

Beware False Profits

CHAPTER ONE

For a minister's wife I spend too much time in bars.

Okay, maybe "bars" isn't exactly the right word. Sure, Don't Go There, in Emerald Springs, Ohio, is a working-class, slugfest, "Daddy won't you please come home," semi-biker bar. And yes, despite the inherent warning in the name, I've "been" there a few times too many. Just asking questions, of course.

Technotes, farther afield, isn't really a bar. It's a dance club with enough blinking lights to trigger seizures and enough taut, gleaming skin to make me sadly aware that my vegetarian diet is not a diet at all. I've had reason to go there, as well.

But the Pussycat Club in Manhattan's East Village, with a fifteen-foot pink cat blinking from the marquee? This one is new to my radar, and it's going to be hard to top. No pun intended, but judging from some of the photographs in the glass case at the entrance, Saturday at the Pussycat is a drag queen review with ladies who are weightier on "top" than I. And I'm often forced to resort to Frederick's of Hollywood for a bra that fits.

I'm getting ahead of myself, of course. Ed and I did not come to Manhattan to inspect, spectate or even speculate at the Pussycat Club. We came for a much needed romantic weekend, something that hasn't happened in years.

This all began when my mother Junie decided to call Emerald Springs her home, too. After decades on the road between one craft or renaissance fair and another, Junie decided that hanging her hat, not to mention her quilts, in one place was a treat she deserved. She bought an old Victorian

house I was flipping with my friend Lucy Jacobs, and moved in, lock stock and barrel.

With us.

The problem is that the Victorian still needs a lot of work, and Junie can't live there yet, much less turn the bottom floor into the quilt shop she envisions. Although we're working on fast forward now, Lucy and I had more or less been taking our time until Junie signed the contract. Lucy works full time as a realtor, and I, well, I work full time at being a mother to two daughters, a wife to Ed and inoffensive to the congregation.

This last role is the hardest.

I was not born to be a minister's partner. I'm not sure anyone is, of course, but truly some people seem more inclined toward this job than others. I was raised to be as bohemian and free thinking as my mother. My two sisters and I traveled coast to coast with Junie, attending school here and there, calling new members of Junie's Husband-of-the-Year Club "Daddy" until the next meeting of Junie's Divorced-but-Deer Club. Junie has been married five times, and Sid, Vel and I each have a different father. Despite our upbringing or because of it, no sisters are closer.

But back to bohemian. On the religion scale Junie's friends ranged from shamans to charlatans, Spiritualists to skeptics. When we went to church as a family, we only went to churches with names that intrigued my mother. The Holy Raiders Revival Church. The Sect of Secrets and Signs. The House of Heavenly Harmony.

Normally we breezed in and out. As a teenager my personal theology grew to include the following: There may or may not be a God. He or She may look like Lord Ganesh, the Hindu elephant god, or perhaps some amalgam of an elephant as described by three mythical blind men who are respectively touching a leg, a trunk or a tail.

Then I met Ed Wilcox, seminary student and devoted attendee of the Unitarian-Universalist church. They were certainly a tad more orthodox than I was, but I did immediately feel at home.

Cut to the twenty-first century and the Consolidated Community Church of Emerald Springs, Ohio, where I update the archives, throw rip-roaring holiday open houses, and find naked bodies on the parsonage porch.

You have to remember, I came to this job without a resume.

Now that Ed has served three churches, one of the things I've learned is that congregations take up most waking hours, and sleeping hours aren't sacred, either. Ed and I have learned to steal moments for conversation and intimacy whenever we can find them. Unfortunately sneaking around can get wearing. When Junie moved into the parsonage and we had one more person in the house to contend with, things began to deteriorate.

So when a Harvard classmate of Ed's suggested we come to the Big Apple and stay in his apartment some weekend while he was off on sabbatical, we bought tickets on the first cheap flight out. And here we are. Standing at the entrance of The Pussycat Club in the East Village on a chilly spring evening, looking at the line-up for the night's entertainment.

"We wouldn't be here if you hadn't given your cell phone number to Norma," I reminded Ed yet again. "What were you *thinking*?"

"I was thinking there might be an emergency." Ed had not come to New York with the appropriate Pussycat clothes. He was wearing a pinstripe dress shirt and pleated khaki pants. He'd planned to ward off the chill with a monogrammed wool crewneck his mother gave him for Christmas, but I'd reminded him we were not having tea after a cricket match and made him leave it at the apartment.

"For pity's sake, Ed, you knew Norma would give out your number if a parishioner's dog got fleas. You might as well have published it in the Flow."

Norma: our garrulous church secretary. The Flow: our Emerald Springs daily.

"In this case Norma gave it out because we have a missing person," he reminded me. Yet again.

I watched Ed shiver and felt a smidgen of regret that I'd denied him the crewneck. Had it only been black. Or fraying at the cuffs.

I stepped aside so that two guys in their sixties, one with a parochial school uniform skirt over dark trousers, could get through the door. "I really can't believe Joe Wagner is missing. And I really can't believe he was ever *here*."

