

## **KITTEN**

**a play about the greatest cat trainer who ever killed**

**written by Emily Buza**

### CAST OF CHARACTERS

MARIA WELLS—a young woman, 21-years-old, a daydreamer, an innocent, an idealist, loves the tigers in the circus and dreams of getting far away from her little hometown

SEAN HAWTHORNE—a less young man, 30-years-old, world-weary and scarred, a man with rough hands and a charming tongue, trains the tigers for the circus and doesn't dream of much

FRANK—an even older man, 38-years-old, ringleader, ignores and dislikes the tigers in his circus and dreams of cheering crowds with money to burn

DAISY—the tiger in the circus, unseen and offstage, dreams of a freedom she's never known

### SETTING

Somewhere in America, Somewhen in the 1930s

A small town in the Midwest, the day the circus comes to town.

The circus train out of town, to anywhere else in the world.

Backstage at the circus, as the years drag on.

## ACT 1, Scene 1

*[MARIA stands alone onstage in no distinct location. She is a pretty girl in her very early twenties. She is dressed simply but does not look plain. She addresses the audience.]*

## MARIA

I was six years old the first time I saw a tiger. Before that, the circus only had lions. And they were fine enough, sure, but they were dull if you stared at them too long. Lions are a sandy yellow, like fine dirt on a backroad. Nothing much special about that. And they'll lay their heads down and sleep and do absolutely nothing after a while.

But tigers. Tigers are brilliant.

I knew from the first time I saw one, they were the greatest animal God ever created. I could look at a tiger's stripes for hours. Just watch the way the orange and black move behind those bars. Nearly did that that first year. Mama had to drag me out of the menagerie tent. The way they pace, back and forth in the cage. Like they just can't sit still. Like if you let them out, they'd just run and run and never stop. They're beautiful.

I was six when I decided what I wanted to do with my life. Looking at that tiger for the first time, I knew I wanted to train big cats for the circus. Every little kid wants to run away with the circus. Sarah and Elizabeth, from down the road, they both wanted to be on the trapeze, but they gave that up the first time they fell out of a tree while practicing. And little Alice wanted to be one of the trick riders, standing on a white horse in a tutu covered in sparkles. But a year later she decided she wanted to be a schoolteacher instead. The boys all wanted to be strongmen or clowns. But I was the only little girl who wanted to be a tiger tamer. And I was the only one who never gave it up.

Every year the circus would come to town, with its painted-up train and all the big tents. It would just appear on the edge of town, following that trail of posters that would go up the day before. And every year, as soon as I bought my ticket, I'd go straight to the menagerie. And from six onward, I would just watch that tiger—back and forth, back and forth—until Mama found me and made me keep moving or until the real show started.

I liked the real show, too. When they'd put a man in there *with* the tiger. And he'd know just what to do. Because the tiger would roar and we'd all gasp, but he'd move just so and crack his whip and that big beautiful beast would jump up where he told her to. I wanted to be in that cage so bad.

When I was fourteen, my Mama started letting me go to the circus on my own. She didn't much care for it, after all, too much work to do at home. And when I was sixteen, I decided it was finally time to get my dream underway. No more playing games with the stray neighborhood cats. I was gonna be in the big show. So, when the circus rolled into town that year, I stormed the lot before the tents were even really set up. Men everywhere putting stakes in the ground and stringing up the canvas, and I just waltzed right through. Mama always taught me that if you walk with confidence, no one will question why you're any place you shouldn't be. Best advice she ever gave me. So, I walked right in and found the ringmaster—the big man in charge.

*[Lights up on FRANK as he enters and sits down at a desk in the impression of a make-shift temporary office. A self-assured man. He is the ringmaster, though he does not wear his full costume now. MARIA turns from the audience, entering the scene with FRANK, who does not look up from the papers on his desk as he begins to speak.]*

FRANK

Name?

MARIA

Maria Wells, sir, and—

FRANK

Let me guess, you want to join the circus.

MARIA

Yes, sir, I'd—

FRANK

And what can you do?

MARIA

Do, sir?

FRANK

What's your act? You a dancing girl, trapeze, tightrope, whatcha got?

MARIA

I want to train tigers.

