

# Chapter One

“I’ve been buying horses from you for nigh onto ten years, Gabor. You’ve always done right by me. Are you going to ruin it now?”

“What are you saying, my friend? Is this not fine specimen? What great horse, eh? Strong, rangy, lots of heart, without all that extra leg for feeding. Just like you. Compact. Powerful.”

“You make it sound like I’m some kind of runt.” At six foot in his socks, Vince Sloan wasn’t used to looking up at many men, but for Gabor, he didn’t mind making an exception.

The older Gabor gave a wide, toothy grin. Pulling his thumb toward his massive chest, he snickered. “Gabor was strong man in circus before he became ring-master. You no slouch either. Come, come, my friend. This horse, your horse. Only problem, maybe horse smarter than you. Gabor knows. Feels in bones, your horse.”

The animal did look strong. He was wide across the shoulders and back, just like his prospective buyer. Not tall or showy, but solid. “Ten years of good business down the bog if this horse turns out to be a dink, Gabor. You know I won’t come back, and I’ll keep my friends away, too. I know every cowboy in this county.”

“And Gabor want to sell horse to each and every friend you got! Bring one! Bring all! And stay to see show. Listen to music. Eat decent bowl of stew. Listen to Madame Gabor tell you where to find nice little wife, eh?”

“Oh, now that’s just what I need,” Vince shot back, sarcastically. “A wife found for me by a fortune teller! What would I do with a wife? I can barely keep myself fed.”

“Wife feed you, my friend. Feed soul! No wife, no life. You cowboys is crazy, like drink more than woman. Ech!” The sound he made was sad and dismissive at the same time.

“That’s not true, Gabor. I like women plenty.”

“Not *women*! Woman. One, for lifetime.”

“Where would I find one like that around here?” Vince spread his hands wide, gesturing to the open cattle country as far as the eye could see. “Plenty of cows, hills, rocks, trees, even a river, but precious few females.”

“Madame Gabor tell you. You come tonight. See show. Have good time.”

“I’ll have my brother and some of the boys with me.”

“And welcome, my friend, as long as they nice boys. Nice like you. Respectful. No guns in my show.”

“No, no guns. We’re not like that. You know me, Gabor. I just mean... well, I don’t want them fleeced by crooked games and pickpockets. You’re not like that, but some of the other shows you’ve traveled with from time to time...”

“No, no, these good men for *gadje*. Not all Roma like Gabor, but good men anyway. You come. Stay away from green wagon. Cook not too careful what kind of meat fall in his beans, eh?” Gabor motioned with a ham-like fist toward a small green wagon nearer to the edge of the river.

Vince noted the place. “We’ll eat at Rosti’s before we come. His peach pie is not to be missed.”

“Petran runs all good games. Not rigged. Good prizes.”

“Which ones are those?”

“Over there. Away from water.” The large man turned and made a sign Vince knew to be against the evil eye.

“Are all your folk afraid of water? Or is that just you?” He had seen more than once how Gabor would avoid swimming horses across a river, choosing instead to go miles out of his way to find a shallow crossing.

“Gabor not afraid. Gabor just big man. Big man not float. Sink like stone. No water.” He made the sign again.

“Up the hill it is. When? Around sundown?”

Gabor nodded his big shaggy head, his dark curls flopping almost to his shoulders. “Around sundown, uphill except for fireworks. Fireworks over pier on river, to drum up business for show. No miss, eh? Then come hear Gabor and see greatest circus East of Mississippi!”

“We’re in Texas, Gabor. We’re west of the Mississippi.”

“West, then. West, east, what is direction between friend, eh?”

“See you tonight, Gabor. Don’t sell that horse to anybody else. I’ll bring the money.”

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Three hours later, Vince led the way down to the pier on the river. Already a large crowd had gathered for the spectacle. Those who couldn’t afford a ticket into the big top could at least

enjoy the fireworks beforehand. “Remember to keep your cash in your front pocket. And you only brought what you can afford to lose, right Slingo?”

The man walking beside Vince appeared to be more or less a smaller stouter version of his companion. “Are you my brother or my mommy, Vince? Last I looked, I was able to cut my own steak, tack up my own horse, and even cross the street by myself. If these ain’t good folks, why are we here?”