The Wagner saga started this morning. Just as Ed and I were getting out of bed after a spectacular marital booty call, Ed's cell phone chirped Beethoven's Fifth. We'd been planning to find a local deli where we could buy lox and real bagels, spread the New York Times from one end of the table to the other, and drink quarts of strong coffee. The rest of the day was filled with glorious possibilities. But the call changed everything.

I only heard Ed's end, which went something like: "Uh huh. No. Of course you're upset. I can't imagine."

I nearly fell back asleep, but when Ed put down the phone, I recognized the look on his face. The sweet afterglow of sex, untarnished by the soundtrack of Saturday morning cartoons and Junie's morning mantra was no longer reflected there. This was unmistakably the look of a minister with another problem to worry about.

"Don't tell me," I'd said. "Oh, please don't tell me we have to go home before tomorrow night."

"That was Maura Wagner."

Maura, husband Joe and son Tyler, are members of our church, although of the three Wagners, Maura is least often on the Tri-C scene. Joe's a big handsome guy, the director of our tri-county food bank and

everybody's friend. Need tables set up for a potluck supper? Joe will come early to help. Need somebody to count the dollar bills in the collection plate after church? Joe's the man. Need a chairman for the annual pledge drive? You get the picture. Joe is one of those people who keeps churches healthy. He shakes hands and gives out orders of service. He gives laughing toddlers rides on his strong shoulders and assures teenage girls that the male of the species can eventually grow up and clean up spectacularly.

Maura Wagner is Joe's opposite. She is small and fragile, with Easter egg blue eyes and a halo of curly blond hair. If Maura stubs her toe, she calls Joe and asks him what profanity she can use. She is weak to his strong, unfocused where he is forceful.

The roles seem to suit them both because from the outside their marriage looks happy. Seemingly the only real bump on their road to marital bliss was the discovery that Tyler, now twelve, was diabetic. But even this was a bump, not a mountain they couldn't scale. Between Joe's attention to proper doses of insulin and Tyler's resilient spirit, Tyler's life seems normal and happy.

Maura Wagner was one of the last people I expected to bother Ed when we were off on a holiday. I wasn't even sure she knew how to dial a telephone.

"Did somebody die?" I asked, afraid I already knew the answer.

"No, but it's not much further down the list." Ed ran his hand over his chin. For months there's been a beard there, not a very successful one. Last week he disposed of it, leaving chin pallor and a small scar on one cheek. He still forgets it's gone.

"Please don't make me guess." I could envision all manner of crises. I've had too much experience with crisis lately, and was not longing for more.

"Joe's disappeared."

"Disappeared is a big word. Is he late coming home from the grocery store? Sitting through a twelve inning game at Jacob's Field? Or, did he make off with their entire bank account last week and she's only just noticed?"

"No, he was here, in the city, for a meeting. And he didn't come home."

"Joe in New York?"

"Supposed to be." Ed rubbed his hand over his hair, which was still, fortunately, intact. It seemed to calm him. He dropped down to the bed beside me. "He was supposed to be home last night, but he didn't show. At first Maura thought maybe his plane was just late."

"Then she knew what flight he was on?"

Ed looked at me as if my IQ had suddenly dropped into an unacceptable range. "Aggie. . ."

"So okay, Maura is not a detail person. But knowing Joe, he left all the information. He probably laminated copies and posted them all over the house. He probably made Tyler memorize arrival times and airline phone numbers to repeat back to Maura at hourly intervals."

"Maura says Joe goes to the same meeting in Manhattan every month and has for over a year. He leaves on the first flight out of Columbus on the third Thursday and comes home at the same time on the third Friday evening. And that's all she knows."

"Only this time he didn't come home? And he didn't call her?"

"That's the strange part. Apparently she did get a call. She has caller ID, so she knows it came from Joe's cell. But the call was garbled, the way they are when the tower's too far away, or the caller's inside a building. She thinks it was Joe on the other end, but she's not even sure of that. And she couldn't understand a word."

I could just imagine how frustrating that had been. But Joe *had* called home. Maura knew he was alive and probably just held up in New York. Why had she bothered Ed?

"Did she call his hotel?" Ed gave me the "look" again and I narrowed my eyes. "You're telling me she doesn't know where Joe stays when he's here?"

"Apparently he moves around. She says he shops for the best deal every time. She doesn't keep up."

This didn't sound believable. "Joe knows Tyler could have a problem while he's away. He would never leave without telling Maura where he's staying."

"That's why he carries the cell phone."

"So, has she tried to call him back?"

"She's not that helpless. Repeatedly, apparently. Through the night and all morning until she called here."

"How did she know to call you?"

"The whole church knows we're in New York this weekend, even Maura."

"Can't she just wait and see if he shows up today on a later flight? It's a weekend. Maybe Joe just figured he'd take a little time for himself for a change."

"You're forgetting something."

I racked my brain, then I realized what Ed meant. "Mayday!"

"You got it."