*[At this, FRANK finally looks up.]*

FRANK

How old are you?

MARIA

*[lying]* Nineteen.

FRANK

How old are you really?

MARIA

Sixteen.

FRANK

And you wanna train tigers?

MARIA

It's all I've ever wanted.

FRANK

You got any experience training tigers out here in the sticks?

MARIA

Well, no, but I'm good with cats and—

FRANK

House cats?

MARIA

And stray cats.

FRANK

Tigers ain't no little stray cats. They're wild animals. And my tigers are the best in the business—don't let anybody be telling you the Ringlings got ones better than ours—which means they're the biggest and the strongest. Enough power to crush you without even trying and paws bigger than your pretty little head.

MARIA

I'm not afraid.

*[FRANK gets up, moves around the desk to stand in front of her.]*

FRANK

You should be. Takes years for someone to learn how to tame one.

MARIA

But that's why I'm here. To learn.

FRANK

To learn?

MARIA

Yes, I could study with the tiger tamer, be like an apprentice and then—

FRANK

Take his job?

MARIA

No, not exactly. I just thought—

FRANK

And what would you do in the meantime?

MARIA

In the meantime?

FRANK

This ain't no college on wheels. Can't just have you freeloading on our magnificent train while

you learn how to train tigers. I don't pay no one who doesn't work, and I don't offer free room and board to little apprentice girls like yourself.

MARIA

But—

FRANK

Hush now. *[FRANK studies her, circling her as he speaks.]* You clearly ain't a dancer. *[FRANK grabs her hand examines it.]* You don't got the callouses of the trapeze girls or the other acrobats. And your arm's too soft to help the roustabouts. You got any experience being shot out of a cannon?

MARIA

No.

FRANK

Shame. We been looking for a girl who can do that. *[FRANK lets go of her hand.]* You're a real pretty girl, Mary. *[MARIA reacts, but does not correct him.]* And that'll take you real far in the world, trust me. You're always gonna be comfortable in your life. But pretty alone don't cut it in this business. You gotta do something extraordinary. I don't pay anyone for anything less than incredible. *[A pause.]* Now, I need to be getting back to my business to keep this circus up and running. Greatest show on Earth takes a lotta work. So, how 'bout you just run along and leave me to it, alright?

*[FRANK goes to return to his desk.]*

MARIA

But—

FRANK

Don't be questioning me, girl. Just move along, get out of my office, and come back for the show later tonight. Then you can see the tigers just like everybody else.

MARIA

Yes, sir.

*[The lights dim on FRANK'S office as MARIA steps out of it and turns back to the audience.]*

MARIA

I didn't particularly like Frank, but I liked his tigers. And I was not a girl so easily dissuaded. I tried to let it go, I did. And I tried to learn something else to get me in, but nothing stuck. So, I relied on persistence—or what Mama likes to call blind stubbornness.

I came back the next year. And the next year. And the next year. Every time the answer was always the same.

FRANK

*[from his desk]* You again? I thought I already told you—we ain't hiring no untrained tiger girl!

MARIA

Frank didn't particularly like me, either. But I was determined. Did that for five years after that first rejection. Did the same with every circus that came into town—got turned away from all of them, too—but I had my heart set on Frank's. Man was a bastard, but he was right about one thing: his circus had the best tigers.

So, I waited. I took a cue from my beloved creatures, the finest ones God ever thought up, and I paced—back and forth—just waiting for someone to unlock the cage.

ACT 1, Scene 2

*[MARIA, twenty-one and lovely, stands in the impression of a menagerie tent. She watches the tiger cage; her stare does not waver as she tracks the animal's movements.*

*After a moment, SEAN enters. He's a bit older than her, his shirt is a bit wrinkled and he wears no jacket over his suspenders. He's a man at work. He sees MARIA, contemplates her, watches at a bit of a distance as she watches the tiger.*

*Eventually...]*

MARIA

Hello, Mr. Tiger. Did you miss me? You look lovely this year. So handsome. Did you do something different with your stripes, Mr. Tiger?

*[SEAN tries to hide a laugh. MARIA stiffens. A beat.]*

MARIA

Are you laughing at me, sir?

