

Chapter One



Honorina and Calliope refused to speak with me, and frankly, I couldn't care less. We had nothing in common. Any communication attempted between us would result in idle chatter, and I've never been very skilled at small talk. In essence, their silence made my life easier.

But it bothered me, right from the beginning, that the sisters had so quickly assessed my place in the Circus Salmagundi as below their own. Maybe, without thinking too much upon it, I'd hoped that the rigid caste systems of the real world couldn't follow me into the land of acrobats and clowns, dancing bears and talking ravens, childhood delights and wonders, and that I'd be protected from social stratification by the magic of the circus.

Gertie helpfully corrected my mistake.

"Oh, no, Rose," she said, eyes full of pity, "The Gibson sisters are far, far, far above you."

Gertrude von Reigel had taken an instant liking to me when I joined the Circus Salmagundi and, like a hen protecting a chick under its wing, decided it was her responsibility to educate me on the particulars of my new life. She was a trick rider, a few years younger than me, and she hadn't been a member of the Circus Salmagundi for very long; perhaps she sympathized with my situation, or perhaps she liked the satisfaction

that teaching a less fortunate creature can bring. Perhaps she was lonely and craved attention, however fleeting. Whatever her reason, it didn't matter. It had been a long time since someone had shown any warmth towards me and I appreciated the attention, plus Gertie knew all the gossip and she was eager to share it.

Gertie had rich brown hair tied up in a fluffy bouffant, a crowning glory of soft tresses and curls that harkened back to an early style and highlighted her high forehead, graceful brows, and sparkling eyes. From a distance, she was beautiful; balancing on the back of a galloping stallion, she became divine. But here, eating lunch together in the galley of the SS *Atropos*, it was easy to spot her terrestrial flaws. Her nose was a bit crooked; it must have been broken many years ago. She always painted her mouth a little too thickly and rouged her cheeks a little too brightly in an attempt to hide her sallow complexion. She could be kind if it served her, but she had a bit of a temper and she certainly lacked tact. Most of the time, Gertie didn't care about anything that didn't directly revolve around her.

She'd filled her teacup to the brim, leaving me with just enough tea to fill my own cup, half-way. She took the best slices of cucumber sandwiches and left me with one soggy triangle. Now, this was not to say she was greedy, per se, but unless you were one of her cherished horses, she didn't think of you as having needs of your own. It didn't occur to her that anyone else lived in the universe. Consequently, if you didn't get in fast with Gertie, you were left with the scraps.

She took one delicate bite of her sandwich, chewed and swallowed, before saying, "Anyone in the Ten-In-One tent is going to be at the bottom of the ladder, I'm sorry to say. No one respects the freak show. That's just natural." She counted out the layers of society using her sandwich as a guide: bread, cucumber, cream cheese, lettuce. "The Geek is at the very bottom, then come the rest of the side show performers, yourself included. After that comes the main tent performers. Now, Wanda and Bill were outsiders, so they're lower than me. I was born into the circus, you know, and that provides a certain amount of privilege." She beamed as she tapped her fingernail against the top piece of bread. "Then you have the owner; he's higher than anyone else. In this circus, Grover Scott is king, and don't you ever forget it!"

Truer words had never been spoken. Mr. Scott was the admiral of our shabby fleet, and he was a solid four-and-a-half feet of determination, grit and vexation, with a face like a pit dog and a constitution to match. You did not cross him, lest you find yourself marooned.

"So where does that stick the Gibson sisters? Are they cucumber or cream cheese?"

"Honorina and Calliope come from a most distinguished lineage! Their family wasn't circus, but vaudeville. And they don't debase themselves for applause; they have real talent! You've heard them: they have lovely voices, nothing cheap or carny. So," and she nestled her fingernail between the top slice of bread and the lettuce, "They sit just below the owner." She threw a smile in my direction that reminded me of a mother soothing a crying child. That singular expression told me to abandon all hope of aspiring to such lofty heights.

From my own pathetic sandwich, I picked a slice of cucumber from its blanket of soggy bread. It lay limp and cold between my fingers.

I sighed. I guess this was me.

"So, the Gibson sisters aren't happy being part of the Circus Salmagundi?" I asked as I ate it.

"Oh, of course not!" Gertie scoffed, "Why would they be? Before the war, they used to perform on stages across England and Europe. They're very far above all of us. Practically untouchable." She poked her finger at the remains of my sandwich. "Are you going to eat that?" Without waiting for a reply, she plucked it from my plate and devoured it.

