

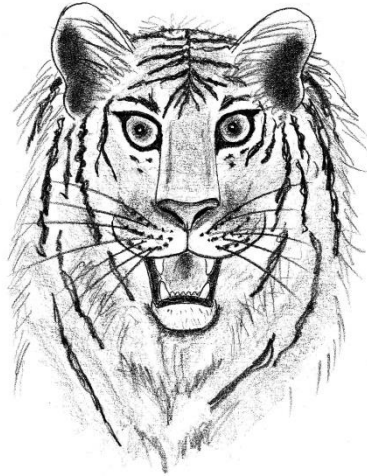
Finnigan  
and the  
Lost Circus  
Wagon

Mary T. Wagner



WATERHORSE PRESS

## Chapter Five



### LEROY and THE TIGER

**F**inally the Farnsworths went to bed. We watched the lights go out in the house one by one, until the last light in Fred and Shirley's room went dark. About the same time, the moon came out again—the storm had passed by.

“The coast is clear,” Finnigan said, and

we all approached the wagon again. It was nearly pitch black in the dark except for a few shafts of moonlight through holes here and there, but we mice have excellent eyesight at night. Not nearly as good as a cat has, but pretty good nonetheless.

Finnigan stood up on his hind legs, stretched those long front legs upward, and nudged the hook free that was holding the wagon door closed on the single hinge. It swung open with a creak.

Finnigan poked his head inside of the wagon but wrinkled his nose at the old chicken coop smell. He sprang to the top of the wagon instead.

I worked my way around the inside. A set of iron bars ran across both walls from ceiling nearly to the floor. They were covered by sheets of weather-beaten wood. Nobody would notice if they were looking at them from the outside. But this must have

once been a cage for something bigger than chickens!

“Hey guys,” Finnigan said. “I found something weird up here.”

I looked at Leroy. Leroy shrugged. “You go, I’ll keep exploring down here,” he said.

“I don’t think you’re going to find any goodies,” I said and rolled my eyes. Leroy is quite a big fella. You could even mistake him for a rat if you didn’t notice his gorgeous mouse tail. It looks **nothing** like a rat tail, which is all smooth and creepy like an earthworm.

Leroy’s a little sensitive about his size...so if I’m going to tease him about eating, I try to stay out of punching range.

Leroy narrowed his eyes and wiggled his whiskers in irritation but shrugged it off. He shuffled to the outside of the wagon while I ran up to where Finnigan was crouched, posing like an Egyptian Sphinx.

Front paws out, resting on his belly, staring at something on the top of the wagon.

I sneezed. “Achoo!!” No small amount of dust had collected on this heap of junk. “What’s up Finnigan?”

Finnigan reached forward and tapped something round and black. “What the heck do you think this is?” His eyes reflected an eerie green in the dark.

I moved in closer and pushed away some dead leaves that covered the thing. Finnigan sat up and looked at it from the side. He scraped some more dirt away with a paw. I sniffed it from one end to the other. It was cold and metal, a loop that was bolted into the roof.

“It looks like something you could tie a rope to,” I said.

“Or maybe a chain,” Finnigan said. “But what for?” He got up and leaped to the low bench at the back of the wagon roof. A

shaft of moonlight lit him up from behind.

I remembered the first night Leroy and I had snuck into Lucy Farnsworth's bedroom and convinced a tiny, brand new kitten that we were his fairy godmothers. It even worked for a while. There was magic in the moonlight that night.

The light now lit up the grey and white stripes on Finnigan's back. He turned and launched himself through the air to the next wagon, and then the next, and the next. I pulled myself to the nice warm spot on the bench where Finnigan had been sitting and sat down to think.

There was so much to ponder! The old wagon. The strangers. How long we could keep Finnigan flying under the radar and a secret from the rest of the Farnsworths!

I watched Finnigan as he circled the barn by wagon by leaps a couple of times, and then took to the trapeze hanging over

the center ring. The ropes attached to the trapeze bar squeaked softly as he swung back, and forth, back, and forth.

