

CHAPTER ONE

The last time I saw a circus parade, I was only four years old. That sunlit summer afternoon is still absolutely clear to me. Vendors with pushcarts hawked sky-blue cotton candy in paper cones. Clowns in pumpkin colored wigs flapped giant shoes over cobblestones as they presented children with plastic pinwheels and monkeys on sticks. As the entourage drew closer my handsome young father lifted me in his arms and told me how Hannibal, his personal hero, had driven elephants, just like the ones coming toward us, across the Alps from Carthage to bring Rome to its knees. Thoughts of any powerful government falling prey to the "little guy" still bring tears to Ray Sloan's eyes, and I'm sure that the day the circus came was no exception.

I know those memories of sunshine and the loving embrace of my father aren't figments of my thirty-seven year old imagination. Nor is my memory of Ray slugging a grease paint glutton of a clown who tried to chuck me under my chin. Then there's my final memory, the two of us dodging toddlers and shrieking old ladies as Ray raced helter skelter from the police who had been charged with escorting the parade, along with the cages of lions and tigers and bears.

Oh my.

To this day, Ray is not a fan of chin chuckers. To this day I'm still a fan

of circuses. I'm also a fan of Ray's, although extra careful with what I choose to report in our letters and phone calls. These days Ray lives in an Indiana survivalist compound with a dozen other Vietnam vets, preparing for the moment when he, like Hannibal, might be called to send Rome, the ATF or the CIA packing.

The good news is that so far, nobody seems interested in asking Ray for help.

I'm not sure where we happened to be living when that last circus strutted into my memories. I do know where I live now. Emerald Springs, Ohio, my home for nearly three years. Today if a clown chucked me on the chin, I would be forced to smile and treat him with understanding, maybe gently suggesting a short course on good touch/bad touch. These days I am the wife of the minister of one of our town's most historic churches. It will not do to slug anybody. Unless, of course, they're trying to kill me, which has happened more times since my arrival in town than I care to think about.

Having Ray Sloan for a father, spending childhood summers marching and orienteering and flipping men twice my size, had its positive side. Thanks largely to Ray's survival training I am still alive, even well. I'm hoping to stay this way for years to come. Like my daddy, I'm planning to survive.

"Aggie, what on earth are you thinking about? You're waving your finger in the air."

I glanced at my best friend Lucy Jacobs, who was sitting in the driver's seat beside me. Luce was trying to find a place to park her cherry red Chrysler, and it was no surprise she wasn't having any luck since, for half a mile behind us, both sides of dusty Horseshoe Bend Road were lined with cars.

Clearly we weren't the only good citizens of Emerald Springs who knew we were about to be invaded. In a town like ours, news travels as fast as butter melting on pierogies. There's a certain collective osmosis here. I'm not sure words are necessary. Like lemmings with larger brains and better survival instincts, the entire population of Emerald Springs probably stepped across their thresholds half an hour ago and headed for their cars. Hopefully no one is going to end this simultaneous migration by throwing themselves under the wheels of the battered RVs turning in to the acreage ahead of us. But stranger things have happened here.

I carefully curled the waving finger back into my fist. "You wouldn't believe the places my mind can go."

Lucy lifted one perfectly penciled eyebrow. "You're kidding, right? We work side by side. I helped you solve three murders. Next to Ed, nobody's seen your mind twirling into outer space more often than I have."

"And yet, from somewhere deep inside, you still find enough goodwill to let me ride in your car."

"What were you thinking about?"

"The day I was four and watched a circus arrive with my father."

"That sounds like a perfectly normal thing to do." She spared me a doubtful glance, wrinkling her perky little nose. "You did normal things together?"

"Ray has his normal moments. When the girls and I visited last week, he acted like any contented grandfather."

"Oh, really? He's taken up bridge? Golf?"

"No reason to. He has his food dehydrator, his weekly paint ball skirmishes, his obstacle courses. He and his comrades are building a wall so massive it's guaranteed to keep out any tank battalion making a wrong turn into rural Indiana. Better yet, if we're all lucky, it'll keep the guys in."

"I can't believe you take the girls with you."

Okay, Lucy knows too much about me. My family background does sound like a screwy sequel to Apocalypse Now or Hair. My father is a burned-out survivalist, and my mother, the much-married, flower child Junie Bluebird, traveled the craft festival circuit through my childhood and adolescence with my sisters and me in tow. But nowadays, except for Ray, our little family can almost pass for normal—if no one looks too closely. My sisters Vel and Sid are happy and productive, and they visit as often as they can. Junie has settled down right here in Emerald Springs, where she opened her own quilt shop, and joined the Chamber of Commerce. She even—I

hope—pays taxes.