This inspiring speech of Gertie's had occurred on May 1, 1920, the first afternoon I'd spent with the Circus Salmagundi. At the time, it struck me as harsh and rigid and wholly impractical, but in retrospect, Gertie's brutal advice turned out to be absolutely correct. The Gibson sisters were a pair of virtuous angels floating high above my blemished mortal coil, ascending into the stratosphere on wings made of song, and neither of them would speak a single syllable to me for a full six months. Over the summer, I'd come to know many of the other performers and roustabouts, but never them. Not a word. Not a peep!

But, like I said, I wasn't too bothered by the shunning. The rest of our troupe seemed happy to believe that the Gibson sisters were quality people, worthy of blind adoration, but I had better things to do with my

time than fawn over them, praise them for their vacuous melodies, or fit myself into their ridiculous hierarchy.

Do I sound bitter? I probably am. I don't have a sweet voice or a fair face to earn my keep. Once upon a time I might have been young and pretty and conceited and vain, but those days are far in my past, and the year 1919 had left me a husk of my former self. Now, I'm scarred and tattooed, cynical and solitary, too old to marry and too stubborn to die. I live quietly on board the *SS Atropos* as we sail from port to port, from gig to gig, and keep mostly to myself, content to mind my own business.



So, suffice it to say, I was astounded when, early on the first morning of October, Honoria Gibson knocked upon the door of my berth and called out my name in a friendly manner, as if we'd always been the greatest of tillicums.

"Rosie? Rosie, my dear? Are you on board?"

We had sailed in late the night before, having come through a nasty squall on the Strait of Georgia, and frankly, I was exhausted from the stress and travel. I'd never been so relieved to see the lights of Victoria! As soon as we rounded Ogden Point, the nasty Pacific swells calmed and the boats stopped lurching, and our flotilla pattered passed the friendly entrance leading into the Inner Harbour, slowly and carefully. Just beyond the rocky turret of Macaulay Point stretched dark swaths of bucolic farmlands; it could be tricky to navigate without lights to guide us, especially when the tide was turning, the night was dark, and the hour was late. Before the lanterns of Victoria had vanished behind us, we turned into a small cove and docked at a rickety wharf belonging to a dairy farmer named Louis Buckley.

I don't know how Buckley and Mr. Scott had first been introduced but the farmer had invited us to set up our tents in his pasture and perform our show for five consecutive nights, starting October 2nd. Mr. Scott was grateful for the opportunity to play to these rural crowds, although he didn't have to say it: the circuit had proven difficult all summer and the whole of our troupe felt the same way. People still feared contracting Spanish flu. That anxiety had burned itself deeply

into their habits, and even though the plague hadn't killed the same numbers this year as it had in '18 or '19, no one wanted to sit in a crowd or huddle together too closely. Most families avoided social events and parents dared not expose their surviving children to any risk. All summer long we'd played to half-full audiences and, frankly, the Circus Salmagundi needed whatever help it could get to stay afloat, every pun intended.

Mr. Buckley's invitation promised eager audiences from the surrounding villages and town-sites, and in return, all he asked for the rental of his land was a quarter of our profits.

How could we refuse? It might be the only opportunity to save us from utter ruin.

Our three ships docked at his wharf, which was really too small to accommodate us, but what choice did we have? The *SS Atropos* had once been a large tug, the *SS Decimo* had been a cargo ship, and the *SS Nona* had been an old steam ferry: none of the ladies were dainty vessels and the bay was not a large one, so to make space, the boats were lashed with ropes and bladders were strung between them to keep them from colliding. From a distance they had the ungainly appearance of three grumpy grandmothers squashed together on a tiny couch, entangled with yarn.

As the deckhands tied up the boats, Mr. Scott and Mr. Buckley greeted each other with the same warmth and good cheer as brothers, although I'd be willing to wager that two, more dissimilar men could scarce be found. Mr. Scott was reserved and squat and frightfully impish; Mr. Buckley towered over him, as boisterous as a beagle, with straw-blond hair cut in a bowl shape just above his ears.