There, in the quiet dark night, watching him swing was almost hypnotic, and I could feel my eyes start to close and the rest of me relax. Back and forth, back and forth...

Leroy padded across the top of the wagon, and hauled himself heavily up to the bench beside me. He plopped down, breathing hard.

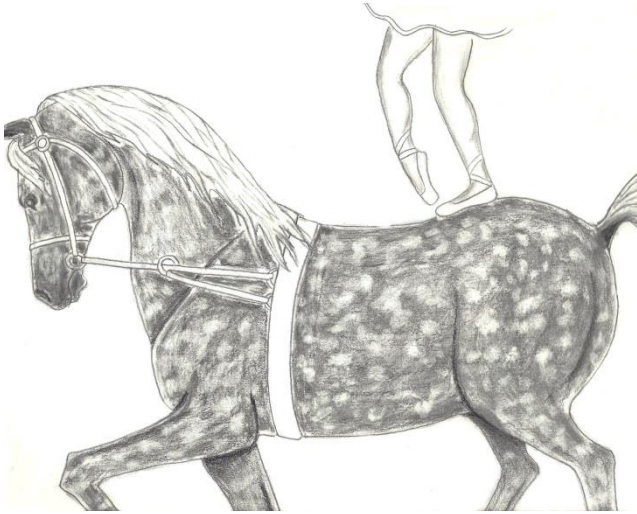
“Oh, come on now,” I said. “What’s the matter? You look like you’ve seen a ghost!”

“Not a ghost,” he said, and still panted, struggling to catch his breath. If he didn’t catch it soon, it was going to be gone!

I gave him a punch on the shoulder to settle him down. “What then?”

“Not a ghost,” he repeated. “A tiger!”

## Chapter Six



### CIRCUS MICE

**O**ur family hasn't always lived at the Farnsworth Circus Museum in the quiet little town of Beechville, Wisconsin. In fact, if one of our great-great-great-grandfathers hadn't fallen in love with the circus, we'd probably still be living in Bavaria in one castle or another, eating



strudel crumbs and whipped cream and rack of lamb with mint jelly off of gold-rimmed plates, and toasting our tails and feet by enormous marble fireplaces.

Way back in the day, our great-great-great (it goes back many dozens of “greats”!) grandfather Felix had been the pet “pocket mouse” of the royal physician to Mad King Ludwig of Bavaria. Both he and the doctor lived a very pampered life!

The castle was beautiful, both inside and out, and the food was every inch fit for a king. The good doctor liked to keep Felix in his vest pocket for company (the doctor was a bit shy with the ladies), and for a mouse, it was a very, very good life.

There were no cats for Felix to worry about while he was tucked safely in that vest pocket. He was always warm and dry, and not only was the food supply endless...every single meal was delicious.

And as mice, our needs are pretty simple: food, shelter, and a cat-free place to live.

It's been passed down in family lore that there was indeed a white Persian cat named Alexander that lived in King Ludwig's household and he liked to lurk behind curtains and books, jumping out to surprise the chamber maids. He also liked to go for walks in the royal woods with the King, which must have been quite a sight. Did Alexander think he was a dog? Perhaps. A little crazy went a long way in this castle!

Anyway, when Felix was feeling adventurous and went exploring the castle in the dead of night, there *were* a few hair-raising escapes. It's a good thing that fluffy cats slide on polished marble floors, otherwise Leroy and I might not be here.

But all of that luxurious living came to an end when the royal doctor traveled to

Berlin to attend a medical conference to learn what was “new” in the dark ages of medicine.

One night the good doctor and some of his friends left their fancy hotel behind and took the nearest horse-drawn carriage to the circus on the edge of town. Felix poked his nose out of that vest pocket and drew himself up over the edge of the pocket to see what was going on just as the doctor stepped into the circus tent, and he was utterly entranced, dazzled and mesmerized.

Felix saw the dappled grey “rosinback” horses with plumes on their bridles, and girls in sparkly costumes balancing on their broad backs. He watched the elephants, and the acrobats, and the lovely ladies dangling dangerously from silks above him, and he smelled the popcorn and heard the music. And then he scampered out of that pocket and down the doctor’s trouser leg

and never looked back. We've been a family of circus mice ever since.

