chapter one

Light from April's full moon swept over the Museum's façade and down the building's marble veneer. It illuminated the man-sized letters that hung high and large enough for a person as far uptown as Canal Street to see, spelling out Barnum's American Museum. From where I sat in my fourth-floor window, nearly all of Manhattan's sky was visible.

I pressed my back against the window frame and watched the moonlight dissolve a fistful of clouds. Its glow rolled across Broadway to cover the spires of St. Paul's and the front of City Hall, the mourning flag for Lincoln still listlessly hanging there, then spilled across the stables and roofs of houses abandoned to haberdashers and tailors. Most of higher society had stampeded uptown toward Fifth Avenue years ago, sticking to the highest part of the island and avoiding the land that sloped down toward the rivers on either side.

A bum staggered to a halt below me on a Broadway emptied by the encroaching night. He bellowed something indistinguishable, then tipped back on his heels to gawk, open-mouthed, up, up, up along the high Museum walls. He gazed in awe at the oval paintings of exotic tigers, whales, and a white-horned rhinoceros that were strung between each story of windows like pendants across the bosom of a well-endowed harlot. Who could blame the poor man for staring? Thousands before him had fallen for the gussied up old place, everyone from the city's poorest paupers to the families of its Upper Ten—and once even a prince. They, too, had all been enticed by the Museum's glitter. And

why not? The place was irresistible. Banners and fluttering flags beckoned from the roof like welcoming hands, and a pied-piper band spewed out terrible music from the balcony twelve hours a day, every day except Sunday. "I take great pains to hire the poorest musicians I can find," Barnum liked to say. "They play so badly that the crowd moves into the Museum just to get out of earshot." Colossal gas lamps flanked the front doors, and just inside stood a huge golden statue of Apollo, his horses rearing, a lyre dangling from his naked shoulder. The great illuminator's index finger pointed toward the ticket window, just in case a visitor failed to see its shiny plaque.

The truth was, even I still found the place impressive after living here for nearly a decade. I'd been one of Phineas Taylor Barnum's Human Curiosities (viewed thrice daily under the moniker Bartholomew Fortuno, the World's Thinnest Man) since 1855, and, all in all, I could not complain about the way my life had unfolded. Few talents managed to make their way as far in the business as I had—Barnum's Museum was the pinnacle of our trade—and I made a good living off the gifts nature had given me. I had found a comfortable home.

So it was with a great sense of satisfaction that I sat on my windowsill that chilly spring night, just after the end of the War of the Rebellion, unaware that change twisted its way to me through the darkened New York streets. Mindlessly, I ran a hand lovingly across my right shoulder, never tiring of the intricacies of socket and bone, then lit a cheroot in defense against the fetid air; the local breweries, tanneries, slaughterhouses, and fat-melting establishments smoldered away even in the middle of the night. Looking north I could make out Five Points, the Bowery, and the mean area around Greenwich Street that was jammed with immigrants and other unsavory folks. So many Irishmen, Italians, and Germans had crammed themselves below Houston Street that I could all but hear the clang of their knife fights. I avoided visiting that part of town. In fact, whenever possible, I avoided leaving Barnum's Museum at all. A man like me had no business in the wider world. Let the outside world come to me and pay to do it.

Catching a whiff of spring blossoms from the West Side orchards, I couldn't help but turn to Matina, who sat on my divan, tatting a lace doily to replace the one she'd stained with lamb gravy the week before. Next to her rested a tray of empty dishes from her evening snack and a pillow she'd embroidered for me years ago with the words *He Who Stands with the Devil Does Himself Harm*.

"I told you it was possible to smell the orchards from here, my dear. Come and sniff for yourself."

"All I smell is garbage," Matina answered, from her seat. "Come away from the window, Barthy. I've something I want to show you before I leave for the night."

