

Chapter One



We left Powell River in the highest of spirits, revitalized and reinvigorated, with a newfound zest for the most delicious morsels of joy that life can offer. How could we not be transcendently happy after enjoying two full weeks of sold-out shows? Nothing boosts the ego like an appreciative crowd.

Sure, the company town wasn't very big. And it was terribly remote, completely cut off from the rest of the world by a range of craggy mountains. And the pulp mill gave it a funky smell that reminded me of moldering cabbage and sweaty feet.

But truthfully, I admired the close-knit atmosphere that these circumstances had spawned. Powell River was cute. It was compact. The matching California-style bungalows along the oceanfront gave the town the feel of a holiday destination, and the shopkeepers in the bustling business district had been friendly to everyone, including the likes of us. The company that owned the town was a forward-thinking, modern corporation, so its buildings and houses boasted all the modern amenities like piped hot water, electricity and new rotary dial telephones. The citizens were well-connected and well-versed in recent events and trends, even if they had no roads going in or out, and couldn't leave their town without the help of a seaworthy boat.

And then there were the crowds! These folks loved the circus! The seats were mostly filled with rowdy loggers, mill workers, and bachelor fishermen, a cavalcade of good-natured blokes who were happy for a distraction, but there were some families, too, full of eager, excitable children that were fresh-faced and giddy with the start of summer holiday. Every night, they'd visit the Ten-in-One, eyes sparkling and full of questions, singing along and clapping their hands and making me feel as if I were the greatest ukulele player to ever pluck a tune. Mercy, I'd never felt more adored! When we finally pulled down our tents, packed our bags, loaded the ponies and horses onto the *Decimo*, and cast off from the dock on a sunny morning in late June 1921, the throng of admirers that came to wish us 'bon voyage' was the largest I'd ever seen.

The Circus Salmagundi had been loved in Powell River. We blossomed from their generosity, warmth and affection.

As our boats slid away from the docks, I stood on the stern of the *Atropos* and blew kisses to our fans through the fluttering fabric of my scarves. Gertie was with me, eager to bask in the glow. To starboard, Nancy Crawshank and May Tanaka waved from the rear of the *Decimo*, but as the boat pulled a full length ahead and left the harbour, the two women retreated inside. I glanced to port and noticed the *Nona* was pulling away from us, too. On the upper wheelhouse deck stood Dr. Kane, his spine as straight as a ramrod, absently smoking his pipe. When he noticed my gaze, he nodded to me and gave a modest wave. The gesture was nothing more than a simple acknowledgement of my presence across the water.

I did not wave back. Instead, I turned away. No one could see my face or how much my smile dimmed.

I'd been cool to him since Union Bay, a few weeks back. I knew what he'd done, and he knew I knew, but we'd reached an unspoken pact between us: I would not rat him out to the ringmaster, Alexander McGee, even though I suspected the doctor's meddling in the jail had resulted in the suicide of a frail, desperate man. In return for my silence, Dr. Kane wouldn't tell Grover Scott, the circus owner, of my meddling in a murder investigation, which could have put our troupe's reputation in jeopardy. Both the doctor and I would continue forward with plenty of space between us. Our friendship could not progress on its previous

convivial trajectory, but we must endeavour to retain a professional relationship.

Still, such agreements can often be misinterpreted.

Gertie, standing at my elbow, gave a coo. "It seems the doctor is watching you," she said in a sing-song voice.

"I know."

"He's sweet on you, Rose."

"Oh, I sincerely doubt that."

"I've noticed him watching you," she teased, as if I was unaware of the sting of his lingering stare. "I thought maybe, after Union Bay, with you both spending so much time together and getting to know each other so well --"

"If you are insinuating that anything romantic has transpired between Kane and I, then I shall ask you, right now, to perish the thought. I don't need any fruitless gossip about me and that hateful man."

My tone was too sharp for Gertie. The woman was as soft as cream cheese. She gave a childish mewl and pouted.

