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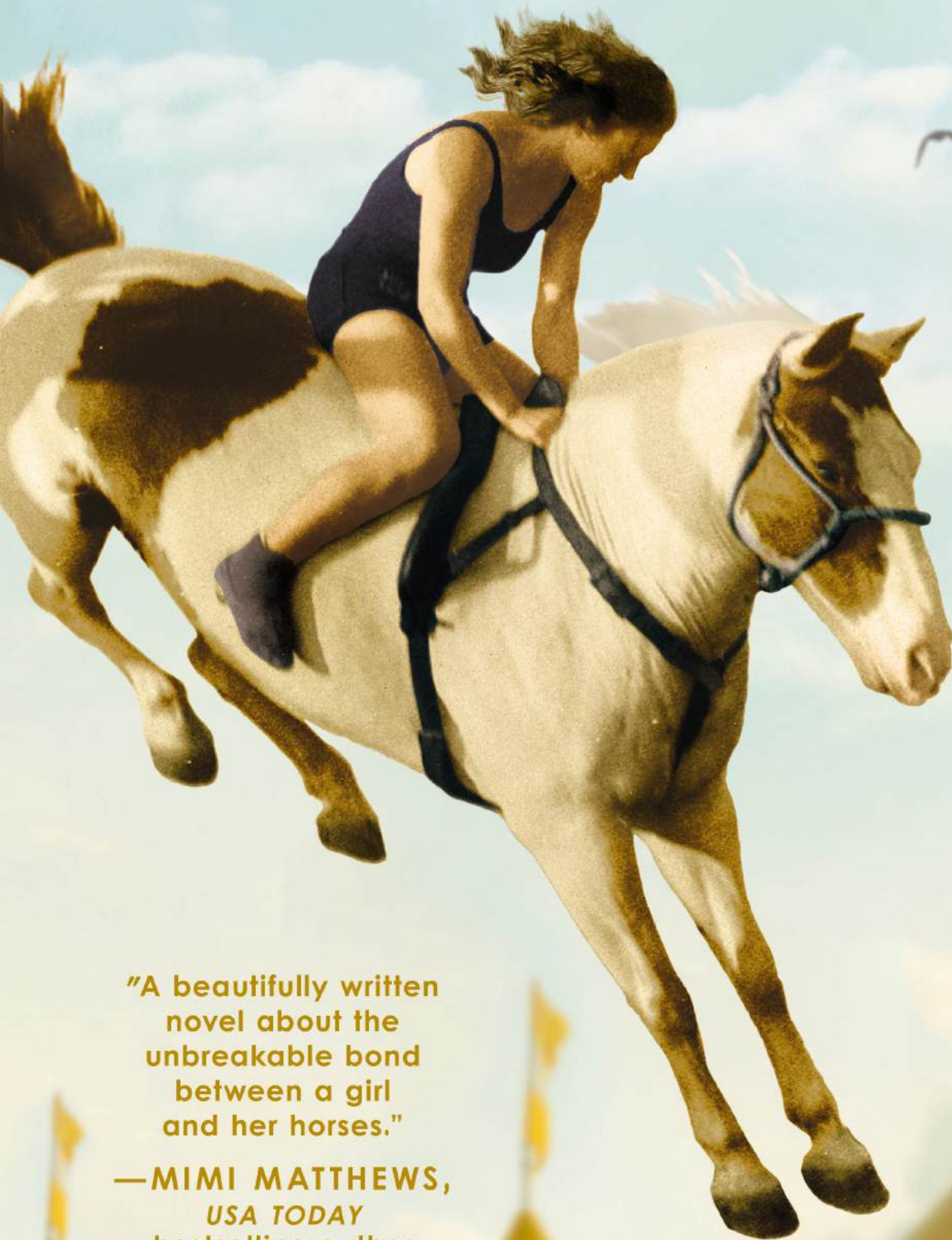
JENNI L. WALSH

SONORA

a novel

"A beautifully written novel about the unbreakable bond between a girl and her horses."

