'Not for many years, Johnny, but it's nice to be remembered.'

'Come in, Aunt Elsie,' said Kate, 'Meet my daughter, Debbie.'

As the introductions were made, Johnny became aware that their visitor was not alone.

'I hope you don't mind one more for dinner, but I've brought my granddaughter with me,' said Elsie. 'Give me a hand with the wheelchair, please, Johnny.'

The girl was 10 years old with the deepest blue eyes Johnny had ever seen.

'I'm Amy,' said the girl.

'I'm Johnny. Are we really cousins?' he asked as he helped wheel the chair through the door.

'Very distant cousins, I think.'

Debbie pushed forward. 'Then you're related to me as well. I'm Johnny's big sister, Debbie.'

'I'm Amy. Amy Turnbull.'

'Don't all stand in the doorway getting cold,' said Kate. 'Come inside where it's warm.'

'This is amazing.' Johnny said as he poured drinks for everyone. 'Instant family.'

'I was a bit shocked, too,' said Elsie, as she took a glass of orange juice from him and settled into a chair. 'I never think of Kate as old enough to have children of her own.'

Elsie turned to Debbie. 'I remember your mother as just a young girl. About your age.'

Debbie's nostrils flared. 'I'm not a young girl. I'm a young woman. I'm 14.'

'A good age,' said Elsie. 'I remember it well.'

Johnny had more important things to discuss. 'Do you really own a circus, Aunt Elsie?'

'Yes, but it's a shadow of what it used to be. At its peak, the *Royal Ruby Circus* was one of the most famous travelling shows in the land. Not the biggest, but one of the best. Now we struggle. The crowds are down and the costs of running it keep going up. And the accidents haven't helped.'

Elsie looked at Amy as she said it.

Debbie looked at Amy, too. 'Is that why you're in a wheelchair? A circus accident?'

'Yes,' said Amy. 'I'm a bareback stunt rider. At least I was. One night I slipped off my horse and injured my back.'

Debbie was impressed. 'You rode a horse, bareback?'

'No, sis,' answered Johnny, winking at Amy as he said it. 'In a circus, the performers all wear costumes. The horses have the bare backs.'

'Don't be smart, little brother. I knew that.'

'It was a wonderful act,' said Elsie, 'Amy and Magic were one of my star attractions.'

Johnny turned to Amy. 'Is Magic your horse?'

‘Pony really. He’s lovely. I call him Magic because he can do all sorts of tricks. He can even count.’

Johnny broke into a grin. ‘Your pony can count?’ Don’t tell Bouncer.’

‘Was that part of the act?’ asked Debbie.

‘No, that’s just something Magic and I do for fun. In the circus, I rode on his back and did somersaults, and back-flips, and jumped through hoops.’

‘Tell us about the accident,’ said Kate. ‘What went wrong?’

‘I wish I knew,’ said Elsie. ‘Before each performance, one of the circus workers always rubbed a bit of resin onto Magic’s back. That gave Amy’s feet something sticky to grip on.’

Elsie frowned. ‘But I suspect that on the night of the accident it wasn’t done, and that’s why Amy fell and injured her back.’

‘But Frank swore he didn’t do anything wrong,’ said Amy.

‘Who’s Frank?’ asked Johnny.

‘One of the workers,’ said Elsie. ‘He also looks after the lions.’

‘We can’t be sure it was deliberate,’ Grandma.’

‘Amy, too many strange things are happening for them all to be accidents.’

‘You mean someone’s trying to sabotage the circus?’ said Johnny.

‘Yes,’ said his aunt, ‘and they’re succeeding.’

‘Let’s talk about something more cheerful,’ said Amy. ‘Where are the famous spiders?’

‘In the backyard,’ said Debbie. ‘Want to see them?’

‘Yes please,’ said Amy.

‘Go on, Debbie,’ said Kate, ‘take Amy outside and show her. I’ll call you when dinner’s ready.’

As the back door closed behind the girls, Johnny turned to his aunt. ‘Will Amy have to stay in that wheelchair?’

‘Not if I can help it. She needs an operation, and the quicker the better, but it’s going to cost a lot of money and I can’t afford it the way the circus is struggling. I’m not sure if we can last out the month.’

‘It’s that bad?’

‘I’m afraid so, Johnny,’ said Elsie. ‘Apart from Amy’s fall, it’s all the other things. Ropes breaking. Equipment misplaced or disappearing. We’re getting a reputation as an unlucky circus. That’s why a couple of my best performers have just quit. We only have enough acts to do the Castleton season. We desperately need some big stars. That’s what people want to see.’

‘I know what you mean,’ said Kate. ‘Johnny and the spiders bring big crowds to our Bayside Entertainment Centre.’

‘You’re lucky,’ Elsie told her. ‘The *Royal Ruby Circus* could use a Johnny Whistler. So could Amy.’

Kate caught Johnny’s eye. ‘Now, young man. I know what you’re thinking, but you can’t run off and join the circus. You’re too young.’

‘Be fair, Mum. Amy’s only ten. She’s in the circus and she’s two years younger than me.’

‘But you’re booked for shows at the centre.’

‘Not over the school holidays, Mum. We get a tonne of time off.’

Kate looked at her Aunt. ‘Would it really help that much if you had Johnny for a few weeks?’

Elsie smiled. ‘Every little bit helps if it means the circus can make enough money to pay for Amy’s surgery.’

‘Great!’ yelled Johnny. ‘What about it, Mum?’

Kate tried to look stern. ‘Don’t forget to pack your toothbrush. And get your hair cut. Try to look like a hairdresser’s son.’

‘Where’s he going?’ asked Debbie, wheeling Amy back into the room.

‘I’m off to join the *Royal Ruby Circus*,’ said Johnny.

‘With the spiders?’ cried Amy.

‘I don’t travel anywhere without them. We’re a team.’

‘Talking of teams,’ said Debbie, ‘what about Bouncer?’

‘Who?’ said Aunt Elsie.

‘Bouncer,’ said Johnny. ‘He’s my best friend. He’s also the compere at the Entertainment Centre. He’s got the biggest voice you’ve ever heard, and he’s great working with crowds.’

‘Now you mention it, Johnny, I do need a new ringmaster with those very talents.’

Debbie stepped forward. ‘Draw up a contract for Johnny and Bouncer and I’ll have them sign it once I’ve checked it.’

‘What’s this got to do with you, sis?’

‘Leave it to me, Johnny, it’s a legal matter. That’s my department.’

A smile crept to the corner of Elsie’s mouth. ‘Debbie, what other talents do you have?’

‘I’m great at getting publicity. I got Mum elected Mayor of Bayside, didn’t I Mum?’

‘You certainly were a big help, Debs.’

‘I could do with some help on publicity,’ said Elsie. ‘What about it?’

It took Debbie less than two seconds to consider. ‘Don’t worry about a contract, Aunt Elsie. After all, you are family. When do we start?’

Chapter Three

'I thought doing publicity for a circus might at least be fun,' said Debbie.

She was trying to stick a large, glue-soaked poster to a wall. As fast as she got one corner up, another corner flopped down. 'How about some help?'

'You're the professional,' said Johnny, watching. 'We're only amateurs at this publicity business. Isn't that right, Bouncer?'

Instead of answering, Bouncer took another lick of his ice cream.

'I think the poster should be a bit higher,' said Johnny.

Debbie, who was already at full stretch, was not impressed. 'If you want it any higher, do it yourself. You're taller.'

'But you're smarter, big sister. That's what you're always telling us. Isn't that right, Bouncer?'

His friend took another lick of his ice cream. 'She's certainly the smartest person I've ever seen sticking up a poster.'

'Just tell me if it's straight,' said Debbie.

'It's definitely straight,' said Johnny, 'except you've got it upside down.'

'I have not!' yelled Debbie who made the mistake of letting go of the poster and swinging around to face her brother.

As she did, the poster started to slide down the wall.

'Bad news, sis.'

'What?' Debbie glared at him.

'It's not straight anymore.'

Debbie swung back to the wall just in time to see the poster collapse into a soggy mess at her feet.

'Johnny's right,' said Bouncer. 'It should be higher.'

He ducked as a glue-laden brush whistled past his ear.

'Come on, Bouncer,' said Johnny, 'we know when we're not welcome.'

'You can both stay there until I've got this one right,' said Debbie, retrieving the brush.

Five minutes later, she gave the poster a final pat and stepped back from the wall.

'There. I told you I could do it.'

Johnny and Bouncer broke into applause. 'Only another fifty to go.'

They'd joined the circus at the nearby town of Castleton, and Debbie had immediately started the publicity campaign.

'My arms are ready to drop off,' she told the boys. 'Are you two going to give me any help at all?'

'We've given you all the help we can,' said Johnny. 'I've got to rehearse. I've never done

a show in a ring with a sawdust floor.'

'You'll stay and help me, won't you, Bouncer?'

'Sorry, Debbie. I have to check my script. A ringmaster's got to get all the introductions right.'

'Anything wrong?' asked a voice that seemed to come from somewhere up in the clouds.

Bouncer looked up. 'Hello, Cedric. Debbie's having problems getting the posters high enough.'

The very tall person Bouncer was talking to was Cedric, one of the circus clowns.

Today, to get publicity, Cedric was in a different costume. A top hat, jacket with tails, and the longest pair of trousers any of them had ever seen.

Inside the trousers were stilts.

'That ice cream looks good from up here,' said Cedric.

'It tastes pretty good down here, too,' said Bouncer. 'Want a bite?'

'Better not,' said Cedric. 'Can't afford to slop any food down my costume. But thanks anyway.'

Bouncer, who was shorter than both Johnny and Debbie looked up with envy. 'It must be great to be that tall.'

'The view's good, but it's not easy walking around on stilts. It's a lot harder than it looks.'

Debbie was trying to glue another poster. 'I'll bet it's not as hard as trying to stick up posters with these clowns giving advice.'

Debbie suddenly realised what she'd said. 'Sorry, Cedric. When I said clowns, I didn't mean you.'

'Forget it,' said Cedric. 'Just keep sticking them up, Debbie. The circus needs all the help it can get. Let's stick one poster really high. Over there.'

They followed Cedric across the road to a wall surrounding a factory. It was full of old, faded posters.

'Must be a good spot,' said Cedric. 'Everyone else sticks them here.'