SEAN

No, miss, of course not. *[He approaches her, stands beside her looking at the tiger.]* Just laughing to myself is all.

MARIA

About what?

SEAN

Well, you see, this here would actually be a Miss Tiger not a Mister. This one's female. You can tell 'cause she's a bit smaller than a male would be.

MARIA

She seems huge to me.

SEAN

Oh, she is. A very big girl, this one. But she's about a hundred pounds lighter than her mate would be. Just as strong though, just as powerful.

MARIA

She's beautiful.

SEAN

That she is.

MARIA

*[addressing the tiger]* You're lovely, Miss Tiger.

SEAN

No need to be so formal with her. Her name's Daisy.

MARIA

“Daisy?” What kind of fool names something this magnificent after a common wildflower?

SEAN

The kind standing right next to you, sweetheart.

MARIA

Oh. *[A beat.]* You mean she’s...

SEAN

My tiger, yes.

MARIA

You’re the cat trainer for the circus?

SEAN

Indeed, I am, little lady. And if we’re making introductions, I’m Sean Hawthorne, cat trainer extraordinaire, at your service.

MARIA

I’m sorry, I didn’t realize you were—

SEAN

Apology accepted... if you give me one more thing.

MARIA

And what’s that?

SEAN

Well, I introduced both myself and my tiger, but I don’t have the faintest idea who I have the pleasure of speaking with. What’s your name, sugar?

MARIA

Maria. Maria Wells.

SEAN

Maria Wells. A lovely name for a lovely girl. *[He takes her hand, presses a light kiss to it. MARIA pulls back, just a bit.]* I apologize for the rough hands. Working man’s hands. Daisy’s fur may be soft but getting her where she needs to go makes a man’s hands hard. My apologies.

MARIA

That’s not it, it’s just... I can’t get over the fact that *[she looks back at the caged tiger]* she’s yours.

SEAN

Technically, she belongs to the circus. But I’m the one who raised her, trained her. She’s mine in all but the paperwork.

MARIA

You raised her?

SEAN

From a cub, fresh off the boat from some far-off tiger land.

MARIA

That's incredible.

*[MARIA'S eyes wander back to the tiger, which holds her attention. SEAN takes notice.]*

SEAN

You like tigers, miss?

MARIA

I love them. Always have.

*[SEAN watches her, taking in the wonder on her face. She is entranced by the tiger and he is entranced by her. SEAN is already smitten.]*

FRANK

*[from offstage]* Hawthorne! Quit flirting with the public and get back to work!

SEAN

My apologies, sweetheart, but it appears I need to duck out.

MARIA

The work of a tiger tamer extraordinaire is never done, it seems.

SEAN

You don't know the half of it, but I hope to see you at the show tonight.

MARIA

I never miss the big show, sir.

SEAN

Then I'll make sure Daisy looks her best for such a special performance.

MARIA

Special? Why special?

SEAN

Well, it's not every day she gets to dance for her biggest fan.

*[MARIA smiles. SEAN gives her a nod. If he had a hat, he'd tip it.]*

SEAN

I look forward to seeing face as lovely as yours in the crowd tonight, Miss Maria Wells.

MARIA

And I look forward to seeing Daisy in all her glory, Mr. Hawthorne.

*[With a final nod, SEAN exits the menagerie to return to work. MARIA stays behind, watching the tiger pace in her cage.]*

ACT 1, Scene 3

*[Outside the circus, after the show. Night has fallen, the stage may be illuminated by string lights or some other form of indirect light. The murmur of the crowd fades as the scene begins.]*

*MARIA exits the circus tent, arms wrapped around herself to shield her from the chilly night air. SEAN enters from the side, coming from a nearby dressing tent.]*

SEAN

So how'd you like the show, kitten?

MARIA

It was... wonderful. I've never seen anything like those acrobats.

SEAN

And what about me, sweetheart? You still like the tigers the best?

MARIA

The tigers were magnificent.

SEAN

And their trainer? The man who tamed the savage beast?

MARIA

I suppose he was alright, too.

SEAN

Just alright?

MARIA

Perhaps a bit more than alright, but not much.

SEAN

You wound me, girlie.

MARIA

Well perhaps you need to try a bit harder to earn my favor than just calling me pet names.