—MIMI MATTHEWS,
USA TODAY
bestselling author



Sonora

A NOVEL

Jenni L. Walsh



HARPER MUSE

Sonora

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AS IN MANY OF MY NOVELS, I tell the story from the perspective of the main character. Sonora was a talented performer of her times, and while her act is no longer done today, she cherished her horses, and I find her tenacious, determined spirit to be truly inspirational.



As seen in the October 9, 1923, edition of the *Savannah Morning News*:

WANTED: Attractive young woman who can swim and dive. Likes horses, desires to travel.

See Dr. W. F. Carver, Savannah Hotel

Chapter 1



MA TAPS THE NEWSPAPER. Presses on the print, actually, the tip of her pointer finger whitening each time.

“You should do this, Sonora,” she prods.

“Uh-huh,” I say, not taking her or the ad seriously, and focus my attention again out the window on my little sister beyond. Arnette’s doing acrobatic-level feats from the river rope swing. Her yellow swimming suit blurs, mixing with the color of the leaves that show the earliest signs of turning.

“Sonora.”

“Ma,” I mock, not sounding like the eldest child I am, but I can’t help emotionally regressing while dealing with Ma’s . . . obsession . . . with the adverts in the dailies.

I sigh as she neatly tears the paper. She’s serious about this one. But I’m not about to look a second time and give it credence. Instead, I chuckle at Arnette, the spitting image of me, despite being six years younger, who completes a flawless backflip from the rope. I taught her that.

I spoon cornflakes into my mouth.

Ma slides the torn square in front of me, going so far as to replace my cereal bowl with the newspaper clipping.

“Sonora,” she repeats.

I have no desire to engage. A slew of ads have elicited declarations of “Oh, Sonora, if this isn’t picture perfect!” since Ula—I refuse to call him Daddy—left us high and dry six years ago, right after President Woodrow Wilson declared war on the German Empire. “You’ll be sent over, Ula,” Ma had said with a note of panic. Her hand was a vise on his. “You’re not too old to go.”

As it was, he volunteered. Ula left with a quick kiss on Ma’s cheek and a pat for each of his six young children. He never came back. It would’ve been easier if the flu or the war had taken him. But the allure of another life? Of another family? That stung like a hornet.

Ever since, Ma’s obsession of running her thumb down the black and white ink has been unwaning and she’s been in a constant state of wanting and being wanted.

FOR SALE: goldfish bowls

Not that we’d ever owned a single fish, nor did Ma have a plan for what to do with the glass bowls, but, “They’re basically giving ’em away, Sonora. How can I pass that up?” What she meant was, how could she fill the void that losing her husband—and his salary—had caused? All I know is seventeen glass bowls didn’t do the trick. The containers sat empty, precariously stacked in a corner for months until Arnette and one of my brothers, Humphrey, roughhoused too closely.

WANTED: cosmetic maker
FOR SALE: unicycle

Ma had pursued them all—*and more*. She seeks, seeks, seeks, then disregards whatever notion she had, moving on. It's as if she wants to be done with something before it's done with her. Which is silly when it comes to inanimate objects. But it's the only way I can rationalize her behavior and the discarded pestles and mortars, random nuts and bolts, and a slew of other forgotten items she leaves in her wake. Tinker Bell would surely have a grand old time.

But the ad that took the cake . . .

FOR SALE: Two acres on Burnside River, fifteen miles from Savannah. Five-room stucco cottage, modern conveniences, two-car garage, boathouse, private pier, six rowboats

I'd been scratching an itch to move about, visiting my aunt in Florida, when I received a letter from my ma.

When you come back, don't go to Bainbridge. We live on Burnside River now.

That wasn't a relocation to the other side of town. It was clear across Georgia. But there we were, my family of seven, crammed into two rooms so Ma could offer rented beds to hunters. It'd been her greatest venture thus far. The thing is, Ma's ideas are about as surefire as a toy gun. She quickly real-

ized she had no actual desire to house lodgers.

But now she seems to have a desire for *me* to do something.

“Sonora, I think you should do this.” There’s that insistent *tap, tap, tap* again. “For yourself. For your family. For the people.”

For the people?

What is this woman getting on about? The better question: How best to placate her so that I can quickly put an end to this conversation?

I look.

I read.

