

Barnum's Ghosts

A Novel by Warren Cook

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WEDNESDAY

Chapter One

A draft cut across Brooks Hall—warm, carrying the faint smell of old leather.

Ted Cassidy paused, floor plan in hand.

The scent vanished.

Under an hour remained before the decorator's crew would arrive to install pipe, drape, and power for the Fifth Annual San Francisco *Autumnfest*.

On a December morning in 1977, the numbers from the last three weekends ran through his mind—San Diego, Sacramento, Seattle—all flat. He'd poured thousands into newspaper ads no one read, TV spots lost between sitcoms, radio jingles that faded into static. Nothing had gained traction. One more weekend like that and *Autumnfest* might not survive the year. *I have to save it.*

Ted resumed his circuit through the windowless exhibit hall beneath Civic Center Plaza. Fluorescents buzzed overhead as he marked last-minute changes on the plan, as if shifting booths might alter his luck. Traffic murmured from the foggy streets above.

A piano began to play—bright, syncopated, antiquated, the notes thin and tinny, skittering through the vast space.

Wrong.

So out of place that he paused, pencil hovering.

Imagination, he told himself.

Ted crossed the hall, climbed the stairs to his show office, and stepped into a space pared to essentials. The music didn't follow. Its absence unsettled him more than its presence would have.

Two battered steel desks and a pair of folding chairs lined one wall; three Formica-top tables filled the opposite side.

His assistant, Rachel Williams, had arrived and was directing a Pacific Bell technician on where to place the phone. She wore a San Francisco State sweatshirt, Levi's, and Birkenstocks—the outfit of a twenty-year-old college student.

“I'm glad you're here, Rachel.”

“I just got in a few minutes ago to meet the phone man.”

The installer set a sturdy black rotary telephone on the front desk, its coiled cord dangling, and crouched to connect the line. A moment later, a dial tone hummed to life.

Rachel pried open the wooden crates Ted had hauled in earlier and began unloading show supplies.

At 8:00, the decorator's truck rolled down the ramp and into the hall. Ted headed to the entrance and met Chuck Parker, owner of Bay-Area Expo Services. The crew would spend the rest of Wednesday installing the festival's 300 booths. He spread the floor plan on the truck's hood and walked Chuck through the layout.

As Ted folded the diagram, movement rippled along the wall, shadows slipping between bundles of aluminum poles and rolls of black drape. His gaze tracked across the space. Nothing but equipment scattered across the cement floor.

Near the stairway to headquarters, the sound of Hope Wolcott's voice—cheery and light—floated toward him like a melody. She must have just arrived. For the first time that morning, he smiled.

He paused at the doorway. Hope's strawberry-blond hair, tied back in a ponytail with a red ribbon, was just as she'd worn it the night after the 1976 fair, when he'd blurted out his proposal over a late supper. She had laughed, kissed him, and said, "Of course."

His bride-to-be wore bell-bottom jeans, Hush Puppies, and a bright green-and-white striped blouse.

Boy, she looks terrific. And here's me—old jeans, old sneakers, and a faded flannel shirt. Well, they say opposites attract.

He pushed his thoughts aside and entered the room.

Hope glanced up and brightened. "Rachel and I were just talking about the artists who didn't do so well at the last few shows."

"San Francisco's different," Ted said. "We've built a following, and December's prime for Christmas shopping."

"No one can accuse you of losing your confidence," Hope said.

Faces of exhibitors drifted past—artists along half-empty aisles, watching him, silently asking why the buyers hadn't come. He had no answer for them. If this show failed, *Autumnfest* would collapse.

He rolled his shoulders, trying to shake off the doubt clinging to him. Easier to fake assurance than to explain it.

Ted went to check on the decorator and asked Chuck to leave space in the back row for possible expansion.

A man stepped out from the side entrance—about fifty, in a collared shirt and cravat beneath a fitted coat, a watch chain gleaming across his vest.

The figure crossed the bare floor without a sound.

I wonder how he got through the locked doors.

“You’re Mr. Cassidy, the producer.”

Ted nodded. “I am. I see you’re already dressed for the festival.”

“These are my everyday clothes. Barnum’s the name. You may have heard of me,” he said, winking.

Ted took in the man’s features—his prominent nose, potbelly, and thinning hair. “Well, you do resemble the photos I’ve seen of him. Congratulations on your getup.”

The stranger’s expression sobered. “I’d like to know whether you believe in spirits—ghosts, Mr. Cassidy,” he said, shifting the subject.

“I’m skeptical—though there are plenty of stories about haunted places. And lots of folks claim they’ve seen ghosts.”

“Indeed, I am Phineas Taylor Barnum, a spirit bound—if but for a time—to the land of the living. I do not haunt. I come bearing an offer of incomparable worth for your grand enterprise. Partner with me, and I promise you an alliance that will bring spectacle and fortune in its wake.”

“I don’t think I need a partner at the moment. But what you’re proposing—I don’t follow.”

“I have examined your newspaper notices—and these miraculous television advertisements. The billing declares: ‘Enter a 19th Century Village Fair.’ Worthy impresario,

such a claim demands authenticity. With my expertise, I shall deliver. Your patrons will step into yesteryear, as if plucked from the present and set down into an age of wonders long past.”

Ted laughed. *My new ads haven't worked that well so far, but I'll humor him.* “Good—you’ve seen them. I was trying to give my show an edge this year. Went with a 19th-century theme and had my artists dress the part.”

“Capital. Permit me to elucidate. By means most extraordinary, I have summoned spirits from the other side of renowned actors, artists, and inventors of the bygone century. These illustrious souls are eager to grace the stage anew or present their masterworks once more.

“I read the disbelief on your face, Mr. Cassidy. Most understandable. When I lived, if a fellow claimed to be a ghost, I’d have laughed and said, ‘Prove it.’”

Ted crossed his arms. “Can you?”

“Indeed, I can, sir. If not incontrovertible proof, then at the least, a most compelling curiosity. I’ll bring by Mark Twain and Vincent van Gogh. You are doubtless familiar with their likenesses. Well, they’ve chosen to manifest in the forms they favored in their heyday, those they wish to *relive*. That’s not quite the word, but you understand my meaning.”

“Twain and van Gogh. You’re putting me on. Why not throw in Abe Lincoln and Napoleon while you’re at it.”

“Ha. Mr. Lincoln is otherwise engaged, and Bonaparte refuses to play second fiddle. They’re not on today’s bill. But Twain will talk and Vincent will paint, and that, sir, will be spectacle enough. I shall return shortly. Meanwhile, decide where they might best astonish your public.”

With that, he tipped his hat, offered a theatrical bow, and glided across the floor—his polished shoes silent—before disappearing through the side entrance.

