

Send in the Clown

'Frankie, two hours to opening. Will you be okay to go on?'

'Sure Gemma, no bother.'

The close-knit cast of *The Martinetti Family Circus* from Glasgow was on its twenty-fifth annual summer tour. Their convoy of six vehicles comprised a low-loader, two high sided trucks, a modified horse box and three large motorhomes. It had arrived at the familiar field on the outskirts of the Cotswolds hamlet of Little Compton around midnight the night before. The circus was fresh from their two-night stand at Milcombe where the show had closed at 8.30 pm.

Seven years earlier Frankie (Francesco) Martinetti and his wife Gemma had taken over the business from his older brother Silvio. The others in their small troupe comprised Frankie and Gemma's son Alfie (Alfredo) (23) and his wife Cassie (Cassandra) (24) with Silvio's son Marco (20) and his daughter Ellie (Elvira) (19). The basic idea was that everyone rotated their roles, helping to keep themselves fresh and adding slapstick innovations to keep the show unpredictable and funny, all corny stuff aimed at family audiences comprising mainly of under-tens with mums and dads and grandparents.

Over the winter they did turns as children's entertainers and providing 'magic moment interludes' at corporate events where the slackwire was always a favourite, if there was enough space to fit the rig into the space. However, it was the summer tour which was their main source of income and Gemma had set up a gruelling schedule for their three-month season, mid-June to mid-September.

During their fourth year in charge, with their final payment made to Silvio and the opportunity to start saving for their own retirement, calamity had struck. Frankie had fallen from his slackwire twisting his spine badly. Gemma had been forced to step in for the remaining six weeks of that tour with Frankie, doped on painkillers, swapping roles with her as Whacky, the clown and ringmaster.

Over the winter, Frankie's back failed to fully mend. On the following season, Alfie had a turn on the slackwire before Cassie had stepped up, soon establishing herself as a very accomplished slackwire equilibrist allowing Alfie to concentrate again on his cycling tricks performed on a variety of BMX and other bikes including a tiny one with 4" wheels.

With Cassie now on the slackwire, Frankie had taken over the animal acts, dressed as a pirate with a huge and vociferous yellow and blue macaw called Winston on his shoulder.

For the dog act, there were three border collies, two German Shepherds, a black Standard Poodle, three white Miniature Poodles and four long-haired Dachshunds who performed a variety of set piece tricks coordinated by loud music with chaos added by a dozen or so free-flying parakeets who swirled around the big top in response to Winston's shrill whistle.

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Six African Greys were tethered on tall perches among the audience seating contributing raucous and ribald comments in broad Glaswegian, keeping the audience entertained during the lulls between acts. For the equine act, there were two beautiful golden-haired Shetland ponies called Calamity and Jane and a braying donkey called Hee-Haw who performed as a disobedient trio, refusing to jump over low bars, either stepping over them delicately or kicking them out of place.

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Frankie stood just inside the artiste's side tent, peeking in, having a fly fag, cupping it in his hand. In theory he had given up, a promise made and broken many times over.

The main tent was packed to capacity for the Sunday matinee with one hundred and sixty-five voices joining with Gemma dressed as an orange pumpkin, singing :

Oooh, I do like to be beside the seaside,

Oooh, I do like to be beside the sea,

And if you were a baby pumpkin,

I'd sit you on my knee.

Yes, I'd sit you on my knee.

I'd sit you on my knee.

If you were a baby pumpkin,

I'd sit you on my knee.

Are you ready now boys and girls?

Altogether now.....

Oooh, I do like to be beside the seaside,

After a few rounds of singing, the tent lights were doused to a minimum safety level as Frankie pulled a long cord connected to a small cannon in the centre of the ring which fired a vertical cloudburst of glittering multi-coloured confetti into the air while three strobe lasers swirled and rotated as the shower slowly descended.

When the main lights were switched on again Frankie, dressed as Whacky the Clown had replaced Pippa Pumpkin in the centre of the ring.

'Ladles and Jelly Babies how are you feeling today? Have you all remembered to look under your seats? We are missing my pet Boa Constrictor called Benji. But don't worry, I fed him at Christmas last year so he will not be too hungry. Ah, look,

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there he is, up there. Can you see him? Oh, I should have said, Benji is still just a baby so you need to look hard.'

On the cue 'baby' Winston screeched:

'Benji's just a baby! Benji's just a baby!'

Then, in response to Winston's whistle, the parakeets swooped from their cage in the upper rigging and swirled around the tent, skimming over the heads of the audience, sparking the African Greys into shouts of:

'Cum Oan, Get aff!'

'Away an bile yer heed!'

'Ma Maw's a millionaire!'

'Gee's a wee biscuit!'

While this was happening, Alfie, already wearing his flashing helmet and dressed in his fluorescent lemon jumpsuit, was setting up the props for his bike act, helped by Ellie.

With Alfie's act in full swing, Gemma stood with Cassie in the side tent. Cassie was already dressed in her figure-hugging pale blue leotard.

Gemma checked again; there was a definite bump. And her daughter-in-law had been quite grumpy recently.

'Cassie, are you expecting?'

'Yes, but I'm fine to do my act, don't worry.'

'How far along are you?'

'Four and a half months,'

'Why didn't you say? Does Alfie know?'

'Alfie thinks I'm still on the pill and, well, I was, but, then, well.'

'Well what?'

'Well, you know what its like. I mean, he's your son after all.'

'What do you mean Cassie, you've lost me here.'

'Alfie's got a new partner and so have I.'

'What!'

'You didn't notice?'

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'Notice what?'

'That we've swapped. I've been sleeping with Marco and Alfie's been sleeping with Ellie. But don't worry, she's still on the pill, so no incest, if she really is his cousin, eh?'

'What?'

'Anyway, Alfie and me, we're not actually married, are we? Just that old gypsy stuff peeing in the same bucket. Gross, actually.'

'Listen, Cassie, this is all wrong. Frankie will explode when he hears about this.'

'Tough! Anyway, this is my last season with the circus. Marco and me, we're leaving soon, try our luck in France. His father has a buddy from his army days who manages a holiday park in the Vendee and we are going there as assistant wardens, starting next February. We've been taking French lessons, but you didn't spot that either, did you? Anyway, Ellie's keen to try the slackline act. I've been coaching her and she's quite good, actually. It's all sorted.'

Frankie appeared, dressed as Whacky, smelling of nicotine.

Gemma cocked her ear in the direction of the main tent then ducked outside the side tent and shouted, 'Marco, come and help Frankie and Cassie set up the slackwire while Ellie and Alfie clear the ring.'

Back inside, Frankie whispered in Gemma's ear, 'So, Gemma, what is it? You look as if you've seen a ghost?'

'Frankie, do you know about Alfie and Ellie? And Cassie and Marco?'

'What is there to know?'

'Nothing, really. I'll tell you later. Time to go and finish up with Alfie and Ellie, okay?'

'Righty-o! Winston and me'll do the argy-bargy routine about Cinderella and Prince Charming with the wrong shoe and get the other parrots riled up, okay? And we'll get the parakeets to do a dive-bombing routine while Alfie does another circuit on the wee totty bike, okay?'

'Aye, Frankie, that'll be just perfect!'