

Encore

by Deborah Oster Pannell

If you had just seen how she looked, cowering in the back of the tent, away from the heat, their eyes, the hunt of their gaze, you would know that I have no need to embellish any of the details of this story.

Her hair was golden, the scar across her right cheek made all the more garish by its glow, and the soft way it curled around her chin. She had had barely enough time to leave the stage before the crowd had erupted in applause that quickly turned to a rhythmic pounding of booted feet on the makeshift floor. As it had been in Orlando, and Biloxi, and later in Detroit, her hypnotic unwrappings had ignited some collective animal instinct, transforming the men into one seething, hungry snarl of a beast. They would not accept no for an answer.

I had just enough money left to afford a train ticket, and I couldn't risk that she would refuse to take it. There would only be a few minutes before they morphed into a bloodthirsty posse, storming the flaps of the dressing room, looking to satiate their unruly needs.

I know. This isn't the way it is, usually. This isn't the way it ever should be. But something in her raw vulnerability and daring beauty drove these men wild, made them forget that they were bound by rules of society and proper boundaries, and perhaps it was the heat, perhaps it was the unending need that had grown among them and their kin during the savage shortages of the recent months, and the silence from anyone who could have provided answers to their desperate questions, but all of that bitter emptiness mixed with the promise of her ripeness had drunkenly combined in the worst imaginable way, and I knew they would be coming for her, blindly grabbing and ripping their way into this room, any second.

Lola, I said to her, you must follow me, right now. I lifted the flap of canvas behind her with one hand, and gripped her right arm just below the shoulder with the other, practically shoving her into the night. All preparations had been made. The money for the ticket was wrapped up with the food I had packed into the knapsack, already wedged next to her suitcase in the cart strapped behind the horse. I was her manager, saddler, travel scout, fairy godmother. I would disappear in her memory just as the dust from the hooves would dissolve in the path behind her.

