



# Lowan's Circus Tricks

Book 7

S. E. Grosskopf

**\*PREVIEW\***

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segrosskopf.com

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## Chapter I

Monday, April 13, 1931

**L**owan climbed the steps and trudged down the hall to his office. He'd just finished a difficult conversation with a client about the conclusion of a case, which had not ended on a positive note. On top of that, it had rained heavily for almost two days straight. The storm knocked down trees and power lines and left streets flooded. Inside the building, the air felt uncomfortably cold and damp. His coat dripped water on the floor, and his shoes squished with each step.

He didn't usually work weekends unless an emergency case demanded it. The last two days had been as eventful as some entire months. Now, his body ached, and his energy ebbed. Unless another case came up, he would take the rest of the day off. Nothing sounded better than a long nap.

Voices drifted through his office door. He pushed it open and found his neighbor, Jane Maplewood, sitting across from his secretary, Rita Nanning.

"I brought cookies," Jane greeted. She held out a round metal canister filled with fresh-baked oatmeal cookies. The sugary scent wafted through the room. Judging by the crumbs on the desk, Rita had already helped herself to several.

"No, thank you." It hurt to pass them up. Her cookies were delicious, but he did not want to encourage her. Jane was an excellent baker. She was also a lonely widow who frequently

## LOWAN'S CIRCUS TRICKS

found or invented excuses to demand his attention. Bothering him at home was enough of an annoyance. Coming to his place of business crossed the line.

He peeled out of his wet coat and left it on the rack, then went to his own desk on the other side of the office and pretended to do paperwork. Jane followed and plunked the cookie tin in front of him. Giving her a stern look, he moved it aside. "Did you come here to hire a detective?"

"I just wanted to make sure you were alright." Her intonation betrayed a Southern origin. Short, gray-streaked blonde hair framed her face. "You've hardly been home all weekend."

"I was working."

"You work far too much, and at your age. . . . Aren't you ever going to think about retiring?" She turned to Rita for support.

"If it's all the same," Rita said, "I'd rather not lose my job."

"Ugh." Jane let out an exasperated sigh. She glanced around the bare office and frowned at the worn wood floors, the dull gray walls, and the one little window. Rita's desk was closer to the door, Lowan's farther back. Other than the desks, chairs, and several filing cabinets, the office was empty. On the back wall was the door to Lowan's private workshop. "You really ought to fix this place up a little. New paint, some curtains on the window, maybe a few potted plants. . . . I could help with the decorating."

Lowan imagined his hair graying by the minute. Having seen her apartment, asking her for help decorating would have been like asking a clown for fashion advice. Blindingly bright colors, contrasting stripes and floral patterns, crowded shelves of mismatched knickknacks covering every wall . . .

"Aunt Jane, that's a brilliant idea," Rita exclaimed.

"Aunt?" Lowan sputtered. The two women were conspiring against him. He was certain of it. And he had no right to complain about the new addition to the family, since he had become Rita's uncle by similar means. He stood and edged toward the door of his workshop—his one final stronghold. If he could make it that far, he might find some peace.

The main door opened. A thin woman with hair a few shades too red to be natural peeked into the room. She wore a yellow raincoat over a spring dress. "I'm looking for a detective," she said in a squeaky voice. "Am I in the right place?"

"Yes, of course you are, dear," Jane said, motioning to the empty chair near Lowan's desk. "Come in and have a seat."

The client shook out a yellow umbrella and leaned it against the wall, then crossed the room with short strides and pulled the chair out. "I was expecting the detective to be younger."

Lowan took his place behind his desk and ran his fingers through his hair, still blaming Jane for the gray, though it had been that way long before he met her. "I assure you, I am not too old for this job." The forcefulness of his voice made her flinch.

"There were two names on the door . . ."

"Sen is only a field agent. He never comes to the office."

"Thank heavens for that," Jane added. She took the other chair in front of the desk and helped herself to the cookies. "Believe me, you'll like Lowan a lot better. Sen could scare the fleas off a dog."

