

Prologue



The sun had yet to rise over Baynes Sound. A few clouds gathered in the dark northwest, bunched together by a gentle breeze like wayward sheep in a wide meadow, but the rest of the pre-dawn sky remained clear, crisp, and speckled with brittle stars. Waves dimpled the surface of the water, dappled in shades of silver and pearl. To the east, the low-lying silhouette of Denman Island stretched flat along the horizon like a slumbering hound. Night retreated quietly with morning's calm arrival. By all accounts, the coming day promised to be beautiful.

Before leaving home, Teddy Wentworth had filled his pockets with enough bread for two boys to eat, while Billy Kagetsu had swiped a pot of sweet red bean paste from his mother's pantry, and the pair were in high spirits as they trudged along the edge of the sea with their homemade fishing poles slung over their shoulders. What a pleasure, to eat a Sunday's breakfast by the ocean, fish nibbling at the bait, not a single adult in sight! A few fairy lights bobbed on the water -- most came from fine-hulled purse seiners dragging nets for herring, but a few were simple lanterns hanging off the bows of rowboats, pit-lamping for spring salmon -- and the murmur of men's voices drifted over the water, muted with distance. This meant Teddy and Billy could talk freely about whatever 11-year-olds like best, without a care in the world, and without any

fear that a father's hand might clout them for cursing. They headed southward into the dawn gloom. The bustle and clatter of Union Bay's gigantic coal pier faded into a dull roar behind them, but even seeking privacy and quietude, they kept the pier in sight. It wasn't wise to wander too far from town.

Billy was long and lanky for his age. His straight black hair fell in his eyes, so he swept it out of his way with a flick of his head. Teddy was shorter, more robust, with ruddy cheeks and a voice that had a squeak to it like a penny whistle. "So, the wife asks, 'Whatcha doing?' and the husband replies, 'I ain't doin' nothing', and the wife yells at him, 'God-damn, you did that yesterday!' and so the husband says --"

"The husband says, 'I weren't finished yet!'" Billy snorted a laugh; not at the joke, of course, but at the absent-mindedness of his friend. "You told me that joke already, Ted. Gimme one I haven't heard!"

Ted chuckled. "Alright, alright. Lemme think."

"While you're thinking, let's set up on that rock out there; it's good and flat and we'll both have a swell seat to cast our lines."

They crawled up onto the slab. The big wedge of granite was cold and damp with dew, and both boys knew it had sat here since time immemorial, washed with countless tides, so they gave it the same sort of respect one displays when entering a church or a temple. It was a holy thing, older than humanity. They removed their shoes and settled reverently at its edge with their naked toes dangling into the refreshing water.

Billy cast off his line as Ted struggled to recall a new joke. "Have I told you the one with the pig and the pie man?"

"Yeah."

"How about the gorilla that escaped from the zoo?"

"You told me that one, too," Billy said. Distracted, his eyes darted towards the dark trees, peppered with small boat sheds and a few cock-eyed cabins. "Jeeze, Teddy, is this spot safe, do you think? We ain't too far from the wharf?"

"Naw, we'll be fine." Teddy flicked his fishing rod and the cork bobber splashed into the water. "Why, you chicken?"

"Hell, naw!" said Billy with great offence.

"Has your sister been telling you ghost stories again?" He tugged at the line. "About the... what was the word she used... the yokai?"

"So what, if she has? I ain't scared."

Teddy smirked but said nothing else.

For almost half-an-hour they sat on the rock and gorged themselves, licking their fingers and laughing. Because March had been unseasonably warm, they removed their coats and pulled up their pant-cuffs to splash their legs in the cold water. They talked about catching a dog shark. The circus was coming to town, so they speculated on the quality of freaks it might bring. Billy spied a few treasures tossed up by the surf -- an old pomade canister with a picture of a lion on the top, a crumpled ladies' handkerchief, the stub of a pencil -- so he gathered up the junk and they laid out the flotsam in a line to devise saucy stories about their owners. Then Teddy performed an impression of their persnickety teacher, Miss Doyle, that was so perfect, Billy almost choked on his breakfast.