There was one very new notice, halfway up the wall. 'What does that say?' asked Johnny.

Cedric read it to them. 'It says "BILL POSTERS WILL BE PROSECUTED".'

Bouncer was puzzled. 'Who's Bill Posters?'

Cedric laughed which made his stilts rock. 'Every town we go to has that sign. Bill Posters is not a person. A bill is another name for a poster. Posting a bill means sticking it up.'

Debbie thought about it. 'You mean anyone who sticks posters on that wall will get into

trouble.'

'Could happen,' said Cedric, winking at Johnny.

'You'd better be careful, sis. You could end up in jail.'

Debbie looked worried. 'That would make me a criminal. It could stop me becoming a lawyer.'

'Don't worry,' said Johnny. 'You're not sticking it up. Cedric is.'

'Give it to me,' said the part-time stilt-walker. 'I'm too tall for any prison cell.'

With Cedric bending down as far as he could without falling off his stilts, and Debbie reaching up at full stretch, they met halfway.

Cedric took the poster off her and held it up against the top of the wall, above the Bill Posters sign.

'High enough?' he asked. It was now several metres off the ground.

'Perfect,' said Johnny.

'Give me the brush, then.'

While Debbie stood well away, in case anyone was watching, Bouncer dipped the brush in the bucket of glue and handed it up.

With a couple of expert slops up and down, Cedric had the poster stuck firmly in place.

'I wouldn't want to be the one who has to take it down,' said Bouncer.

'Don't look at me,' said Debbie.

Johnny had an idea. 'Let Bill Posters do it.'

Cedric looked at his watch. 'Once more up and down the main street and then back to the showground for me. I want to have a nap for half an hour before the show. Put my feet up.'

He looked down at the wooden feet on the end of his stilts. 'My own feet, of course.'

As Cedric stalked off towards the main street, Johnny and Bouncer headed off for the Castleton showgrounds where the circus had set up for a short season.

It was a colourful scene. The circus site formed a big square. At the front of the square, nearest the road, was the ticket office, an eight-wheeled trailer.

To one side stood the generator truck which produced electricity for the show.

'Hi, Sparky,' called Johnny. The man who was cleaning the generator looked up briefly, waved, then went back to what he was doing.

'Why do they call him Sparky?' asked Bouncer.

'All electricians are nicknamed Sparky.'

Lined up in a row beside the generator truck, stood the other vehicles which had hauled the circus to town. Most of them were now empty and would stay that way until the circus repacked to move again.

One truck had not been unloaded. The fire truck stood in one corner of the square, ready with a water tank and hoses.

At the back and on both sides of the square were the caravans where the artists and circus workers lived.

And in the centre of everything, stood the big top!

As Johnny and Bouncer arrived, crowds of onlookers had gathered to watch the tent rise into the air.

The four giant king-poles had been positioned around the thirteen-metre dirt and sawdust main ring where the acts would perform. The king-poles were the most important part of the whole frame.

The circus' three elephants had been used to pull the big poles upright, and they were now held in place by long ropes staked to the ground.

Bouncer looked up at the top of the king-poles. 'What a great view you'd get from up there.'

Johnny nodded. 'Even better than Cedric gets from on top of his stilts.'

'Those poles are monsters.'

'They have to be, Bouncer. They support the whole tent.'

Now the fireproof canvas pieces of the roof were laid out on the ground and stitched together with ropes threaded through eyelet holes around the edges.

'How do they get the roof up?' asked Bouncer.

'See those big rings in the canvas?' Johnny said. 'Watch.'

He'd asked Aunt Elsie how it was done, so knew what was about to happen.

As Johnny and Bouncer watched, Meeska, the woman who trained the elephants, gave the signal and the elephants took the strain on the ropes attached to the rings.

The ropes were hooked over the top of the king-poles and slowly, the big top roof rose from the ground.

'It's like running a flag up a pole,' said Bouncer.

'Biggest flag in the world,' said Johnny.

With the roof in place, the circus workers now placed the smaller quarter poles around the edge of the big top and staked them down. Finally, the canvas side walls were tied into place.

Keeping a watchful eye on everything was Elsie.

As the boys watched, other circus workers were carrying portable seating into the tent to be set up for the first performance. Two men were carrying in a drum kit and sound equipment.

'Ted and Jimmy,' explained Elsie. 'Ted's the drummer. You need a live drummer in a

circus. Most of the other music is on tape. That's Jimmy's job. He runs the sound desk. What he doesn't have on tape, he plays on an electronic keyboard. He can make it sound like a full orchestra. A regular one man band.'

'I know the feeling,' said Johnny.

'Everything's going well so far,' said Elsie. 'Maybe our luck's turned for the better. We can't afford any more mishaps.'

'There won't be any,' said Johnny.

'There will be if you don't stand aside!' The voice came from behind them.

Johnny turned around to find himself eye to trunk with an elephant. Sitting on top of the elephant was Meeska, the elephant trainer.

'Sorry,' Johnny said as he did a graceful sidestep to avoid having a toe crushed, keeping his distance as the three huge grey beasts lumbered by.

'Meeska's good with those elephants,' said Elsie, 'but she does get a bit bossy sometimes.'

Bouncer liked that idea. 'If I was riding an elephant, I'd get bossy, too.'

'Don't let Debbie ride them,' said Johnny. 'She's bossy enough.'

'But Meeska is really nice when you get to know her,' said Elsie. 'Pity I can't say the same about Vic.'

Vic Smith, or Victor the Valiant as he was known in the circus ring, did an act with four lions.

In the background, they could hear the lions roar as their mobile cages were wheeled into position beside the big top.

'Not every circus these days has lions and elephants,' said Elsie, 'but along with horses they're still two of the most popular acts. And we take really good care of all our animals. They're part of our circus family.'

'Like pets?' said Debbie.

'Exactly,' said Elsie. 'Big pets,'

'We've got three of those living at our house,' said Johnny.

Elsie paused and then frowned. 'Pity Vic's lion act isn't better, but he's all I can afford. Oh, I wish you'd seen Amy and Magic before the accident. Their stunt-riding routine was wonderful.'

Johnny looked up at the brightly coloured banner that was now being strung between two of the giant poles poking up through the roof of the tent.

'Why is it called the *Royal Ruby Circus*?' he asked.

'When my husband, your Uncle Harry, was young and just starting out as a ringmaster, he saved the life of a man whose fire-eating act went wrong. That man was a gypsy king. In

gratitude, he gave Harry a big red ruby ring. Harry wore it all his life. Claimed it was his good luck charm.'

'So he called it a royal ruby because it had been given to him by a king?'

'Correct.'

Bouncer's eyes widened behind his glasses. 'Was it worth a lot of money?'

'A lot of money, Bouncer. Enough to pay for Amy's surgery and save the circus.'

'Where is it?' asked Johnny.

'A good question,' said Elsie. 'When Harry got sick and knew he had to go to hospital, he hid the ruby away for safekeeping. Unfortunately, he died before he could tell me where he hid it.'

'You mean it's lost?'

'Gone, completely vanished.' Elsie started walking towards the big top. 'I've looked everywhere, but I can't find it.'

'Wasn't the ring insured?' asked Johnny, hurrying to keep pace with the sprightly old woman.

'No. Harry thought it would be unlucky to insure a lucky ring. Now, of course, it really is unlucky.'

'How can it be unlucky if it's lost?' asked Bouncer.

'People in the circus take it as an omen,' said Elsie. They think losing the ring has brought bad luck. That's why so many performers have left. Let's go inside and see if everything's in place.'

In the big top, they found workers spreading sawdust around the circus ring. They also found an unhappy Vic Smith.

'Get those spiders down!' he yelled. This is not a playhouse.'

High above the circus ring sat Sunshine, Rainbow and Sky. They'd climbed the rope ladder to the trapeze platform.

'It's okay,' said Johnny. 'They won't come to any harm.'

Before Vic could reply, five grim-faced figures in silver leotards marched into the ring to join them. The Flying Fishers were the best trapeze act in the business.

'I don't like the look of this,' Elsie muttered to Johnny. 'If they quit, I'm finished.'

Papa Fisher, the leader of the trapeze family was fuming. 'It is too dangerous.'

'Stop worrying,' said Johnny. 'They're rubber.'

'Rubber?' Papa Fisher's face turned an even brighter pink. 'What is this you are talking about?'

'Bouncy stuff,' said Johnny, pointing upwards.

'I am not talking about your silly spiders!' said Papa Fisher.

Johnny bristled. 'They're not silly. They're very smart.'

Papa Fisher hadn't come to the big top to discuss spiders. In his hand, the trapeze artist held a piece of rope which he waved under Elsie's nose.

'See this,' he said. 'Someone has tampered with a safety rope. It is the final straw. This circus is jinxed. The Flying Fishers are leaving. We quit. Now. Goodbye.'

Following their leader, the five trapeze artists marched out of the tent. Elsie's lip trembled and Johnny could see she was fighting to hold back tears.

'What a shame, Mrs Turnbull,' said Vic. 'This really is the end of the road. You shouldn't have to worry about this sort of thing at your age. Why don't you take my offer, and let me buy the circus? You could retire somewhere nice and quiet.'

'On your offer, Vic, I couldn't retire to a cats' home!' The tears had suddenly gone from Elsie's eyes. 'I'm not giving up and I'm not selling you the circus. The show must go on. Go and get the lions ready.'

Johnny noticed the angry look on the lion tamer's face as he stalked away. 'Why does he want to buy your circus, Aunt Elsie?'

'I don't know, Johnny.'

Elsie looked up to the roof of the big top where the spiders were now hanging off the trapeze platform in all directions.

'Our high-wire walker quit last week, and now we lose our trapeze act. It's not much of a circus anymore. At least I've got you, Johnny. Get the spiders down so we can finish setting up the tent. It's only a couple of hours to the first show. I'll see you boys later.'

In response to Johnny's whistle, the spiders scrambled down the rope ladder to the circus ring.

'Poor Aunt... ah, Mrs Turnbull,' said Bouncer. 'Where do you find new acts at short notice?'

Sunshine was the first to arrive at Johnny's side. He stroked the spider's bright yellow face.

'Bouncer, I've got an idea. In fact I've got a couple of ideas. But you must not tell Aunt Elsie. Not yet.'