Ted returned to the show office. “I just met the strangest guy in the hall.”

“I thought only the decorator came today,” Rachel said.

“So you ran into someone else,” Hope said.

“Yeah.” he exhaled. “He introduced himself as P. T. Barnum.”

Hope blinked. Rachel laughed.

“He could have stepped out of a Dickens novel,” Ted continued, “like the old photographs—
down to the coat, vest, and watch chain.”

“He must be one of our new exhibitors in the San Francisco show,” Hope said.

“That’s what I asked him. But no, he claimed he was the ghost of Barnum. And get this—
he wants to be my partner this weekend.”

“Far out,” Rachel said. “Having Barnum’s ghost as your partner would be great PR. I’m
guessing he wasn’t scary.”

“No, not at all. I’m sure it’s a practical joke or some kind of dare.”

“Tell us what else he said.”

“He told me he could bring together spirits of famous performers and artists from the
1800s. He said they longed to perform again, or display their paintings or other artworks. And he
insisted he’d return with the ghosts of Vincent van Gogh and Mark Twain.”

Rachel grinned. “Can’t wait to meet them.”

“I know you’re kidding. And get this—he somehow slipped into the hall through the
locked side doors, and then vanished back through them without a sound.”

Hope nudged him. “That’s quite a story. You’ve been carrying a lot of pressure. Maybe
your imagination’s trying to help.”

He didn’t answer.

The three of them worked in silence, arranging the office.

After a time, Ted glanced at Hope. “We’ll soon find out if I’m hallucinating. The person who says he’s Barnum promised he’d be back.”

Right on cue, the man swept into the room, flanked by two others.

“As promised, I present to you the illustrious spirits of none other than Mr. Samuel Clemens, whom the world knows as Mark Twain, and the esteemed Vincent van Gogh. Call them ghosts if you wish, but gentlemen of their caliber transcend such a mundane label.”

Ted looked away, then back again. They were still there.

It had to be a setup—actors playing Barnum, Twain, and van Gogh, angling for a spot in the show. Still, he didn’t dismiss it: *What if this is exactly what the festival needs?*

Chapter Two

The two characters turned toward Ted. One wore a white suit, his mane of hair and bristling mustache the exact image of Mark Twain from the old photographs. The other, wiry and red-bearded, carried the same angular features Ted had seen in van Gogh's self-portraits.

The man calling himself Barnum gestured toward his companions with a proud smile. "Mark Twain is eager to regale your guests with a lecture of his own devising, after which he shall entertain their inquiries with his usual wit and wisdom. Meanwhile, Vincent van Gogh desires a space in which to exhibit his paintings, keen to observe how your attendees respond to his work.

"And speaking of Vincent—observe: he now possesses both ears."

These "spirits" acted more like automatons. In sync, they bowed, smiled, and said, "Pleased to meet you, Mr. Cassidy," without offering a hand to shake. They swiveled toward Hope and Rachel. "Dear ladies, we're honored to make your acquaintance."

Ted glanced from one figure to the other. "I don't have any idea how you found these dead ringers—heck, even yourself. We're set for this weekend's festival, but they might add something *next year*." He asked how much money he wanted.

Barnum chuckled. "Ah, but sir, you mistake our intentions. We spirits have no need for earthly coin—there is no use for money to those who dwell beyond the veil. No, as I've said, what we seek is far more precious: a grand stage upon which to dazzle, booths from which to display our finest works, and—most importantly—your audience, their eyes wide with wonder. And mind you, thus far, you've made the acquaintance of but three among us. There are many more.

"If you'll indulge me, I'll announce the spirits I wish to bring to this year's spectacle: Tchaikovsky conducting selections from *The Nutcracker*, Sarah Bernhardt swooning as Camille, Harry Houdini—escaping the inescapable." He went on revealing one legendary figure after another.

Hope shook her head, eyes wide.

"You've impressed me," Ted said. "But I still doubt ghosts exist."

Barnum grinned. "Wait. In due time, you shall come to believe in all of us." He began counting on his fingers. "We'll also need booths—one for Vincent, naturally, and several more for my other renowned painters.

"And room for my sculptors, inventors, and visionaries of every sort." Barnum continued rattling off one legendary 19th-century figure after another with theatrical flair.

The images of these celebrities flickered through Ted's mind like a rapid slideshow, each one distinct yet fleeting.

"Amazing. But they'd be competing with my artists for customer sales."

"Ah, but no, they shall not. The masterpieces your patrons know—the renowned works of these famed artists—reside in museums and private collections, their earthly forms long claimed. What we present here are but phantasms of the originals. Even the pieces they create

anew during the festival—those too shall be ghostly artworks, shimmering echoes of genius past.”

“That’s better.”

Barnum spread his arms. “We’ll also honor the literary greats and the champions of craft. As for myself—I shall require a booth to commemorate the splendor of the *1893 Columbian Exposition*—a world’s fair like no other. Though,” he added with a mischievous grin, “I may see fit to include a few curiosities from my own American Museum, just to keep things lively.”

Ted held up a hand. “Enough already. This sounds intriguing. And you and I will have an *entire* year to prepare.”

“A year. My dear fellow, why wait. I aim to present you with these legendary spirits *this weekend*. Just imagine the media frenzy they would stir.”

“I’m not sure if newspaper and TV editors would believe all that.”

“Trust me, we need only lure in one or two—once they witness this, word will race through the city. I know how the game is played. I commanded every paper in town to sing the praises of my acts. General Tom Thumb, the smallest marvel of that time; Jumbo the Elephant, the grandest beast to walk the earth. Millions flocked to them because I made certain they had to see for themselves. And, my dear Ted, we shall do the same.”

“Outta sight.” Rachel exhaled.

Though the idea intrigued him, Ted crossed his arms. “I’m counting on my own publicity bringing in crowds over the next three days.”

“And how is that going?”

“It’s only Wednesday. I should have a good read on it by tomorrow.”

Barnum smiled. “Ah, then I shall remain ever the optimist. I dare say you may come around yet. In fact, I’ve told my spirits to be at the ready.”

“Understood. Back to your entertainers—you said you wanted your acts to perform on *our stage*.”

“I ask but for one day—Saturday, if you please, owing to its longer hours. Your regular performers shall have their time on Friday and Sunday undisturbed. And let us not forget, our grand spectacle shall cost you not a penny. No wages lost, only a shift in schedule. A single day’s stage surrendered in the name of history, mystery, and marvel. A most profitable bargain, by any measure.”

Hope leaned toward Ted and whispered, “It sounds exciting.”

“Too good to be true.”

“With the stage, maybe you should bring Nick into this.”

Ted agreed, his mind already racing ahead. “Right.”