I think that if it had been Leroy in that pocket on that fateful day, the memory of the amazing eats at the castle might have been enough to keep him right where he was, watching the goings on in the center ring from a nice warm vest pocket. And if it had been me in that pocket... Well if it was a cold night I might just have stayed put because I **really** like a warm safe place, and I'm pretty sure that a vest pocket next to the doctor's chest would always be warm and toasty. And cat-free as well.

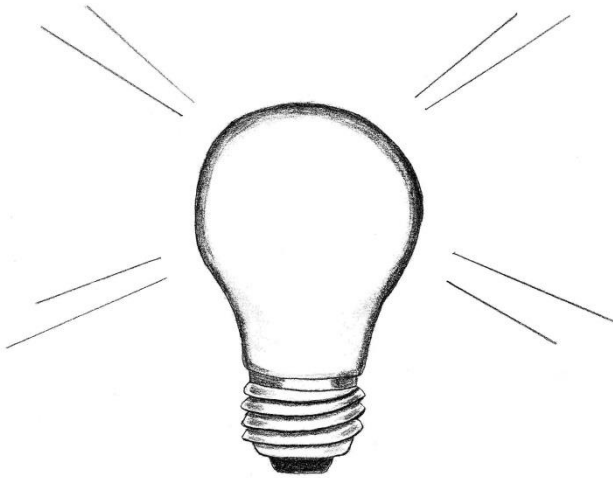
But of course, neither Leroy or I were with the doctor all those years ago, and so Felix threw caution to the wind and followed his heart right into the bright lights and canvas tents of the circus life.

Of course, Leroy and I have only known life in the Farnsworth Museum. But one

thing that mice know with absolute certainty is cats! It's just a matter of simple survival. Big cats, little cats, house cats, barn cats, jungle cats, desert cats, wild cats, and of course very big circus cats.

And so if Leroy was telling me he saw a tiger, well...I'd wager a brick of cheddar cheese he saw a tiger!

## Chapter Seven



**EUREKA!**

**F**innigan landed with a thump on the roof of the wagon and swiveled his head around to get a better look. His eyes were as big as saucers.

“A tiger!” he said. “Where?”

Leroy shook his head, still out of breath.

“C’mon buddy, what did you see?” I asked him.

“The wagon,” Leroy panted. “It’s under the wagon.”

Finnigan gave him a puzzled look, but pounced to the ground and peered through the spokes of one of the wheels.

“I don’t see anything,” he said. The fur on his shoulders bristled with excitement.

“Let’s back it down a level,” I said, and I took Leroy by the paw. “Show me what you saw.” I slid along the side of the wagon, trying to be as tiny as possible. If there was a real tiger out there, there was no need to serve any of us as an evening snack!

In the meantime, Finnigan had launched himself back to the roof, and was sitting on the bench for a higher vantage point. He looked like he was scanning a field of elephant grass that could camouflage a tiger’s stripes.

“See anything?” he called down.

Leroy waddled up the tongue of the wagon and sat at the end of the span.

“Look,” he said, and pointed toward the darkness beneath the wagon.

I peered as hard as I could but I saw nothing but dark.

“Look under the box,” he said.

“All I can see is the floor of the barn,” I replied.

Leroy smacked the side of the wagon right next to my head. “Right here,” he said, and pointed to what looked like a tarnished piece of metal that was quite possibly holding the frame together.

“Leroy, I want to believe you, but you are not making this easy!” I said.

Leroy scrubbed at the piece of metal with his elbow, and slowly the dirt came off. It gleamed a little in the moonlight. Whatever it was seemed to be carved in the



shape of a lion's head. Trust it to circus wagons, absolutely everything that could be decorated usually was!

“Right here,” he said proudly. “And just look underneath.” He pointed along the side of the wagon into the dark.