"I'm sorry," I back-peddled in a milder voice, "I know he's watching me. It is not from any sort of affection, Gertie." We'd pulled far enough from the docks that the crowds were dispersing, returning to their grey-hued lives. I dropped my hands, peeled back my scarves, and turned to face her. "You warned me about him, remember? You said he's not a pleasant person. I should have listened to you and Wanda."

"Ah!" This vindication brightened her spirits. "Did you catch him peeping at you? He does that, you know. He's always trying to sneak a glimpse of Wanda when she's dressing." Gertie reclined along the rear railing and unpinned her hat, letting her waves of sable hair tumble freely in the wind. "She's caught him a number of times. He insists he's innocent, but one of these days, she's going to deck him good."

The thought cheered me. Wanda, the knife-thrower's assistant and wife, may appear prim and glamorous but she packed a mean punch. "Wouldn't that be something to see!"

"I bet Mr. Scott could charge a nickel for folks to view the fight!" Gertie tipped back her head and laughed, then her stomach gave an awful growl, which prompted another volley of laughter from her.

"Oh, fiddlesticks! I'm starving!"

A glance towards the *Nona* showed her wheelhouse deck was empty; the doctor had gone inside. "Magda's making lunch for the children," I said, "If we hurry, she might have made enough for us, too," I said.

We found the circus owner's wife at the big iron stove in the galley, portioning out bowls of beef soup that were so thick, the motion of the boat's movement made almost no waves in it. She hummed a merry tune, and when she saw us, she jerked her head towards the table to invite us to join.

It was an ancient table, oval-shaped and hewn from oak planks, scratched and sliced from years of labor. Four of her children sat around it, waiting for their lunch.

At the head of the table sat Mary the World's Tiniest Magician, only nine years old, entertaining her siblings as she practiced sleight-of-hand with a penny. Next to her was thirteen-year-old Martha, known affectionately as Matty, and she was helping three-year-old Harry cover his lap with a red cloth bib. In a wooden highchair bolted safely to the wall, 8-month-old Baby Dee giggled and burred, reaching out one fat hand towards the shiny penny. All four children had the same dark brown hair and average height as their mother, but their deep-set hazel eyes, scattering of freckles, and button noses came straight from Grover.

"Where's Hugo?" said Gertie as we each took a seat.

"He's helping Pa with the rigging," said Mary, her eyes riveted on the coin that danced over her nimble fingers. "Pa says he's old enough now to have a real job, a man's job."

The eldest Scott boy was only fifteen but strapping and sturdy. I could see how Grover would want his son's help with heavier tasks. The dwarf was fiery and headstrong and an excellent business manager, but hauling ropes or cargo was beyond his physical abilities, and Grover would find it very helpful, indeed, to have a strong young body at his beck and call.

"We'll see how long that lasts," said Magda in her faint lilt as she handed out bowls to her children. Then she set soup bowls in front of Gertie and me, too, and sat down to rest her feet. "Hugo has already made some veiled threats about leaving us to find something better... 'honest work', as he called it."

"I'm sure that went over well with Mr. Scott," said Gertie.

Magda wiped her hands on her apron as she rolled her eyes. "T'was a comment given on the sly, but hot po-tay-ta! Grover's hair stood on end like an angry tomcat!" She clucked in amused disappointment at her idealistic son. "Hugo wouldn't last a day on dry land, I'm sure of it. But if, over winter, he wants to try something new, maybe we could find him a place with Lou's uncle in Victoria, working on the docks loading cargo bound for China."

I took a sip of soup. It was hot, delicious, and loaded with onions. "Hugo would hate the city," I pointed out.

Gertie waggled her spoon at Magda. "We stayed with Wanda's sister on the goat farm over winter, and Cedar-By-The-Sea was a lovely little town. Maybe he could help out there?"

"Ah, that's not a bad plan, my duckling," said Magda. "A few months of drinking goat's milk and he's sure to run back to the circus as fast as his legs will carry him!"