I tried to explain our little Indiana getaway. "Deena's gotten so good on the rifle range, she could keep us in wild game—if we weren't vegetarians. And considering she's now officially a teenager, the self defense tricks Ray taught us will come in handy. Teddy can stalk wild asparagus and make a sourdough bread starter pretty much out of thin air." I left out the part where Ray had taken one good look and started me on a physical fitness program designed to make sure I can qualify for some underground version of the Army Rangers.

"I'm always surprised when you come back in one piece."

"For the most part, the guys at the compound are harmless. They aren't amassing weapons." I paused. "At least not that I could see."

Although the off-limit underground bunkers do worry me a tad.

Lucy spotted a space on the other side of the road that was not large enough that a normal person would consider it. She fishtailed between two oncoming cars, and slid into it at an angle, stopping just inches from the trash strewn drainage ditch. I had to give her credit. The back bumper of her Concorde had neatly cleared the road. I doubt she was on the right side of legal, but I also doubted anybody in authority would care. The cops were probably more concerned with crowd control up ahead.

Lucy flipped off the ignition. "Well, speaking of misfits. . ."

I was glad to change the subject. "I can't believe a circus bought the old

Weilly farm. I can believe you made the sale. The other realtors in Emerald Springs must despise you."

Lucy smiled like a cat. "Oh, they do, they do. And it's not a circus. I keep telling you. The new owners call themselves Sister Nora's Inspirational Tent Show. They don't just entertain, they bring people to the Lord."

Somebody should have taught Sister Nora about acronyms, a lesson she apparently hadn't learned at Tent Revival University. I said it out loud and managed not to smile. "SNITS. Which is what the city council is having, I bet. We have an ordinance against setting a mousetrap without a hunting license, but there's nothing in place to keep exotic animals off this property? Or a religious cult?"

"Ohio doesn't have any laws against owning exotic animals. The farm is just outside the city limits, and Sadler Township has rules about pigs and cows, but not elephants." Lucy shook back her copper curls, then decided that wasn't good enough. She fished for an elastic band in her purse and scrunched her hair into a springy ponytail. I could relate. We were about to launch ourselves into the heat. Outside the safety and security of the Concorde's efficient air-conditioner, the sun was unrelenting. June in central Ohio can be hot and humid, but this June was setting records. And nobody was sure where the humidity came from, since it hadn't rained in Emerald Springs for almost three months.

Before leaving home I'd done the ponytail thing myself, although the majority of my dark hair had already slipped out and was waving limply against my cheeks and nape. Chastened by Lucy's good example, I tried for renewed order.

"I can't believe the girls aren't here to go with us," I said. My daughters Deena and Teddy were off with my mother camping in Junie's motor home. With her new quilt shop doing a tidy business, Junie has finally found assistants capable of keeping things going for a few days when she's away. As soon as we'd gotten back from Indiana, she and my girls had gone off for a fling to a nearby lake. Before I'd had time to unpack my own stuff, Lucy had kidnaped me to bring me here.

"Just remember all the details, so you'll have a great story to tell them," Lucy said. "And quit stalling."

I opened my door and nearly succumbed to the first fiery burst. The air was as still as a meditating monk. Maybe a breeze would have been cooling, or maybe it would simply have swept more heat in our direction. Having accompanied Junie through deserts and swamps during my checkered childhood, I'd certainly experienced worse. But despite Ray's exercise plan, I was still too soft these days, unrepentantly opposed to sunstroke and heat prostration.

I caught up with Lucy, who looked comfortable enough, even though sun

plays havoc with the complexions of green-eyed redheads. I decided a new freckle or two wouldn't be amiss. Lucy's cute enough to turn the head of every male who comes within ten yards of her. Extra freckles might weed out the ne'er-do-wells from the potential husbands.

Marrying off Lucy is something of a change of pace for me, but in the last year I've realized I need a new avocation, since my old one—solving murders—comes with a nasty downside of potential victimhood. Now, to stay busy, I'm planning to find Lucy an acceptable man, so I can become godmother to red-haired bouncing babies. Of course Lucy's Jewish, so I'm not sure about the godmother thing. But there has to be something equivalent.

Of course I have, as yet, not mentioned this to her.

We weren't the only ones hiking down the road to see Emerald Springs' latest sideshow. With zombie-like determination, family groups, teenagers, old couples arm in arm, were staggering toward the acres that were slowly filling with tractor trailers, RVs sprouting satellite dishes, and cages on flatbed trucks.