"I'm Violet Meer." She clutched her handbag on her lap and twisted the strap around her fingers, then rummaged inside for a handkerchief. "My daughter Eloise was kidnapped by a traveling circus, and I want you to bring her home."

"Oh, you poor thing," Jane cooed while Violet sniffled into her handkerchief. "Tell us all about it."

"How long ago was this?" Lowan asked.

"Last October."

"Have you been to the police?"

"Oh, those stupid police can't do a thing right." Violet dabbed at her eyes.

Lowan frowned and crossed his arms. "Some of my best friends are police."

"They won't look for her because she's an adult. They said she left on her own, but I know that's not true. Eloise wouldn't leave me like that."

## LOWAN'S CIRCUS TRICKS

“And after seven months, why are you looking to hire a detective now?”

“You’re the third one. First, I went to Marvin Kane. He took my money, and then I never heard from him again.”

“Kane has a good reputation. He has been a detective far longer than I have, since before I moved to Milford Falls. We worked together on several cases.”

“I heard he was good, but he’s nothing but a crook. Then I went to Fritz Gallop.”

“I would call him the crook,” Lowan said. Gallop’s fees were the cheapest in town and no case was beneath him. He usually handled divorce. “He cheated me out of fifty dollars last month.”

“He took my money too, then wasted weeks doing nothing, and now he’s not going to keep looking. I can’t get anyone to help me.”

Violet’s last statement had been quiet enough for Jane to lean closer. Jane touched her arm and made sympathetic noises.

“It’s nice that your wife helps you at the office.” Violet smiled through dramatic tears. “You’ll bring my daughter back?”

Before Lowan could set the record straight, Jane blurted, “He’ll find your daughter for you.”





## Chapter II

“Jane is not—” Lowan sputtered and choked. Rising blood pressure pounded in his ears. Strong emotions clouded his judgment and reduced his telepathic senses. He took a deep breath, cleared his thoughts, and focused on Violet. What he saw, he didn’t like. He found a minimum amount of concern for her daughter at the back of her mind. For the most part, she thrived on sympathy and attention. The level of narcissism unsettled his stomach. “I may not be able to help you with this case.”

“Why not?” Jane objected on Violet’s behalf. Both women stared across the desk at him with expressions balanced on the division between shock and horror. “If Eloise is in trouble, and you won’t do anything . . .”

He struggled to find an excuse which would not paint him as a villain. Even more than Violet’s self-centered demands, he resented Jane’s intrusion into his business affairs. “After seven months, the trail will have gone cold—”

The main door opened. Detective Lieutenant Marx stepped inside, saw that the chairs by Lowan’s desk were already occupied, and froze. His face was red and twitchy. He took a lot of quick, short breaths and gulped. The feeling of his presence contained an unusual amount of outright terror.

Lowan stood and motioned for Violet and Jane to go to Rita’s desk. “My secretary can take your statement and contact details,

## LOWAN'S CIRCUS TRICKS

and go over the contract with you. I would like to know everything about the circumstances surrounding your daughter's disappearance, anything you can tell me concerning the circus, and anything either Kane or Gallop told you about their investigations." While they hesitated to vacate his desk, he waved for Marx to join him.

Marx edged closer, glancing sideways at the others. Emotional turmoil heightened his fundamental shyness. Whatever was bothering him, he wouldn't want to discuss it in front of anyone.

"Step into my workshop." Lowan opened the door and motioned inside.

Marx darted through the doorway, stopped, and looked around. A bright light above the worktable illuminated pages of diagrams, components, and tools. Lowan rarely invited anyone into his workshop. Though the office suite had been designed as an outer reception area and an inner office, he used only the first room for the detective agency.

This area was reserved for his development with radios. Unrelated to his detective work, his patents and contracts regularly made him far more money than the cases he solved.

"I . . . uh . . ." Marx stepped farther into the room, then turned around to face Lowan.