I sigh.

“Let me get this straight. You want me to perform with . . . what? A circus?”

Ma scoffs. “I see no such mention of a circus.”

“Then enlighten me, Ma. What is this?”

“You’d be part of an *attraction*. The show must go on!” She demonstratively raises an arm.

“Really, Ma?”

She laughs. But then her hand covers mine. “You’ve always had your head in the sky, my dear. When you’re not helping me here, you’re off galivanting, feeding that soul of yours. Does this not seem exciting? Read it again.”

“I’ve read it twice,” I counter.

She smiles. “You know what they say: third time’s the charm.”

I humor her.

WANTED: Attractive young woman who can

swim and dive. Likes horses, desires to travel

The kettle on the stove screams. “I’ll get it,” I offer, as I always do. But I’m also eager to stand, to get out of her cross-hairs, to turn my back so I can’t see Ma’s gaze trained on me. I feel it on my back as I pour hot water into her favorite mug. I add chamomile. She could do with some calming down. How can she even suggest I be an *attraction*? Bless her heart, it’s another of her spontaneous notions. I shake my head, catching Arnette out the window again.

Whip those arms, I try to mentally communicate to her. It’ll help her rotate faster in her tuck position. Arnette surfaces and immediately makes for the bank to go again. I long to be out there with her, perfecting my own dives, but I’m due at work soon. We have bills to pay. Many mouths to feed.

I set Ma’s mug in front of her, preferring to remain standing, prepared to make my exit.

“Listen to reason, Sonora.” Ma sips her tea, steam rising from her mug. She stares at me as she swallows, as if waiting for me to supply the reason. A song and dance we do often. This time I do nothing but stare back.

She sighs. “Don’t you see? It offers everything you’ve ever wanted. And you’ve got all the qualifications. You’re young.”

I shrug. Nineteen. Whether or not that’s young depends on who you ask.

“You’re mighty pretty too.”

I scoff. “You reckon so? Remember what Mamie Lou did?”

Ma shakes her head. “My mama was a straight shooter, God rest her soul.”

“Straight shooter or not, she said after seeing me for the first time, she rushed to the chapel to pray because I wasn’t anything for the eyes.”

“Well, it worked, and it’s not a sin to acknowledge you’re a looker. Those big green eyes and that red-brown hair of yours, not a strand out of place.”

Sure, right now, but I was out on the sycamore, minnows darting beneath my feet, only an hour ago. Wild child one moment, prim and proper the next.

But I know I’m not horrible to look at, not that it’s done me any good with the boys. Roger Meadows and I were inseparable for a time. I’d even begun to doodle *Sonora Meadows*. I’d been a fool. After a few months’ time, he moved on. So did I.

Ma says, “You’ve got the courage of a lion too.”

“Now, that’s not in the ad,” I point out.

“No, but it should be.”

Yeah, it should be. Diving from great heights, which I assume is what’s being asked of this young, attractive woman, can be dangerous work. I’ve dabbled; I know. The funny thing is, I’ve never considered the idea of being courageous before. Having courage is like coming from old money. If a millionaire walks down the street and sees an item in a storefront that he wants to buy, he goes in and buys it without a second thought. That’s how I feel about courage. I’ve never questioned it because I’ve always had ample amounts of it. For me, having courage is as natural as having fingernails.

Ma taps the want ad again, then stands to turn up the pressure. “You could do it. You swim like a fish, and I’ve seen you climb and dive from the old sycamore when you don’t

think I'm watching. Flipping and twirling all the way down. It's enough to stop my heart. But you do it. You do it well. And don't even try to deny your love of horses. You traded Humphrey for a horse, for Pete's sake."

I try to hide a smile. It's true. All of it: the flipping, the twirling, and the part about trying to trade my baby brother. I was taken with Sam ever since I saw him grazing in our neighbor's pasture. He was a beautiful stallion. I was a fanciful five-year-old with a sibling to spare. Mrs. Jenkins noticed the hearts in my eyes for her Sam. One day she jokingly asked me if I wanted to swap Sam for Humphrey. I kicked up so much dust running inside to fetch my nine-week-old brother that Mrs. Jenkins coughed out dirt.