The velvety glow of dawn crept across the land. Boulders and bushes began to take shape. It was at that magical time, when the first confident rays of sun pierce the last lingering curtains of night, that a lumpy shape on the beach caught Billy's attention.

"Hey, what that, over there?"

Teddy saw at once what Billy meant.

It wasn't uniform and straight like a log, or rounded and humpy like a worn stone. The surface had a soft texture, woven together like a big tangle of eel grasses, and it lay under a thick overhang of ferns and salal bushes a few feet above the high tide line.

"Don't know," said Teddy, "Maybe a dead seal? We must've walked right passed it. I'm surprised we didn't trip over it."

"Well, it wasn't there when we came fishin' yesterday," Billy replied as he set his pole aside and stood, stretching his arms over his head. "I'm gonna go see. If my line gets bit, you reel it in. Swear?"

"Yeah, yeah, I swear."

On his bare feet, Billy left the flat stone and crossed the twenty feet to the object. As he drew closer, he heard faint skittering sounds like glass marbles thrown across a tile floor, so he looked down to his toes. A swarm of green crabs, each one no bigger than a penny, scuttled back and forth across the gravel and seaweed. There were hundreds of them, maybe even thousands. A few were so bold that they hurried

over the swell of his foot, the tiny legs prickling like nettles against his skin.

"Damn!" he said, trying to sound brave.

But a sudden sharp fear flared in his chest. Billy tried to smother the panic that was rising quickly through his body, chilling his fingers and arms. He almost turned back. Instead, he took a deep breath to muster his courage, and he reminded himself that Teddy would get a good laugh if he retreated from a bunch of tiny sea creatures. So what, if there were too many to count? An unstoppable army of tiny spiders dressed in green armour? Their claws outstretched, their beady black eyes watching him from atop monstrous stalks? Billy knew he'd never hear the end of it, if he was a coward. There was nothing worse in all the world! Miss Doyle said they'd almost lost the war because of all the conchies and skirkers who refused to fight, and the older boys in the schoolyard were sure to give a good, patriotic pummelling to anyone branded a sissy. Billy wasn't about to let that happen! He straightened his shoulders, flicked the black hair from his eyes, and kept on course, following the crabs towards the curious lump, all grey and brown and solitary in the fresh, clean light of dawn.

When he reached it, he swallowed hard.

At first, the scene didn't make any sense to his eyes. The woven mat of grass was actually a sweater knitted of grey-brown wool. The woman lay on her side, youthful but not young, slim but not skinny. Her back was to the sea and her face was to the land with her arms crooked awkwardly under her, a crown of damp mousy curls covering the back of her head. She didn't stir as Billy approached. She lay as still as a statue on the beach without a care in the world. But if she was asleep, why was she lying with her head pushed down between two big rocks? That seemed a mighty uncomfortable place to rest.

Then Billy circled the woman, and his eyes followed the crabs' parade to the patch of crimson that spewed from the side of the woman's head, and the breath snagged rough in his hitching lungs. The blood clung to the rocks like molasses, all chunky and gummy, black and red. The hole where her cheek had been was like a second gaping mouth, providing Billy with an easy glimpse of pink tongue and shattered teeth. The opposite side of her head lay gently against the stones, but Billy

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could see that it had been transformed into a crater of hair and mush, surrounded by a shifting halo of swarming crabs. They crawled across the ragged edge of her flesh, over her face and through her curls, using their mandibles to nibble on the softest morsels. Some of them were crawling right inside, brazen little things.

Billy stumbled back, arms pin-wheeling. Cowardice be damned: the boy let out a blood-curdling scream.