Matty scoffed. "Hugo's being a twit. He doesn't know how good he has it here," she muttered as she dipped a spoon into her soup, blew across it to cool it, and attempted to feed it to fussy Harry.

With her eyes still riveted on her coin, Mary smirked. "Most kids are running away TO the circus, not FROM it!"

There were general sounds of agreement.

Magda turned her attention to me. "And how are you today, Rose?"

I swallowed my spoonful of soup. "Fine."

"Did you get into any mischief in Powell River?" she asked with a glimmer in her eye. "Solve any dastardly crimes when I wasn't looking?"

Her blithe questions made me squirm. "I stayed respectable," I replied.

She looked me up and down as if she didn't quite believe me. "Is everything fine between the doctor and yourself?"

Gertie gave a little squeal. "See!? Everyone's noticed!"

"Oh, by all the stars in heaven... There's nothing romantic between the doctor and me!"

Magda glanced at Gertie. "Did I say 'romance'? I don't think I did. How curious that Rose would jump to such a conclusion!"

Gertie snorted a laugh but I could not bear to have any gossip spiral

out of control. I put down my spoon to show the gravity and depth of my feelings on this matter. "Hector Kane and I have recently come to an understanding that our world-view is not analogous. I assumed we were in harmony on a few key points but I was mistaken."

"A fancy way to say, they don't agree," Magda translated to her children.

"There are no warm feelings between the doctor and me, but I'm a professional and I promise I will not let any petty disagreements get in the way of my performance."

Magda reached into a fold of her aprons, covered in pockets and grease-stains. "Well, let's see about that, shall we?" She withdrew a small paper box and opened it up to reveal a deck of cards.

These were not the same cards that she kept in her berth, secreted away in a drawer hidden in her bed frame; no, those hidden cards were luxurious, ancient, gilded works of art, passed down through the generations of women in her family. Instead, this little finger-worn deck looked like a standard playing deck with its classic red-and-black designs. However, at a glance, it seemed a little thicker: Magda had added a few extra cards to represent the mystical figures of the major arcana. She slid the deck through her graceful fingers as if they were made of ice, then she cut it three times and laid out three cards, face up.

Matty gave a little gasp. Her mother had been teaching her the art of fortunetelling. She saw some occult message there to which the rest of us were blind.

The sound was not lost on Magda. "Go ahead," she urged, "What do you see?"

The girl leaned forward for a better look.

"The first card represents the situation. It's a Five of Wands --"

"But that's a club, ain't it?" said Gertie. She was instantly shushed by the other children, who had been taught from birth to never interrupt a tarot reading.

"A card of conflict and rivalry," Matty continued, "Rosie and the doctor had a disagreement and they are now in a place of competition, but it's a show of strength rather than of hatred. They want to be heard but neither is listening."

"Excellent," said her mother. "And this one?" She tapped the middle

card.

"This is the card of action. It's the challenge you need to overcome in order to progress," said Matty. Her face screwed up as she thought. "It's a three of swords -- or spades, as you know them," she said to Gertie. "This is a card of great sorrow, of grief and separation."

"I don't care that much for the doctor. If he left, I wouldn't be heartbroken," I said, skeptical. "He's an acquaintance, nothing more."

"No, the card represents your journey and your choices," said Matty. "How should I explain... You will choose an action that will bring you into the midst of great heartbreak and trauma. You will meet someone in pain and you will help them."

The girl stared deeply at me. I flinched, wishing she'd return those blazing hazel eyes of hers back to the cards on the table. Then, with such glib innocence that I barely had time to hide my emotions, she said, "You have experienced great loss, Rose. I can see it in your face. Your intimate understanding of grief will help you with this person."

I swallowed, suddenly unable to speak for the lump in my throat. In all innocence and naivety, Matty had ripped off the scab and left me bleeding.

But Magda, hawk-eyed, saw that her daughter had struck too deep. Under the table, the woman reached out to grab my hand and gave my fingers a reassuring squeeze.