"Sit." The workshop only had one chair behind the worktable. Lowan pointed to it. Under the circumstances, Marx needed it far more than he did. "What happened? I left you at the home of Fredrick Fieldcrest less than an hour ago, and you were not in this condition."

Marx sank into the chair, tossed his hat onto the workbench, and put his head down in his hands. His voice was tight and hoarse. "I went back to headquarters . . ." He let out a short and uncharacteristic nervous laugh. His hands shook.

Lowan searched through Marx's mind, trying to find the source of his terror, but the jumbled flood of images and emotions gave him a headache. Kramer loomed over the mess like a giant blond ogre. Other than that, he couldn't find a

coherent picture of anything. “What happened? Is this about Acting Captain—”

“He’s not Acting Captain anymore. His promotion just got finalized. He’s Captain Kramer now.” Less than twenty-four hours ago, Marx had tackled an armed murderer twice his size, without a single thought of fear. Now, a long-expected change in police hierarchy left him shivering and in tears. “He’s going to fire me.”

“Have you given him any reason—?”

“He doesn’t n-need one. He’s h-hated me since the minute I s-s-started.” He choked on his words and turned away. “Every other word he says to me is *dummkopf*. Every day for the past three years—”

“Have you spoken to Chief Benson about your concerns?”

“I tried, a little, but he wouldn’t listen.” Marx paused to gasp for air. His voice went high-pitched. “He won’t ever hear a bad word about anyone and expects us all to just get along. And besides . . . if I have a complaint . . . I’m supposed to go to my direct superior first. Guess who?”

“Marx, take a deep breath.” Lowan put his hands on Marx’s shoulders and forcefully projected a sense of calm. Hypnotizing a friend felt unethical, even if it was to Marx’s benefit. He waited until Marx’s breathing slowed. “How have I advised you to handle Kramer in the past?”

“To just focus on doing my own job the best I can.” He rubbed his eyes and sat up.

“How has that worked for you?”

“I solve way more cases than he does. He only got the promotion because he’s been there years longer.”

“Kramer has been *de facto* captain for months already. I doubt this finalization will bring about any significant change. The police department is chronically understaffed, and good detectives are rare. Your record of solving cases is well above average. If Kramer chooses to fire you, it would be to the detriment of the entire city. He may be abrasive, but he is not stupid.”

## LOWAN'S CIRCUS TRICKS

Marx sighed. The worst of his terror passed, though a deeper anxiety still lingered.

“You will get through this one day at a time.” Lowan stepped back and changed his tone from supportive to businesslike. “I have a new case, though I am not sure how far I will get with it. There are some troubling aspects. When did you last hear from Marvin Kane?”

“A while.” Marx paused to think, his mind finally settling on something other than fear of Kramer. “Months, I guess. Sometime last year.”

“The woman in the next room claimed that she hired Marvin Kane to look for her missing daughter. He took her money and disappeared.”

“That’s not like Kane. Are you sure she didn’t get him mixed up with Fritz Gallop?”

“She went to Gallop afterward. He also worked on the case for several weeks, then dropped her without solving it. I plan to contact him for any details he may be willing to share, though I expect very little of him.”

“Must have been some case.” Marx began to sound more like himself. “What’s it about?”

“Violet Meer claims that her daughter Eloise was kidnapped by a traveling circus. Apparently, there was a police investigation, but they did not settle the matter to her satisfaction. Do you remember anything?”

“A traveling circus?” Marx’s eyebrows moved closer together and he stared at the wall for several moments. “I remember something about that, only because a circus isn’t normal. Last October? It was Kramer’s case. He thought she left on her own. I guess he even talked to her over the telephone, and she said so. She was old enough to make her own choices, and there wasn’t any reason to drag her back just because her mother was worried. Please don’t make me ask Kramer for more details than that.”

“I would not dream of it.”

“October was a weird month. That same time while the circus was here, I was busy with the screwiest case I ever saw. Some

slumlord called Big Frank Harvey disappeared. We found a poetry note in his penthouse that said Harvey was changed into a rat, signed by a crank called Merlin. There was a big rat in his penthouse, too, at the time. It scared the daylights out of the cleaning lady. I never did find out what happened to Harvey.”