All of this had transpired very late in the evening. Once the boats were secured and introductions made, I'd collapsed in my cot to sleep the deep, dreamless repose that only travelling can bring. My berth was a cramped broom closet on the lower deck of the *Atropos*, containing nothing but a grey wool cot for sleeping and a travel trunk for personal items, with my entire wardrobe of colourful shawls and dresses hung from lines strung across the ceiling. This gave my room the appearance of a laundry, and normally my clothes swayed with the motion of the waves, but because the boats had been bound to each other, my clothes

hung straight and still. When I woke at Honoria's rapid knocking, I was so disoriented that I thought I was living back on land.

Then one hand hit a wall, another tangled in a scarf, and I remembered where I was. Immediately I cast about for some clue as to what had disturbed my sleep.

Another pounding at my door made that clear.

"Rosie? Are you here?"

I held my tongue. During last night's tumultuous crossing, Gertie had made plans to take a streetcar to visit a lovely Japanese tea garden nearby, and it was reasonable to assume I was with her. If I stayed quiet and said nothing, Honoria would never know I was here.

But my curiosity is a powerful force. Once ignited, nothing can stifle it, and it sweeps away all my good reason.

"What is it, Honoria?"

"Can I... can I speak with you?"

I stumbled from my cot, pushed a few silk robes aside, and reached for the doorknob. The narrow door swung open a crack.

Honoria wore a timid smile. She and her sister both had long glossy tresses of honey-blond hair, eyes as blue as the Aegean Sea, and flawless skin as pale and luminous as porcelain, but Honoria was the older sister, and her chin was a little stronger, her features a little more pronounced. Calliope often wore filmy skirts and seductive chiffon dresses, but Honoria dressed in wool trousers and vest, taking a masculine fashion and making it feminine with her charm and grace. The Gibson sisters were the epitome of classical beauty, but if Calliope was Aphrodite, Honoria was Artemis.

And how must have I looked to them? It's no wonder they shunned me. With my close-cropped hair the colour of cinnamon, whip-thin scars crisscrossing my limbs, and vibrant tattoos across arms, legs and torso, I must have seemed like some strange savage little wild-woman, eccentric and frightful, only a step up from the Geek.

"I'd invite you in, but..." I waved my hand around the cramped room.

She clasped her hands at her waist and tried not to wrinkle her nose in disgust. "Our room on the *Nona* is quite lovely," she said, "We have a particularly fine view of the water."

I scowled and narrowed my eyes. Had she really come all this way to brag?

Then, with a start, I realized she was inviting me -- in her own stilted way -- to join her in her berth.

Honorina glanced over her shoulder to see if anyone was in the corridor. She looked relieved that no one was there. "I need to speak with you in private, Rose," she explained. "Calliope has a... well, we both have... a problem. Will you join me?"

I'd never seen her look so meek!

I grabbed my blue silk robe and followed after her. We left the *Atropos* and climbed the gangplank to the *Nona*, and Honorina's eyes flitted back often, as if she didn't quite believe I'd follow her along the outer deck to her own stateroom door. She gave a small knock to announce our presence then opened the door. Perhaps afraid that I might bolt, she grasped my wrist and practically yanked me inside after her.

When Honorina said her room was lovely, she hadn't exaggerated. I whistled low; the Gibson sisters shared very comfortable lodgings.

The layout was a broad square with three portholes that looked out along the outer deck, a feature that my own below-deck room lacked, and the presence of natural light flooding in from outside reminded me of my old life, when I lived in a normal house on a normal street on normal dry land like a normal person. I had to shake myself out of my nostalgia. Two brass beds sat on either side of the room with a stout oaken chest-of-drawers between them and a couple of cupboards flanking the main door. Not a single item was hung from the ceiling. Nothing was stashed in nets and strung from the corners. The only objects on the walls were two oil paintings: one was the portrait of a young woman, and the other, a portrait of a man with a handlebar moustache. From their features, it was obvious that these were Honorina and Calliope's parents.

Calliope sat on the edge of one bed, her eyes red-rimmed. She dabbed at her nose with a linen handkerchief embroidered with little red flowers.

"Oh, thank heavens, you found her!" she sniffled.

"Please sit down, Miss Rose," Honorina said as she dragged me over

to her own bed and offered me a seat there. The mattress squeaked when I sat; it wasn't made of hay, but of springs! Lord almighty! What other treasures did they have hidden here!?

"Oh, Rosie, I'm so glad you've come," Calliope said, "I desperately need your help!"

Still in shock at the luxury and richness of their accommodations, I said nothing. My mind had only enough wits to stare at the books on the sideboard (books!), the fringed lamp on the dresser (an electric lamp!), the thick blue rug on the floor (a real Persian rug!) as I catalogued each facet of opulence and the floor space it took to house it...