I caught up to Lucy. "Don't the animal rights folks make a fuss about the way these animals are transported?"

"I've done a little research. Sister Nora's fielded a few crack pot complaints, professional grouchers who don't think any animals, even well cared for ones, should be in captivity. No circuses, zoos, rodeos. Nada. But it

seems to me those complaints have been more public relations than serious lawsuits. No authority has ever cited the show. When they were still a circus, they had a sterling reputation."

Sterling seemed like the wrong word. Nothing about the procession of dilapidated vehicles looked shiny or valuable. Battered cutlery was more like it. The kind you toss in the picnic basket because it doesn't matter if somebody throws away a knife or a spoon with the chicken bones. The circus—whoops, the inspirational tent show—looked like it was subsisting on its last dime. I wondered how Sister Nora could afford to feed the two elephants waving their trunks in the distance. And meat for the big cats? I shuddered. Did they intend to raise it here?

"How on earth did they afford this land?" I asked Lucy. "There must be what, eighty acres?"

"Ninety, but after the owner died, the place was abandoned for most of a year. The heirs didn't want to work with a realtor, so every once in awhile they advertised it for way too much, with no takers. The land's okay, but the house is so rundown I wouldn't even consider it for one of our flips."

Lucy and I flip houses as a team. She finds likely prospects that don't need extensive renovation, and together we do the work. So far we've managed three. Now we're looking for a fourth project, something fast and easy to sink our not so massive profits into. So far neither of us had been thrilled with the

possibilities. Or maybe the prospect of scraping and prying and carrying out truckloads of garbage when the temperatures are so fierce is the roadblock.

"I'm not sure a farmhouse would be a good flip anyway," I said as we drew closer. "Any farmer worth his salt would pay less and do the repairs himself. And nobody would want this place for a summer cottage. Horseshoe Bend isn't the prettiest country road I've ever seen. More Heartbreak Hollow than East Hampton."

"Which is perfect for Sister Nora, since none of the neighbors are going to have the cash to kick her off her land or the clout to get the authorities to do it. They'll leave her alone. If an animal gets out and bothers somebody, they'll shoot it."

I winced.

We were nearing the gate into the property now, which was wide open for the trucks and RVs. Lucy kept moving.

"As to how they paid for it?" Lucy smiled at me and wiggled her brows. "Aren't you glad you know me?"

Actually I was. Thrilled, in fact, since my friendship and partnership with Lucy was one of the reasons I had come to terms with living in a town where "change" was something you threw in the Salvation Army bucket at Christmas.

"How did they pay?" I prompted.

"She converted a multi-millionaire."

"She? Sister Nora?"

"The one and only. He paid for the farm in cash. A little, wizened dude named Henry Cinch. We might spot him. Look for the old guy with the bald head."

"That's pretty general."

"No, his bald head is counterintuitive. He has all his hair on top, and none around the edges. Anyway Henry made his money in Texas. Apparently a lot of it. Now he's getting rid of it as fast as he can."

"Most likely it's that New Testament teaching about rich men, heaven, and the eye of a needle. I mean, if he thinks his end is near enough, he'll want to spend his ill-gotten gains on good things pretty quickly."

"Does it work that way? You can live any way you want, then repent at the last minute?"

I ignored the theological challenge, since answering big questions is my husband's bailiwick. "It sounds like he's doing more than repent. He's divesting. I wonder if they'll use some of his money to fix up the house."

"They'll sure have the labor to do it."

About that, Lucy was right. Even if none of the RVs held tiny munchkin families sleeping six to a bed, enough vehicles had gone through the gate to indicate that at least a hundred people were connected to SNITS. Probably a

good many more.

The crowd was gathering just outside the gate. There was no chance of a riot. Midwesterners are far too polite, too orderly, to push their way on to private property. We're not, however, too polite to gather and stare. We're also, as a species, prone to keen interest in anything that smacks of the strange or illicit. I wasn't sure which category Sister Nora and her crew might fall into, but I was anxious to find out.

Lucy walked around the edges of the gathering mob, waited for another truck to pass, then minced her way across the cattle guard that ran parallel to the fence. With an apologetic glance at the people who were watching us, I followed just in front of an approaching RV, nearly sprawling head first when I caught a toe between steel pipes.

I caught up to her. "Luce, if we were going in, why didn't we just drive? why all the parking nonsense?"

"Because I figured we'd make better time on foot than lining up with the other vehicles. I have a couple of documents for Sister Nora."

I grasped her shoulder and held her in place. "Lucy?"