"I *almost* traded him," I correct Ma. "You caught me running out of the house with him. He was barely out of his crib for ten seconds."

Ma smiles. "Always a free spirit, my Sonora."

"But," I say and glance again at the ad, "what does liking horses have to do with diving?"

"Can't say, which is why we should meet the man. And think, answering this here ad could give you the opportunity to travel more." She pauses. Ma waits for my eyes to lock with hers. "You can satisfy that wanderlust of yours."

"You've already mentioned that."

"For good reason."

Maybe. I can't deny I get antsy staying in one place. That feeling's always been there. When I was younger, I wandered off so frequently that Ma had to lock me in the backyard. She never guessed I'd scale the fence, withstanding one reprimand

and punishment after another.

God help me, I read the advert in full again.

My chest tightens.

It's nerves. It's from the thought of this Dr. W. F. Carver taking one look at me and saying, "No, thank you."

Or maybe even worse: him taking me on, then changing his mind, leaving me to pick up the pieces of my life and what I'm going to do next.

I meet Ma's gaze, kneading my hands together. "You really think I should meet him? That he'd like me?"

"I really do, honey. The timing couldn't be more perfect. You're not married."

"Nor do I want to be," I say quickly.

I'm ignored.

"You never finished high school."

"Well, that's a kettle calling the pot black."

"You've always moved to the beat of your own drum." As she says this, she touches my bobbed hair. "You work as a bookkeeper at a department store, making fifteen dollars a week. How will that ever help support a family of your own?"

"Like you pointed out, I'm not married and I've no desire for more of a family. I've already got plenty with all of you."

I won't say it and hurt Ma's feelings, but I practically raised half my siblings, doing everything but holding them to my own breasts. Families nowadays are larger than most can afford. Financial quicksand, if you ask me, especially when one of the providers runs off.

Ma sighs. "I could use one less mouth to feed."

I frown, all the while knowing having five instead of six un-

derfoot would make life easier for her. “Mama, are you trying to rid yourself of me?”

Her hand covers mine again. “Of course not. I was being facetious. But I am being earnest when I ask, what do you want for yourself, Sonora?”

The question stops me. I glance again at Arnette, simply swinging now, head tilted back to collect the sun.

No one’s ever asked me what I want before. I’ve just helped to take care of my siblings and worked a steady job at Adler’s department store. Neither lighting me up inside, but necessary work. Reliable pay.

I’m not sure how to answer the question of what I want for myself. Not yet, anyway.

“Sonora, honey, ever since your daddy left . . .”

I squeeze my eyes tight.

She’s quiet.

I open them.

She goes on, “You’ve only been half living, sweetie. I appreciate all you do for us, but you’ve been taking the easy route, protecting yourself.”

From failure.

From love.

From figuring out a future.

From being abandoned again.

The words flash through my mind.

Ma acknowledges, “Now, I know I have my own holdups. And I know I’ve done little to encourage you. I’ll admit I’ve been caught between needing you exactly where you are, doing exactly what you’re doing, while also wanting you to stretch

your wings. It's beginning to feel like I'm doing nothing more than clipping your wings, though, and this here job feels like it could be the ticket to you figuring out what you want for yourself, that's all."

My mouth goes dry. I swipe her mug and take a sip. I let what she's saying sink in. This conversation is a bit of a novelty for us, Ma and me acting more like two ships passing in the night the majority of the time. But maybe she has a point. Maybe this could be a good opportunity to figure out who Sonora Webster actually is. She's certainly not a bookkeeper, that much I know. "You're sure about this? About me meeting him?"

"I am, darling. It'll be good for you. For all of us."

"Okay, then. I'll meet him," I say in a small voice. I hold up a finger to keep Ma from talking. "I'll make no promises, but I'll meet the man."

To consider being a diver as part of a carnival act . . .

The seed has been planted in my own head, and I daresay, I've picked up the scent of a life with horses without even knowing how they fit in with diving yet.

"I'm glad you'll meet him," Ma says, snatching back her mug, "because I've already spoken to him. We've got an appointment tomorrow evening."