Rachel wore a huge grin. “Ted, like Barnum said, if he produced all these personalities, you’d have terrific PR opportunities.”

Before Ted could respond, the sound of gunshots reverberated through the building, sending a shock of adrenaline through him. He bolted from the office, heart pounding. With only a few rows of drapes installed, he had a clear view across the vast hall.

At the rear stood a man in fringed buckskin, his cowboy hat pulled low. Beside him a woman clad in a vintage dress and wide-brimmed hat, held a rifle. The man tossed up objects. The woman raised her rifle, and with each shot the airborne targets shattered mid-flight.

Hope and Rachel hurried after him, faces etched with fear. Ted found his voice. “Stop!” He rushed down the stairway and ran toward the two.

As he drew closer, the warm, animal scent of old leather returned. Were they already here?

The woman lowered her rifle and smiled. “Just keepin’ my aim sharp for the fair. Name’s Annie Oakley. This here’s a piece of my act.”

The man gave a sweeping tip of his hat. “And I’m Buffalo Bill. This little lady’s the finest shot in the world—and the brightest star of my Wild West show.”

Ted still reeled from the gunfire, but the sight of these “ghosts” sent a thrill through him.

“You folks do a fine job bringing these historical figures to life,” he said, studying the pair who mirrored the photos he’d seen in books.

“Bringing them to life,” the Buffalo Bill look-alike replied. “Why, my friend, we *are* the genuine spirits of the last century. Mr. Barnum himself reached out to us, along with a host of other performers, asking if we’d care to journey forward in time, to join in a grand fair in the year 1977. Well now, Annie and I needed no persuadin’. We told Barnum right then and there we’d be delighted to oblige.”

Ted offered a skeptical smile. “I’ll play along with your story for the sheer novelty. Still, that doesn’t mean I’m buying it.”

Then he added, “We’re talking about next year. Everything is in place for this weekend. Even for next December, we’d need some sort of agreement. For starters, we’d have to find a way for you, Annie, to show off your sharpshooting skills without endangering anyone.”

“Bill and I guarantee it won’t be a problem.”

“Follow me. The actors playing Barnum, Mark Twain, and Vincent van Gogh are already here.”

Ted stepped into the office and found Hope and Rachel chatting with Barnum's earlier "ghosts," their composure restored.

Bill and Annie greeted the women and the other "spirits."

No handshakes. *Part of the act*, Ted told himself.

"I'm phoning Nick DeMartini, our MC," Ted said to Barnum. "I'll see if he can come meet you."

He dialed. "Nick, it's me. We've had a *fascinating* turn of events over here." He recounted the morning's occurrences.

Silence hung on the other end of the line. Then Nick said, "Ted... what on earth are you smoking? That's the wildest story you've ever tried to sell me."

"I'm not making it up. Hey, I can put Hope and Rachel on the phone to confirm it."

"Okay. Debbie is in school until 3:00. It's 10:00 now. I'll be there as quick as I can."

Nick arrived at 10:30 wearing a Golden State Warriors T-shirt, jeans, and sneakers. In his early thirties and newly cast in a TV series, he'd shed the beer belly. Today he wore glasses instead of the contacts he used when acting or emceeing at Autumnfest.

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Barnum approached Nick and gave him a slight bow. "Ah, a pleasure indeed, Mr. DeMartini."

"Just Nick, please. You must be Phineas T. Barnum. Your costume and makeup are impressive—as are your friends here."

"No costumes. No makeup. Dear fellow, I assure you, neither paint nor powder has touched our faces, and these garments are what people of my era wear. But come; let me present my esteemed colleagues."

After making the introductions, Barnum clasped his hands together with enthusiasm. “I told Ted I aimed to be his partner for the weekend—though I may have let my flair for exaggeration run away with me. Thus far, he has not granted us leave to appear this year, insisting we wait until next year.”

Barnum ushered Nick toward the office entrance, away from the others. “Here’s what I propose—one grand day, a full spectacle on your stage. You, of course, would remain the master of ceremonies, but I should like to take a turn introducing each act, lending it that certain something only I can provide.”

Nick crossed his arms. “That’s asking a hell of a lot.”

“Yes, indeed it is. But in return, I promise you and your audience a performance the modern world has never witnessed. A day of marvels, of legends come to life.” With that, he launched into his grand pitch, recounting for Nick the all-star lineup he had given to Ted.

A piano struck up from the hall below. His expression brightened, and he stepped outside the office onto the landing. Nick followed.

From their vantage point, they could view the festival's Main Stage—a wooden platform, large enough to host a variety of performances, elevated a few feet for visibility. Tall red curtains spanned the rear.

On the stage, a Black man in a navy-blue suit, white dress shirt, and bow tie played an upright piano. He performed “The Entertainer.”

Barnum pointed. “Behold the spirit of Scott Joplin himself, a genuine genius of his time. And lest we forget, *that* melody sprang from *his* fingertips.”

Nick walked down the stairs and leaned against the wall. Barnum smiled, seeing Nick absorbed in Joplin's performance. After playing three more ragtime pieces, Scott stood up from the piano and departed.

Another 'spirit'—a woman in a white satin bodice and skirt—came onto the stage, accompanied by a gentleman in formal attire who took a seat at the piano.

Barnum joined Nick. "And now prepare yourself for the voice that once enchanted all of Europe, the great Jenny Lind."

"My turn," Jenny said. She ran through a set of scales and launched into a beautiful soprano piece, then sang two more numbers.

"I don't know these tunes," Nick said. "But she makes each thrilling to listen to."

Then she shifted keys—and to Nick's astonishment, began "Evergreen," the popular Barbra Streisand song from the 1977 movie *A Star Is Born*. She and her pianist disappeared soon after.

Barnum turned to Nick. "Well, what do you make of my performers, my *spirit* entertainers?"

"Unbelievable. Her voice is out of this world. And that ragtime, best I've ever heard. I admit I'm fascinated with these actors of yours playing entertainers from another time."

"Actors? Oh no, my good fellow. I have proclaimed them—and my exhibitors as well—*Barnum's 19th Century Celebrity Spirits*. Rolls off the tongue, wouldn't you say?"

Nick smiled. "Catchy, you're playing the showman famous for coining slogans. But I'm not enthusiastic about giving your performers a full day on stage at the expense of ours. I'll talk with Ted about it, though I'm glad it won't happen until next year."

“Much obliged, Nick. I’ve given this matter great thought, and I daresay, it’s the course that shall serve *all* interests best.”

Barnum hopped up the stairs and into the show office. A moment later, he and his four ‘spirits’ exited the room and *vanished* through the entrance to the Plaza above.

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Nick walked back into the office and shared with Ted the performances by ‘Scott Joplin’ and ‘Jenny Lind’ he’d just witnessed.