“How very odd.” He reached for the door and leaned out, relieved to see that both Jane and Violet had gone. Marx followed him back to his desk. Lowan flipped through the phone book, then picked up the receiver and dialed. Nothing but a busy tone. He hung up, then dialed the operator. “I seem to be having trouble placing a call.” He read Marvin Kane’s number out of the advertisement in the phone book.

“I’m sorry, sir, but that number has been disconnected.”

“Thank you.” He set the phone down and looked across the desk at Marx. “Apparently, Kane has not paid his telephone bill.”

“I’ll check on him.”

Lowan flipped to the next page, gritted his teeth, and dialed again.

“Fritz Gallop, Private Detective. I’ll solve your case faster than Gallant Fox can run twelve furlongs.”

“I did not call for bad jokes.”

“Oh, it’s you.” Gallop’s voice went flat. “If this is about Saint Patrick’s Day—”

“When did you last hear from Marvin Kane?”

“I . . . uh . . . not recently. What’s this about?”

He regretted not being able to read minds over the telephone. “Violet Meer just left my office—”

“Whatever she wants, don’t take it. I mean that.”

“She asked you to look for her daughter, who left to join a circus.”

“And now she wants you to scold me for not doing it? Boo-hoo.”

“I wanted to know how far your investigation went. Did you find the circus? Did you speak to Eloise?”

“I found the circus. It’s run by a guy named Victor Vanguard, and they’ve been heading southwest since October. Last I heard,

## LOWAN'S CIRCUS TRICKS

which wasn't long ago, they were about to set up in a dismal spot called Dry Creek, Kansas. That's about a whole day away from here by train."

"Did you speak to Eloise?"

"Uh . . . yes and no." He sounded nervous and evasive. "She wasn't coming back. Ever. That was pretty final."

"What happened when Marvin Kane found the circus?"

"He only made it as far as Illinois. He ain't ever coming back either."

"He is . . . dead?"

"Not exactly."

"Then, what?"

Gallop lowered his voice. "He got turned into a bloodhound. I swear it's true. I talked to a guy who saw it happen. Whatever you do, don't go looking for Eloise."



## Chapter III

**T**uesday afternoon, Lowan stepped onto the train station platform, suitcase in hand. He was the only passenger to disembark. The small shack near the tracks also served as Dry Creek's post office and telegraph office. The train line considered Dry Creek no more than a fifteen-minute water stop, and the train was already whistling its intention to leave.

Two rows of sun-bleached wooden buildings faced each other across a strip of dry hard-packed dust which passed itself off as a road. Nevertheless, the town was a busy one. Buckboard wagons navigated their way around a few old cars from which the unforgiving sun and abrasive dust storms had removed all traces of paint. A rattling tractor's arrival startled several horses, which instigated a few angry shouts directed at the tractor's driver. The rural population surrounding the town, which came to patronize the general store, exceeded the population of the town itself.

To the left, at the edge of town, a large red and yellow tent contrasted with the rest of the colorless scene. With the town and the circus so close together, transportation would not be a problem. Lowan planned to visit the hotel first, and then investigate the circus.

A sudden fight prevented him from stepping off the platform. Two boys, each about six years old, wrestled in the street, kicking up a cloud of dust which clung to their patched overalls. Two

## LOWAN'S CIRCUS TRICKS

brown spotted mutts, probably from the same litter, yipped and raced in circles around the fighting children.

It hardly seemed proper for a stranger to intervene, but Lowan hated to let the fight continue. He was ready to interrupt when a silver-haired woman in a somewhat theatrical-looking green dress advanced toward the fighting pair from across the street.

“Boys!” When the woman shouted, the children both immediately stood to attention. Shame crossed their faces. They fidgeted and mumbled a few juvenile excuses. She instructed them to shake hands, then gave them each a quarter to buy ice cream. They jogged down the road with their matching mongrels trotting behind.