She shrugged it off. "Okay, just Welcome Wagon stuff and information about county trash pickup. But I wanted to see this up close, didn't you?"

We walked farther into the melee, and there was, indeed, a lot to see. Scruffy men clad—at most—in tank tops and cut-offs were directing the vehicles

into roped off areas. Ten yards from where we stopped a bare chested giant with a narrow head and stevedore shoulders was pounding metal stakes into the ground with a sledgehammer. A much smaller sidekick walked along beside him carrying the stakes. Four muscular women just beyond us were unloading a van filled with picnic tables that had to weigh several hundred pounds each. Two men on the ground were setting them into some kind of frame on wheels and carting them in the direction of the man with the stakes.

"Cookhouse," one of the men said as he passed, nodding in that direction.

He had answered my unspoken question. No one seemed annoyed we were staring. One of the Amazon women hefting picnic tables even flashed me a warm smile. Everybody seemed to know exactly what to do and how to do it. And from the little I'd seen so far, nobody seemed to mind.

"They seem happy," I told Lucy. "For what might be a cult."

"If they offer you Kool-Aid, opt for bottled spring water."

We continued on our way, past circling wagons and RVs that were cranking up awnings and setting out barbecues. We passed children spilling happily from cars into the unrelenting sunshine; men erecting what looked like a temporary corral for the horses, and horse trailers that smelled pungent and earthy, but not abundantly so.

"They take particularly good care of the horses. As a girl Sister Nora

starred in the equestrian act," Lucy said. "This is what remains of the Nelson-Zimboni Circus."

"You did all this, you learned all this while I was in Indiana?"

"Well, I had to do something, didn't I? Other than grieve your absence?"

I poked her in the arm. "Doesn't it seem, um, precipitous to you? I leave for a week, I come back and we're watching an inspirational circus move in."

"Actually, they've been looking in our area for a long time. Just a few realtors knew, and we were sworn to secrecy. Then I heard about this place, realized it would be perfect, and talked the owners into listing with me. When Sister Nora saw it, she wanted it fast. I gave her fast. The place was deserted. The tent show had the cash. It was something of a coup, if I do say so myself."

The roar of a lion lifted me off my feet and deposited me a few inches farther from Lucy.

"Horses were only part of the show," she continued, as if she was already used to the presence of man-eating beasts so close to our fair town.

"Nelson-Zimboni is generations old, but it was never large like Ringling Bros. or Clyde Beatty. Instead they were known for quality, and they had a huge following in small towns like this one. The equestrian act was one of the biggest draws. Gorgeous horses, gorgeous women, death-defying feats. From what I've had time to unearth, Nora's whole family starred in it. She doesn't

talk about that now, though. That's all in the past."

"The horses don't seem to be." I pointed to the trailers. "And neither do the lions."

"The Nelson wing of the circus created and maintained the animal acts. I guess they started at a time when zoos were just for city folk, and circuses filled the gap everywhere else. Little Beau and Baby Bubba only got to see tigers and lions under the big top."

"I'll be interested to see how Sister Nora uses them in her evangelism. Anybody who doesn't agree with her preaching gets a trip into their cage of choice?"

We moved out of the route of a tractor trailer and started up toward the house that sat in a grove of listless, dehydrating maples.

"I don't know how Emerald Springs is going to take to all this," Lucy said. "The animals, the revival meetings."

Not to mention a lot of talk about heaven and hell. We'd been used to talking about hell when I lived in Northern Virginia. That close to the White House, everybody was sure that whoever happened to be residing there was courting the devil, so it came naturally. But here?

"People in Emerald Springs want to think about the Cleveland Indians or the Cincinnati Bengals," I said. "They want to discuss whether little Jennifer is going to make it to the finals of the Emerald Springs Idyll, not whether she's

going to make it to heaven. Which reminds me, I've got to be back by four."

"Tell me again why you got corralled on that committee?"

The fund-raising committee Lucy referred to, the reason I had to be back in town, had been foisted on me by several powerful members of our church. Our task was to make sure that the Idyll, an overinflated talent show, ran smoothly and raised as much money as possible. It was exactly the kind of committee I hated most.

I listed reasons that didn't make me sound like a wimp. "It's important. You and I are between flips, and I need something to do this summer besides drive Teddy to swimming lessons and Deena to the stables."

"And because Sally Berrigan twisted your arm."

"That was only part of it." The other parts were Dolly Purcell and Esther, our organist. All three were members of our church.

"Is this in some minister's wife handbook? Caving in to people who can make your husband's life miserable?"