"I'm sorry, what?"

The sisters shared a poignant glance at each other. Then both sets of piercing blue eyes fixated on me, and they might have told me then what they needed, except there came a heavy knock at the door.

Without waiting for an invitation, the door opened and Magda stepped inside. Seeing the owner's wife here, in this private room, well! My jaw dropped fully open.

Let me explain. Yes, Magda Scott is Grover's wife, but it's misleading to describe her in such a simplistic way. We're close in age but she possesses a strength and bearing to which I can never aspire; she is, in all ways but legal, the co-owner of our circus and the mighty queen to Grover's king. Magda is tall and broad with an eagle's nest of black braids wound around the top of her head, so tall and ornate that they're almost a headdress instead of a style. Under thick black brows, her eyes are sharp and brown with flecks of gold that flash in the sunlight. She wears flowing gowns made of homespun wool, embroidered with symbols and sigils beyond my interpretation, and she often wraps fringed scarves around her shoulders and dangles silver rings from her earlobes to match the silver rings on her fingers. When Magda speaks, she displays a slight accent; some said she is Irish, while others said she is Polish, but no one is quite certain of her origins and it seems poor form to inquire, like asking a magician to explain a trick.

She had bountiful curves as the result of four children with another one on the way, and when she swanned into the room, Magda moved with the grace of a galleon crossing a calm sea. She saw me sitting on the bed and nodded her approval. "Ah, good, you are here, Rose," she

purred, "I was worried you might have gone for a walk into the city and that we would be unable to benefit from your good counsel."

"My what?"

Magda settled herself down next to Calliope, opposite me. She wore a scarlet dress trimmed with gold thread and covered with a black apron, and she smoothed the fabric across her generous lap before laying her strong, sun-browned hands flat upon her thighs.

"You know a little about medicine, yes?"

I looked directly at Magda. The woman had found me and offered me a place on the boats, a position in her circus, a job and a home. She already knew my history; this question was meant to inform the sisters of my background.

"I do."

"I heard a rumour that you were a nurse," said Honoria.

"I had some medical training, a long time ago," I corrected, hiding my surprise at this revelation laid so baldly before me. "What other rumours have you heard?"

"Only that you left your life as a nurse because all of your scars made it difficult. You were in an accident of some sort, I don't know what." Honoria replied, "And your husband abandoned you because of your injuries."

Magda said, in a firm way that demanded no following questions, "Rose's husband died of the Spanish Flu in 1918."

"Then you *were* a nurse," Calliope replied. That was all she really cared about. If they felt any pity for me, they didn't show it.

"Yes," said Magda. "And Rose will know what to do."

Oh dear. What sort of trouble had Calliope gotten herself into?

Honoria sat down beside me. "My sister is... is..." She stumbled over the words, ashamed.

"I missed my blood," Calliope admitted. Her fingers drifted to the flat plain of her stomach. Her chin started to tremble. "I can't be more than a month or two along."

I tried to stifle my surprise. "Oh!"

"There's still time, isn't there?" Honoria pressed, "To get rid of a baby?"

"Yes, there is time," Magda assured her, "You girls were wise to come

to us so quickly. At this point, there are methods we can use to reinvigorate your blood, isn't that right, Rose?"

"Yes, of course," I said, "A few different ways."

"But you mustn't tell a soul!" Honoria commanded. She grabbed my hand and squeezed it until my knuckles stung.

"Girls, girls," said Magda, "Most women experience such a trial some point in their lives. Rose will not say a word, nor will I. Your innocence is not imperilled."

"Of course, I wouldn't say a thing," I replied, "But what about the father? Does he know?"

Instantly my mind went to the men who lived on board the *SS Nona*. There weren't many culprits from which to choose. The doctor and taxidermist, Hector Kane, was much too surly and cynical for such an affair; the animal trainer, Orville Mann, had a pungent body odour worse than his pet bear Cosmo. Bill Peacock was happily married to Wanda and I couldn't imagine his devotion wavering. There was Virgil Stonehouse, the captain of the ship, but he was forty years her elder! Of course, there was also --

I gasped. "Is it Alexander McGee? The ringmaster? Has he put you in a family way?!"

Magda cackled out a laugh as Calliope cried, "Oh, goodness, no!"

With a half-shrug, Honoria said to her sister, "Would that be so terrible?"