“I caught them.” Ted kept to himself that Joplin’s music matched the bright, syncopated piano that had floated through the hall earlier while he paced and revised his floor plan.

“So, how did your conversation with ‘Barnum’ go?”

“Good. He almost has me believing in his ghosts—or spirits, as he calls them.”

“I can’t say that I do. But it doesn’t matter. Next year we can promote them as spirits from the past.” He paused, considering the idea. *They might be the key to attracting the larger audience I’ve been aiming for.*

“He’s calling them *Barnum’s Nineteenth-Century Celebrity Spirits.*”

“Sounds kinda sexy. I guess we could work with that.”

Hope and Rachel joined the conversation.

“Whether or not they’re ghosts, I’d love to meet all the artists and inventors Barnum mentioned,” Hope said. “I wonder if Vincent van Gogh would paint in his booth. And if Thomas Edison would bring his original creations.”

“You’d need to call the papers and TV stations and let them know about your spectacular additions,” Rachel added.

“You’re right,” Ted said. “You’re always thinking of the publicity angle.” *But all of Barnum’s actors playing ghosts would have to show up. If not, the media could turn around and bite us in the ass.*

Nick left at 2:30 to pick up his daughter from school.

Hope remained to assist Rachel. Soon, the two women began walking the show aisles, distributing sheets of paper, each marked with an exhibitor’s name and booth number, to help them find their spaces on move-in the next day, Thursday.

Meanwhile, Ted wandered to the entrance where Chuck Parker's truck remained parked.

Another man in past-century costume emerged midway along the ramp, his figure sharp against the foggy morning sky. He wore a wool suit, a vest, a high-collared shirt, a tie, and a derby hat—complete with a styled mustache—and appeared about thirty.

As he approached the last stretch of the slope, the air turned frigid, and Ted’s shoulders stiffened, bracing for something unseen.

"Hello, Mr. Cassidy. Word reaches me that you are the promoter of the upcoming grand festival. If I may, an introduction: I am the spirit of Dr. Henry Gordon, once of Chicago, where I plied my trade during the famed World's Fair of 1893. There, I devised a most remarkable remedy—*Dr. Gordon’s All-Pain-Relief Elixir*. I would be most pleased to offer it to your patrons. Alas, I can only mix it in ghost form. But providence has led me to a capable pharmacist in San Francisco who can follow my formula to the letter. If you would grant me a modest space, sir, I should be forever in your debt."

Ted blinked, trying to process the man’s words. *How am I attracting these kooks?*

“Whoa, you’ve said a mouthful. I think you and your friend Barnum have come here to play a prank on me—pretending to be spirits and asking to join the festival. Some kind of joke. Some kind of dare.”

“I never had the honor of making Mr. Barnum’s acquaintance. But word reached me through spirit channels that he planned to assemble artists and actors of distinction for your magnificent *Autumnfest*. I petitioned him at once, but alas, he declined, insisting he sought no vendors of wares. And so, Mr. Cassidy, I turn to you in the hope that you might allow me to take part in your esteemed gathering.”

Something in the man’s too-smooth tone made Ted’s gut tighten, as though another motive lurked beneath the pitch. “I haven’t talked with the Barnum lookalike about how his so-called ‘spirits’ might take part. Plus, I can’t have an exhibitor selling an *elixir* here. I won’t risk customers getting sick and suing me because I allowed an unproven patent medicine into the show. No, I’m afraid not.”

Dr. Gordon sighed. “I am obliged to you for granting me this audience. I shall endeavor to find another means by which to participate in your festival. It is my earnest wish to make myself known to your modern-day exhibitors and patrons and to share with them my tale.”

Ted noted that the man’s eyes would not meet his. “Very well, Dr. Gordon.”

Without another word, Gordon slithered up the ramp and vanished into the fog. A cold haze and a chemical stench that burned Ted’s throat lingered in his wake.

He mused over these “19th-century” personalities. *If it’s a practical joke, I can’t see the point. And I don’t want to consider they’re spirits. “Humbug.” Barnum would say.*

When Ted arrived back at his office, he found that Hope and Rachel had also returned. To the two, he related his encounter with the man claiming to be the spirit of a Dr. Gordon and wanted a booth to sell his elixir to the show's customers.

"Well, we don't have anyone else peddling an elixir here," Rachel said, grinning.

"If an artist cancels or you add on extra booths, will you let him in?" Hope asked.

"No way." Ted answered. "I told him I couldn't risk my customers becoming ill because I allowed someone into the show selling a strange concoction."

"Then that's one less spirit we have to worry about," Rachel joked.

"Maybe not," Ted said. "He acted determined. In fact, he told me he'd try to think of another way to join in the festival. It wouldn't surprise me to see him show up again, maybe as soon as tomorrow."

"Still, that should be our last *ghost story* for today." Hope said.

By 5:00, Chuck Parker and his crew had finished installing the festival booths. Chuck told Ted he'd return at 7:00 the next morning to fill special orders from exhibitors.

"I need to hit the road," Rachel told Ted. "I have homework due tomorrow."

"I can't believe you're working full blast with the show—and taking classes at SF State."

Rachel grabbed her coat, left the hall, and headed toward the BART train station.

"Let's you and me go too. I'm starving," Ted said to Hope. They threw on their jackets, locked the office, and stepped out into a cloudy twilight.

They walked a block to the San Franciscan on Market Street. Beneath the lobby's high ceilings, a bellhop wheeled a cart past along a polished marble floor. They rode the elevator to the third floor and let themselves into a modest room with a double bed, a scarred wooden dresser, two upholstered chairs, and a patterned carpet faded by years of footsteps.

Each took a shower and changed into nicer clothes for the evening—Hope, a dress, and Ted, slacks and a sports shirt.

“Where do you want to eat?” Ted asked as they exited the hotel.

“How about Tommy’s Joynt. We haven’t been there in a while. They have great food, and we don’t need a reservation.”

“Perfect,” He slipped his arm around her as they set off.

The two crossed Market, walked along Grove Street past City Hall, then turned up Van Ness Avenue for several blocks, passing the opera house, car dealerships and small shops to Geary Boulevard and Tommy’s Joynt.

Inside, the room carried Ted and Hope back several decades. The Hofbräu-style restaurant featured old neon signs, Tiffany lamps hanging from the ceiling, checkered red and white tablecloths, shelves filled with quirky knick-knacks, and a well-stocked bar. The air was rich with the aroma of roast meats, pickles, warm bread, and decades of beer-soaked wood.

The couple lined up at the cafeteria-style counter, and when it came their turn, Ted ordered buffalo stew and a Heineken, while Hope opted for a corned beef sandwich and a cappuccino. They found a cozy corner to sit in, the surrounding atmosphere lively with the chatter of other diners.