Chapter 2



BY THE TIME MA and I *click, clack* into the Savannah Hotel the next evening, my initial allure at being a diver for a traveling carnival had lost some of its shine. Or maybe I've simply lost confidence in myself, fearing that he'll take one look at me and laugh in my face. Ma, on the other hand, is still beaming at full wattage.

She eagerly bumps me with her hip, not breaking stride.

Both of us are in our Sunday best. Dresses on, hair pinned back, stockings straight, slips the appropriate length. Everything is meticulously so.

Except maybe for my twisting hands. The more time that passes, the more I believe coming here may've been a mistake. Why put myself in a situation to fail? This isn't black-and-white like the number in the ledgers I keep, even if that work is as boring as all get-out.

I scan the lobby, trying to spot Dr. W. F. Carver before he sees us. Perhaps there's time to pull Ma back by the arm and tell her I've changed my mind. I figure this Dr. W. F. Carver to be the slick type. Maybe in a suit, considering he's got doctor

ahead of his name. Or maybe in a red-and-gold ringmaster getup, as if he's just stepped out of a big-top tent.

A man stands, a commanding presence. A head taller than everyone else in the lobby.

I know it's Dr. W. F. Carver right away by how he focuses on me, as if deciding if I could be his next prized mare.

And I've pegged him all wrong.

Not a doctor. Not in a black top hat. But in a ten-gallon hat, his wavy, gray hair reaching his shoulders. Immediately his hand is out—even though he's still a good twenty feet away—and he's charging toward us, barely dodging other lobby-goers, as if he doesn't have a single second to lose.

"Ma, no," I whisper. "You can't mean to send me off with that man."

He could be a caricature of the Wild West, oversized belt buckle and all.

"Hush now, Sonora, you're being rude."

Rude or not, my mind is spitting nouns at me. Dr. W. F. Carver is—how do I say this gently?—a burly fella, likely double me in weight. Someone who seems more suited to be a cowboy, rancher, or a renegade, even. But not what I'd imagine a showman to be.

And now here he is, taking Ma's hand first, shaking it as if she were a man.

Cross my heart, Dr. W. F. Carver is as big as a redwood or sequoia. Maybe getting close in age to those trees too, though it's hard to tell how old he is exactly with such weathered skin.

He takes my hand next.

His is calloused.

He shakes me like I owe him money.

“You must be Sonora.”

His voice is formidable, just as his stride was as he barreled toward us.

“Yes, sir,” I say. I wouldn’t dare leave off that *sir*. If someone told me he once wrestled a bear, I’d only reply, “Why yes, I do believe he has. And he won. Poor bear.”

“This way,” Dr. W. F. Carver says without further preamble. “My son and daughter are just over here. Carver’s High-Diving Horse Act is a family business, you see. Call me Doc, will you?”

High-Diving Horse Act?

It’s the first I’m hearing those four words put together in that way, the want ad being one-sided, focusing on what I can do, not what I’d be doing with the horses.

Likes horses, I remind myself.

I do. I really do. It’s a large part of the reason why I’m even here. But does that mean I’d be diving *with* them?

I glance at Ma as we follow Doc. She’s smiling from ear to ear.

“Here we are,” Doc says. “I’d like to introduce my children, Allen and Lorena.”

Both are sitting at a round table, enough chairs for each of us. I turn toward Lorena first, feeling too intimidated to lock eyes with another Carver man just yet. I reckon she’s closer to Ma’s age than my own. She’s pretty, her hair such a deep red shade that I’m not sure if it’s natural or if she paid for it. Where her father’s complexion is ruddy and leatherlike, Lorena’s skin is pale, smooth, with only a hint of wrinkles emerging between

and around her eyes.

We exchange our hellos, and I sense a tinge of something in her voice, but I can't quite put my finger on what it is.

"I go by Al," Doc's son says, pulling my attention to him. The shake of my hand is so quick, it feels like an obligation more than a nice-to-meet-you. The bones of his cheeks are defined to a point that a fairy could enjoy a seat there. A green hue deeper than my own make his eyes that much more penetrating, intimidating even. "Only my old man calls me Allen."

