

**JUGGLER
IN THE
WIND**

**THE WAND BEARER TRILOGY
PART 1**

WIM COLEMAN & PAT PERRIN

CHIRON  BOOKS

Juggler in the Wind

A ChironBooks novel for young adults

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FOR MONSE

As soon as the Emperor Julian of Constantinople, the last of the Roman emperors to worship the Olympians, had been killed fighting the Persians in A.D. 363, Zeus was told by the Three Fates that his reign had ended—he and his friends must leave Olympus.

Zeus angrily destroyed the palace with a thunderbolt. . . . The Olympians were forced to hide in woods and caves, and have not been seen for centuries.

—Robert Graves, *Greek Gods and Heroes*

1. THE ARRIVAL

They were getting ready to hoist the main tent. From my attic window, I could hear the thudding and scraping of big wooden crates getting unloaded from trucks, sledgehammers pounding humongous stakes into ground, a tiny band practicing Sousa marches way off key, guys yelling at each other at the tops of their lungs ...

They were just on the other side of our neighbor's wide flat pasture. Some of the workers were obviously performers, already halfway in costume. A few were completely decked out in rhinestones and sequins and feathers. But there weren't even three dozen people in the whole outfit.

I wondered, *How can so few people make so much racket?*

Then the noise stopped. They all dropped whatever they were doing and spread out in a line in front of three huge poles they'd set up. Several of the bigger guys in overalls manned a rope looped through a pulley at the top of the center pole. They hauled on the rope, and everybody watched solemnly as the big tent rose off the ground. It wasn't a moment any of them took lightly. And it was all so very, very quiet.

I kept thinking, maybe if I were closer by, I'd hear something—the squeak of metal grommets, the creak of the rope taut under all that weight, the slapping of hemp

against canvas, to say nothing of the huffing and puffing of the guys tugging and pulling. But all I could hear was the wind. That late afternoon hot Kansas breeze caught the canvas and filled it like a sail. Crazy-colored banners rose up with the tent, flapping and fluttering all the way.

I was hypnotized.

The second the tent reached its full height, the spell snapped. Guys yelled and cursed as they lashed ropes around steel stakes. The little band tooted and drummed away. A few performers began working over their acts. I kept wondering when the rest of the troupe was going to show up. It didn't occur to me that this was the whole bunch.

I'd never seen a real live circus. I *had* to get over there. What if they were in town for only one night?

I galloped down the stairs and headed for the front door. My mom had just pulled her car up out front and was standing in the doorway holding a bag of groceries. Just home from work, she was still wearing her white nurse's uniform. She looked flustered and upset, and her long, lean face seemed even more drawn and pale than usual.

"Where do you think you're going?" she demanded, barring my way through the door.

"To the circus," I said.

"You're not going," she said.

That was strange. Mom usually let me do what I liked—not that there was much of anything to do.

"Why not?" I asked.

She didn't reply, just walked straight down the hallway with the grocery bag. I followed her into the kitchen.

"My homework's almost done," I said.

"I said you're not going."

"But why?"

"I don't need a reason."

I said nothing and watched as she set the bag of groceries on the Formica table. She unpinned her stringy brown hair, letting it down from the bun she wore it in all day. Then she went to the cupboard, took down a glass, and set it on the table.

"Leave me alone," she said.

I didn't move. I didn't say anything.

She reached into the bag and pulled out a bottle of vodka. She opened it and poured some into the glass. She sat down and took a long swallow. I tried not to show my alarm. Mom hadn't been drinking for some while now—at least not that I knew of. Whenever she did drink, she mostly kept it hidden and generally waited until after I'd gone to bed. She'd seen her father drunk a lot, and didn't want me to see her that way.

"What are you looking at?" she asked defensively.

Again, I didn't say anything. She sighed and turned her eyes downward. She gazed into that glass, half-full of vodka as clear as the purest water, as if it were a crystal ball that could tell her everything she wanted to know about her life.

“It’s not the last circus in the world,” she said with a sigh. “We’ll go see another one together. In Topeka, maybe. Or Emporia. Just not this circus.”

Mom and I never went to Topeka, and hardly ever to Emporia. We seldom went anywhere, really. And why was she so upset about *this* circus?

“Just tell me what’s wrong,” I said.

“Nothing’s wrong,” she said, a pleading hoarseness creeping into her voice.

“Okay,” I said. “I won’t go to the circus if you don’t want me to. But I was thinking about heading over to Grace and Doc’s for a soda after supper.”

“Don’t go anywhere!” she exclaimed so sharply that it seemed almost a cough. We stared at each other for a moment. I saw something strange in her eyes as she glared at me. I had the feeling she was frightened. She fell silent for a moment and added quietly, “Not tonight.”

“But why?”

“Because I say so.”

Another silence fell.