Ted took a sip of his beer and let out a sigh.

“You’re rather quiet tonight,” Hope said.

Ted stirred his spoon through the stew without taking a bite. “So much happened at the hall today, I forgot it was my mom’s birthday.”

Hope rested her hand beside his on the table. “How old would she have been?”

“Fifty-eight.” He stared into his beer. “Too young.”

The restaurant around him faded—the clink of silverware, the murmur of voices. In its place came the late-night phone call, the strained voice on the other end, and the words drunk driver and head-on collision. Highway 287. Just outside Lander. Ted blinked and looked down before the tears could spill.

Hope leaned in and kissed his cheek.

He shook his head, a smile tugging at his lips. “At least I’ve got a boatload of wonderful memories.”

He finished his stew and drained his beer.

After dinner, they strolled along Polk Street toward their hotel. Even on a Wednesday evening, the street bustled with people. Dive bars, cafes, delis, and upscale restaurants each attracted their own distinct customers. Bookstores, record shops, and thrift stores remained open at this hour, which added to the bohemian vibe of the neighborhood.

As they wove through the crowd on the sidewalk, Ted turned to Hope. “I’m thinking our turnout this weekend might not be what we counted on.”

“I know you haven’t received much media attention.”

“Nope, lots of advertising, but no newspaper stories. Just mentions in their event listings. We’ve got our ads running on Channel 12, but no success so far getting them to commit to covering the festival on Friday.”

“That’s Barnum’s biggest pitch—adding PR for your show.”

“Exactly. In fact, if there aren’t any articles about us in tomorrow’s papers, I’m considering adding Barnum’s artists but not his entertainers.”

Hope slipped her hand into his. “You know best, honey.”

The two settled into a natural quiet, the kind born of a couple who knew each other well.

They continued on to the hotel. Once inside their room, the mood changed. The stress of the day melted away as they embraced and kissed, their touches becoming more intense as they undressed one another. Even after a year together, their passion hadn't dimmed.

Ted drifted off to sleep thinking about his mother and the life they'd had in Lander.

But hours later, a nightmare jolted him awake. In it, crowds of people wandered aimlessly across Civic Center Plaza—the park above Brooks Hall. The crucial ramp that connected the Plaza to the expo hall had vanished. Below, all his artists stood in their booths, waiting for customers who never came.

Ted lay frozen, his pulse racing beneath the blanket. He squeezed his eyes shut, as if that could banish the vision before it became real.

THURSDAY

Chapter Three

Ted and Hope rose at six, dressed, and headed to the lobby where Ted bought the morning papers. The aroma of coffee brewing greeted them as they entered the restaurant.

Over breakfast, Ted flipped through the papers.

“I can’t find articles on *Autumnfest* in either the *Tribune* or the *Mercury*, only our ads. But here’s an item in the entertainment section of the *Chronicle*.”

“That’s something,” Hope said.

“Ted frowned. Not something good. It reads:

Autumnfest returns to Brooks Hall in San Francisco, Friday through Sunday. This year, it’s billed: Enter a 19th-Century Village Fair. This sounds rather silly for an arts and crafts event with modern-day artisans. What will they add—pony rides, sheep and pig judging, a carousel, some old-time carnival acts?

“Then it gives the times and admission prices, and that’s it.”

“That’s discouraging. What’s your next step?”

Ted pushed his plate aside, his appetite gone. He pictured his exhibitors unloading vans, setting up booths, counting on him. “I have to do what’s best for my artists, my customers too. I need to save the show.”

“You’re being overdramatic.”

“It’s time for high drama,” Ted said, still convinced Barnum was nothing more than an unusually committed actor. “I’m going to find him.”

They stepped outside the hotel, greeted by the moment between first light and sunrise, where fading stars marked the edge of night and day. A chill hung in the air, so they pulled on their jackets.

Hope left to get her van from the parking lot behind the building.

Ted crossed the street and made his way through the Plaza. Its walkways, lawns, and symmetrical rows of trees were only faintly visible, bathed in soft grays and pale pinks. At the far end, City Hall stood tall, its iconic dome casting a long shadow over the park.

He reached the ramp leading to the loading area in front of the hall entrance and hurried down to the wide bay built for dozens of vehicles to move in and out

At 7:00, some fifteen artists in their trucks, vans, and cars greeted Ted, eager to unload and set up their booths. Though their engines had been turned off, the air carried the oily musk of lingering exhaust fumes. He requested hall staff to retract the sliding glass doors at the entrance, creating an expansive eighty-foot entryway for easy access.

Barnum arrived. *Out of nowhere*, dressed in the same sharp clothes he’d worn yesterday.

“A fine morning to you, Ted. I had a notion you might be seeking me out.”

“Yes, I am,” Ted hesitated, then nodded. “I’d love to have your actors portraying artists, inventors, and writers participate in Autumnfest this weekend.”

“Splendid. You have my gratitude. But there remains the matter of my extraordinary performers.”

“As outstanding as they are, we’re set. I’ll try to fit in at least some of them next year.”

Barnum placed a hand over his heart. “Ah, a disappointment, to be sure—but a gentleman knows when to take a gracious step back. I shall rally my exhibitors at once.

“And now, my dear fellow, you can summon the newspapers and beckon the television cameras to trumpet the glorious arrival of *Barnum’s Spirits*.”

Ted glanced around, picturing the impact it would create for the event. A nagging fear rose—what if reporters saw through the illusion and exposed the ‘spirits’ as frauds? “I’ll make the calls once I’ve seen them set up,” he said, hedging his bet.

“Excellent. Now let us discuss where you shall place us.”

Chuck Parker had driven down the ramp with one of his crew. “We have spare space at the back of the hall. I’ll have our decorator add twelve extra booths for your exhibitors.”

He approached Chuck and explained where to place the booths. The decorator, his assistant, and Barnum headed out.

Hope arrived and drove her Ford Econoline down the ramp and parked. She exited the van, swung open its rear doors, and removed her cart. With Ted lending a hand, they loaded it with shelves and several wooden crates packed with her ceramics. Together, they made their way toward her booth in the festival’s first aisle—Hope leading the way, Ted pushing the cart close behind.

He shared his recent conversation with Barnum. “I think he knew I’d come around to accepting his invitation.”

Hope smiled. “My guess is he figured he'd convince you from the get-go.”

They arrived at Hope's booth. "I'll take it from here," she said.

"Great. I'm off to see how Barnum's setting up his space and roam the show to make sure move-in is running smoothly."

Ted walked to the rear of the hall. The decorator had added Barnum's booths and laid down their electrical cords. A dozen booths branched out from the opening Ted had asked Chuck to create in the back row of the regular exhibitors' spaces—six on each side of a fifteen-foot aisle that ended in a cul-de-sac.