"Chapter one, second page, third paragraph. But really?" I slowed, because although I'm in relatively good shape after forced marches and chin ups last week, I was feeling winded from the heat. "It is a good cause, Luce. A new pediatric wing for Emerald Springs Hospital feels pretty personal. Suites where parents can stay comfortably with sick children, a four bed pediatric intensive care unit, a play area. How could I say no? If I can do

anything to make it happen, I need to."

Lucy didn't even try to argue. In fact her real estate agency had pledged a whopping sum to the new pediatric unit, and I was pretty sure a fair piece of it would come right out of Lucy's pocket.

"I see Sister Nora." Lucy nodded to the porch of the old farmhouse just yards away now.

The sunshine was a bright smear, and without conspicuously shading my eyes, I couldn't view anything clearly. I made out at least three figures to one side of the house, under the deep shade of a sagging roof, but not much more. I lowered my voice to a whisper. "Do we genuflect? I'm about as familiar with how to do that as you are. Which knee do we go down on?"

"You're going to like her." Lucy broke into a smile and started up the steps.

I was halfway up before the glare lessened and I could see a small cluster of people on a porch that was badly in need of paint. A middle-aged woman broke away from the others, who continued to converse in hushed tones, and started toward us. She was reed slender, almost emaciated, and her skin was the seasoned tan of my leather sandals. Both attributes made her enormous pale blue eyes nearly pop out of her head. She wore a blue work shirt that hung limply on her thin frame, and jeans that were probably a "minus two." She was average height, and if she hadn't been so gaunt, she would have been

pretty. The blond hair piled on top of her head and twisted in place with a barrette was probably a few shades lighter than the good Lord had intended, and threads of silver were making it more so. All in all, though, she was striking, a woman who would be hard to forget.

I guess that's a good thing in Nora's line of work.

"Lucy." Sister Nora extended her hand and grasped Lucy's. Her smile was warm and genuine, not one bit fake television preacher.

Lucy returned the smile. "I brought you a packet of information. And I wanted to see if you needed anything while you're moving in."

How Lucy could say that with a straight face intrigued me. Sister Nora needed a lot of things. Barbed wire around the perimeter for starters.

Lucy turned to me as Sister Nora did and made the introduction. Sister Nora grasped my hand and squeezed. For a drinking straw of a woman, she had a grip like the governor of Kah-li-foan-ia.

"Quite the commotion, yes? I'm sure your little town is wondering what we're all about." Sister Nora spoke with absolutely no accent. But that made sense for somebody born into a traveling circus. Growing up on the craft show circuit did the same for me.

"We don't get a lot of excitement here," I admitted. "This is about a year's worth, all at once."

"I hope you'll assure your friends and neighbors we mean no harm."

"Aggie's husband is the minister of a church on the Emerald Springs Oval," Lucy said. "You'll probably want to get to know him."

Sister Nora nodded, as if she was taking that to heart. "Everyone will be welcome here, sinners and saints alike."

I wondered where Ed would put himself on that continuum. The Consolidated Community Church is a liberal church. Of course we're fond of saints while not so fond of sin, but we're also prone to thinking there's a middle awash in multiple shades of gray.

"I'll be sure to tell Ed," I promised. Ed was going to find that conversation fascinating. In my future I could look forward to scintillating lectures on the role of the traveling evangelist in nineteenth century America.

"We're looking forward to meeting everybody in the community." Nora's irises were like star sapphires, a deep blue with the oddest twinkle of light beaming straight from the pupil. "We have a message for the people of Emerald Springs."

I knew better than to ask what it was. I knew better. But here I was, my curiosity mixing with perspiration and oozing out every pore. I glanced at Lucy, who didn't seem to know what Nora had meant by a message, either. Apparently the "message" had gotten lost in negotiations for the farm. Offers and counter offers and roof inspectors will do that.

"Is this a message you'd like me to pass on?" I asked at last, knowing I

shouldn't, but incapable of stopping myself.

"It is," Sister Nora said, with a nod. She still looked pleasant. She still looked completely comfortable with our conversation. Neither prepared me.

"The world is coming to an end very soon," she said in her husky, everyday voice, as if she was talking about a favorite series she was watching on television. "I've negotiated with God because I firmly believe the world's a better place than He does. So he's giving us one more chance. And the people of Emerald Springs have been chosen to provide Him with proof. We're here to teach you what you have to know."

I had no idea how to answer that. Beside me I could sense Lucy shifting her weight uneasily. All I could do was clear my throat and release the first thought that came to mind.

"It's going to take elephants?" I asked.

Sister Nora smiled gently. "It's going to take all of us."