His tone isn't exactly friendly. Nor harsh. Maybe nonsense is a good way to describe it.

Doc enthusiastically gestures to the free seats. I take one. Ma takes the other.

Both Carver men are distinguished-looking. Same shape to those eyes. Same prominent cheekbones. Same straight nose. Same general likeness in how they confidently hold themselves with their backs ramrod straight. But the rest is night and day.

Al is more the type I was expecting to meet. Ten or so years older than me. Dark hair in a shorter style, highly glossed and slicked back. Fedora not on his head but on the table. Snappy suit. The kind of clothing you'd wear to close a deal. The thing is, I don't get the sense this Al wants to close anything with me. He may be physically at the table, but mentally he's already moved on, his attention out the window on the passing cars. Rude, yet that suits me fine. Let him judge the cars rather than me.

My eyes jump to his daddy. Meeting Doc's gaze is no better, not with how he's sizing me up.

"Her name's good," Doc says. "Don't you think, Allen?"

When his son is noncommittal, he turns to his daughter.

“The name’s decent for a poster, I guess,” Lorena says, not unkindly, but in a manner I now see as perhaps sullen.

Ma chimes in, “I named her after my great-grandmother, a performer in her own right.”

I cock a head at Ma. I’ve never heard such a thing before, and I get the sense she’s talking nonsense to impress him.

“So it’s in the blood,” Doc bellows. “That’s grand, Mrs. Webster.”

“Miss,” Ma corrects. After Ula left, she went from missus to miss, but insisted on keeping the same last name as her children.

“Apologies,” Doc says, ever-so-slightly tipping his hat. “And I must say, you weren’t fibbing. Your daughter is mighty pretty.”

I can’t help a glance at Al, whose disinterest is beginning to narrow my eyes. I’m here to help *them . . . him . . .* with their act. How is Doc nonplussed with his children’s lack of enthusiasm? He simply goes on, saying, “The crowd will like her. I already do.”

Ma says, “She can swim. Dive. This one is fearless, I can tell you that, Mr. Carver. But can you tell me more about—what did you call it?—the Carver’s High-Diving—”

“Horse Act,” Doc finishes. “Carver’s High-Diving Horse Act.”

“Horse,” I repeat. “In what manner are the horses involved?”

“Well, they dive, of course. Horse and girl dive together.”

My mouth drops open.

Together?

I'd gotten it correct, as incredible as this sounds.

He adds, "That's what Lorena here has been doing for years."

Lorena's chin is raised. Proud as a peacock.

I hate to ask it—this girl already not overly friendly toward me—but I have to. "Couldn't that be dangerous for the horse?"

Doc inhales sharply, and I instantly regret the question. If his next words sent me packing, I wouldn't be surprised.

Fortunately, Lorena answers, though her words are just as sharp as her father's inhale. "No. The horses would dive on their own. It's how this whole show came to be. Isn't that right, Daddy?"

Doc nods and motions for her to keep on talking.

Lorena beams, looking pleased to do just that. "My daddy here was riding across a bridge when it collapsed underfoot. One would expect the horse—Silver King was his name—to bellyflop, but instead he angled himself down and dove into the river. Daddy hung on, emerged from the water on his back, and Silver King swam against the rough current, getting them both safely to shore. My daddy recognized the potential for an act, and Silver King was more than happy to oblige the fans. No one *ever* has to force one of our horses to dive when there's water beneath him."

Doc squeezes his daughter's hand. "It doesn't stop folks from the SPCA from sniffing around. All he ever finds, though, is his own—"

"Doc," Al says, suddenly taking notice of our conversation.

It's interesting Al doesn't call him Dad. We're similar in that way. Though I wonder if his is merely for show.

"Apologies," Doc says, hand to his heart. "The devil got in

my blood for a moment. But the question's a good one, Sonora. What else would you like to know?"

I can see how Doc charms an audience. I can see the showman now in how he talks, moves. Winks. "How about pay?" Doc offers. "Money makes the world go around, does it not? Especially in the twenties. It's like the world's gone mad. Good for business, though. I'll tell you that much. And I'll tell you I'm prepared to offer my new diving girl fifty a week."