He turned to Barnum as he surveyed the scene. "Should I call you Phineas or P.T.?"

Barnum laughed. "P.T. will do just fine, my friend."

"You decide where you want to place your exhibitors. Rachel can mark out sheets of paper with their booth numbers and names."

"I believe I'll arrange my six painters along one side. On the other, I'll set up my sculptors, inventors and, of course, my grand display honoring the 1893 Columbian Exposition.

"My literary luminaries will want to put up racks and tables for their books," Barnum continued. "I've summoned twenty of them, though they're a restless bunch—they'll drift in and out as the mood strikes. Where might they fit best?"

"How about in an Authors' Corner at the rear of your dozen booths? They'll need extra space with so many of them. Our decorator can lay out space for them at the end of the aisle."

"First-rate," Barnum said.

"Imagine it—your guests will witness my painters recreating their masterpieces before their eyes. Vincent at work on *Sunflowers*, Edvard Munch capturing *The Scream*. Edison and Bell demonstrating their revolutionary inventions, Rodin and Tiffany exhibiting their artistic marvels. And your patrons shall have the rarest of opportunities—to speak with my authors,

discussing *The Innocents Abroad* with Mark Twain himself, or *Little Women* with none other than Louisa May Alcott.”

“Impressive. I’m excited to see how they look once they’re in place. And, hell, I want to meet them myself.”

Van Gogh materialized as if conjured from thin air. Ted jolted backward in surprise.

“Show me where my work is to be placed,” he said to P.T.

“You, Vincent, shall claim the booth at the entrance.” He then pointed out to Ted where he envisioned the other five painters.

“I’ll ask our decorator to design and hang a big banner above the aisle at the entryway of your addition,” Ted said. “It can read: *Meet Barnum’s 19th Century Celebrity Spirits.*”

Barnum clapped his hands. “Splendid. Now, there is much to be done to bring this spectacle to life.” With that, he and Vincent strolled into the addition.

Ted headed to the entrance. As he continued, he regarded the show site.

Brooks Hall had its advantages: 90,000 square feet stretched beneath Civic Center Plaza—an underground maze large enough to swallow trade shows whole. BART trains and MUNI lines emptied riders only a block away; parking lots ringed the surrounding streets.

As he maneuvered around another thick concrete column, Ted considered the hall’s burdens. The low ceiling pressed overhead, while the massive supports rose every few yards like tree trunks in a forest, disrupting customer flow and cramping booths into awkward spaces. Worst of all, the facility sat *completely underground*.

Exhibitors referred to the site as “Mole Hall” or “Gopher Palace.” Still, artists and craftspeople loved having *Autumnfest* here for the loyal customers who returned every year to buy their work. Now, with the addition of Barnum’s crew, Ted allowed himself a belief he’d

denied until now: that this weekend just might draw big crowds.

He found himself back at the hall loading area. He spotted Bart and Betty Zonka, his good friends from Kings Beach on Lake Tahoe, pulling boxes of their wooden toys from their 1950s-vintage Volkswagen cargo van. They stacked train sets, jack-in-the-boxes, and merry-go-rounds onto their hand truck.

Bart, rail-thin, wore Farmer John coveralls, while Betty's Mother Hubbard dress concealed her plump figure.

Ted recounted the series of events that had unfolded since yesterday morning.

"Come on, Ted," Bart said. "What are you smoking?"

"I know, I know—it's the same thing Nick asked. It sounds like a pipe dream out of *Alice in Wonderland*. "But all of Barnum's ghosts resemble the real people."

Betty smiled, her eyes twinkling with amusement. "Heck, you're advertising the show as a 19th-century fair. I guess they'd fit right in."

"That's what Barnum said; he told me he could offer a *genuine* 1800s atmosphere to our customers. I asked how much money he wanted."

"That's it. He wants real dough for his pretend ghosts," Bart said.

"No, he said ghosts had no need of money, that he wanted booths for his spirit exhibitors to display their works—and our audience."

Betty and Bart finished loading their cart and left for their space.

Rachel arrived. "I took the BART train over and went straight to the show office," she said, her tone brisk. "Artists are asking the usual questions about getting badges for the weekend and where they can store extra stock. So, I have to get back. But the folks playing Annie Oakley

and Buffalo Bill just showed up on our stage and began tossing and shooting objects out of the air.”

“Not again.”

“I told them they were endangering people. But Buffalo Bill assured me they were using *ghost bullets*—realistic to onlookers, but not made of lead or any physical substance.”

“Like the *ghost paintings* Barnum told us would be in his *Celebrity Spirits* painters’ booths.”

“You sound like you’re beginning to believe Barnum and his people are authentic ghosts.”

“I’m not there yet—but I can pretend. Once the story breaks in the papers and on TV news, it’s bound to boost our crowds for the next three days.”

Ted repeated what had transpired between him and Barnum. He took a small tablet from his pocket and sketched a diagram of how Barnum would situate his *Celebrity Spirits*. He handed it to Rachel, instructing her to make name sheets and place these in their corresponding booths.

Hope returned to her van to get more pottery just as Cindy Harris arrived with her own vehicle. Cindy jumped out and hugged both Hope and Ted. “Great to be back here in Brooks Caverns,” she said.

“Yeah, it’s like coming home—now that it’s our fifth year of *Autumnfest* here,” Hope answered.

“And I get to wear my vintage costumes again this weekend.” She began unloading her van and placing her work and clothes racks on a dolly.

Ted helped both women.

Across the lobby, Dr. Gordon stood rigid against a column near the glass doors into the hall, his hands balled into fists, and his gaze fixed on Hope and Cindy.

He approached him. "Since you're not part of the festival and these artists need to concentrate on setting up, I'm asking you to leave."

"Mr. Cassidy, my only intention this morning is to see if there might be a place for me in your magnificent event." With that, Gordon vanished, leaving behind an eerie swoosh and a whisper of cold.

Hope stepped to Ted. "Did that just happen? Poof—and gone. That was the fellow you met yesterday, right, the one who wanted to sell his medicine?"

"Yes, that's him. I saw the way he watched you and Cindy."

"I couldn't help but notice. Kind of spooky. But I guess ghosts *can be spooky*, can't they?"

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"Follow me," Hope said to Cindy. "I'll show you where your booth is—it's next to mine, of course." Along the way, Hope told her friend about the weekend's ghost exhibitors.

"They're probably new artists wearing better-than-usual costumes," Cindy suggested.

"My first reaction too. But you have to see them to believe it. And there are *lots* of them."