“I’m not implying we’re going to get robbed. I’m suggesting you tend to forget the word ‘no’ when it comes to a game, or a chance to show off. And we’re here because Gabor is good folk, and he wanted me to come. He can’t account for every man in the camp, but he’ll watch out for us and make sure we aren’t targeted. And he’s right. It’s good to get out and live a little,” Vince replied.

“That’s what a saloon is for,” the third man in their party asserted. Shorter legs and a less purposeful stride gave him an air of unkempt lassitude, but he kept up without apparent effort.

“Life outside a saloon. It’s good for you, Ray, so hush up and enjoy the show.” Vince found them a good place out of the way of the running kids and the mothers who followed in their wakes.

“Haven’t we seen this show before? I think I recognize some of the wagons,” Slingo commented.

“Sure, they’ve been in Brightly and Nogarino. We saw them both times. I recognize the animal acts.” Vince pointed to some garishly painted wagons with sides that opened up to reveal monkeys, llamas, and other assorted beasts.

Slingo perked up. His head swiveled from side to side suddenly and he started edging toward the crowd. “You think? The same circus as in Nogarino?”

“Same circus, but don’t go getting your hopes up. Your little sweetheart might not be with them anymore. You know how these folks are, always switching up routes and groups, traveling together for a season, then playing fruit basket turnover so the crowd doesn’t get bored with the same old acts passing through year after year.” Putting an arm on his brother’s shoulder, he turned the younger man around. “They’re starting. Look!”

Even the fireworks display, impressive and exciting as the color spray was, reflected in the calm depths of the river as it followed its winding course past the rocky outcropping and on

toward the small grouping of buildings that made up Bumchuck, couldn't hold Slingo's attention for long. Almost before the show was over, Vince looked around and realized he was gone.

"Are we still going to the circus?" Ray knocked dust off his hat before returning it squarely to his head. "I've heard that they've got ladies in this show who wear nothing but tights and frilly little skirts. These gals swing on ropes and fly right through the air, if Bob ain't pulling my leg."

"Yeah, we're going. We'll have to rescue Slingo in case the worst happens. That means getting there before he has time to make a darn fool of himself."

"And what if he finds her?"

"That's what I mean by the worst happening." Vince kept his eye peeled for his brother, but he didn't intend to miss the show. He and Ray paid for their tickets without Slingo. "I have to admit," Vince said to Ray when the show was over, "Gabor wasn't just whistling Dixie. That was some spectacle!"

"Sure was! Bob didn't tell the half of it. Man alive, what that girl could do up there!"

"Hey, she's still womenfolk. Show some respect."

"Oh, I got nothing but respect for the fairer sex." Ray's awe was apparent in his tone.

Vince gave him a short shot to the ribs anyway. "See that it stays that way. You don't know, but what she's kin to Gabor or something. Let's go find him. I can give him the money for the horse. We need to leave at first light. And I can ask him if he knows little Drina. We find her, we'll find Slingo."

"Drina's like Gabor, ain't she? Same kind of name. Not that she favors them, really. Not enough hair, and what she's got is only kind of brown, not black."

"I don't know whether she's Romani or not. They're a secretive bunch. Even Gabor won't talk about it, but there are signs. Little tells that let me know. For example, he won't eat off a plate after I've eaten off it. It's got to do with their purity rules or some such. Real clean folks are Gabor and his kin. Now, Drina, she'll share food with Slingo. I've seen her do it. So, I don't know if she is or isn't. Only a few of these circus types are kin to Gabor, and if she is, it's a distant relation."

They were on their way to find Gabor when Vince's hunger got the better of him, so they stopped off at Rosti's wagon and scarfed down a quick dinner. "This way, we'll be sure Gabor is out of his ringmaster duds and ready to deal horses," Vince observed.

“Fine by me,” Ray replied, his mouth half full of the rich stew Rosti was famous for. “Just as long as you don’t get between me and my dinner. And I want to try some of that pie I’ve heard so much about.”

It was another half an hour before Vince caught up with Gabor, looking harried and bedraggled, near the back of the big tent where the show had taken place. The big man started shaking his head before Vince got within speaking distance. “No horse! Not tonight! No time. Come back tomorrow!”

“What’s wrong? Is something going on? Something I can help with?”

Just then, a smaller man clad in the distinctive garb of a lion tamer drummed into view and began to shout in a language unfamiliar to Vince. Gabor apparently understood what the man was saying, but answered in English. “What can Gabor do? Is Gabor father? Is Gabor policeman? Go find yourself! Gabor stays out! Buyer beware? Seller beware!”