Alex had the roguish good-looks of Rudolph Valentino and the smouldering intensity of Bert Lytell, along with the swaggering confidence of Zeus and the fidelity to match. After every performance, he enjoyed a parade of admirers following after him and I couldn't imagine he'd make a dutiful father or faithful lover. "It's probably for the best that it's not Alex," I replied. "But if not him, then who, Calliope?"

A blush brought colour to her cheeks. "Morris."

Morris Cave, the roustabout? The horse-faced fellow who strummed on his ukulele to earn a few pennies? I'd never have guessed him! A taciturn and pensive artist, the man kept mostly to himself. He preferred the company of his sketch books and charcoal pencils to drinking and carousing. It didn't matter how big or small of a town we were visiting: while the rest of the men were playing poker or chasing

pretty girls, he'd be off to the nearest museum, library or art gallery with his sketch book in hand, perpetually seeking inspiration.

But at the mention of his name, Calliope's eyes filled with stars. "We picked up together at the end of August," she replied, "And we haven't done much together, we've been really careful! We always made sure to stand up against a wall when we did it!"

Honorina nodded. "You can't get pregnant, standing up."

Silly, young, flighty fools, the both of them.

"I'm afraid, girls, you are quite mistaken," Magda replied, patting her stomach. "I'm fairly certain this one was conceived with a similar arrangement."

Honorina cringed but Calliope blushed. For a moment, the tension lifted and she even managed a giggle.

"If you're only a month or two along, Calliope, then you won't have to risk a criminal operation," Magda continued, "Not that I know anyone in this city who provides such a service, but we should be able to find you some herbal teas that will help ease your troubles more naturally."

"So, I won't need a doctor?"

"Not at this point," I said. "Does Morris know about your situation?"

"I told him right after I told Honorina. I was happy to marry him and we could start a family, but he said he'd rather take me back to England and marry in the presence of his father, and if Morris returned already married, his father would be quite cross. If there was already a child, too? No, it's out of the question."

"The time is not right," said Honorina.

"I do love him, and he loves me, but he's of no mind to be a father yet, and this little tin-pot circus is no place to raise a family."

Magda's shoulders visibly tensed and her dark brows arched severely. After all, Grover and Magda were raising their family on our ships, and none of their children seemed worse for it.

Luckily, Calliope was not so clueless or self-centred as Gertie. She realized almost instantly that she'd misspoke. She grasped Magda's hands and her tone softened as she said, "Please don't think me ungrateful. The Circus Salmagundi has been very good to us, Miss Magda, but

I'm in no fit state to be a mother." She turned to me. "Miss Rose, you must believe me: Morris is a very caring soul and he will not stand in my way. He wants to do all he can to make sure I'm comfortable."

Then we'd have no trouble with the father -- that was a bit of a blessing.

"Magda and I can put you back right," I promised, "Give us a bit of time to find what you need, and you'll be done the whole ordeal by the end of the week."

The young woman looked like she might cry with joy. She pressed kisses to our hands and thanked us profusely, but as Magda and I left, Honoria flashed me an expression that was stony and guarded. She put no stock in my promise. She'd only be happy once the deed was done.

Magda and I left the *Nona* without a word shared, yet I felt a silent pact pass between us: this situation required a certain amount of discretion, and the secret that had been shared with us in the Gibson's room was not to be discussed in the open. However, it required planning, and that meant conversation, which demanded a place of privacy and quietude. When we climbed the gangplank onto the *Atropos*, Magda gestured for me to follow her to the galley.

Located at the front of the main deck, the galley was the heart of our ship. It was more than just a kitchen or dining area. Under normal circumstances, people gathered here to eat and converse, to play cards or share stories, to renew those bonds of fellowship that life in a small troupe inevitably forges. On any other day, the galley would be the worst spot for a delicate conversation, but today our circus had fractured into independent fragments and cast themselves out to admire the sights, choosing to spend their free day abroad, and so we found the galley almost empty. Only thirteen-year-old Martha stood there, daydreaming at the big cast-iron stove as she absently stirred a cauldron of fragrant mutton stew. Nicknamed 'Matty', Magda's oldest daughter was a very capable girl with a steady constitution. Sometimes her brother teased her because she was small and slight, but it was common knowledge that the girl had inherited the best combination of her mother's bewitching looks and her father's stubborn disposition. Matty

wasn't flustered easily. She walked with her head held high, her straight rope of glossy black hair cascading down the centre of her back, and she was generous to a fault. She'd set out bowls and spoons upon the table; anyone was welcome to share her lunch if they wished, but there was almost no one left on board. Circumstances had aligned to give us all the stew we cared to eat and all the privacy we desired.