Matina, my friend and frequent companion, had spent the evening with me as she often did, and I was glad to have her company. She'd been a permanent fixture at the Museum for four years that spring, having come from Doc Spaulding's *Floating Palace*, the great boat circus that barged up and down the Mississippi. Her stage name back then was Annie Angel the Fat Girl, and although she no longer performed under that sobriquet, it suited her well. Matina was as charming as a beautiful child. With her blond finger curls, alabaster skin, and great blue eyes that gazed out at the world as if she were seeing it for the first time, she resembled a great big porcelain doll.

Flip sides of the same coin, we'd taken to each other the first time we met, and our friendship had only grown over the years, in spite of constant taunts from Ricardo the Rubber Man. "The woman weighs over three hundred pounds, Fortuno! And look at you. A stick figure! I'll bet it slips in like a needle in the haystack." I was mortified by such crass observations, especially when they were made in front of my lady friend, but everyone knew that Ricardo's taunts had little truth to them. Matina had understood from the beginning that my body was not built for pleasure, and we'd both accepted the limitations of our relationship a long time ago. I liked to think our friendship was stronger because of it.

Earlier this evening, I'd spent an hour or so reading aloud from the current installment of *Our Mutual Friend* in *Harper's*. Dickens's fine wit made Matina smile, and she giggled like a girl as she put away her

lace and then plumped up the pillow on the sofa and tapped the seat next to her.

"Come look at my new discovery," she said, digging into her bag and hauling out an oversized book. She flung it onto the low table in front of her, jangling the lamp as it landed. "It's by the same man who wrote *Peter Parley's Tales of America*. But this one is about people like us. I hear it goes back hundreds of years."

The book, bound in black cloth and covered with fine embossing and gold letters, was titled *Curiosities of Human Nature*.

"He illustrates quite well, I think. Wouldn't it be marvelous if someday we wound up in a book like this?"

The leaves of the book crackled as I thumbed through the pages. Matina was right; the woodcuts were of excellent quality. Although I vastly preferred my own books on congenital anomalies—Willem Vrolik's *Handbook of Pathological Anatomy* or his more dramatic *Tabulae ad illustrandam embryogenesin hominis et mammaliam tam naturalem quam abnormem*—Matina's new book was not a bad alternative. Her taste usually tended toward the pictorial—like most New York ladies, Matina kept an extensive collection of *cartes* not only of Prodigies and Wunderkinds but of famous New York families like the Schermerhorns and the Joneses—but at least she was literate.

Matina flipped through the pages of her new treasure one by one. "It's quite comprehensive. Look here. He's done a whole section on dwarfs. Jeffery Hudson, born in 1619, only three feet nine." She furrowed her eyebrows and read out loud. "'Midgets and dwarfs have generally one trait in common with children, a high opinion of their own little persons and great vanity.' Ha!" She looked up, bright-eyed. "Well. *We* could have told him that!"

She was quite right. Over the years at least a dozen midgets had cursed us with their presence, and—with the exception of Tom Thumb and his lovely wife, Miss Lavinia—not one of them was tolerable. Dwarfs could be even worse—testy, arrogant, and impossible to please—but fortunately, Barnum rarely hired dwarfs. He thought them too misshapen for the delicate sensibilities of his feminine clientele.

"And here's a story about a young boy, six years old, who did impossible calculations in his head. You see here?" Matina used her finger like a teacher's baton, poking at the page. "Zerah Colburn calculated in his head the number of seconds in two thousand years. In less than a heartbeat he answered, Sixty-three billion seventy million." She looked at me with a touch of irony. "They say he had a very large head."

"Any good phrenologist would tell you that head size and intelligence are closely correlated," I observed.

Matina laughed. "What if I were to knock my forehead and develop a big bump right here?" She poked a finger into the front part of her brow. "Would that make me smarter than you?"

I let the comment pass.

Around midnight, Matina complained of heartburn and said she was ready for bed. I thought she would soon leave for her own quarters, but she surprised me by walking toward my bedroom.