Chapter One



Ah, the circus! Is there anything more magical? The mere whisper of its name inspires a riotous parade of images: ferocious tigers in iron cages, an elephant with trunk raised, a multi-coloured calliope playing a jaunty tune on the back of a tooting steam train. Or maybe it brings to mind the iconic canvas Big Top in stripes of yellow and red, erected in a farmer's field and festooned with pretty electric lights, crimson flags snapping from the highest spar, and its broad tent flaps swallowing a centipede of sticky-fingered, candy-stained, over-excitabile children?

I am in awe of how such a simple, single word has the power to ignite the fires of imagination. Put up a poster proclaiming the circus has come to town and a sizzling current of anticipation runs through the entire population! You can see the wonder on their faces as their imaginations run wild: visions of empyrean nymphs swinging on a high trapeze, untouchable angels soaring over a terrestrial stage tangled thick with the limbs of acrobats, jugglers, and stumbling clowns! Or a parade of white horses decorated with pink marabou feathers, the melodic toot of a brass band, the screech of monkeys and parrots! Feel the rib-rattling roar of a lion, the punch of heat and burst of fire as a cannon blasts, the dizzying whirligig of countless acts -- one can barely catch their breath amid the tempest! Spectacular! To someone living a predictable life of

drudgery and daily chores, the circus provides a portal to all that exists beyond the mundane. It is the distilled essence of exotic delights from far-away lands, of dazzling dreams made real.

But such notions, while diverting, aren't always... accurate.

Take us, for example.

Like the salad of the same name, the Circus Salmagundi was a little bit of this, a little bit of that, thrown together with a dash of spice to hide the musty parts. If we were a regular circus, I'd be relaxing in a comfortable dining car on a train, watching fields and small towns whisk by -- not sitting in my cramped, cabbage-smelling, windowless cabin on a run-down steamship, swaying back and forth with the pull of the waves. Yes, we may advertise ourselves as a circus, but our little show is not your typical affair. We have jugglers and clowns and acts to delight the children, and we even have a couple of wild animals -- to be precise, a raven and a bear -- but we aren't exactly polished, and instead of a train, we rely on three antiquated vessels to ferry us up and down the coast. Like a trio of lively old ladies, each ship has her own irrepressible personality. The *Nona* is stubborn and prone to breakage, the *Decimo* has a boiler too small for her weight class, and the *Atropos* is a clattering orchestra of rattling pipes and creaking boards. At first glance, none of them appear particularly seaworthy, but they carry us faithfully along our route of tiny coastal towns, and we do our best with what little we've got to charm and entertain our audiences. For the most part, they seem appreciative and try to hide their disappointment.

We're more rag-tag than resplendent, but let's be honest: when it comes to diversions, these isolated folks have nothing else to choose. They have no option but to love us. Our charming ringmaster Alexander Crask McGee uses their isolation to his advantage.

From my bunk, I heard him pacing back and forth on the upper deck: he has a bounce to his step that betrays his endless optimism. Where his font of good-natured cheer comes from, I don't know -- from what he's told me, the Great War had not been kind. Heartily sick of the smoggy, greasy skies over Glasgow's grey stones, he saw the war as an opportunity to change his fortunes. Like a drowning man strikes out in desperation for any scrap of floating wood, he'd jumped into a lowly position as a coal trimmer on a merchant liner without any sense of the

path he'd follow. With no plans for future goals, he swiftly learned that coal trimming is a miserable profession -- bad pay, long hours, and fraught with danger. Trimmers stoked the fires and kept the boilers hot, but they also raked the coal in the ship's hold to keep it level so that the boat wouldn't capsize. Consequently, the air in those suffocating hell-holes is full of dust: a highly volatile miasma that ruins men's lungs and threatens to ignite with the smallest spark.

Soon after shipping out, the true, crushing, exhausting nature of the job became horribly evident to Alex. The young man endured tedious, gruelling shifts at the open hell-mouth of a boiler, sucking in barely enough oxygen between billows of black smoke. Sweat dripped down every crease and wrinkle until his clothes were soaked and sopping.