“What was that all about?” Vince asked.

Gabor ignored him and called to three roustabouts who were taking down the high rope for storage overnight. “Leave it! I do! You go find problem.” The men left without a word. Apparently, they knew what was going on. To Vince, he said merely, “Women!”

“This is about a woman?”

“No, is caused by woman! Always caused by womens, the trouble, eh?” Gabor began unwinding the securing lines for the high wire act. “Got to take down wire. You not believe trouble this act can cause. How many kids sneak back in, try to climb ladder and walk line, break silly legs. Or worse.”

“So you take it down?” Vince started pitching in, helping Gabor secure the ropes and wires, storing them securely in a locked box near the performers’ entrance.

“Every night, lock away. Gabor wish he could lock womens away. Then they safe, too!”

“Is there one missing? I thought you told that guy you were staying out of it.”

“If woman missing,” Gabor said with disdain, “does Gabor stay out? Never! But no woman missing. This good camp. Gabor’s camp!”

“Then what’s this all about? Maybe I can help and then I can get my horse. I want to leave at first light.”

“You good at finding girl?”

“I thought you said she wasn’t missing.”

“Not missing. Running.”

“From what?”

Vince realized his suspicions must have shown on his face because his old friend’s tone was defensive. “Not from Gabor! No, this was business deal gone bad. Drina should know better, but...”

“Drina? She’s involved? So she’s here? Oh, heck. That tears it! If Drina’s here, you can bet Slingo’s now mixed up in it as well.”

“Slingo? Your brother? And Drina? Maybe you help Gabor after all. Find Drina. Is good, no?” There was hope in Gabor’s voice.

“Is it good? Why is she running? What business deal?”

Gabor took off his hat in an exhausted manner, running his hand over his thick black hair. “Drina buys items from Vitorelli, man you see here. Vitorelli take money, tell Drina he hold items for her until she ready take them. Drina not want wait. She say she ready now. Vitorelli just laugh. Yesterday, Drina take items. Vitorelli not ready. He take items back. Now, Drina gone. Items gone. Vitorelli up in arms. You find Drina, is good, no?”

“But why not just let Drina take her items. They’re bought and paid for.”

“Vitorelli want eggs.”

“What?” Vince knew Gabor’s English wasn’t perfect, but even he knew what eggs were. All this fuss couldn’t be over eggs.

“Drina bought some eggs and now this Vitorelli fella won’t let her leave with them?”

“Drina no bought eggs! Bought Peahens! And Pearooster.”

“You mean peacocks?”

“Yes, one rooster, three hens. One hen ready lay eggs any day. Vitorelli want.”

“But if Drina bought the bird, the eggs are hers, too.”

“Look, is like this. I think you right, but you really want Drina running around open road with just four birds?”

“Ah, I see. She’s trying to leave the circus and strike out on her own. On her own? Not with Slingo?”

“This is first I hear of Sling. Maybe your brother keep her safe, eh? Not bad.” Gabor was obviously giving this idea serious consideration and finding it to his liking. Vince wasn’t sure he concurred.

“No, no, Slingo’s got a job right now. We’ve got a sweet setup with a good outfit. He’s not in the market to be taking on guard duty for a girl and flock of peacocks. She’d be okay on her own, I reckon. Nobody around here is going to harm a woman.”

“Maybe not one man in hundred would harm woman, true. But what should Gabor do? Start counting mens? How many she already know? Say sixty in camp. You sixty-one. Him sixty-two,” Gabor counted, pointing to Ray. “Pretty soon, we get to one hundred. Bam!” He shook his head as if the thought were too terrible to contemplate. “Gabor not sit by and count.”

Vince could understand the man’s dilemma. Gabor tried to act like a tough boss, but when push came to shove, he would protect all his people, especially any females under his care. “Where’s her father? Why doesn’t he do anything about her?”

“Father gone. Mother gone. Die in what you say? Epidemic, many years ago now. Drina raised in wagons with Gabor’s kin most of life. Good girl, just headstrong. Gabor’s people promise watch over her.”

“I see. So you feel some loyalty to...”

Just then, a huge rumbling crash split the night. Following it came the sounds of shouting and, Vince noted with relief, a good bit of laughter.

Gabor threw his hands up as if to ask an uncaring sky. “What next?”