Chapter Four

'I've been working nonstop sticking up these rotten posters,' protested Debbie. 'My arms are about to fall off. And now I've got to fetch and carry water during the show.'

'Helping the Tortino Brothers,' said Johnny.

'Still fetching and carrying. Passing them props. I didn't join the circus to be anyone's slave. Why can't I have a rest?'

'Because,' said Johnny, 'a circus is a team. We're going to be doing three shows a day. Nobody gets a rest. Everyone does several jobs. Even Aunt Elsie.'

Elsie, despite her age, was part of a comedy team with Cedric. She was BoomBoom the Clown.

Debbie wasn't convinced. 'But, Johnny, you only do one job.'

'That's about to change.'

Debbie looked puzzled. 'What are you wearing under that coat?'

Johnny quickly buttoned up the outsized jacket of his regular busking costume. 'You'll see soon enough. Give me a hand with my bass drum.'

With Debbie's help, Johnny tightened the leather shoulder straps of the bass drum on his back. He played it with drum sticks tied to his elbows.

Next he adjusted the harmonica which he wore round his neck on a wire frame. He checked the cymbals tied between his knees and picked up the accordion.

Finally, he flicked his hair back off his face and plonked his favourite old top hat on top of his head.

Debbie couldn't contain herself. 'In those clothes you make BoomBoom look well dressed.'

'BoomBoom is a clown,' Johnny protested. 'There's no comparison.'

'You wouldn't say that if you were standing where I'm standing.'

'Five minutes to showtime!' Bouncer's big voice rang out around the circus grounds.

Most of the circus acts got dressed for the show in their own caravans, but Johnny had chosen to get ready in the tent the spiders were using as home.

The spiders' tent stood to one side of the big top, close to the elephants' tent, the lions' cages, and the hay wagon.

The spiders were lying around, resting before the show, which Debbie thought was a good idea. She plonked herself down on Sunshine's rubber back.

'I wish I'd been there when Aunt Elsie was telling you about the ruby ring,' she said.

'I've told you the whole story, Debs.'

'Where could Uncle Harry have hidden it before he died?'

'All he'd say was that because it was a king's ruby, it would stay close to his heart...

whatever that means.'

'Whatever that means, little brother, is the answer to a mystery.'

'Just one of the mysteries around here,' said Johnny. 'The other one is, why does Vic want to buy this circus?'

'Come in.' Victor the Valiant was buttoning the brightly-coloured shirt he wore for his lion-taming act.

The door of Vic's caravan opened. 'It's me. Frank.'

'I knew it wasn't Meeska and her elephants, you idiot. Close the door before someone sees you. And leave that filthy cigarette outside.'

Frank stubbed out the cigarette butt on the grass before entering. He was the circus worker responsible for the lions. 'What do I do now?'

Vic turned and faced him. 'Apart from looking after my lions, nothing, unless I tell you to. Cutting that rope was a good move. It certainly got rid of The Flying Fishers. Eventually the old lady will have to sell me the circus. Until she does, I'll just keep applying the pressure.'

'What if the ruby's not here?'

'Of course, it's here. You know what Harry said - it would stay close to his heart. The circus was his whole life. The royal ruby's around here, somewhere.'

'And when you buy the circus you can tear the place apart to find it,' said Frank. 'But wouldn't the ruby still belong to Mrs Turnbull?'

'Who would tell her? Not me. Finders keepers, Frank, finders keepers. Of course there'll be a small reward for you, for all the help you've given me.'

'What about the Whistler kids and their friend with the big mouth?'

'You mean Bangles?'

'Isn't his name Bouncer?'

'Who cares? It's too late for anyone to save the circus. Now, have you fed my pets?'

'I think you like those lions more than you like people.'

'Lions don't answer back,' said Vic.

'What are you going to do with them when you find the ruby?'

'The lions? Find them a good home, somewhere else. With all that money, I'm going to retire from the circus. Find some tropical island and spend the rest of my life sitting under a palm tree.'

Frank opened the door to leave.

'Remember, Frank,' said Vic, 'don't do anything unless I tell you to. In a couple of days, when everyone realises that even Johnny Whistler and his spiders can't save this circus, that old lady will be happy to sell. Even when I drop the price.'

'I can't, Johnny,' said Amy.

'Yes, you can.'

'But I haven't been back in the ring since the accident.'

'Amy, I'm not asking you to ride Magic. Just do that other trick.'

It was almost time for the first show to start.

'We've never done it for an audience,' said Amy. 'The other trick is just for fun.'

'So is a circus,' said Johnny.

'What about the sawdust? It will be too hard for me to push my wheelchair on that surface.'

'Someone can wheel you on,' answered Bouncer.

He was dressed in the traditional ringmaster's costume of black trousers, a red tailed coat and top hat.

'And while the clowns are on,' said Johnny, 'one of the workers can bring Magic around.'

Amy still looked uncertain. 'Have you asked Grandma?'

'No,' said Johnny. 'She's already got too much to worry about. Let's surprise her.'

Bouncer looked at his watch. 'Almost time to start. Stand by for the opening parade.'

The big top was only half full for the first show, but the anticipation was still electric.

Jimmy played a fanfare on his electronic keyboard, and then Sparky's spotlight picked up the ringmaster as he strode into the ring.

At a nod from Bouncer, Ted launched into a drum roll.

'Ladies and Gentlemen,' said Bouncer into his microphone. 'Girls and Boys, would you welcome please the stars of the *Royal Ruby Circus*...'

And out they came.

Meeska, sitting high above the ground on the back of one of her elephants with the other two close behind.

The three Tortino Brothers bouncing and tumbling along behind, hinting at what was to come.

Debbie turned to Elsie 'This is wonderful.'

'I agree, Debbie. I've been around circuses all my life and I still get a thrill out of the opening parade.'

Cedric passed by. 'Come on, Elsie, it's our turn,' he said, taking her arm.

Elsie was unrecognisable in her BoomBoom costume with an enormous red nose, bright yellow hair and a hat that was even more battered than Johnny's.

The clown act of BoomBoom and Cedric joined the parade.

Victor the Valiant was next. He scowled at Johnny, but then broke into a big smile as he

stepped into the ring behind the two clowns, cracking his lion tamer's whip.

'I don't think he likes me,' Johnny said to Debbie, as he prepared to join the parade.

The noise of the music and the small crowd, which was already deafening, grew even louder as Johnny and the spiders entered the main ring.

All around the big top people were pointing in their direction and clapping.

'Listen to that applause,' Johnny said to Vic who was just in front of him.

Vic turned his head and hissed at Johnny. 'They're clapping for me, not you.'

'Of course,' said Johnny. 'With a star like you out here, who'd get excited about three giant spiders?'

As the parade left the ring, Sparky's spotlight swung back to Bouncer.

'To start our show,' he said, 'would you please welcome back the Amazing Meeska and her elephants!'

Meeska, in a brightly coloured turban and with a long robe flowing behind her, ran back into the main ring, followed by the three elephants.

Around and around the main ring they raced. Then, simply by lifting her hand, Meeska made the elephants stop in their tracks and rise up on their hind legs.

On her commands they spun in circles, rolled over like puppies, and then had the crowd in stitches kicking a big rubber ball around the ring.

Johnny spotted Debbie walking by with a bucket in her hand. 'Hey, sis, those elephants are better soccer players than you are. And they don't talk as much.'

Debbie lifted the bucket of water as if to toss it at him.

'Don't,' said Johnny. 'You'll ruin my costume.'

'Bad news, little brother. The way you dress, you'd never know the difference.'

The applause and the gasps from the crowd got louder with every passing minute and with every act.

The last scheduled performers before interval were the three Tortino Brothers who did a tumbling and juggling act.

Using a trampoline and springboard, they flipped and bounced all over the ring. And then for a big finish, they bounced up, one on top of the other's shoulders, to form a three-man tower.

This was Debbie's big moment. With the three brothers in position, she ran out and handed the bottom brother a set of rings which he started juggling.

She then handed the middle brother three tennis racquets, which he started juggling.

Now came the tricky bit of the act. Before the top brother started juggling something, he would first balance a sword on his head, with a dinner plate spinning on the end.

Debbie was so fascinated by the first two juggling brothers, she forgot what she had to

do next.

‘The sword,’ hissed the top Tortino Brother. ‘Hand me the sword, girl.’

‘I’m not a girl,’ Debbie hissed back.

‘And I can’t balance up here forever. Hand me the sword!’

‘Oh, all right,’ said Debbie, thrusting the sword up in the air - sharp end first.

The Tortino tower tumbled as the three brothers forgot about balancing and juggling and took evasive action to avoid being stabbed.

The three acrobats went in three different directions, while the sword went in a fourth, finishing point down in the dirt.

Luckily, being tumblers, the brothers all finished up on their feet and the audience, thinking it was part of the act, laughed and applauded.

The brothers bowed. So did Debbie.

‘Listen,’ the sword-balancing brother growled at Debbie, who was still bowing, ‘we’re going to do that again.’

Debbie was pleased. ‘Exactly?’

‘No! This time you’re going to get it right. Otherwise you can be part of the new act we’re working on.’

‘What’s that?’ she asked as the applause finally stopped.

‘Knife throwing!’

‘Those ungrateful brothers.’ Debbie waited with Bouncer, watching the Tortinos finish. She was furious.

Bouncer could see it from the Tortinos’ point of view. ‘You almost turned them into a spit roast with that sword.’

‘That’s what they’ve threatened to do to me if I get it wrong again,’ said Debbie. ‘There’s more to this circus business than I thought.’

Bouncer nodded in agreement. There was a lot to making a circus run smoothly, but he felt right at home.

‘Johnny and I have come a long way since we started performing for the tourists outside your Mum’s salon.’

‘And you look great in that suit, Bouncer. Johnny could do with one like that.’

Debbie noticed the paper in his hand. ‘What’s that?’

‘Instructions. Mrs Turn... I mean BoomBoom wrote them down for me.’

Clutching his microphone, Bouncer marched to centre ring.

‘Let’s hear a big round of applause for the fabulous Tortino Brothers.’

The three brothers bowed, bounced, tumbled, bowed again and went tumbling off as

Bouncer stole a glance at the note in his hand.