Hope set up her booth with practiced ease. She laid a warm red-and-gold rug across the space, assembled her wooden shelves, and filled them with rows of stoneware—mugs, bowls, teapots, serving dishes, and vases, their glazes catching the dull shimmer of the fluorescent light.

She moved to the front of her booth and peeked around at Cindy, also setting up her display. With her red hair in a pageboy and freckles dotting her face, Cindy at 25—the same age as herself—remained girlishly cute.

Cindy placed her knit jackets on two freestanding metal racks down the middle of the space and hung samples of her sweaters and shawls on wooden pegboards at the rear and two sides.

Across the aisle, Hope glanced at Betty and Bart organizing their toys on shelving and tables. Betty waved hello, and Hope walked over.

“Did Ted tell you about our *guest* artists this weekend?”

“You mean our *ghost* artists,” Bart said, grinning.

Barnum moved down the passage. “My dear Hope, please be kind enough to introduce me to your companions.”

Cindy bounded over to join Hope.

“Meet my close friend Cindy Harris, a talented clothing designer who sells her own creations, and Betty and Bart Zonka, outstanding toy-makers. Cindy, Bart, and Betty, I present to you P.T. Barnum himself.”

“Golly, you sure look like Barnum,” Bart said. He raised his hand to shake.

Barnum kept his hands at his sides. “Ah, best not attempt that, my good fellow. I’d hate to startle you when your hand goes clean through mine, leaving you grasping at nothing.”

Bart laughed. “C’mon. I can’t believe that.”

Barnum chuckled. “Very well, but don’t say I didn’t warn you.” He lifted his hand to meet Bart’s, only for it to pass straight through, as if made of mist.

Bart jumped back. Cindy let out a startled gasp, clapping a hand over her mouth, while Betty’s face paled. “Dear God,” she whispered. “That’s impossible.” Hope inhaled, then exhaled with a nervous laugh.

“Wow, how do you do that?” Bart asked. “You a magician?”

Barnum grinned. “Of sorts, one might say. After all, pulling all these spirits together feels like a touch of magic.”

Turning to Hope, he continued, “I’m on the hunt for Ted. I’d like him to look at how we’ve arranged our stands.”

“He’s at the show entrance. I’ll walk there with you.” They strolled down the aisle. Hope still grappled with Barnum’s display. “Amazing—your handshake, or your sleight of hand. Maybe you are a ghost...even the spirit of P.T. Barnum.”

“Doubt is natural, but I must say I’m pleased to see you warming to the idea. Now, tell me—your story. That accent of yours has the ring of New England about it.”

“I grew up in Maine. Yes, I guess I do have a Down East accent.”

“Ah, a fellow Easterner. And what led you from the rocky shores of Maine all the way to California?”

“I left home at seventeen, ran away with a boyfriend. He disappeared. California didn’t.”

“So you stayed.”

“Yes, it’s great here. It never rains in the summer, and winter is much warmer.”

“A fair argument. Tell me how you came to the art of pottery.”

“I had taken ceramic classes in Maine, then apprenticed to a potter in Marin County. After two years, I headed out on my own, started selling to galleries and at craft fairs. I’ve exhibited at *Autumnfest* since its beginning.”

Barnum nodded. “Excellent. An artist who built herself from the wheel up.”

Hope spotted Ted near the entrance, leaning into conversations with exhibitors. She waved at him and shouted, “P.T. here is looking for you.”

Hope glanced at her future husband, his smile stretching wide as usual. His face might not turn heads, but his ever-present grin lit up everything around him. She turned and headed back to her booth.

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Ted approached Barnum. “Rachel told me that Buffalo Bill and Annie Oakley are back on our stage again.”

“Ah, but of course. Bill’s a true showman through and through—he spent decades touring with his *Buffalo Bill’s Wild West* and can’t resist the lure of the spotlight. The thrill of the crowd never leaves a man like that. Say, let’s walk back to the Spirits section.”

“Sure. Let’s go.” The two headed through the hall.

Barnum clasped his hands behind his back as they walked. “I had the pleasure of hearing Hope’s story earlier—a fascinating woman. Now, Ted, tell me about yourself and where you began.

“Lander, Wyoming, near the Wind River Mountains.”

“A land of grand, sweeping vistas. Do you still have family there?”

Ted spoke of his mother and how she’d died in an auto accident. “Her birthday was just yesterday.”

“And from Wyoming, you moved to California?”

“By way of Oregon. I got a degree in chemistry and a teaching certificate, then got hired at a high school in Concord and taught science courses.”

“A scholar of the sciences. And yet, here you are, not in a classroom, but at the helm of a grand festival. Quite the leap, my friend. How did you find your way from education to the world of art shows?”

Ted laughed. “Simple. I put together parties and small events in college. One summer vacation, I organized a little craft fair to make some extra money. And guess what—I enjoyed producing the fair more than teaching and decided I’d try it full time. Within a year, I presented my first *Autumnfest*.”

“Marvelous. A man who follows his passion. There’s nothing quite like discovering one’s true calling and having the courage to pursue it. And look where it’s brought you—hosting a festival where even the *spirits* of the past are excited to take part. Now *that* is a legacy in the making, my friend.”

As they walked, artists cast curious glances, no doubt wondering who the man in the elaborate costume could be. They reached the new section. It already had the banner raised above the aisle:

Meet Barnum’s 19th-Century Celebrity Spirits

Ted stepped into a striking scene. With Barnum having communicated his good news to his exhibitors, many “spirits” had materialized and begun constructing their booths with *otherworldly* precision.

Along the left-hand side, actors portraying some of the finest painters of the last century hung famous works in their booths, each with an easel and canvas set nearby. Despite his doubts, their convincing presence made playing along feel almost reasonable.

Barnum led him to the only woman painter.

“Ted, allow me to introduce you to the incomparable Mary Cassatt—a true master of her craft and, in my opinion, the finest female painter of the 19th-Century.”

The artist’s “spirit” looked to be in her mid-thirties. She wore a floor-length black-and-white striped dress and a hat trimmed with artificial flowers.

“Hello, Mary,” Ted said. “Welcome to our festival. Your work is beautiful.”

Mary smiled. “Much obliged, Mr. Cassidy. You have my sincere thanks for welcoming us to your exhibition. I look forward to showing your guests my finished paintings and observing their reactions—for an artist, there is no greater reward. I also intend to begin a new canvas here, capturing the essence of the festival as it unfolds.”

"Like Mary," Barnum said, "all of my exhibitors wish to discover how your patrons will respond to their work and whether their creations will be appreciated."

Across the aisle, Barnum’s sculptors and inventors occupied the next five booths. The last space on that side showcased the showman’s *1893 Chicago Columbian Exposition*.

“I’ll give you a proper tour of my booth later,” he told Ted.