“If only all disagreements could be settled that easily.” Lowan stepped off the train platform into the dusty street.

“You’re new here.” The woman looked slightly surprised by the interruption.

“I am on my way to the hotel.” He indicated his suitcase.

“I was heading in that direction myself. Vivian Glory.” She offered to shake hands.

“Lowan.” When he took her hand, warmth flowed up his arm. He smiled. Here was a woman who radiated genuine goodness and grace. The kind of a person who restores one’s faith in humanity. “Believe me when I say the pleasure is all mine.”

“You remember me?”

“I am sure that we have never met.” Lowan saw that he had misunderstood.

“I meant on the stage.”

“No, I am not from around here.”

“I toured the whole country and parts of Europe. Where are you from?”

“Milford Falls.” He hated to lie to her.

“I was there in 1883.” Her eyes took on a far-away look. “With the Liberty Theater Company, we did a magnificent production of *Kathrine’s Golden Hope*. It was made into a film in



1919, but by then I had to play Kathrine's mother rather than Kathrine herself. Have you seen it?"

"No, I have not."

"Oh, well." She paused to sigh. "And with the talkies, now, soon no one will watch the old films anymore. Will you be staying here long?"

"Not long. A young woman recently joined the circus that is in town here and her mother hired me to ask her to come home."

"Bringing wayward young ladies back into the fold. . . . That's an unusual career."

"I am a private investigator." He doubted it would do any harm to share that information with her.

"I saw the circus yesterday. It isn't much. What if the young lady won't go home?"

"That is what she told the police when her mother reported her missing. If she is not in any danger and it truly was her decision to stay with the circus, I will not interfere."

"Her mother will be disappointed."

"Undoubtedly, but having met the mother, I can hardly blame Eloise for leaving."

"One of *those*," Vivian commented knowingly. "When I joined the theater, my father practically disinherited me. Then when I started making the headlines, he couldn't brag loud enough. It's not always bad for a young woman to look for her own path."



Under a wooden archway that announced *Victor's Magnificent Traveling Circus* in fading letters, Lowan paid the five-cent entry fee. The ticket seller nodded tiredly when Lowan passed through the gate. The price was affordable, even in difficult economic times, and circuses offered a temporary diversion from the depressing realities of ordinary life. Consequently, a circus as unimpressive as this one attracted some visitors.

## LOWAN'S CIRCUS TRICKS

Somewhere, an out of tune band organ played its heart out, tiredly, turning *Entry of the Gladiators* into an unrecognizable cacophony of disharmonious notes at a depressing tempo. A small group of trick riders galloped past, the riders standing in their saddles. The horses seemed to move in slow motion; their sharp hooves flung up a cloud of dust. The circus was not large. In the plain light of day, the handful of red and yellow canvas tents appeared faded and patched.

Most of the games and sideshow attractions along the midway, the main avenue through the middle of the circus, required an additional fee. Typically, another nickel. Groups of spectators made their way from one tent to another.

“Peanuts . . . Popcorn . . . Get your lemonade here . . .”

Lowan didn't want to wait in line. While another group crowded around the concession stand, he moved on. The next booth looked like a game. Concentric rings were painted on a piece of plywood at the back of a narrow alley.

“Hit the bullseye three times and win a prize.” A young man plunked three darts on the counter in front of him.

Lowan picked up one and examined it. It felt unevenly weighted. The flights were bent. He doubted he could hit the target once, but he tried anyway. The dart *thunked* into the wood about a foot off-center. “Where might I find Eloise?”

“Don't know any Eloise.” The man answered too quickly to have given the question any consideration. Surprise and fear quivered at the edge of his voice.

The group from the concession stand gathered behind Lowan, waiting their turn for the game. Lowan set the other two darts back on the counter. The lie stuck out like a bright red stop sign on the otherwise flat landscape. The young man's fear prevented him from seeing any further into his mind. “What are you afraid of?”

His eyes darted past Lowan. “We're not supposed to talk about Eloise.”