"Do you mind if I rest here a minute or two? My stomach is bothering me something terrible. I won't stay long." As she passed, I caught a whiff of the sweet smell that always hovered about her. Tonight: a potpourri of pork shanks, braised leeks, and apples mixed with her usual lavender perfume.

Down went Matina's massive body on my bed, the wood frame groaning in protest, and within minutes she fell into a snoring sleep. Much as I would have preferred her to go to her own rooms, I could hardly have said no. It was my duty as a friend to accommodate Matina's physical problems. She suffered from a number of ailments, ranging from sleep difficulty to the swelling of her legs and, most recently, a racing of her heart even at rest, but anyone with gifts like ours knows to take a philosophical view of such complaints. I myself often suffered from swollen joints, the pain of bony knees knocking together, the bumps of exposed elbows, a lightheadedness appearing at inopportune moments, or an unpadded chair torturing my hips and spine. Every gift has its price.

I laid my comforter over Matina's bare arms—her off-the-shoulder gown was charming but not very sensible—and left to tidy up my

parlor. After lowering the gas lamps, I swallowed a nip of tonic for my aching joints and shimmied back out onto my bedroom window ledge to watch the evening pass.

The clatter of a carriage in the street soon caught my attention. Gripping the window's frame, I tilted out to find the source. At first I saw nothing, only street shadows and lamplight and a gray dog darting between the sycamores across the road. And then there it was, a grand carriage appearing at the far end of Broadway, the clop-clop of its horses drawing it toward the Museum. How curious. One might expect to see a two-seater at such an hour, carrying someone's mistress home or taking a gentleman from the fancy brothels like Flora's or the Black Crook down to the scruffier waterfront ballrooms, but this was a landau coach, posh and stylish, its top latched down and its lacquered sides glinting in the moonlight.

Rather than turn west toward the more pleasant Church Street, the coach continued straight, passing the twin gas lamps that stood guard before the Museum's entrance. I leaned a bit farther out the window, straining to keep the carriage in sight. It came to a stop a few paces later. One of the horses whinnied as the driver jumped from his perch and drew open a cushioned door, ceremoniously rolling out the steps. A glimpse inside the cab attested to its luxuriousness: its walls were plush with padded fabric, its seats were covered with fine leather, and its floor was elegantly tiled. It was much finer than any coach I'd ever had the pleasure of riding in. I considered waking Matina, who took great delight in mysterious happenings, but the next thing I saw kept me riveted to my place.

Out of the coach, a tiny foot emerged, followed by a gloved hand reaching delicately toward the extended arm of the driver. An apparition appeared. She wore a full veil of white attached to a fashionable bonnet, and her traveling coat was of unquestionable excellence. This was a woman of quality if ever I saw one. She faltered on the stair, and the driver took her by the waist to assist her. She brushed aside his hands and gently stepped onto the wooden planks of the walk in front of the Museum.

"How dare you manhandle this woman, sir?"

A booming voice that could only belong to Barnum rang out from inside the carriage. Most intriguing. Had the great Phineas T. returned early from his scouting trip? Barnum often left us to chase down rumors and ferret out new talent, and usually he stayed on the road for months at a time, scouring the traveling circuses, the carnivals, and the other grand cities for the unnatural, the exotic, and the new. According to the Museum manager, Benjamin Fish, Barnum was not due back from his current trip until mid-June. That was still nearly two months away, but here he was, forcing his bearlike body out of the carriage door and stomping across the dirty planks of the walkway, sending the rats below scurrying into the street. I gazed down at the great man. Barnum's receding hairline hinted at his age, but his eyebrows—as bushy and wild as ever—spoke to how vital he still remained.

Barnum puffed out his chest, his belly protruding above his satin waistband, and approached the driver, who looked around the abandoned street as if Barnum were addressing someone else.

"Have you heard me, man?"

"I ain't done nothin,' sir," the driver yelped. "Tried to help her down is all."