‘Ladies and Gentlemen, Girls and Boys, that brings us to the end of the first half of our show, but we’ll be back after a short interval with... ’

He got no further as, on cue, in burst the clown act of BoomBoom and Cedric.

Elsie, in her BoomBoom costume, pretended to stumble, which wasn’t hard considering the big clown shoes she was wearing and her baggy pants.

Cedric was riding a bike. He was a traditional white-faced clown with a high pointed hat, a ruffle round his neck, and pompoms on his shoes.

Bouncer followed the script. ‘What are you two doing here?’ he demanded in a loud voice, pretending to be annoyed.

BoomBoom, being a clown who didn’t talk, pulled out a car hooter from the baggy trousers and honked it in the ringmaster’s face.

That was the signal for Bouncer to chase BoomBoom around the ring. Just when he was about catch the clown, Cedric rode by on the bike and plucked his friend to safety.

At that point, Bouncer, as instructed, retreated to the entrance tunnel and left the clowns to get on with the rest of their act.

Johnny was waiting for him. ‘I’ve sent Frank to get Magic.’

Amy sat quietly in her wheelchair. ‘I hope I can do it.’

‘Of course you can,’ said Johnny. ‘You’re an old trooper. Well, not that old.’

That made Amy laugh. ‘I know the tradition. The show must go on.’

As they spoke, Frank arrived leading the pony. ‘What’s happening?’

‘An unscheduled act,’ said Johnny.’

‘She can’t ride this pony.’

‘Wait and see,’ said Johnny, but instead, Frank handed him the lead rope and ran off.

‘What’s the matter with him?’ Johnny asked.

‘He gets nervous when I’m around,’ said Amy. ‘He knows Grandma blames him for my accident.’

‘But she hasn’t got any proof, has she?’

‘No.’

The roar from the big top alerted them to the end of the clown act.

As Bouncer headed back towards the main ring, he almost collided with Elsie as she came into the tunnel.

‘Well done, Ringmaster,’ said Elsie. ‘You’re doing a good job.’

‘Thank you, BoomBoom... ah... Mrs....’

‘Aunt Elsie will do fine.’

‘Thanks, Aunt Elsie,’ said Bouncer, smiling as he ran back into the ring.

Elsie stopped when she saw Amy and Magic. 'What are you doing?'

'Don't be angry, Grandma.'

'I suggested it Aunt Elsie,' admitted Johnny. 'Amy can't ride him, but she and Magic can still do a few tricks.'

Elsie looked at Johnny and then at her granddaughter. Even under the outrageous clown makeup, they could see the disapproving look. She shook her head.

'You can't go out there, Amy. You can't.'

'Now,' Bouncer told the crowd, 'a surprise act. Magic the smartest pony in the world, and her trainer, Amy Turnbull!'

Bouncer looked towards the tunnel. Nothing. He started again.

'Ah... Magic the smartest pony in the...' but got no further.

Out of the tunnel burst Magic, and Amy - with Johnny pushing the wheelchair.

'She's doing what?' demanded Vic.

'Don't blame me,' said Frank. 'Amy's back in the ring with that pony. I came straight over to tell you. Listen.'

The roar from the big top carried clearly to Vic's caravan.

'What are we going to do?' said Frank.

'We're not going to do anything for the moment except get ready for my act. Don't worry. It'll take more than a kid in a wheelchair to stop me.'

Chapter Five

Amy sat in her wheelchair in the centre of the ring with Johnny behind her.

Magic stood quietly to one side.

'Now, Magic...' Amy started, but her voice faded away.

She tried again. 'Magic, I...'

The initial roar had faded. Someone in the audience coughed.

Johnny bent down and pretended to adjust the wheel of the chair. 'Speak up,' he whispered.

'I can't,' she whispered back. 'Grandma doesn't want me to be out here. I shouldn't have come. Johnny, take me back.'

'Go on,' hissed Johnny. 'You can't give up now.'

'But you saw the look on Grandma's face.'

The crowd was starting to get restless. They could sense that something was wrong.

Amy tried again. 'Magic, have you...?'

A voice came from the audience. 'We can't hear you. Speak up.'

Amy froze. Johnny turned towards where Bouncer was standing and made signals for the ringmaster to bring out his microphone.

Bouncer started towards the centre ring, but suddenly he felt the microphone snatched out of his hand. Someone else was running towards Amy.

It was BoomBoom!

The clown held out the microphone. Amy took it.

'This is where I leave you,' whispered Johnny and raced out of the ring.

Amy looked up with her big blue eyes, right into the face of her grandmother.

'Thank you, BoomBoom.' Her voice over the microphone was strong and clear.

She turned back to her pony. 'Magic, have you ever ever been to school? Tap once for yes, twice for no.'

Magic lifted his front hoof and tapped it on the ground, twice.

The crowd's embarrassment had gone. They roared.

'Poor Magic. Are you sure you've never been to school?' Magic again tapped twice for no. 'I suppose you wouldn't like a sugar cube?'

Magic tapped once and Amy fed him the sugar.

Elsie, playing along, pulled out the motor car hooter and blew once. 'You want a sugar cube, too, BoomBoom?' asked Amy.

BoomBoom jumped up and down with excitement and then did a somersault.

'Magic, you tell me you've never been to school, but I'm sure you could do some simple sums. Want to try?'

Before Magic could reply, BoomBoom hooted once.

‘All right, BoomBoom. It can be a contest. Ready? What’s two plus two?’

BoomBoom jumped up and down in excitement and hooted - five. Magic tapped the correct answer - four.

Three plus two. Eight minus three. BoomBoom got them all wrong. Magic got them all right.

Johnny, Bouncer and Cedric looked on. ‘That pony’s better at maths than I am,’ said Bouncer.

‘No one can be good at everything,’ said Johnny.

Cedric smiled and his white face seemed to split in two. ‘This is the best “intelligent-pony” routine I’ve ever seen. Whoever came up with the idea should take a bow.’

Bouncer nudged Johnny who shook his head. ‘Don’t look at me. Amy deserves all the credit. It’s her pony and she trained him.’

‘Listen to that applause,’ said Cedric. ‘Sounds like it’s over.’

As Bouncer headed back to wrap-up the first half and recover his microphone, Johnny suddenly felt someone standing behind him. It was Vic.

‘Fancy letting a child in a wheelchair go out there.’

‘It’s not as if Amy is doing a lion act,’ said Johnny.

‘I wish you’d try and make your Aunt see some sense, Whistler.’

‘All she can see is the need to get Amy out of that wheelchair,’ said Johnny. ‘And I’m going to help her.’

‘Well, whatever you’re dreaming up, just keep away from my lions. They’d eat your spiders in one bite.’

‘They’d end up with sore jaws if they tried,’ said Johnny.

During the interval, while the small crowd munched hot dogs and ice creams and popcorn, the big steel-mesh safety barrier was set up around the ring for the lion act.

Although assembling it took most of the interval, taking it to bits afterwards was simple and it could be done while the other acts continued.

While Johnny and Debbie listened in, Victor the Valiant stood in the tunnel and gave Bouncer last minute instructions on how he wanted to be introduced.

‘You’re to say - “Ladies and Gentlemen, Girls and Boys...”’

‘I know that bit,’ said Bouncer.

‘Just listen. Then you say, “You’re about to witness the bravest act ever seen in a circus ring”.’

‘That’s what I like,’ Debbie said quietly. ‘Modesty.’

It wasn’t quiet enough. Vic looked around and scowled at her before turning back to

Bouncer.

'Then you're to say, "Would you please welcome, the famous Valiant Lions, led into the arena by the king of the jungle, Hero."'

When Bouncer said that, Vic explained, Frank would open the door of the mobile cages which had been wheeled up to the opening in the barrier. And Vic's lions would then enter the ring, roaring and snarling.

Johnny turned to Debbie. 'I wonder if Vic writes the lions' script as well?'

'I heard that, Whistler,' said the lion tamer. 'If you paid more attention to what I'm telling your friend, you might learn something.'

Vic put his hand on Bouncer's shoulder. 'Then you introduce me. This is the most important part.'

'I thought it might be,' said Debbie.

'You've got to get this exactly right, Bangles. You must say...'

'Bouncer,' said Johnny. 'His name is Bouncer.'

'Whatever. Now, Bungles, you're to say "Introducing the world's most dangerous animal act, performed by the world's bravest lion tamer..."'

Johnny interrupted. 'At which point, Bouncer, you say, "Here's... Fester the Fearless!"'

Vic whirled around and thrust his face close to Johnny's. 'I'll wring his neck, then I'll wring yours if your four-eyed friend here gets my name wrong.'

Johnny didn't flinch. 'Then start by getting *his* name right. It's Bouncer.'

Vic glared at the ringmaster. 'Have you got all that, *Bouncer*?'

'Yes sir,' said Bouncer, giving a mock salute as Vic stalked away.

'What a charmer,' said Debbie.

'At least somebody loves him,' said Johnny.

'Who?'

'Hero, the king of the jungle.'

Victor the Valiant was an old-fashioned lion tamer. His whole act centred around the crowd believing he was brave and fearless, stepping into the ring with four untamed wild animals.

Vic's antics made the lions look wilder than they were. He started by holding up a chair with one hand as if to protect himself. With the other hand, he cracked his whip.

Later, as he made the lions sit up on their hind legs and snarl at him, he pulled a starter's pistol from a holster and fired blanks into the air.

'Overacting,' said Debbie, 'and I'm not talking about Hero.'

Elsie nodded her head and her BoomBoom hat wobbled.

'One day,' she said, 'when this circus is back on its feet, I'm going to get a new lion act. I

only hired Vic because I was desperate. This type of lion tamer routine was all the rage when I was a girl, but it's too old fashioned for today's audiences.'

'What would happen if Vic left?' asked Johnny. 'Would he take the lions with him?'

'He wouldn't have to. Someone else could take them over. Hero and the others are all young and healthy.'

'How old is Hero?' asked Debbie.

'About four.'

'What's that in human terms?'

'About 14,' said Elsie.

'My kind of lion,' said Debbie.

Elsie looked at Johnny. 'You're always ready for a challenge. Want to work on a lion act?'

Johnny thought for a moment. 'I *have* had plenty of practice.'

'Practice?' said Elsie.