Lowan spun around, but saw no one other than the spectators waiting for the game. He moved on. Groups moved past, pushing

their way from one attraction to another. Single men gravitated toward one particular tent. He retrieved another nickel from his pocket and followed.

The ticket seller grabbed his sleeve. “This one’s *twenty-five* cents, friend. But she’s worth it.”

Lowan located two more dimes and clinked them into the ticket seller’s tin can. He stepped into the dark interior of the tent.

“. . . King Gondo of the Mafutsi tribe . . .,” an announcer with a deep syrupy voice droned, his words blending with the phonograph recording of a steady drumbeat and tuneless flute. The announcer himself, standing to the side of the stage, was barely visible in the dim light of the tent. But then, no one came here to see him. “Queen Ataylah was unable to have children, so the king stole a white woman from safari . . .”

Not one member of the audience listened to the announcer. Outside, there had been seemingly few visitors to the circus. Here, however, were at least twenty spectators, exclusively male. At a quarter apiece, this one act likely supported the rest of the circus.

Their thoughts were wolfish and distracting. Lowan edged his way nearer to the front. A woman onstage was illuminated by the soft glow of a spotlight.

“King Gondo lavished his affection on his only child, Princess Zenah . . .,” the announcer continued. “In a fit of jealous rage, Queen Ataylah tried to murder her foster daughter, but Zenah escaped . . .”

The dancer’s costume consisted of a grass skirt and a few tiny bits of leopard skin. She looked barely eighteen. Many of the audience members were old enough to be her father. Lowan wondered what outrage they would feel if other men ogled at their own daughters the way they stared at her.

Instead, Lowan turned his attention to the dancer’s thoughts. She didn’t see the audience. Zenah danced for herself, as if no one was watching. She enjoyed playing the part of a tribal princess, focusing only on the music and the motion of her body.

## LOWAN'S CIRCUS TRICKS

Suddenly, she missed a step and put her hand to her face. He had pushed too far into her mind, disturbing her thought patterns enough for her to notice. She picked him out of the crowd. Seeing her spectators for the first time, she stared past the others directly at him.

Princess Zenah was the daughter of a Montana rancher and had joined the circus last year. Her name was Penelope Elderbloemen. Satisfied with this discovery, he turned to leave. The tuneless rhythm continued in the background.

He paused to speak to the ticket seller outside of Zenah's tent. "Where might I find Eloise?"

Rather than react with fear, this man laughed under his breath. "Try the menagerie."

Lowan found the menagerie tent, which was the second largest after the big top, and paid the five-cent entry fee. Inside, cages of colorful birds squawked and fluttered. Other visitors gathered around glass cases of snakes, scorpions, and other exotic and dangerous creatures. At the far end of the tent, a gaunt and mangy lion paced behind iron bars.

A thin man covered in a checkerboard pattern of tattoos watched nearby. He appeared to be in charge. Lowan studied his thoughts long enough to find the name Sal. He also didn't notice any fear or malice. "Where might I find Eloise?"

Sal pointed to a ring-tailed monkey. "There."

Lowan put his hand up to the bars of her cage. The monkey grabbed his finger. He leaned close and let her chatter into his ear, then made chattering noises in return, as if sharing a private joke. "There must be some mistake. I was looking for Eloise Meer, a young woman from Milford Falls."

"She's the only Eloise here." Sal knew more than he said.

"This Eloise tells me she has never been anything but a monkey."

"You can't believe everything monkeys tell you." Sal grinned, showing a set of large white teeth and squeezing together the pattern of tattoos on his face. "Monkeys are terrible liars."

“I have often found that animals are more honest than people. By chance, do you also know Marvin Kane?”

“Carl’s got a dog called Marvin.” Sal shrugged. “Looking for any other friends? Julius, maybe?”

“Who?”

Sal pointed to the lion. “We’ve also got a cobra named Rameses, a tarantula called Fuzzy, a badger named Bob, a whole tank of scorpions . . .”

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