“Leave me alone, okay?” she said at last.

I didn’t argue, just turned around and left the kitchen.

I finished my homework while she fixed dinner. The rest of the evening was on the awkward side. We hardly said anything over dinner, but that wasn’t unusual. I was relieved that she was only drinking tap water now. She

seemed agitated and worried, but not drunk. I only got up the nerve to break the silence once.

“Mom, do you want to talk?”

“What about?”

“About the circus.”

“You’re not going.”

“*Okay*, but why are you so upset?”

“I’m not.”

“Then what about the bottle?” I blurted.

“I don’t want to talk about it.”

“Maybe later?”

“Maybe.”

We both stopped talking altogether. It was for the best. Mom and I had done a lot of fighting in years gone by, and neither of us wanted to go there again. Silence was more comfortable.

After picking at her food a little, Mom got up and went straight to her bedroom. Usually, she’d watch a little television or sit out on the front porch swing, reading and watching the sunset. And normally after supper, I’d have gone out for a walk by the river, or maybe headed over to Grace and Doc’s drugstore. But that night I abided by Mom’s decree. I went up to my attic room to wait out Mom’s weird mood.

I was fourteen then, and my room was a mess, scattered knee-deep with books everywhere. I liked stories about heroes. I read Jules Verne and Edgar Rice Burroughs, those

kinds of authors. And of course, absolutely all the comic-book heroes. But that night my eyes wouldn't even focus on a page of *Tarzan and the City of Gold*. The circus music kept stalking me from across the way, distracting me. I set the book aside and sat down with my arms crossed on the windowsill. I just watched and listened.

It was early in September, so nighttime was still coming fairly late. And there were all those bigger-than-life colors of the circus, the enormous, faded patches that held the tent together, the battered and tarnished gold decor all over the ticket booth, and banners of every color waving in the breeze. Behind all that, distant trees were turning that blazing yellow green that always comes as dusk approaches. And the bluest sky in the world capped it all off. It really held me.

A barker trumpeted away in front of the ticket booth, trying to lure folks in. I couldn't hear what he said, but the words didn't matter. I liked his style. As long as I watched, I don't suppose he brought in more than twenty folks. At last, they all disappeared into the main tent. I could hear the band pick up as the circus got under way.

I watched and watched. The sky deepened, getting darker from the top down. It was like somebody squirted ink into a glass of water, the darkness seeping down until everything was indigo, with just a pale strip close to the horizon. Then even that got filled up with darkness.

Swimming around in that inkiness were hundreds of fireflies. And all those sweet smells of the night broke out, like some fancy dessert so rich you could barely eat it, no matter how good it tasted.

The trees turned into cut-out silhouettes. As the night deepened, all I could make out of the circus was a skeleton of crazy-colored lights strung everywhere. The lights were just like the stars; they seemed to come out without my even knowing it. If there was applause from the pitiful crowd, I couldn't hear it. The only sound that came across the pasture was the tiny band, playing bravely but none too well.

I couldn't take my eyes away. I've never paid such close attention to how a night came on. It was like I knew it all from some place before, knew the whole scene, the sights, the smells, and the tastes of it. But I couldn't remember from when or where. It made me shiver. It scared me a little.

But something else caught my eye. It was my mom. She was standing by the maple tree in the front yard. I could just barely see her in the light spilling off the porch. She was watching the circus too. For all I knew, she'd been watching for as long as I'd been.

She was in her housecoat, with one arm stretched against the tree. She looked weak somehow, like she needed the tree for support. Then she lifted her other hand and took a big swallow from the vodka bottle. My stomach felt

queasy. Something about the way she stood expressed all sorts of feelings—more feelings than I thought she could even experience anymore. It was a weird mix of longing, hurt, love, and fear.

And for no reason I could think of, I felt them all too.

2. FLYING DUTCHMAN

The next morning, I was up at seven o'clock fixing omelets. I don't want to give the impression I fix omelets every morning. Sometimes a couple of three-minute boiled eggs is all I can muster.

The truth is, back then Mom hardly ever seemed to notice what she was eating. But I definitely felt a strong desire for onions, mushrooms, and three different kinds of cheese folded into fluffy eggs. To my mind, the smell of sautéed onions is better than coffee for waking you up.

Mom sat at the breakfast table in her housecoat. She didn't read the newspaper or even sip her coffee. She just sort of stared blearily ahead.

At long last, she took a single bite of toast. Then she rose from the table to leave.

"Aren't you going to eat breakfast?" I asked.

"I did eat," she replied tiredly.

"Hardly anything. You weren't hungry last night, either. And what are you going to do about breakfast?"

"I'll get something to eat at work."

And without another word, she went upstairs to shower and get dressed for work. I just sat there staring after her, worried all over again. Why was that circus causing her so much concern?