As my eyes got more accustomed to the shadows under the wagon, I could see a pattern repeating over and over. At least a half dozen of these carved things sat along the length of the undercarriage.

I edged past him and took a seat next to the nearest carving. It sure looked like a lion to me. Even though it was not much bigger than me, it had snarling lips pulled back over pointy fangs and angry eyes. It looked absolutely ferocious.

I felt a little let down. “Really,” I said. “Another lion?”

“No, Max. Look”

I did. It still looked like a lion to me.

“Okay, then,” he said, and rolled his eyes like I was the one who was not the brightest bulb in the chandelier. “Feel this.” He ran his hand over the carved metal cheeks and the back of the neck.

I did the same thing. Felt like a lion to me...and a rusty one at that!

“Guys, I can’t see him anywhere!” Finnigan hopped down from his perch on top of the wagon to join us.

“That’s okay,” I said. “Leroy was just a little confused in the twilight and his imagination ran away with him.” I started to make my way back to the floor.

Leroy stepped in front of me and blocked my way out. He is so much bigger than me, I will never outmuscle him.

“I did not imagine this,” he said stubbornly.

I looked at Finnigan and shrugged.

“If you can’t see it, then you need to feel

it again,” Leroy said.

“What?”

“Close your eyes.” He was quite insistent. I opened my mouth to argue but then figured that the quickest way to get off this wagon and back into the hay to get some sleep was to go along.

I felt Leroy take my paw and pat the lion’s head with it. I played along and shut my eyes.

“What am I feeling?” I was about to ask, and then I felt it myself. There, on the lion’s battered metal cheeks, on the top of his head, on the back of his neck were...stripes!

I looked back at Leroy. “Good eye!”

“So what does it mean?” he asked.

I had a sudden notion, but I needed to think on it some more. “I’m not entirely sure,” I said. “Let’s go back upstairs.”

We got ourselves all tucked into our favorite spot near Finnigan’s bed on the

second floor just as Lucy made her nightly sneak visit to see Finnigan. She had found him when he was just a few weeks old and brought him home, even though she knew her dad was deathly allergic to cats.

And so Finnigan grew up out in the barn with me and Leroy showing him the ropes. Still, Lucy still managed to sneak out of the house almost every night to bring a special treat just for Finnigan.

And the two of them would sit, once he'd finished drinking up a bowl of cream or eating some treats, with Finnigan in her lap wrapped in a blanket, and her telling him a bedtime story. You could tell this was the best part of his day, no matter **how** many adventures we pulled off!

Lucy finally went back to the house after telling Finnigan "The Three Billy Goats Gruff." Leroy and I snuggled ourselves into Finnigan's furry side and tried to make

sense of the day. Finnigan had dropped off to sleep, though sometimes it could be a little hard to tell what was snoring and what was purring.

I felt my own eyelids start to droop, but Leroy was still pretty wound up. I glimpsed his face in the moonlight and saw that his eyes were wide open and big as buttons. I turned over and shut my eyes, pretending that I was already asleep. Maybe Leroy would follow suit.

A minute later I felt him tap on my shoulder. “Max, I can’t sleep!”

I pretended to yawn, hoping that he might find it catchy. He didn’t.

“Why don’t you count sheep?” I suggested.

He looked at me with alarm. “Are you kidding? Their hooves are sharp and they could step on me!”

“Only in your imagination,” I said.

“Doesn’t matter,” he said stubbornly. “I could still get hurt.”

No amount of logic was going to beat that one. So I tried again. “Okay, then why don’t you count butterflies?” I said.

He rolled his eyes. “They tickle,” he said.

From long experience, I knew where this would end up. I was going to be in for a restless night with Leroy tossing and turning next to me unless I surrendered now.

“Max,” he said, and I reluctantly sat up, still resting against Finnigan’s soft, rumbling fur.

“What, Leroy?” though I knew what came next.

“Tell me a story?”

## Chapter Eight



### TELL ME A STORY!

“Fine...” I said. “But just one!”  
Leroy rearranged himself in my direction, but still kept laying down...in case he'd fall asleep halfway through the story. As if!

