

# 03:51AM

“Sounds like we’re trapped in a steel barrel and someone’s poundin’ on the side with a sledgehammer,” Rashawn said, covering her ears.

*That’s exactly what it sounds like,* Chase thought, tempted to find a steel barrel, curl up inside, and stay there until Hurricane Emily blew herself out. He ran his tongue along the jagged edge of his front tooth and stretched his shoulder — both still ached. He’d hoped that when they finally reached the farm the nightmare would be over, but it wasn’t. A leopard named Hector was running around the property with Nicole’s grandmother’s pet monkey, Poco, dangling from his mouth, and her family’s house looked like it had been crushed with a wrecking ball. At first they’d thought that Nicole’s grandmother, Momma Rossi, had been trapped under the rubble, but she had taken refuge down the hill in the barn just before the house collapsed.

Momma Rossi was a little person, like Nicole’s father, Marco. The dwarfism gene had bypassed Nicole, so she was regular height. Chase glanced at Rashawn, who was alternating her gaze between Momma Rossi and the very large

elephant chained in the middle of a sawdust-covered circus ring. It was hard to say which sight confused Rashawn more.

Momma Rossi fixed her brown eyes on Chase. “How are my treasures?”

“Uh . . . I don’t know. I didn’t get a chance to check,” he replied. Momma Rossi had predicted that the house would go down in the storm. A day earlier, she’d asked Chase to transfer dozens of boxes of memorabilia to a storage container near the swimming pool in back of the house. He’d caulked the container and wrapped it in tarps, but he doubted it had held up to Hurricane Emily’s fury.

“What’s important is that you’re all okay,” Momma Rossi said.

“What *is* this place?” Rashawn asked.

“Our farm is winter quarters for the Rossi Brothers’ Circus,” Momma Rossi explained. “Normally this time of year the farm would be filled with show animals and performers, but they managed to book some additional dates in Mexico, prolonging the season. Nicole’s mother runs the show and her father — my son — Marco runs the farm.”

“Why’d this elephant stay behind?”

“Pet? She’s pregnant with her first calf,” Momma Rossi said.

“Why’s she chained up?”

“So she doesn’t float to the ceiling,” Nicole and Chase said in unison and laughed.

“You guys are hilarious,” Rashawn said, rolling her eyes. “I bet she’s chained so she doesn’t tear this building down.”