"You've acted beyond your position," Barnum said. "You've forgotten your place."

I realized that I'd lost sight of Barnum's mysterious companion, but then I spotted her resting against a post. She straightened her veil with a small gloved hand as the driver shifted back on his heels. Barnum advanced. The driver clenched his fists in what looked like an acceptance of Barnum's challenge, but then he scuttled back and hopped onto his coach, barreling away in a storm of scattered stones and dust.

Barnum and the veiled woman, alone now, lingered in the gaslight below. I could make out only the muffled rise and fall of Barnum's voice against the soft murmurings of the woman's responses. Moments later, the great front doors opened and they disappeared into the Atrium. I retreated from the window back into the bedroom, calmed by the sound of Matina's rhythmic breathing.

In my parlor, I picked up the tray full of Matina's empty plates and glasses and set it outside in the hall for the chambermaid to fetch. The veiled woman must be a new act. But, if so, why would Barnum slip her in under cover of night? It made no sense at all. Barnum was the consummate showman. No one in the world knew how to create drama and interest the way he did, and every new act was an opportunity for him to step into the spotlight and seize the attention of all of New York. Human Curiosities were Barnum's greatest pride. He was forever boasting of our gifts. "My Curiosities are the royalty of the underworld," he would say. "Like everyone else, but more. So much more." In fact, when I first came to the Museum, Barnum cleared an entire room for my exhibit. He gathered every skeleton in the place—from a six-inch steppe lemming to the reassembled bones of a Romanian water buffalo—and placed them, smallest to largest, around the perimeter of the room. Full-sized portraits of yours truly in all my six-foot, sixty-seven-pound glory touted me as THE THINNEST MAN IN THE WORLD.

Barnum gave an equal introduction to Jonathan Alley, labeling the muscled newcomer The Giant Boy of Hungary and dressing him in bright red pantaloons and one of those tidy bow ties commonly worn by boys from the better families. Although Alley was nearly twenty-five years old at the time and bore the shadow of a rugged beard, Barnum worked the monster-child illusion perfectly. Alley came to the Museum with great flourish, caged atop a painted wagon drawn down the center of Broadway during the height of commerce. The "boy monster" rattled the bars of a cage full of bunting and big yellow balls. I laughed until my side stitched when I first saw the man. "I think it's a perfectly decent presentation," Matina had said, offended by my laughter. But then hadn't she started her career dressed as a cherub, wings and all?

When Barnum hired his giant, Emma Swan, The World's Tallest Woman, he flew flags off the balconies and made up twenty-foot posters of her seated with two midgets on her lap. He claimed that she stood eight feet high—what did it matter if she had to pile up her hair and teeter around on shoes with four-inch heels in order to measure

up? Barnum even had Ricardo the Rubber Man stretched from one balcony to the next for an entire morning during the first week he came to us. Yes, all of us had been given a proper introduction to the public. So why would he sneak this newest act into the Museum in the dead of night?

I pulled the shutters closed and stuck my head into the bedroom. Matina was sprawled across two-thirds of the bed, her hair flaxen in the moonlight. Her generous breasts rose and fell like waves on the ocean beneath the blue silk of her dress. What if the woman I'd seen with Barnum was competition for Matina? She'd be furious. But no. The woman I'd seen outside did not look large. Had Barnum perhaps found a new Hottentot Venus? Again, no. The new woman was slim and elegant, with no protruding buttocks, at least as far as I could tell. Still, the real Hottentot Venus had been dead for years—I'd heard rumors that certain oversized parts of her had been pickled and now floated in a jar on display by special invitation only at Kahn's Anatomical Museum—and a new Venus would be a true coup.

Maybe I should wake Matina. Surely, she'd know who was coming up through the circuits. And oh, how she'd love the gossip of a mystery woman! But I decided it best not to disturb her. Instead, I settled into the small space beside her, pulled my mother's comforter over my ribs, and gave myself over to dreams of great and mysterious women.