SEAN

I already fought a rabid animal for your entertainment. What more do I have to do?

MARIA

I don't know yet. What do you have in mind?

SEAN

If I had more time, I might take you out somewhere nice. Give you a right proper date. But I don't have much time, darling, so the pet names and tiger training will have to suffice.

MARIA

Why don't you have time?

SEAN

Show's packing up and hitting the road after tomorrow's matinee.

MARIA

Oh.

SEAN

You know how the circus works, sweetheart. Everyone does. Not more than a day or two in the same spot. We're catching the afternoon crowd tomorrow and then back on the train before sundown.

MARIA

I guess I just never realized how short a time that is. It always seemed to stretch on forever when I was little.

SEAN

You're still pretty little, girlie.

MARIA

I'm a grown woman.

SEAN

Then you can make your own decision about whether or not I get to see you again.

MARIA

You already said you're leaving tomorrow.

SEAN

You could come see the show again tomorrow.

MARIA

I might do that.

SEAN

Who knows, maybe I'll get eaten by Daisy tomorrow. Wouldn't that be a way to say goodbye.

MARIA

She'd never hurt you.

SEAN

You'd be surprised. *[A pause.]* But whatever she did, you could come see it.

MARIA

I'd like that.

*[A Beat.]*

SEAN

Or...

MARIA

Or?

SEAN

I don't mean to be too forward but...

MARIA

I'm an unmarried woman talking to a circus man, this is already so scandalous my Mama's probably having a heart attack on the other side of town, nothing is too forward at this point.

SEAN

Well, I don't want to overstep but... You could come with me.

MARIA

What?

SEAN

Hop the train out of this town and never look back.

MARIA

You're right, that is a little too forward.

SEAN

I just mean—you love the tigers, and I'm pretty fond of you.

MARIA

We met this afternoon.

SEAN

But you're a pretty girl and you like my work. Never seen anybody look at those tigers the way you do. And I like that. Any man would be lucky to have a woman who appreciates his work and I think I found one who does.

MARIA

I'm sure you say that to all the girls. How many have run away with you before?

SEAN

None.

MARIA

Because they were all too smart and proper to fall for a circus man?

SEAN

No, because I never extended the offer to any gal before you.

MARIA

My Mama would kill me if I said yes. She's always wanted me to marry a farmer or a preacher or

the son of the pharmacy owner. Settle down, a Church wedding and a couple of kids. Might not be big dreams, but she's still got dreams for me.

SEAN

And what dreams do you have for yourself?

MARIA

Tigers.

SEAN

You dream of tigers?

MARIA

Just tigers. I want to be around those animals every day of my life.

SEAN

If you came with me, you could see Daisy whenever you like. Hell, maybe someday she'd even let you pet her.

MARIA

Really?

SEAN

Honest to God. She ain't a friendly animal, not like the horses and dogs, but if you spent enough time near her and she saw how much I liked you, she just might open up a bit.

MARIA

That would be incredible.

SEAN

Then come with me. Let me show you all that.

*[SEAN steps closer to MARIA, takes her hand in his.]*

SEAN

Let me take care of you, sweetheart. Just say you'll jump on that train with me tomorrow night and let me do this for you.

*[MARIA hesitates. She is both scared and tempted. And yet...]*

MARIA

Can you give me a day to think on it?

SEAN

A day? I don't quite have a full day to lend a to a girl's thinking, no matter how pretty she is.

MARIA

Just one night, then. Give me one night to sleep on it, and then I'll give you an answer.

SEAN

Will you come back here tomorrow to see the show?

MARIA

Yes. And I'll give you my answer then.

SEAN

You won't just skip out on us to avoid ever seeing me again?

MARIA

If I did that, I wouldn't get to see the tigers again before you all leave. I'd never pass up an opportunity to watch them work.

SEAN

I'm the one doing all the work, kitten. The cats just stand there and look pretty.

MARIA

Don't let Daisy hear you say that.

SEAN

I wouldn't dream of offending a tiger's pride.

MARIA

I thought lions were the ones with prides.

SEAN

A cat is a cat, no matter what it looks like.

MARIA

You're a confidant man.

SEAN

And you're a hard woman to please.