Bart strolled through the entrance of *Celebrity Spirits*. He began shaking his head, but then laughed. “Incredible. I have to see it to believe it.”

“Maybe that’s what it takes,” Ted said. “Seeing all these spirits at one time.”

“But I’m still not convinced. I wonder if Barnum is one terrific magician and has brought these actors together as part of his illusion. He may look to you to give him status and publicity.”

“I’m sure he wants status and publicity. But I wonder if he could get all these *actors*, as we’ve been calling them, together in one place; all these beings who look like their photos or portraits. That would be *Mission Impossible* makeup jobs, not on one or two people like in the TV show, but on dozens. Look at all the painters and inventors here.”

“Okay, I hear what you’re saying. Maybe we’ve entered a fantasy world.”

“That’s a way to look at it, I suppose, that we’ve all entered the *same* illusion. Since it seems to only be happening here, maybe Brooks Hall is fantasy land—at least for this weekend.”

“Well, it’s spooky but also cool. Hell, I guess I can suspend my disbelief for a few days for the fun of it.”

“There you go. Somehow, I’m hoping most of our artists here will join you and me in suspending their disbelief just for the thrill.”

Barnum approached Bart. “Tell me, my good man, what do you make of my esteemed companions?”

“They’re amazing. Can I talk to them?”

“But of course. That is the purpose—to have you, the other artists, and this weekend’s visitors engage with the remarkable spirits I’ve gathered here. They’re excited to share their works, their stories, and their genius with you.”

Bart didn’t need further encouragement. He walked up the aisle and spoke with the spirit of Thomas Edison. Ted overheard Bart say, “Mr. Edison, you’re one of the most recognizable actors—uh, I mean ghosts — here. Your mind and your inventions have always fascinated me.”

Edison chuckled. “An actor? Well, I’ve always enjoyed the spotlight. Look here—this is my original phonograph. A tinfoil-covered drum captures sound as grooves cut by the needle, and when retraced, those grooves give the voice back. The complete wonder lasts but two minutes.”

“Can I pick it up?”

“Unfortunately, no. It is a *ghost* machine, like me,” he laughed. “You can try to touch it, but your fingers will pass right through.”

“I know how that goes.”

Alexander Graham Bell’s spirit came around into Edison’s booth.

“Come and see the improvements I made to Tom’s original phonograph,” he said to Bart. “And you’ll want to see how I developed the telephone.”

“Hold on, Alexander.” Edison said. “I hope you won’t be stealing my visitors this weekend. This gentleman will make his way around to you in due time.”

“I see there’s a little rivalry here,” Bart said. “I ought to help Betty finish setting up our booth. But I’ll find time to return and visit *both* of you.”

Barnum turned to Ted. “You’ll note that while these remarkable beings may be spirits, they are still lively. Once the crowds arrive, the enchantment will take hold. Each inventor, painter, and writer will draw their own admirers—eager souls ready to be dazzled by their genius and inspired by their achievements.”

Rachel arrived. “Hey, Ted. Clem and Mitzi are here. They want to talk to you about this weekend. They’re at the stage watching Scott Joplin’s ‘ghost’ play his piano.” With that, she strode beneath Barnum’s banner and into *Celebrity Spirits*.

Ted walked through the hall toward the performance area. Halfway there, he spotted Dr. Gordon standing in the aisle watching Jill Bankhead, an exhibitor in her early thirties, set up her booth of black-and-white graveyard photographs.

He frowned at Gordon, but before he could say a word, the figure met his gaze with a nod. Then, in an instant, he vanished—dissolving like a wisp of smoke, leaving behind only an eerie lingering chill where he had stood.

Damn, he keeps reappearing and then disappearing. But I don’t see how I can keep him out of the building. “I’ll ask Barnum what I should do about him,” he said aloud.

He reached the stage as Joplin finished playing “Felicity Rag” and then evaporated along with his piano.

Clem and Mitzi both wore puzzled expressions. Clem had shown up in his usual green overalls and yellow sneakers. Mitzi, Clem’s wife and partner, sported red slacks and a white jumper.

“Nick called and gave us the scoop about what’s going on at the hall this weekend,” Clem said. “I had my doubts, but now I’m curious. Who was that guy, and how did he disappear?”

“That’s Scott Joplin, one of Barnum’s ghost entertainers. I think he misses playing to an audience, so he keeps appearing. Some of P.T.’s other performers have also passed through, even though I told Barnum we couldn’t put them on stage until next year.”

“Good. I’m glad to hear we don’t have to worry about *that* this weekend.”

“We want to set up and test our sound system,” Mitzi said. “Is Tim coming today?”

“I don’t know. We’ll ask Nick. I see he just got here.”

Ted observed Nick had changed into a San Francisco Giants T-shirt, visible through his unzipped jacket.

“Mitzi and Clem are asking if Tim is coming to help adjust the sound system.”

“He should be here anytime,” Nick said.

Barnum arrived at the stage. “Good morning, Nick.”

Mitzi turned to the two. “Nick, you mentioned that an actor portraying P.T. Barnum had gathered a group of exhibitors for the weekend. This must be the man himself.”

“I’ll introduce you,” Nick said. “Mitzi and Clem, along with Jim and Andy, play the best bluegrass you’ll ever hear.”

Barnum did not extend his hand but instead offered a warm nod. “It's a pleasure to make your acquaintance. I've had the delight of listening to your record, and I must say your music is marvelous. It reminds me of the lively fiddle tunes I used to hear among dear friends in the Appalachian Mountains—melodies that filled the air as they gathered on Sunday afternoons.

“Rest assured, I shall be here tomorrow, front and center, to applaud your performance with the enthusiasm it deserves.”

“We're happy to meet you too,” Mitzi said.

“Thanks for picking up our album,” Clem added.

Ted seized the moment to talk with Barnum. “That figure calling himself Dr. Gordon keeps appearing. I've caught him staring at Hope, Cindy, and Jill Bankhead, a photographer in the show. It isn't casual glancing; his eyes cling to them.” Ted's voice tightened as a protective instinct kicked in. “There's something predatory about him; I'm afraid he means them harm. I hope you can make him disappear.”

“I'll have a word with him, but understand—I cannot command him to vanish into the ether. However, if he senses he's unwelcome, he may choose to move along on his own.”

Ted pressed on. “And maybe you can figure out what he's all about. He mentioned being in Chicago during the World's Fair, if that helps.”

“Ah, that explains why his name escapes me. You see, I departed this world two years *before* the grand spectacle of the 1893 World's Fair. But fear not. I shall inquire among those present—Annie Oakley, Buffalo Bill, and a few others might recall him.”

“Thanks, P.T. Say, it's now time for me to announce *Celebrity Spirits* to the world.”