'Yeah,' said Johnny, 'living with Debbie.'

'Very funny, little brother.'

'I'm serious, Johnny,' said Elsie. 'I think you're a natural for this business.'

'But not a lion act, Aunt Elsie. Maybe something else.'

Before Elsie had a chance to ask Johnny what he meant, Victor the Valiant finished his act with a flourish, and with more cracking of his whip and firing of blanks, chased the lions back into their mobile cages.

That was the cue for Frank and the other circus workers to swing into action.

In minutes, they'd dismantled the lion barrier, restoring the main ring.

Bouncer cleared his throat. 'Ladies and Gentlemen, Girls and Boys, the *Royal Ruby Circus* proudly presents a brand new attraction. For the first time under a big top, all the way from Bayside, Johnny Whistler!'

Johnny burst into the circus ring, his paint-splattered sneakers sending up a cloud of sawdust as he slid to a halt.

It was vintage Johnny Whistler. The slow start. Building the momentum. Pumping his elbows to beat the drum on his back. Knocking his knees together to work the cymbals.

Now unwinding his bright red and silver-coloured accordion. His right hand picking out the tune on the keys, while his left hand worked the buttons that formed the chords.

Lurching forward at the harmonica, and blending it into the musical mix, all the time his arms and legs going faster and faster. Then lifting his head, his whistling carried over the top of all the other circus noise. It was Bouncer's cue.

'Please welcome Johnny's support act - the Spiders!'

Out of the tunnel burst Sunshine, Rainbow and Sky.

They did what they always did. They danced and they pranced, they jumped and they bumped, sending the audience into a frenzy.

Elsie, never far from the centre ring, applauded too. As BoomBoom, she had to be ready to go on at any time and fill the gap if there was a hitch in the show.

Bouncer took the microphone again as Sparky suddenly dimmed the lights and Ted started a drum roll.

‘Now, the *Royal Ruby Circus* is proud to present another world first.’

The crowd hushed, wondering what was coming next.

As Ted held the drum roll, Johnny slipped out of his own drum harness, untied the cymbals and drums sticks, and threw off his busking costume.

Underneath he was wearing sparkling tights.

Debbie was the first to realise what her younger brother was planning. ‘So that’s what he was wearing under his costume.’

‘What’s he up to?’ asked Elsie. Then the answer came to her. ‘Oh, no, Debbie, he can’t. It’s too dangerous.’

‘Ladies and Gentleman,’ Bouncer’s voice rang around the tent, ‘the world premiere performance of Johnny, “High-Wire”, Whistler, and the sensational, Spinning Spiders!’

Even before Ted crashed his cymbal, Johnny was halfway up the rope ladder with Rainbow, Sunshine and Sky close behind.

At that moment, Elsie burst into the centre ring, waving her head from side-to-side and blowing up a storm on the hooter.

Johnny looked down from the ladder. ‘Sorry, Aunt... I mean... BoomBoom. This circus needs a high wire walker and a trapeze act.’

Elsie hooted and waved even more frantically, trying to get him down.

Johnny was now on the top platform.

‘Don’t worry, BoomBoom,’ he called down. ‘The spiders are going to do most of the work, and they’re unbreakable.’

Elsie, realising he wasn’t about to change his mind, grabbed the rope ladder and started to climb. She’d already passed Sky when Johnny whistled.

To the roar of the crowd, Sky reached up and grabbed BoomBoom’s legs, while Sunshine reached down and grabbed the clown’s arms.

‘Sorry, BoomBoom,’ yelled Johnny and whistled again, at which the spiders dropped Elsie, gently, into the safety net below.

Johnny looked down at the audience, which looked like a sea of faces. ‘I hope this is a good idea,’ he muttered to himself.

It was a brilliant idea!

If they hadn't known better, people watching might have believed Johnny and the spiders had been born into the circus.

At Johnny's command, Rainbow started by catching hold of the nearest trapeze and launching himself into space, grabbing onto the bar of the second trapeze.

Now, with Rainbow acting as catcher, Sunshine followed, doing a complete somersault in mid-air before linking arms with his multi-coloured friend.

The sight of the two giant rubber spiders doing trapeze stunts had the audience gasping.

Elsie, who realised she couldn't stop it, nudged Debbie. 'This is unbelievable.'

Sky stepped out onto the high wire.

'Impossible,' said Elsie. 'There's no way that spider can keep its balance.'

Elsie was wrong. Sky balanced perfectly and crossed the wire from side-to-side and back again without a problem.

'You learn something every day,' said Elsie. 'But what's this?'

Johnny now climbed on board the bright blue spider's back as Sky set off again, using four legs to grip the wire, while sticking the other four out to the side for balance.

Only when the pair reached the middle of the wire, did Johnny realise how much sway there was in a high wire.

He dug his heels into Sky's rubber sides, more to hold on than to make Sky go faster.

Elsie was almost speechless. 'A boy riding a giant spider across a circus tightrope?'

Debbie pretended to yawn. 'Just a typical day in the Whistler house.'

Chapter Six

'This was certainly not a typical early show,' said Elsie, after the performance had ended. They were all sitting in the box office caravan.

'Less than half full, but still the biggest crowd we've had in months.' She turned to Debbie. 'Those posters helped.'

'Which is what I could have done with, Aunt Elsie, some help.'

'What about the new act?' asked Johnny.

Elsie looked at Johnny and then Amy. It was the happiest she'd seen her granddaughter since the accident.

'We're keeping *both* new acts.'

'Will you stay in mine, Grandma, and do the counting with Magic?'

'Try and stop me,' said Elsie.

'What about my act?' asked Johnny. 'Will you keep chasing us up the ladder so the spiders can drop you into the safety net?'

'No, Johnny. Once is enough. But Cedric thought it looked fun. I'll lend him the hooter so he can do it.'

Elsie recounted the ticket money. 'By the time the audience from the first show get home and tell their family and friends, we could do even better for the second.'

Elsie was right. There was a steady stream of people flooding into the big top right up until show time and this time it was almost a full house.

The bigger crowd also made the atmosphere even more exciting.

'Great,' said Elsie. 'If we can keep this up...'

If Elsie thought the second show was successful, it was nothing compared to what followed. Crowds had started to gather for the third and final performance even before the second one had finished.

An hour before show time, there were more people queued up outside than could ever fit in the tent.

Elsie peeked through a crack in the canvas. 'I do believe we're going to do it.'

Johnny tapped the back of Amy's wheelchair. 'So do I, Aunt Elsie.'

Back in his caravan, Victor the Valiant had the same thought and he didn't like it.

'We're going to have to tighten the screws,' he told Frank. 'No more Mr Nice Guy.'

'I'd never have called you nice,' said Frank.

'That kid and his creepy spiders could save the circus. I'm not going to lose that ruby.'

'But it's already lost.'

'Just listen, dummy. After everyone's in bed tonight, we get serious.'

It was well past midnight and pitch black as Vic and Frank crept towards the lions' cages.

'Ouch' said Frank.

'What is it?' hissed Vic.

'I stubbed my toe on something. Can't we use a torch?'

'Why stop there? Why not use a microphone as well, so everyone can hear us?'

'I don't like this.'

'You don't have to,' said Vic. 'It's my idea.'

In his cage, Hero, the star of the lion act started to stir but then, realising it was Vic, settled again.

'I'll miss these big cats,' said Vic.

Frank felt differently. 'Even though I feed them, they still frighten the life out of me.'

'We only need one. Hero will do fine. Open the cage door.'

Frank lifted the bolt of the cage and opened it just enough for Hero to slide out. Vic slipped a chain round the big cat's neck.

'I did what you said,' said Frank. 'I didn't feed him tonight.'

'Then my big friend will be very hungry.'

'He wasn't very happy when he saw the others get fed and not him.'

'But now we'll make it up to him.' Vic stroked the lion's mane. 'Something different on the menu this evening, Hero. Spider stroganoff.'

'Rather him than me,' said Frank. 'Those spiders look mean.'

'Rubbish. Haven't you seen them with that awful Whistler boy? Those spiders are harmless. They're just like big pussy cats.' He patted the lion's mane. 'Sorry, Hero.'

'Let's get on with it,' said Frank. 'It's cold out here.'

'But things are about to get very hot for those spiders.'

'What happens afterwards? Won't Hero run away? We don't want a lion on the loose.'

'Don't worry, Frank, I've thought of everything. After Hero's devoured those mutant monsters, he'll fall asleep. He always does after a big meal.'

The two men and the lion were now outside the spider's tent. Vic pulled back the flap and, slipping the chain off, pushed the big cat inside.

'Bon appetit, my friend.' He turned to Frank. 'Let's get out of here.'

Johnny, Debbie and Bouncer were sleeping in a borrowed caravan on the edge of the circus ground, and it was Johnny who first realised something was wrong.

'The spiders.' He sat up in his bunk and switched on the overhead lamp.

'Turn that light off,' grumbled Debbie. 'I'm trying to get some sleep. Some of us around

here have to work.'

'Listen, Debs.'

She sat up and listened. 'I can't hear anything.'

Bouncer had also woken up and reached for his glasses. 'What's going on?'

Suddenly, a spine-chilling roar echoed across the circus grounds.

'The spiders!' yelled Johnny grabbing his dressing gown and a torch and scrambling out the caravan door.

The roaring was getting louder by the second.

'Spiders don't roar,' cried Debbie, grabbing a coat and following him.

'No,' yelled Bouncer, 'but lions do!' He stumbled out into the darkness behind them, trying to keep Johnny's torch beam in sight.

The noise had woken everyone. It was coming from the spiders' tent. Some of the circus workers had grabbed pitchforks and nets and stood ready to tackle the ferocious sounding beast inside.

Vic came running up. He was wearing pyjamas and looked as though he'd just woken up.

'My lions!' he cried in his best, dramatic, Victor the Valiant voice. 'What's happened to my pets?'

Elsie knew. 'Hero's missing from his cage. He must be in that tent... with the spiders.'

She realised what she was saying. 'Oh, Johnny, I'm sorry.'

'Sorry for what, Aunt Elsie?'

The noise built to a crescendo, then suddenly stopped.

'Dinner's over,' said Vic.

Johnny tried to keep a straight face. 'Not until the bill's been paid.'

From out of the tent came a low, pitiful, moan.