Mayday!, complete with exclamation point, is the Tri-County Food Bank's yearly fundraiser on the first Sunday afternoon of May. It's a big deal for Emerald Springs. Unless you've lived in a small town, you can't understand how important an event like this one is in community life. We don't have a symphony or ballet—unless you count the annual spring recital

of Bela's Ballerinas, featuring seven-year-olds wearing tutus and lipstick. There's no auditorium for fifty miles large enough to showcase touring companies with third rate casts of old Broadway musicals. For the most part we entertain ourselves. And each year Mayday!, a spring carnival with pony rides, games of skill and more junk food than you can shake a corn dog at, is happily anticipated.

Planning for Mayday! takes all year, and dozens of people spend the whole weekend doing the necessary physical labor. Last year I spent an entire day setting up and taking down tables in the food tent. I'll confess removing myself from table duty was one of the joys of coming to New York this particular weekend.

"Joe told me once that they raise more than a quarter of their yearly budget at Mayday!," I said.

"So Joe would never willingly miss it."

"But what does Maura expect you to do?" I saw the answer in Ed's eyes. "No, Ed. . . We aren't going to spend our only Saturday in Manhattan looking for Joe, are we? Please tell me we aren't."

But of course we did.

Now, after a day of following clues, here we were at the Pussycat Club on a borderline seedy East Village street. There had been compensations. I've done a lot of detective work on my own this year, and this was the first time I hadn't been forced to shield my activities from my husband's suspicious gaze. Today Ed and I had been a team, albeit a reluctant one. And even if our activities hadn't been as much fun as a leisurely stroll down Fifth Avenue, at least we'd been together.

"Let's go over what we know one more time," I said now, "and maybe we'll have a great idea, which will include hopping in a cab and going somewhere else. Like out to a great restaurant for dinner."

"Repeating the facts won't change them."

I repeated them anyway. "Joe was supposed to be in the city at a meeting of an organization called Funds for Food. He told Maura he came here to attend a similar meeting every month."

"And now we know there is no organization in New York called Funds for Food, and that nobody at any of the local food banks has heard of an organization by that name." Ed glanced at his watch.

Behind us, the perpetual serenade of police sirens and honking horns crescendoed. I spoke louder. "Our repeated calls to Joe's cell phone have gone unanswered."

Three guys pushed past us. One was dressed as a cowboy, the second a cop, and the third was unmistakably an Indian chief with a headdress that almost didn't clear the doorframe. They were three guys short of the Village People. I stifled the impulse to raise my arms and make the letters YMCA in salute.

Apparently Ed didn't consider this, because he was still listing facts. "Unfortunately just as we were about to give up and tell Maura we'd hit a brick wall, you had to try one more time."

"I wrinkled my nose in apology. "Sorry, I get going and I just forget to stop."

"Whoever picked it up—"

"A guy with a gravelly voice—" I reminded him.

"Said there was nobody named Joe Wagner there."

"But just before Gravel Voice spoke, I heard—"

Ed sang the finale: "Pussycat, pussycat, I love you. Yes, I do."

"Welcome to the East Village's own Pussycat Club," I finished on an exhale.

"See any good reason to hail a cab?" Ed glanced at his watch again.

I opened my mouth to say no, that it looked like we were stuck with paying the cover charge at the East Village's own Pussycat Club, and

trooping inside to see what we could discover. But as I avoided eye contact with my significant other, my gaze fell on the photos displayed in the case just in front of us.

"Ed. . ."

"You know, we could be in and out of there in minutes, Aggie. But first we have to go in."

"Ed. . ."

I took his arm. "I, well. . ."

I turned him a little. "Look at these photos and tell me what you see."

I didn't want to influence him, so I forced my eyes and watched as three heavily made up women in sequins and fishnet stockings sauntered into the club.

Ed sounded tired. It had been that kind of a day. "I see what I'd expect to. The Pussycat Club's a no-holds barred kind of place. Old fashioned burlesque on Monday and Tuesday, Vaudeville on Wednesday and Sunday, Female impersonators on Thursdays and Saturdays. Something for every. . ."

He stopped. I let my eyes drift back into focus. "That's some coat, isn't it?" I said.

Ed leaned closer. But I didn't have to watch to know exactly where his eyes were riveted. He was staring at the gorgeous dame, third from the left, posed in a stunning full length fur coat with just enough shapely leg peeking out the opening. How many animals had gone to the happy hunting ground to provide enough pelts for that number? Because the gorgeous dame had to be six foot three in her bare feet and broad shouldered to boot. She had straight black hair and thick bangs, like the younger Cher, and the toothy, flirty smile was Cher's as well.

But the face was not. Nope, under the false eyelashes, the layers of foundation, the close, close shave, the face was even more familiar.

"Maybe we've been working on this so many hours we're just seeing him everywhere," Ed said at last.

"Or maybe we're looking at the real reason Joe Wagner comes to New York once a month."

We both stared at the photo a minute longer. Then Ed sighed.
"Exactly what are we going to say to Joe if we find him in there dressed like that?"

I took Ed's arm and pulled him toward the door. "I Got You, Babe?"