I cleared my throat and then began.  
“Once upon a time...” I said.

“NO!” said Leroy. “Not a fairy tale!”

“No fairy tales?” I asked.

“Tell me a circus story,” he said.

“Well there are a million of those,” I said. “Are you sure you wouldn’t rather hear about Jack and the Beanstalk?”

“Nah,” Finnigan broke in. “Lucy just read me that one the other day.”

“I thought you were asleep!”

“Not with you two yammering next to me,” he said.

“I remember when I was little my grandpa would tell me stories about the olden days in the circus to get me to fall asleep,” Leroy pleaded.

“Okay, let me think for a bit,” I said.

Well, there certainly were a lot of circus tales to pick from, some funnier than others, and some more gruesome than others! Leroy, being a hopeless romantic, was a big fan of love stories and happy endings.



So I decided **not** to pull out the story about the lion tamer who was in love with a girl who worked the flying trapeze.

Unlucky for the lion tamer, another performer was in love with the same girl. And so one night, before the lion-tamer went into the ring, his rival sprinkled sneezing powder on the shoulders of lion-tamer's fancy costume.

The high point of the lion-tamer's act was putting his head in the mouth of his **very** tame pet lion. But as you might guess, when he did the trick with the sneezing powder on his costume, the lion sneezed... and that was the end of **that** love story!

No, that one would certainly give Leroy nightmares. Maybe I'd keep that one for a time we needed to stay **awake!**

"Do you know any stories about tigers?" Leroy blurted out.

Well, that was a good question. Things

were starting to come back to me now, from when I was just a sprout. Leroy wasn't the only mouse in the family who had been rocked to sleep with circus stories! And since this wagon we found seemed to be connected to tigers, a story my own grandfather had told me suddenly swam up from memory and right back into focus.

"As a matter of fact, Leroy," I said, "I do!"

\* \* \* \* \*

This was indeed a story about a tiger, but more importantly, it was a story about a tiger **wagon**. The very wagon sitting below us in our very own barn. Yes, it was really a tiger wagon. But it wasn't just **any** tiger wagon. And so I began to remember...

*Most of the time, when a circus parade made its way through a town pulled by teams of sturdy horses, the big cats were **inside** the*

wagons.

Really, can you think of a safer way to transport and display a huge jungle cat through a crowd of people that he looked at like tasty snacks? The big cats would roar, the crowds would scream with delight and fear, children would cling to their parents' hands, and everybody went home to their beds knowing that they were never in real danger.

**HOWEVER...**there had been one traveling circus, the Viglietti Brothers, that liked to bump the excitement and spectacle and risks up by a few hundred notches. Their acrobats leaped higher, their trapeze artists did more triple somersaults without a net, and they had a tiger who was an absolute show-stopper.

This ferocious tiger was Rajah, and he was tame for just one person, his lovely mistress, Serena. Serena was a dark-haired beauty who had grown up in the circus and had raised Rajah from a tiny cub when his mother died. For her, Rajah was always just a

*kitten at heart, but he could be ferocious on cue when Serena gave him a secret signal. And when that tiger roared, nobody watching him would ever think he was putting on an act.*

I looked over at Finnigan, and could see that he'd totally given up on trying to sleep. He was hanging on my every word, just like Leroy. I felt just like a ringmaster!

*When this circus parade rolled into town, Rajah didn't spend it sitting inside a wagon with iron bars on the sides like the other big cats. He and Serena rode **on top** of the wagon, in the open air. Serena sat on a velvet pillow on a seat at the back, wearing a costume made of sapphire blue silk and spangly things. Rajah sat her feet, wearing a matching jeweled collar, surveying the crowds below as they passed by.*

*If you were on the top of the wagon with them, you'd have seen that Rajah's fancy collar was really attached to a chain fastened to an iron loop in the floor of the roof. The*

*circus owners may have been daring, but they certainly weren't crazy!!*

*While the crowds lining the streets didn't know it, they were actually quite safe from Rajah, who every once in a while would throw back his head and roar and show off those mighty white fangs. He looked like he couldn't wait to jump into the crowd and have a school teacher for lunch!*