'Stand back,' demanded Vic, in his lion tamer's voice. 'If anyone has to face a raging lion, let it be me.'

As the circus people stood and watched the eerie scene, lit only by their torches, Hero staggered out of the tent and flopped onto the grass. His whole body was shaking and trembling, especially his face.

'Why is Hero's mouth twitching?' asked Debbie, not getting too close.

'He doesn't look very well,' said Bouncer.

Vic moved closer. 'Eating those spiders has done it.' He tried not to let the satisfaction show in his voice.

'Eating what spiders?' asked Johnny.

'It's all your fault, Whistler,' cried Vic, still overacting. 'Those spiders were probably

poisonous. That's it. They've poisoned my beloved big cat.'

'The spiders haven't poisoned anyone,' said Johnny.

'How do you know that?'

Johnny pointed. Vic looked back at the tent. From around the flap, peered three large coloured heads.

Vic couldn't believe his eyes. 'But.. but...?'

'I told you this afternoon,' said Johnny. 'The only thing you'll get from trying to eat a rubber spider is a sore jaw. Why don't you take Hero back to his cage? If he's still hungry, you could feed him some soup... through a straw.'

'There's only one thing still worrying me,' said Elsie.

It was morning, and in the last couple of weeks, the circus, with its new acts, had already visited two other towns without further problems.

Every day they were playing to three full houses, and still turning away people.

'What's still worrying you?' Johnny asked.

Elsie was doing her accounts. 'We still don't know who let Hero out of his cage, or who caused the other so-called 'accidents'. Whoever it was could strike again at any time.'

Elsie put down her pen and looked at her watch. 'Look after things here for a moment, will you, Johnny? There's some more seating arriving. The truck should be here about now. This is a popular show.'

Ten minutes after Elsie left, there was a knock on the office caravan door. Outside stood one of the biggest men Johnny had ever seen.

The man, whose voice was as deep as his body was wide, stepped into the caravan, pulled a baseball cap off his head and offered Johnny a huge hand.

'My name's Goliath.'

'That figures,' said Johnny. Goliath's hand could have shaken six of Johnny's with room to spare. 'Is your name really Goliath?'

'No, but my real name is a secret, known to only one other person in the whole world.'

At that moment, Elsie put her head in the door. She took one look at Goliath and threw her arms around his neck. 'Rupert! It's so good to see you again.'

'Rupert?' echoed Johnny.

Goliath frowned at him. 'Unfortunately, Elsie is the person I was talking about. But now you know my real name, too.'

'Your secret's safe with me,' said Johnny.

Elsie couldn't contain herself. 'Rupert... I mean, Goliath, what are you doing here?'

Goliath sat down on one of the padded seats. They could all hear the springs

complaining. 'I heard your circus was looking for acts. Here I am.'

'Did you hear that, Johnny? When top performers like Goliath start coming to us, it means our luck's changed for the better.'

She turned to her old friend. 'Same act?'

'Sure,' said the big man. 'Goliath - the strongest man in the world.'

'Who's the strongest man in the world?' asked Debbie, as she entered the caravan.

'I am,' said Goliath.

Debbie looked him up and down. 'Who's arguing?'

'I'm joining your circus.'

'Wonderful!' said Debbie. 'What a great chance for more publicity.'

'Yeah, Debs,' said Johnny. 'You can put up some more posters.'

Debbie suddenly lost interest. 'We have full houses now. I wouldn't want to oversell it.'

Goliath stood up. He had to bend his head so as not to hit the roof. 'When do I start?'

'Today,' said Elsie. 'Johnny, give him The Flying Fishers old caravan. It was big enough for five trapeze artists so it should be big enough for Goliath. Then take him to the big top so he can rehearse.'

Johnny, Debbie and Bouncer watched in amazement as Goliath warmed up by bending steel bars.

'How do you do that?' asked Bouncer.

'Practice, practice and more practice. It works with anything.'

'Not with maths,' said Bouncer.

Goliath now stepped over to a long steel bar, with huge shiny weights at either end. He lifted it off the ground and above his head with ease.

'I'll bet those weights are hollow,' whispered Debbie, in a voice that was just a bit too loud.

In a flash Goliath was towering over her. 'Hollow?'

'Hello to you, too,' said Debbie, in a small voice, for once wishing she hadn't opened her mouth.

'Hollow?!' Goliath boomed.

'His voice is almost as big as yours, Bouncer,' said Johnny.

The next minute Goliath swept Debbie up in his huge arms and carried her into the ring, plonking her down beside the bar and weights.

'Hollow, huh?' said the big man. 'Then *you* lift it.'

'My arms are still tired from sticking up posters. If you don't mind...'

A huge finger pointed straight at her face. 'Lift!'

Debbie tried, but not very hard. 'See, too heavy,' she said and started to walk away. An enormous hand grabbed her by the scruff of the neck. 'Try harder.'

Debbie huffed and she puffed and she huffed and she puffed.

Bouncer dug Johnny in the ribs. 'This is like watching a rerun of the Three Little Pigs.'

'Except there's only one little pig.' Johnny put his hands to his mouth. 'Come on, Debs, or the Big Bad Wolf will eat you.'

Goliath looked over to where they were sitting.

'You shouldn't have done that, Johnny,' said Bouncer.

Goliath beckoned. 'You two, help her.'

'About time,' said Debbie as the two boys joined her. 'I'm sick of doing all the work around here.'

'On the count of three,' called Johnny. 'One, two, three!' The bar didn't move. 'Again. One, two, three!' Nothing.

The combined muscle of Johnny, Bouncer and Debbie wasn't enough to even move the weights, much less lift them off the ground.

After one final heave, the three of them fell back into the sawdust.

'You win, Goliath,' cried Debbie. 'Those weights are real.'

Goliath laughed. 'During my act, I get people out of the audience to try and match my strength. They soon realise I really am the strongest man in the world.'

Hearing the commotion, the spiders had ambled into the tent.

'How strong are you compared to a spider?' asked Johnny.

Goliath laughed even louder. 'A spider? No contest.' He looked at the newcomers.

'So these are the famous giant spiders I've read so much about. They may be big, but Goliath is stronger.'

'You've never seen them kick a football,' said Bouncer, under his breath.

Johnny whistled softly and Rainbow went over to the bar.

'He couldn't lift that,' said the big man, 'even if he had a hundred legs.'

'Would you like to bet on it?' asked Johnny.

'I never refuse a challenge. If he *can't* lift it, you can do my chores for the next week.'

Goliath touched his cap. 'But if one of your spiders can even move that bar, I'll eat my hat.'

'Deal!' cried Johnny, and he whistled instructions to the spiders.

As Goliath watched in amazement, Sunshine and Sky came and stood close to the bar while Rainbow climbed on top of them.

'Why is he doing that?' asked Goliath.

'To get a bit of height,' Johnny explained. 'He's too close to the ground. This way, he can reach down and pull the weight up.'

‘You’re serious, aren’t you?’

‘Oh, yes,’ said Johnny, ‘very serious.’

Slowly Rainbow extended his legs down and, securely anchored on the backs of the two friends, lifted the weight off the ground.

Goliath was thunderstruck.

‘Well?’ asked Johnny.

Goliath shook his head. ‘I don’t believe this.’

‘You should be around on a really *good* day,’ said Debbie.

‘You must make me a promise,’ Goliath demanded, grabbing Johnny under the arms and lifting him up until they were nose to nose. Johnny could see the twinkle in the strongman’s eye.

‘In fact, two promises,’ said Goliath. ‘You must never reveal my real name, and you must never tell another soul that the strongest man in the world lost a challenge to a spider.’

‘Promise,’ said Johnny, with a grin.

He was high enough off the ground to snatch the baseball cap off Goliath’s head.

‘Would you like some tomato sauce when you eat this?’

Chapter Seven

The night air was chilly and Frank shivered as he walked along with a cigarette dangling from his mouth.

He stopped alongside the lions' cages and leant up against one of the wheels, but then moved away when he heard Hero stir.

Frank was now only a few metres from the big top and the elephant tent.

Everything was quiet. The last show had finished and the circus site was deserted. People were snug and warm inside their caravans.

Frank wanted to be warm, but he'd also wanted to smoke a cigarette. The other circus hand who shared his caravan hated the smell and always made him smoke outside.

Frank took the last puff and turned to go. As he did, he flicked the still glowing cigarette butt into the darkness.

Right into the hay wagon!

'Fire! Fire!' By the time the alarm was raised, the hay wagon was well ablaze.

Elsie pulled her housecoat around her as she ran towards the flames.

'Get the animals to safety,' she yelled to Johnny who'd arrived at the same time.

'I'll get mine,' called Meeska, running for the elephants' tent.

'Someone get the lions!'

'Leave them to me, Elsie!' yelled Goliath, as he took hold of the coupling on one of the lion's cages and started pulling with all his might.

'What about the big top?' cried Johnny.

'The canvas is fireproof,' yelled Elsie, above the crackle of the flames. 'The animals are more important.'

Vic had now arrived. He looked sick. 'My lions!'

He ran to where Goliath was struggling to move the cages and threw his own weight into the battle.

The circus fire truck was parked in one corner. It carried water and a pump, plus hoses for just such an emergency.

'Where's that fire truck?' yelled Elsie.

Sparky's voice drifted across the grounds. 'It won't start. The battery's flat.'

'Buckets!' yelled Elsie. 'Everybody form a bucket brigade.'

Now the circus performers swung into action.

Meeska stood shoulder-to-shoulder with the Tortino Brothers, passing buckets of water along the chain.

Debbie passed them on to Bouncer, who passed them to Sunshine, on to Sky, on to

Rainbow.

Rainbow passed them to Johnny and on to Ted and Jimmy, who threw the water on the blazing hay.

In an emergency, it was all hands to the pumps, or in this case, buckets.

The roar of the lions was now deafening, but for all his strength, Goliath couldn't drag the cages away from the flames.

'Pull harder, you great lump,' cried Vic, pushing with all his might.

'I am pulling. It's no good.' Goliath pointed to the wheels.

The weight of the heavy metal wagons had caused the wheels to sink into the dirt. The cages wouldn't budge.

Vic was panic-stricken. 'We'll need a tractor to move them.'

'We haven't got a tractor,' yelled the circus strongman, 'but we have got the next best thing.'