MARIA

You wouldn't like me half so much if I didn't make you work for it.

SEAN

Maybe so.

*[A pause. SEAN raises MARIA's hand to his lips, places a kiss against the back of it.]*

SEAN

I have to go make sure everything's squared away for the night—make sure Daisy's tucked up all comfy in her cat bed. But you promise you'll come back tomorrow?

MARIA

I wouldn't miss it for the world.

*[SEAN lets go of her hand, sweeps into an exaggerated performer-worthy bow.]*

SEAN

I look forward to seeing you again, Miss Maria Wells.

*[MARIA giggles and gives him a slight curtsy in return.]*

MARIA

Goodnight Sean Hawthorne, Tamer of Wild Beasts.

*[SEAN smiles—perhaps even laughs—before exiting. He leaves MARIA alone onstage as she addresses the audience again.]*

MARIA

I didn't need a night, not really. I already had my answer. But propriety meant that I needed to consider carefully, weigh all my options before I made a decision. But the decision was easy. I was supposed to stay up all night, worrying about what I was going to do. Would I run away with the circus like every little kid dreams? Run away with a working man like every Mama fears? Or would I stay at home like a good little girl and get married to a farmer or preacher's son in some big white church and have enough children to keep my Mama happy? I was supposed to stay up all night considering each of those paths, seeing where they'd lead me before I picked the right one.

But I didn't lose a wink of sleep that night. No, I slept like a baby. Because I already had my answer and I already knew what I was going to tell Sean the next day.

I already knew what I wanted out of my life. I'd known since I was six.

ACT 1, Scene 6

*[A moment of quiet. MARIA is half-dressed, getting ready for the day.]*

MARIA

Sean! Have you seen my belt?

SEAN

*[offstage]* No. Check your trunk.

*[MARIA opens a steamer trunk, begins digging through looking for her belt. She pulls out several items—a shirt, stockings, Sean's whip, his jacket, etc.—before discovering a shotgun buried among the clothing. She holds it almost reverently, her search abandoned.]*

*SEAN enters—his shirt is half-unbuttoned, his suspenders hang at his sides, his hair is wet, he is barely ready for the day—and sees MARIA holding the gun.]*

SEAN

Put that down, kitten. It's not a toy.

MARIA

Why do you have a gun?

SEAN

It's part of the job. Nothing for you to worry your pretty little head about.

MARIA

You perform in a circus, Sean. What part of jumping around a tent requires a shotgun?

SEAN

You've seen me perform.

MARIA

And?

SEAN

Are you honestly telling me you never saw the gun in that cage?

MARIA

Never.

SEAN

Then I musta done a better job of hiding it than I thought. Or else you're just blind.

MARIA

I was a little too focused on the tiger to be scanning the rest of the cage.

SEAN

Well, that's the idea. We want you and everybody else in the stands to be looking at me and at her. We want you scared even if I'm not.

MARIA

You're not scared?

SEAN

No, sometimes I'm terrified of her. That's why I have the gun.

MARIA

What?

SEAN

If it ever comes down to it, kitten, I'm not letting her kill me. I'd take her out before she could get in more than a scratch.

*[SEAN means this to be comforting, but MARIA recoils, still holding the gun.]*

MARIA

You'd shoot Daisy? You'd shoot your own tiger?

SEAN

She ain't mine. She does what I say, mosta the time, but if she steps outta line, she'd kill me as soon as look at me. She's got claws and teeth and three hundred pounds of muscle. I've got a shotgun. Fair is fair.

MARIA

But—

SEAN

She ain't no house cat, sweetheart. I gotta be able to defend myself in there. I don't wanna kill her, never have. But if it came down to it—if it were me or that thing—I'd do it. I'm more important than her. *[Beat.]* Aren't I, kitten?

MARIA

*[A pause that is one second too long.]* Of course.

SEAN

Good. Now give me the gun. I don't want you hurtin' yourself with that thing.

*[MARIA hesitates for a moment before slowly offering him the shotgun. SEAN takes it from her outstretched hands and kisses her on the forehead, before turning back to the trunk. SEAN places the gun back inside and pulls out the belt MARIA was originally looking for. SEAN hands it to MARIA, who accepts it without another word.]*