*Of course, this being the circus, a lot of things looked different (or more expensive) than they really were. And those "jewels" on Rajah's collar were really made of glass—blue for sapphires, white for diamonds.*

*Serena loved Rajah fiercely, this tiger she raised from a cub. But she had also fallen in love with the driver of the wagon that pulled the two of them through the crowds. His name was Ivan, and he was tall, and strong, and hopelessly in love with Serena. He was also a master at handling the four-horse hitch that pulled this special wagon.*

And that was a **pretty enormous job**, keeping four horses calm and steady and moving forward when they were hauling a wagon with **A LIVE TIGER** on top! I'm sure that the horses weren't in on the "this tiger is just a big pussycat and he can't get loose" secret. All that the horses knew was that they were a few feet away from a big cat who could break their necks with a swipe of a giant paw!

By this time, Leroy had huddled into the side of Finnigan's neck and was holding on by fistfuls of fur. Finnigan didn't even seem to notice.

Now Ivan was not only skilled at driving horses, he also worked with metal and built wagons. He and his family left Russia when he was a child, with their family fortune reduced to a handful of jewels that were easy to carry and hide. And now Ivan was the only one left in his family.

Ivan and Serena made plans in secret to leave the circus with Rajah and take the tiger

*to India by boat. At night, after everyone was asleep, Serena and Ivan would substitute the real jewels for the glass ones on Rajah's collar. Really, what better place could there be to keep them safe and unnoticed than around a tiger's neck? Nobody ever got close enough to look at his collar, or even wanted to!*

*Finally it was the night to make the plan happen. Serena put Rajah on a leash, took a bag with a few pieces of clothing, and snuck away from the circus and down to the harbor to the ship that Ivan had booked passage on for the three of them. And there Serena and Rajah waited...and waited...and waited...and the next morning the ship set sail for India. But Ivan wasn't on it.*

Leroy looked like he was shock. "What happened?"

"I don't remember most of the rest," I said. "I always fell asleep before Grandpa got to the end of the story."

Finnigan narrowed his eyes and stared

at me, like he could will me to recall more.

“All I know is, something happened to Ivan that night to keep him from getting to the boat in time,” I said.

“What happened to Serena and Rajah?” asked Leroy. “Did they reach India with the jewels?”

“For some reason, I don’t think the jewels went with them,” I said.

Leroy frowned with disappointment.

“You know I like happy endings,” he said. “And that didn’t turn out very happily for poor Ivan and Serena.”

“Well, I’m sure it turned out happy for Rajah,” I said.

“Do you think he ever found some other tigers to hang out with when he got to India?” asked Finnigan.

“Probably,” I said. Thinking too much was starting to make my head hurt. “But you know, even if he didn’t, he still had



Serena. They were a family.”

“Like us,” said Leroy. He seemed a little happier, and his eyes finally started to droop shut. Then Finnigan followed suit, and we all finally dreamt of roaring tigers and sparkling jewels and skittish horses.



Mary T. Wagner is an award-winning author, grandmother, and cat-owner living in Wisconsin.

She first started to imagine the series of Finnigan stories after her younger son and his wife brought home the smallest kitten she had ever seen from an animal shelter.

As he grew, the wee Finnigan's grey stripes and moustache reminded her of a circus acrobat's costume, and his habit of pouncing on the other animals in the household just added to his daredevil demeanor. And what combination of things could possibly be more loveable than a kitten and a circus!!

Coming soon...!!

# **FINNIGAN THE LIONHEARTED**

When a traveling circus comes to Beechville, Finnigan and his pals Leroy, Max and Boomer can't resist sneaking in to watch. The elephants! The horses! The aerialists! The lions!!

After the show, Finnigan and the mice make friends with the "big cats" of the Big Top. But danger still awaits them in the shape of two neighborhood cats with a taste for mice and an axe to grind.

Before the night is over, Finnigan must channel his "inner lion" to be braver than he's ever been!