"Let's look at the last card," Magda said. "Go on, Matty dear."

It was a homemade card, artfully repurposing an old Joker by turning the figure into a grinning demon, capering without a care in the world.

"This card represents your destination: the outcome of the choices made and the people met. This is... this is..." The girl stammered to a pause, then said, "The last card is the Devil." She faltered, looking to her mother for clarity, unwilling to speak ill. After a pause, she admitted, "I don't want to read this card."

"Gotta agree, the Devil ain't a fella you want to stumble over!" said Gertie.

Magda studied the card and its placement. Her face darkened. Confusion seeped into her features. "How odd," she mused.

"What does it mean?" I pressed.

Under the table, she squeezed my hand again. "The Devil is not always a bad card -- it can serve as a warning, depending on where it falls in the reading. It can remind us to cast aside materialism and lust. But..." Again, her voice faded away as she returned to her thoughts. For almost a minute she considered the card.

"Tell me if it's bad news," I said. "I'd rather know."

"Bad news can be good news in disguise. We must be tested in order to grow." She seemed to gather a bit of confidence from her own wisdom, and she tapped the card with one index finger. "The Devil stands for hedonism, excess, and greed. There is despair here -- and where the cards sit, I can see no other place than directly in your future. What can I say? If this card is correct, you will undergo a radical act, terrible and disastrous, and when all is said and done, you will experience a most momentous transformation." She turned to speak directly to me, holding my hand tightly. "Something wicked is coming, my love, and in its path, you are utterly powerless. You will be terrified, you will abandon that which you hold precious, you will strike out and fight against forces more powerful than any of us. There is terror here. I can see no other interpretation."

"Hold on," I said, shaking my head a little in disbelief, "A momentous transformation? Is that your nice way of telling me I'm going to die?"

I'd been so happy, leaving Powell River after such a fruitful week! This was not the sort of news one wants to hear!

"That's beyond my ability to tell," Magda admitted. She released my fingers and gathered up the remaining deck in both hands. "But I know we cannot leave your reading cast in darkness and shadow. We need clarity. Let us see if the next card tells us more about what's to come."

She flipped over one more card and laid it on the table before me.

I half-expected to see the Death card! Luckily it was not the hooded figure starting up at me, but a single heart with a title scrawled in childish script along the bottom.

"The Ace of Cups?" I read.

Magda seemed even more perplexed by this.

"I... I can't say what is coming in your future," she said. "It makes no sense." She tapped the Devil card, "This is a sinister card of materialism

and greed, and yet here," she tapped on the other, "Here we have a card of joy and abundance. We have the seed of a fulfilling and lasting friendship planted. How do they work together? I cannot reconcile them -- they are the antithesis of one another."

"Maybe the doctor and Rose will resolve their differences?" said Matty.

Her brow furrowed, Magda shook her head. "I don't think so."

Gertie stared at the Joker with its hand-drawn horns. "Maybe Rose will make friends with the Devil."

We all looked up and glared at her.

"What?" she said, "Makes sense to me!"

Magda began to gather up her cards, scoffing, as Baby Dee began to fuss and Matty took up the spoon to feed her.

I must've looked worried, because Gertie chuckled as she tucked into her soup again. "Aw, Rosie, don't be so fussed. It's all a bunch of hookum," she dismissed. "No offence, Magda."

The children looked scandalized but Magda shrugged and shuffled the deck. "None taken," the fortune-teller replied. She continued to stare at the cards in her hands as if they were a puzzle to solve, and she was clearly perplexed by her inability to translate them, but she wouldn't waste her breath trying to defend her art to someone like Flirty Gertie.



As I finished my soup and washed out my bowl, Gertie pestered Matty into telling her future, too, but I'd lost my appetite for fortune-telling and suddenly felt tired, and I decided to retire to my berth. I left the merry group in the galley and made my way along the main deck, down the stairs to the lower decks, then finally sequestering myself in my tiny berth, lighting the oil lamp that sat on my bedside table. Most people would find the room too small and cramped for comfort. A single cot was pressed against the wall. There was no window to provide a sea view. All of my clothes hung from lines strung across the ceiling so that the place had the ambiance of a Turkish bazaar, but it wasn't far from the coal ovens that heated the boiler, so the temperature was always cozy and comfortable and warm.