Goliath stopped pulling and called across to the bucket brigade. 'Johnny! The spiders!'

Johnny and the spiders left the chain and ran to Goliath's side. 'What can we do?'

'Even Goliath can't move these cages by himself,' said the strongman, 'but with some help...?'

'You've got it.' Johnny whistled instructions.

Goliath, Victor the Valiant, and Johnny Whistler and the spiders now threw themselves at the first cage, rocking it backwards and forwards to get it free of the groove worn by the wheels.

'This time, and... heave!' yelled Goliath.

It worked. The wheels pulled up over the lip of the groove and the cage started to roll.

While Frank and some of the other circus workers helped pull it to safety, Goliath and his team tackled the second cage.

Bouncer ran up to lend a hand, but Johnny waved him away.

'Do what you do best, Bouncer. Give us the signal.'

'Right,' said Bouncer, unleashing his biggest voice. 'One, two, three. Heave!'

The cage came unstuck with such a rush, Vic had to jump out of the way to avoid being knocked down.

As the flames on the hay wagon finally died down, Vic grabbed Frank and started shaking him. The others were too busy to notice.

'Did you do this?' he hissed.

'No,' protested Frank, through chattering teeth. 'I...I don't know how the fire started.'

Frank knew very well his cigarette had started the blaze, but he wasn't about to admit it.

Vic released his arm. 'At least my pets are safe.' A smile crossed his face.

'I suppose it doesn't really matter how it happened. It's another nail in the coffin of the *Royal Ruby Circus*. Victory is near. I can smell it in the air.'

Frank sniffed. 'All I can smell is burnt hay.'

The next week was hectic as the circus packed and unpacked into two more towns. Bouncer stood in the tunnel ready to walk out and face the 8 o'clock crowd. It was another full house, even with extra seating.

'Do you realise we're almost there?' asked Johnny.

'Almost where?' asked Bouncer.

'Back to school,' said Debbie.

'It's going to be pretty dull after this,' said Bouncer.

'Very dull,' said Johnny. 'At least things are looking up. We've gained a great new act with Goliath and the "accidents" have stopped.'

They all heard the music start up. 'That's your cue, Bouncer. Get out there and wow them. Let's make it a show to remember.'

'They'll never forget this night.' Vic sat in his caravan, waiting for the first half of the show to end.

'It's too dangerous.' Frank liked the new scheme even less than he'd liked the others.

'No one will get hurt if you do it right.'

'You want me to loosen off all of the ropes around the big top, so...'

'No, you idiot!' Vic jumped to his feet. 'Not *all* the ropes. Just *some* of the ropes. Enough to start the whole tent vibrating and give everyone a good fright.'

Frank remembered the next bit. 'Then they'll have to empty everyone out of the tent.'

'Exactly. After that, the authorities will have to close the circus down while there's an investigation. By the time that's over, the circus will be ruined. No one will want to buy it... except me.'

'What if they find out we did it?'

'I'll have an alibi because everyone knows I have to attend to the lions after my act. As always, your alibi will be that you were helping me. Foolproof.'

'And here they are,' cried Bouncer, 'the stars of our show, Johnny, "High-Wire", Whistler, and the sensational Spinning Spiders!'

Johnny, Rainbow, Sunshine and Sky clambered up the rope ladder to the platform. Cedric, who was now part of the act, made his usual hopeless attempt to stop them, but as always finished up being dropped into the safety net.

From his position on the high platform, Johnny looked down at the sea of faces gazing up at him. It still made his spine tingle.

He let out a whistle and the spiders swung into action.

First Rainbow, swinging across to the second trapeze to be catcher, then Sunshine joining in. They were getting better with practice.

Sunshine's single somersault had now become a double. With practice, Johnny was hoping to get him up to a triple. As always, the crowd was stunned.

Now Sky, with Johnny on board, started to cross the high wire. The crowd held its breath as spider and boy reached the halfway point.

That's when the big top began to vibrate.

Down below, Elsie, in her BoomBoom costume, felt it, too.

'Trouble!' she yelled to Bouncer. 'The ropes are coming loose. Get out there and tell people not to panic. We'll have to empty the tent.'

Bouncer ran into the centre ring, microphone in hand. People all around the big top could feel the vibrations.

With the tension off the ropes, some of the wall panels were starting to flap like sails in the wind and Bouncer had trouble making himself heard over the shouting and screaming.

'Please stay calm!' he yelled, but it was no good.

People were falling over each other in their panic to get out.

Within seconds, every exit was blocked.

'I did it, I did it,' Frank called softly, running up to Vic.

Vic could see the big top shaking.

Frank looked back at the tent. 'Just like you said, I loosened all the ropes and...'

Vic grabbed him by the shoulders and spun him around. 'You did what?'

'I loosened the ropes...'

'How many?' demanded Vic.

'All of them!'

Vic was deathly pale. 'I said only some of them. Just enough to frighten everybody. That way, no one would get hurt.'

He spun Frank around again and pointed him back towards the big top. 'That tent's going to come crashing down at any minute.'

In the roof of the big top, high above the crowd, Johnny had troubles of his own just trying to hang onto Sky.

'Thank goodness for eight legs at a time like this.'

Slowly the giant spider and passenger edged the last few metres to complete their crossing of the high wire which was now flexing and twisting as the tent buckled and bent.

'We've got to get out of here,' Johnny yelled to the spiders, but his voice was lost in the screams from below.

He looked down. He could see the exits were blocked and he could also sense the whole thing could collapse at any moment.

'If we can get to the ropes outside, we might be able to hold the tent up long enough for everyone to escape. We have to find a way out. But where?'

The answer came in a cracking noise above his head. Looking up, he saw stars.

The twisting of the big tent had ripped a hole in the roof. It was a certainly a way out, but it was too far above his head to reach.

Johnny whistled the spiders into action.

Rainbow dived at the trapeze, swinging backwards and forwards, higher and higher.

And then, on Johnny's command, Rainbow let go of the bar and flew through the hole in the roof.

Johnny turned to Sunshine and Sky. 'Your turn!'

They quickly followed Rainbow on the trapeze and up through the hole onto the roof of the tent. Within seconds, the three spiders were peering down at him.

Now it was up to Johnny. 'Why did I have to join a circus in the school holidays?' he called to no one in particular as he prepared to follow his friends.

'Why couldn't I have taken a holiday job delivering newspapers?'

Down below, in the midst of the pandemonium, Elsie looked around. Some of the crowd had finally pushed their way out.

Goliath had carried Amy and her wheelchair to safety before racing to join those fighting to keep the tent upright.

Other circus workers, including Debbie, were moving the people out of the tent as fast as they could.

Elsie made no attempt to escape. Like the captain of a sinking ship, she felt she had to be the last to leave. Bouncer felt the same way.

'This tent is going to come down at any minute, Bouncer! We need more time to get everyone out.'

Bouncer pointed upwards. 'Don't give up yet!'

As they watched, Johnny grasped the trapeze bar and started to swing. Out and back, out and back, with each swing, getting higher and higher, closer to the hole in the tent roof.

At the top of the third swing, he let go and flew straight for the hole above him... and missed!

‘Johnny!’ screamed Bouncer and Elsie together.

Even as Johnny seemed about to fall, a dozen rubber arms reached down and snatched him to safety.

‘Remind me to stick to busking!’ he yelled to the spiders, as they dragged him through the rip in the canvas. ‘So far so good, but how do we get down?’

He struggled to stand upright on the wildly sloping roof and suddenly answered his own question.

‘It’s a giant slide!’ And dropping onto his back, feet first, Johnny took off down the sloping canvas roof at high speed and hit the ground with the spiders close behind.

All around, people tried desperately to help Goliath take the tremendous strain on the ropes, battling to keep the tent from collapsing on those still trapped inside.

Johnny whistled and waved. ‘All hands, and legs, over here.’

The three spiders joined the struggling circus workers.

Rainbow stood side-by-side with Goliath. ‘Now, let’s see who’s the strongest,’ cried the strongman as he gave an extra tug which Rainbow matched.

By this time, Meeska and her elephants had joined the battle while Vic and Frank strained to drag the lions’ cages to safety.

Suddenly, the tent started to lean back at a crazy angle. It was about to fall on top of them.

‘More hands to the other side!’ Goliath bellowed.

‘Spiders United to the rescue!’ yelled Johnny as he took off at top speed around the tent. With a whistle Rainbow, Sunshine and Sky launched themselves at the ropes.

Gradually the big tent again stood upright, but more of the side walls had ripped loose and were thrashing about in the wind. The roof was in tatters.

For what seemed like hours, but was really only minutes, the skeleton of the tent rocked and swayed.

Finally Elsie came running up. ‘They’re all out. The tent’s empty.’

As if hearing her words, the giant king-poles, holding the canvas aloft, finally gave way and what was left of the once proud big top crashed to the ground.

Elsie looked heartbroken. Johnny had never seen such a sad clown. ‘It’s over, Johnny. The *Royal Ruby Circus* is finished.’

Chapter Eight

'It's not all bad news, Mrs Turnbull,' said Vic, standing outside the office caravan later that night.

'Can you think of anything worse?' asked Elsie.

'My offer to buy the circus still stands.'

'Which is more than can be said for the tent,' said Johnny.

Debbie and Bouncer arrived, pushing Amy in the wheelchair.

Elsie took her granddaughter's hand and turned to Vic. 'Why do you still want to buy it?'

'It's every child's dream to own a circus. I may be an adult...'

'Almost,' Debbie whispered to Amy.

Vic chose to ignore it. 'Of course, after tonight's disaster, the price will have to come down. But I'm willing to offer you cash so we could do a deal on the spot. Why don't we go into the office and talk about it?'

Elsie squatted down until her face was level with Amy's. She could see the sadness in her granddaughter's deep blue eyes.

'I'm sorry it turned out this way, Amy. I'm sure the money I get from Vic will barely provide us a place to live. But I'll find a way to pay for your operation. I'll think of something.'

A dejected Elsie, still dressed as BoomBoom the Clown, and a much happier Victor the Valiant stepped into the office.

By now the grounds were almost deserted. The other circus performers were back in their caravans, already packing their bags, ready to start looking for new jobs.

The only light came from the moon, and the spotlights Sparky had turned on to illuminate the area.