Under the table, Ma kicks my foot. I barely feel it. "Fifty?" I parrot, astonished.

"That'll go up, too, as we book more shows."

I'm stunned speechless. That's more than three times what I make as a bookkeeper, and I'm in Savannah's largest department store.

"We do shows in the summer and into the fall. We winter in Florida. We keep the act small, close-knit. You'd travel with us, live with us."

"But what about diving?" I ask. "I've dived plenty over the years, but never on the back of a horse." I twist my lips. I want to point out that it sounds dangerous. But maybe I have a screw loose, because I'm more intrigued than scared. "How do you know I can do the job?"

"Miss Sonora," he begins, "I could teach a pig to fly, as long as that pig has a thirst to fly. The thing is, most pigs don't. Do you want to learn to fly on a horse, Sonora?"

Do I?

Would that help answer Ma's question about what I want for myself? I'm not sure. Beside me, Ma blessedly doesn't kick me this time. She doesn't chirp in either.

“Look,” Doc says. “I’m not going to pressure you, sweetheart. I love them horses more than I love these two.” He thumbs toward his children.

I begin to laugh but stop short when Al and Lorena don’t so much as chuckle.

My hands go into my lap.

“We’ve got a show this weekend. You go. You watch. You see what diving for me is all about. And if you think you’ve got the thirst, we’ll talk some more.”

“All right, sir.”

“But, Sonora, I can’t promise you the next girl I meet with won’t say yes right away.”

Or that his two children won’t like *her* better.

I understand he’s giving me the hard sell. Ma bought it from the second she saw the want ad. But me, it’s the horses I need to see to help make my decision. Those beautiful, powerful animals may make the risk of rejection or failing and being thrown out with the bathwater worth it. All I say is, “I understand.”

With that, Al plucks his hat from the table, Doc tips his, and Lorena stands.

The three Carvers leave Ma and me sitting there.

In a matter of days, I’ll see a girl diving with a horse for the first time.

And for the first time, I have a feeling my courage will be tested.

Chapter 3



BEFORE I KNOW IT, the weekend is upon me. I have mixed emotions about seeing the Carvers again, any of them, but I am intrigued to see their horses.

To see a horse dive.

With a girl on its back.

Wouldn't that be the bee's knees?

Ma and Arnette join me. My other sister, Jacqueline, stays behind to watch our brothers. Nighttime is kissing Savannah by the time we arrive at the fairground. We missed one or two of the other acts. To think, only days ago this was open land. And now, per the flyer Ma brought home, the grass is speckled with apparatuses for aerialists, high-wire walkers, and trapeze artists. And next up under the lights, there will be a diving girl. The Girl in Red, she's called.

I purposefully keep my eyes on my feet as we walk past idle chatter, voices in varying octaves of excitement, and toward empty seats in the grandstand. I've built up this evening and the horses in my head, and I want to be sitting on the bleachers, the aroma of candied air lofting all around me, before I

raise my head and see all there is to see about the Carver's High-Diving Horse Act.

I take my seat. I press my heels together. I fold my hands in my lap. And I look up. And up.

My eyes are drawn to a tower.

A spotlight is trained at the top.

I find myself holding my breath.

Ma told me the tower is forty feet tall, but at the time the measurements were merely words. Now those words have taken shape. A series of two-by-fours painted white rise from the ground—higher and higher—in a crisscross pattern, dwarfing everything around them. Then at the top, a platform, outlined by streamers and a string of lights.

At the base of the tower, a second spotlight flickers on. Within the beam of light, there's Doc Carver, a sly half smile stretched across his weathered face. His cowboy hat is even larger than before. His jacket is adorned with tassels. A microphone stands before him.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he begins.

I sit up straighter.

Arnette grips my hand.

Unable to stop myself, I smile over at Ma. I'm surprised her own smile hasn't fully formed, but I see the intrigue in how her mouth hangs slightly open.

Doc Carver bellows into the microphone, "It is my complete pleasure to welcome you all to Carver's High-Diving Horse Act and the Girl in Red!"

At that, a third spotlight illuminates a girl at the base of the tower. The Girl in Red. She wears only a swimming suit and a

helmet. Both red. One of her hands grips a ladder.