Yet even this didn't make the jolly Scotsman bitter. Instead, he grew determined. After all, he'd sought adventure amongst the glories of the world, not servitude to a merchant shipping company, and he wasn't going to let a little thing like a recruitment contract chain him down. One night, while the captain was drunk on the top deck and the boat tugged at its anchor in a rocky bay, Alex decided he'd seen too much of a ship's boiler room for his liking. He abandoned his post and dove overboard to swim for shore. When he dragged himself onto a gravel beach, he was destitute and penniless but overjoyed to be liberated in Victoria, British Columbia.

Alex was a clever lad with Scottish tenacity, a new zest for life, and a keen eye for opportunity. After a month of living amongst the resource-mongers of the far West, Alex spied another interesting individual haunting the taverns and auction-houses: a remarkably short man wearing an expensive suit, with a gold pocket watch, a neatly trimmed beard and a pair of watchful hazel eyes. This man exuded confidence and style. It didn't matter the location, he never seemed out-of-place or unbalanced.

After four or five of these chance glimpses, Alex began to wonder what the man was doing. Then, late one night, he strolled into a sandwich shop near his boarding house to purchase a meal. He spotted the same short gentleman sitting at the counter, sipping a mug of coffee. Steam wreathed his face, and for the first time, Alex noted a haggard

look hidden under the fine clothes and trimmed beard. Those piercing eyes rolled his way. The man gave a nod of greeting.

Never one to avoid a pleasant conversation, Alex sat on the stool next to him.

"I wondered how long it would take you to say hello," growled the dwarf from behind the rim of his mug. "I noticed you down on the docks, three weeks back." He gestured to the counter-girl to bring a second coffee, "How far do you think you can get on that charm of yours?"

"It's no failed me yet," said Alex with a cheeky grin.

"Then I got a job for you," he replied, "Go on, order a sandwich. We're gonna be here for a while."

In his heart, Alex wondered if this was the devil sitting beside him: a very fine wardrobe, an expensive watch, an impish face and a stubby body, offering him food and drink and promises of employment? All the signs were there. But it had been a long day and he was half-starved. He figured if he needed to sell his soul for a sandwich, then so be it.

As Alex ate, he listened. He was clever enough to see that Grover Scott had all the makings of a natural manager: whip-smart, sharp-tongued, steel-hearted. Grover had spent the last five years working for a mid-range circus touring the Midwest, and he was heartily sick of the merciless weather, bland beige food, and cruel supervisors. Following an incident with a cocaine-addicted snake-handler and a hungry anaconda, Grover lost his temper, quit his position, and headed west towards the Pacific coast, where all hopeful dreamers go to find inspiration -- but this move had gained him no sympathy from his wife, Magda. She reluctantly followed with their brood of children in tow. Day or night, she whispered in his ear, nagging him to find employment so they wouldn't all starve.

Since arriving on the coast, Grover had recognized a common thread that linked the miners, the fishermen, the foresters, the furriers. They all possessed a thirst for entertainment unbounded by train stations, tracks or trails. From Seattle to Prince Rupert lay thousands of miles of crooked coastline, islands beyond counting, and all of them dotted with company towns: logging camps, coal mines, fishing villages, and canneries. Some of the settlements didn't even have roads.

But they all had docks and piers. The towns of the Pacific coast were connected to each other through a snarled, byzantine network of steam ships, skiffs, canoes, barques, rowboats, trawlers, barges, punts and paddle-wheelers, with most children learning to sail before they learned to ride a horse. The narrow waterways that wove between rocky outcrops and rugged islands provided fine, protected byways and plenty of sheltered harbours, and a man might live on his boat without any inconvenience, picking up supplies as he went.

Plus, the companies that ran the towns were willing to pay a handsome price to bring in a distraction for workers, wives, and children. Grover possessed the ambitions of a tycoon and the brave soul of an explorer, and he recognized a lucrative opportunity when he saw one. It was time to reinvent himself and launch a glorious travelling show!

"Besides," he confided as he motioned for his cup to be refilled, "I'm getting desperate. I need to find a job to soothe my wife, feed my children, and build my career." His smirk was particularly jolly. "With the help of a few investors, I believe we can build our own carnival -- preferably free of snakes."