Johnny shivered. 'It's like a ghost town.'

Bouncer looked worried. 'Don't say that.'

'If there are any ghosts,' said Debbie, 'maybe they could help us find the royal ruby. That would solve all our problems.'

'It's so sad,' said Amy. 'Look at the tent.' The big top had fallen in a heap. In one place, a broken king-pole had pierced the canvas and now stood at a crazy angle.

'That pole looks like a sentry,' said Debbie.

'Except there's nothing left to guard,' Amy replied. 'Losing the big top has ripped the heart out of this circus.'

'What did you say?' asked Johnny.

'I said there's nothing left to guard.'

'No, after that.'

'I said the heart's been ripped out of the circus.'

'The heart,' Johnny repeated. 'Your granddad mentioned his heart when he talked about the ruby. What was it he said?'

Amy looked puzzled. 'He used to say it was a king's ruby so it would stay close to his heart.'

Johnny suddenly let out a whistle. Out of the darkness came the spiders. 'More work to do, I'm afraid.'

Debbie started to protest. 'I've done more work around this circus than I've done in my entire life. Get someone else to help.'

'Well, sis, if you don't want to be there when I find the ruby...'

Debbie's eyes widened. 'You know where it is?'

'I've got a pretty good idea.'

'Where, Johnny, where?' cried Amy.

'All will be revealed. Now, Bouncer get me a torch. Debbie, find me a good strong pocket knife.'

As Bouncer and Debbie ran off to do as Johnny requested, Amy suddenly had a thought. 'Grandma! She's about to sell the circus.'

'All the more reason to hurry.' Johnny whistled to the spiders. They grasped the edge of the tent and lifted it for him to crawl under.

'Here's the torch,' said Bouncer, as he and Debbie arrived back at the same time.

'And here's the knife, little brother. What are you doing?'

Johnny grinned at her as he disappeared under the canvas. 'Looking for treasure. Buried treasure.'

'I know it's not very much money, Mrs Turnbull,' said Vic, showing Elsie out of the caravan, 'but it's all this broken circus is worth. And that cash will give you a start somewhere else.'

'Not much of a start and it will leave Amy in her wheelchair.'

'I'm sorry it had to turn out this way, but I can't pay more than the circus is worth, and it's not worth...'

'Aunt Elsie! Stop!' Bouncer's voice echoed across the circus grounds.

Elsie could see the four of them over near the collapsed tent. It looked like Johnny crawling out from under the canvas.

Now Johnny and Bouncer started running towards her. Debbie was right behind, pushing Amy.

'Good news,' said Bouncer as he arrived, puffing. 'You... you don't have to sell the circus.'

'It's too late. I already have.'

'For cash, too,' said Vic. 'No refunds.'

'But, Grandma,' said Amy, as Debbie slid the chair to a halt. 'Johnny's worked out the mystery.'

'What mystery?'

'What Granddad did with the ruby.'

Under the spotlights, Vic's face started to turn green. 'Ah... what did he do with it?'

'Remember, he always said it would stay close to his heart?'

Elsie started to smile. 'And you worked out what he meant?'

'Exactly,' said Johnny. 'As a ringmaster, Uncle Harry's heart was where the heart of any circus is - the centre ring. That's what he meant.'

Elsie's face fell. 'Sorry, Johnny, but the centre ring was the first place I looked.'

Johnny nodded. 'But there was a second clue.'

'What?' said Elsie.

'Yes, Grandma,' said Amy. 'Remember what Granddad used to call the royal ruby?'

Elsie thought about it. 'Oh, you mean a king's ruby?'

'Which needed a king's hiding place.' Johnny held out his hand. On his finger was the royal ruby ring.

Vic looked as though he was about to fall over. 'The ruby,' he choked. 'Where did you find it?'

'Where else would you hide a king's ruby?' asked Johnny, 'but in a king pole.'

Elsie was grinning from ear to ear. 'The big poles that hold up the tent. The *king*-poles that stand around the centre ring.'

'At the very heart of any circus,' said Johnny. 'Uncle Harry drilled a hole in one of the king poles and sealed up the ring inside.'

'Well done, Johnny.'

'Ah... Mrs Turnbull.' It was Vic. 'I wonder if we could have another talk about buying the circus.'

'But, you've already bought it,' said Elsie.

'That's what I'd like to talk about. I've changed my mind.'

Elsie put her hand into the pocket of her clown suit. She pulled out a piece of paper and a wad of bank notes.

'I've got a contract, Vic, and you've already paid me. In cash. Remember?'

'But.. but...'

Johnny shone his torch in Vic's face. 'Is it because we found the ruby?'

By the light of the torch, Vic's mouth tried to form the word 'no', but his eyes and his

unhappy face said 'yes'.

'I suppose I *could* buy back the circus,' said Elsie.

Vic looked as though he was about to fall on his knees in gratitude. 'Oh, thank you, thank you very much.'

'Of course,' said Debbie, 'as my Aunt's legal adviser, I'd have to recommend she offer you a lower price than you paid for it.'

'I think about *half* what she sold it for would seem about right, wouldn't it Debs?,' said Johnny.

Debbie frowned at him. 'This is my case, little brother. Leave it to the expert. What do you think, Aunt Elsie?'

'I think it's good advice, from both of you.' She turned to Vic. 'Let's go back to the office. We can complete the sale without delay. Then you can pack your bags and leave.'

Chapter Nine

Johnny came running into the Whistler house in Bayside. Bouncer was close behind, yelling at the top of his voice. 'It's a letter. A letter from Aunt Elsie.'

The noise brought Kate and Debbie hurrying into the room.

'Open it, little brother.'

'I'm going as fast as I can.' He pulled the letter out of the envelope. It was written on red and white striped paper. Across the top was printed *THE NEW ROYAL RUBY CIRCUS.*

'So, she finally sold it,' said Debbie.

'Again?' asked Kate.

'Not the circus, Mum,' said Johnny. 'She finally sold the ruby.'

Kate was shocked. 'But it was worth a lot of money.'

'And that's what she sold it for, Mum, a *lot* of money. She says here that getting Amy out of that wheelchair was more important than keeping the ruby.'

'How is Amy?' Debbie tried to see over Johnny's shoulder.

Johnny pulled the letter away. 'All in good time, Debs. Let me finish.'

He started reading again. 'Amy is getting stronger by the day and she's almost fit enough to resume her bareback riding act with Magic.'

'Great,' said Bouncer.

'What does Elsie say about the new circus?' asked Kate.

'Well, it's been financed by some of the money she got for the ruby, and what was left over after our friend, Victor the Valiant, sold her back the circus... at a bargain price.'

'Serves him right,' said Debbie.

'I'm going to miss Vic,' said Johnny, breaking into a grin, 'but not a lot.'

'Me, too,' said Bouncer. 'It's not every day you get the chance to work with the world's *bravest* lion tamer.'

'Even if old "Fester the Fearless" was the only one who believed it.'

'Fester?' asked Kate. 'I thought his name was Vic.'

'He wasn't even fearless,' said Debbie. 'The only lion tamer in the world with a vegetarian lion.'

'You've lost me,' said Kate.

'Hero,' Johnny explained. 'He gave up eating meat after Vic tried to feed him spider stroganoff.'

'Does the letter say what happened to the lions?' asked Bouncer.

Johnny checked. 'According to this, Vic sold Hero and the other lions to the Tortino Brothers and left town in a big hurry.'

'The Tortinos,' said Debbie, remembering. 'Working with lions should be a lot safer than

a knife throwing act.'

'Aunt Elsie says Frank's gone as well. Left town the same time as Vic.'

Kate was impressed. 'You three certainly had a fun few weeks.'

'Not really fun, Mum,' said Debbie. 'Circuses are hard work. I've still got sore arms from sticking up posters.'

Johnny looked at Bouncer and winked. Debbie wasn't getting any sympathy from them.

He continued reading. 'The circus has got a new manager.'

'Who?'

'Rup... I mean, Goliath.'

Kate was puzzled. 'The circus is managed by someone called Goliath?'

'It's a big job,' said Bouncer.

'And you couldn't find a bigger man to do it,' Johnny added, continuing to read.

'Meeska's still with the circus. So is Cedric, Ted, Jimmy, Sparky. Even The Flying Fishers are begging to be allowed to come back. Aunt Elsie is thinking about it.'

'What a woman,' said Debbie. 'She's my new role model.'

'What about me?' asked Kate. 'I thought I was your role model?'

'Can you be a clown, Mum?'

'I've had plenty of practice, Debs, being a mother.'

'Listen to this,' Johnny interrupted. 'Aunt Elsie wants to know if we'd like to spend our next holidays with the new circus.'

'As ringmaster?' asked Bouncer, breaking into a smile.

'Doing publicity?' asked Debbie, breaking into a frown. 'Oh, my aching arms.'

'Could we do it, Mum, please?' begged Johnny.

Kate wasn't sure. 'The next holidays are a long way away. We'll worry about it nearer the time.'

Johnny put the letter down and got up from the table. He started pacing the room.

'I'd love to go back to the circus one day. I've got a whole new act worked out.'

'More high wire stuff?' asked Bouncer.

'Sort of,' Johnny replied. 'Certainly high.'

'Come on, little brother,' demanded Debbie. 'What are you talking about?'

'Perhaps it would be more suitable for you,' said Johnny. 'After all, Aunt Elsie is your role model.'

'You want to be a clown?' asked Debbie. 'You are already.'

'No. I want to do what Aunt Elsie used to do. A cannonball act.'

'No you don't, young man,' said Kate. 'No son of mine is going to be shot out of a cannon.'

At that moment Rainbow, Sunshine and Sky wandered in from the back yard and flopped down around the kitchen table.

‘I can’t believe this,’ said Debbie. ‘I know you were good on the high wire, Johnny, but being shot out of a cannon is really dangerous.’

‘I’ll be happy to announce it for you, Johnny, but *you’ll* have to do it,’ said Bouncer. The idea was almost too big for him to grasp. ‘A human cannonball.’

‘Who said anything about *human*?’ asked Johnny.

‘In a circus, what else would get shot out of a cannon?’

‘Well,’ said Johnny, looking around, ‘how about some brightly coloured, unbreakable cannon balls - of the eight-legged variety?’

The End