I expected Lorena, but as I squint, I don't believe it's her. Though at this distance and with her head beneath the red football helmet, it's hard to tell. The Girl in Red waves to the crowd. We cheer, Arnette's high-pitched voice vying for the loudest.

Then the girl begins to climb.

The spotlight follows her. Her sneakers are so white they reflect the light. Up she goes, never pausing, never looking down.

Would I?

At the top, she waves, then proceeds to the platform's edge. She dramatically leans over, one hand holding a rail, and the audience collectively grows louder.

It's showmanship I would do, I think.

There's a large circle-shaped pool at the tower's bottom, dug into the ground. The final spotlight is trained there. The water is still, untouched. I can't see its depth, but I can't imagine Doc Carver would allow one of his horses to be hurt. At one side of the tank of water, a ramp rises to the ground. A man is there. I squint again, trying to determine if it's Al. But no, it's a younger boy. A groom, I guess, to see to the horse after the dive.

The girl straightens from leaning over the tower's edge. Her shoulders visibly rise and fall as she walks toward the backside of the tower. Is it nerves? Would they ever go away?

"We are the first act of its kind, the only women—the only *performers*—to complete such a daring feat! Because of the dangers involved, I ask you to hold your applause. Hold your

voices,” Doc booms into the microphone.

A hush falls over the grandstands.

I pull my bottom lip between my teeth.

Doc Carver goes dark.

The girl raises her arm.

She holds it.

She drops her arm.

It’s a signal, I realize, for the horse. I can’t see the horse, but in an instant, a galloping sound engulfs us. The mighty beast runs up a ramp barely visible in the night. I can feel him, as if his footfalls rumble every inch of the fairground.

The horse’s shadow looms higher and higher. The strings of lights on the tower shake.

Then his head, neck, and shoulders appear. Within a heart-beat, the Girl in Red launches herself onto the horse’s back. He’s gray, my mind registers, before both the horse and the girl launch from the platform.

They become a single silhouette against the dark night: the horse’s slender neck, his long legs, her torso.

I find myself sitting taller, stretching my own torso.

It’s marvelous, each and every glorious second they own the sky.

And in that moment, my breath held and my body tense, I realize this is what I want for myself. I want to be on the back of a horse, owning the sky. And I want that feeling day after day, night after night.

Then they splash, the horse meeting the water first, the Girl in Red following on his back. Water sloshes over the sides of the pool, a crescendo to the dive.

Instantly, the crowd is on their feet. I climb onto my seat, desperately needing to see the horse emerge from the water. When he does, the girl is still on his back. She thrusts an arm into the air. There's nothing to hear save for applause, but for a moment, panic seizes me. The horse's expression is fierce, with his teeth bared and his nostrils sucked in, and I worry he's been hurt. If he is, the Girl in Red doesn't let on. I rip my gaze from him to gauge the reaction of the others in the grandstands. Ma has a hand over her mouth. Arnette may burst out of her skin. Most are clapping wildly. Some have tears in their eyes, as if they witnessed something momentous.

They have.

I focus again on the horse. Droplets drip from him as he climbs a ramp out of the man-made pool. I blow out a breath; if he was struggling, he's successfully made it, not looking any worse for wear. In fact, his head is high and his tail is swinging freely. The girl slips off him. She bows.

I begin shaking my head. A little from disbelief at what I just witnessed, a little from awe, and a lot from envy at what the Girl in Red gets to do. Soaring through the air with that magnificent animal is her job.

If I thought I was enamored with Roger Meadows, then I need lessons in love. Because I've truly fallen in love this time, simply and completely, with the idea of this being my future.

All I can hope is that Doc Carver hasn't already hired a girl to teach to fly through the sky. I want to be his new Girl in Red. I have an unquenchable thirst to be that girl.

About the Author



JENNI L. WALSH worked for a decade enticing readers as an award-winning advertising copywriter before becoming an author. Her passion lies in transporting readers to another world, be it in historical or contemporary settings. She is a proud graduate of Villanova University and lives in the Philadelphia suburbs with her husband, daughter, son, and various pets.

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