I lay down on my bed and, with the lamp casting out a faint circle of light, the berth transformed into an intimate cell, fit for a contemplative nun. Rampant thoughts circled in my mind. I tried to squash them but without success. Magda had been telling fortunes for most of her life; how could she not have known the meaning of my cards? Her state of confusion was the most disturbing of omens.

An hour or so after I left the galley, a knock came upon my door.

"Are you there?" said Magda.

Hearing her voice, I let her in. There was no room to go anywhere but for both of us to sit on the edge of my thin mattress.

Magda folded her hands in her lap as if in prayer. "I must apologize for my daughter," she began.

"There's no need," I replied. "I simply wasn't expecting Matty to mention... anything... from my past. It caught me by surprise."

"She's young. She doesn't understand the value of tact. But the reading has left you upset and for that, I am sincerely sorry."

"It's not her fault, or yours, or anyone's."

Magda shook her head sadly. "As soon as that Devil card appeared, I should have stopped everything so that we could speak privately. It's a powerful symbol. It shouldn't have been left to a child to decipher."

"Matty would be infuriated to hear you call her a child!"

This coaxed a laugh from her and the mood lightened. My heart eased, because Magda was normally warm and welcoming and cheerful, and it felt fundamentally wrong for her to be brimming with regret.

"When you joined us, Rose, you were in a terrible state," she continued tenderly, "As fragile as a cherry blossom! I was happy to take you in with us, happy to find you a place with our troupe, and happy to give you a home. You needed a port in the storm. I knew at once that we could be that for you."

"And you have been!" I said, reaching out to clasp her fingers. "The Circus Salmagundi is my salvation."

"But Rosie, there is still such pain in your heart that I can't fix! For me, there is an unspoken promise to never ask you about your life before us," she said, Tears glimmered in her thick lashes. "It's not my business. It will never influence how I think of you or what you bring to our family. But your wounds remain unhealed, and with the Devil card and

all that it represents, I worry what it might mean." She ran her fingers over the tattoos that covered my wrists. "Cormac did a good job of covering up your scars, but that doesn't mean they're gone."

Ah, Cormac Murdock. A most gregarious and amusing gentleman in New Westminster, working out of the back room of a beer hall, who had learned his craft during his time as a sailor.

"It was a stroke of brilliance on your part," I smiled, "Cover up the scars of my old life with the tools of my new life. They've served me well; I don't regret getting them, not for a single minute." I leaned my back against the wall at the top end of my bunk. "Yes, there are still wounds here, in my heart and my mind, but my husband is dead and he can never hurt me again."

"But still, I see how skittish you are," she said, "I see how little you trust others."

I tried to smile to assure her, even though I knew she was right; I was always on my guard, especially around men. The mind tries to heal from trauma but the body rarely forgets.

"My pain will fade with time, Magda," I said, "I have to believe that."

She stood and pressed a kiss to my crown.

"You do not need to be alone, Rose. Come up to the galley. Lou has promised to play his fiddle while I bake bread, and you know how he loves to sing. It will put you in a jolly mood."

I shook my head. "I'm tired. It's been a busy fortnight. I'd rather get a good rest."

"Alright, then," she relented, "But don't be too down. Grover says we'll dock in Nanaimo just before midnight, so you can look forward to seeing a fresh new city when you wake." She opened the door, only turning back at the last minute before leaving. "And please, Rosie, don't fret about what the cards say. Did you not hear Gertie? She doesn't put much stock in my fortunes."

"Maybe not," I said, "But I know better."

"Well, no matter what comes to pass, you have friends here who will help you. There's strength in numbers," she replied as she slipped out into the corridor. "We can weather whatever storm comes, as long as we're together."