"If you're looking for investors, I'm the wrong lad," said Alex around a mouthful of ham on rye. "I hardly have two pennies to rub together."

"You don't think I've figured that out, following you around all this time?" Grover growled. "I don't need your money, Mr. McGee. I need your face."

"Ah, so you are the devil, come to take my physical form!" Alex replied.

Grover broke into gales of gravelly laughter. "God damn, I would if I could!" he exclaimed. "No, Mr. McGee, I need someone handsome and charming to help me snare my investors. They look at me and they recoil in horror, but I think they'd be much more willing to open their pocketbooks for someone of your caliber." His sneer made his face even more pinched and ugly. "Mr. McGee, I want you to be my ringmaster."

The thought of working for a circus had never entered Alex's mind, but the proposal was too strange and compelling not to consider. Grover Scott had been born to the side show so he understood it to the marrow of his bones. The two men continued to scheme through the evening, moving their meeting from the sandwich counter to the speak-

easy, and at some point, during their second bottle of rye, they decided to hell with the risks. A maritime circus was a stroke of goddamn genius! They shook hands and, by the law of the theatre, entered into an unbreakable business partnership.

The war was raging in Europe but the two men remained unaffected; Grover was exempt from service on account of his height, and after jumping ship, Alex had never bothered to register himself with any authorities. This gave them both a portion of freedom, and they struck out together to collect -- not coins or stamps, of course, but loyal entertainers and a few enthusiastic investors. When conscription went into effect in August 1917, it didn't cause a single pause in their search. They trawled the vaudeville circuit for the bizarre and eldritch, the wondrous and sublime, and Grover managed to secure a number of plum contracts around which he could construct his own carnival. The stranger the act, the better. Then the men visited the shipyards and bought three antiquated boats for cheap at auction, painting them in a riot of bright colours and congratulated themselves on their acquisition of a fleet. By the end of 1917, the Circus Salmagundi was in full swing.

Magda wasn't completely convinced that this was a good idea, not at first, but it was better than freezing to death in an Idaho winter. She had big round curves and glorious waves of black hair, often wrapped up in a calico handkerchief. Her personality was suffused with a warm, loving aura that made her seem wise beyond her years. She made an approachable, stalwart counterpart to her husband's fiery personality. Perhaps that's what motherhood can do to a woman; with no effort at all, she treated the entire crew of the Circus Salmagundi as extensions of her family. As surely as she would kiss Mary's skinned knee, she could stitch up a gash on Cosmo's paw or press Gertie's tear-stained face to her ample breast, rocking and singing to soothe a broken heart. Magda cooked hearty stews and tidied the boats, clucked around us to make sure we were healthy, disarmed any growing drama that might threaten our unity and, for the most part, she succeeded. Magda Scott became mother to us all.

Arguing was never tolerated, discussions were always encouraged. I learned a great deal from Magda about patience, resolutions, and communication. She was fair. She was persistent. She was kind. Because

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of that, the various personalities aboard our boats treated her with great respect, and anyone who disagreed with her methods was quite welcome to hop off at the next port. It was rumoured she could tell the future with the cards, and with her dark hair and brown eyes flecked with gold, she fit the image of the fortune teller perfectly.

Together the three of them -- Grover, Magda and Alex -- took a flickering idea no more substantial than a candle flame and built a concrete business, a safe haven for the lost and the forgotten. The Circus Salmagundi was more than just a bit of fluff entertainment. For me, it saved my life.

But don't be lulled into thinking our situation was easy. No, not at all!

For one, Alex McGee was a lecher and a tomcat, and swaggered around like a revolutionary, following whatever pretty thing caught his fancy. Magda Scott, for all her soft-hearted kindness, was easily distracted and easily beguiled. Finally, Grover Scott was a sour-faced, miserable bastard. He was a man of ambitious passions, unbound by the insecurities of a lesser creature, and a man like that makes a difficult boss.