Matty turned at the sound of our footsteps on the creaking wooden floorboards.

"Hey, Rosie!" she greeted. Without asking, she ladled out a hearty helping of potatoes and mutton and plunked the bowl in front of me.

I thanked her for the food as Magda sat next to me.

"A woman needs her vitality restored, hmm?" said Magda.

"It can be quickly done," I replied. "She's only missed her first blood."

"And that's a great relief," Magda replied, "The more time passes, the more difficult it becomes." She tapped her fingers on the tabletop as she thought. "It won't be the first time I've had a young lady on our ships who has found herself in such a predicament, and this problem can be dealt with cleanly and quickly, but," Magda held up one finger. "We must not enter into it lightly. Here, as you eat your stew, we shall lay out the cards."

From some hidden pocket deep within the valleys and folds of her scarlet dress, Magda withdrew a small pouch sewn from black velvet and tied with an emerald ribbon. She plucked the knot open and slid a deck of cards into her palm. They were old and blunt-edged, and the white paper had long ago faded into a dirty ecru, but the painted images in red-and-black remained vibrant and arresting. The accents of gilded gold shone like molten fire.

"Now," the woman whispered, "Let us see how this shall play out."

Her nimble fingers danced of their own volition. She shuffled lightly, then one, two, three, four cards were flipped onto the tabletop in a line, each one with their face down.

Magda flipped the first card over. It portrayed a youth in a jaunty red hat, skipping along a road with a cup carried high and sloshing liquid everywhere, but the card was upside down. I reached out to turn it around and Magda slapped my hand.

"Leave it as it falls," she said, "It is the Page of Cups, reversed."

"Upside-down changes its meaning?"

"Ah," she said with an impish twinkle, "When upright, the Page of Cups symbolizes a happy idealist, a dreamer. But reversed?" She shook her head. "The young person seeking our aid is not yet mature or wise. She's insecure and flighty and perhaps even a little silly, and she covers over her nonsense with a haughty disposition. She might appear to an outside observer like an arrogant and over-confident snob, but that's only because she does not know her own self-worth or what she desires. She has not yet gained a sense of independence. She does not know her own strength. If you ask my opinion, she's not in a place to make a very good mother."

How frightfully accurate.

"And the second card?"

"Well," Magda said as she flipped over the next card, "Here we see the Seven of Swords. There's deception and trickery. We've not been told all the circumstances behind this affair, I think."

"She assured us, she's already told the father about the baby. There's no secrecy there."

"Yes, yes," came the reply, "But he has not been truthful with the mother."

"He claims to be content to let Cal --" I glanced quickly to Matty, who was listening, enraptured. "I mean, the mother. He's content to let the mother terminate the pregnancy."

"Well, of course he is! He is a man! They run away from such uncomfortable things as fast as their legs can take them," Magda said, throwing one hand in the air. "He will let her deal with this challenge while he retains his freedom and he will feel no guilt at all. But," she tapped the card, "He has not been truthful to her about his circumstances. I think he has lied to her about himself in a much more fundamental way." When she glanced up at me, her eyes held warmth and affection. "Of course, who on these ships has been truthful about their past? We all keep our secrets well-guarded, don't you think, Rose?"

My heart jumped. "A person's life before joining the Circus Salmagundi is their own business. You told me when you hired me: this place gives each of us a fresh start."

"Yes, it can," she agreed as if to placate me, "But in this instance, the card bids you to be careful. The father is not what he seems."

And yet, Morris seemed harmless. He was quiet, almost painfully shy for a man employed by a circus, and he took great delight in playing joyful songs on his ukulele for the children. As hefty as an ox with a little more flesh than muscle on his bones, Morris had an easy laugh and a silly sense of humour, although he often kept that to himself. The other roustabouts were prone to drinking and crude humour, but not Morris. Instead, he enjoyed simple pleasures, like drawing pictures of birds or portraits of people, and he was a talented artist with a discerning eye. Morris didn't seem like the sort of fellow to harbour sinister secrets.

Magda continued to the next card. Flipped over, it portrayed a serious woman holding a scale in one hand and a sword in the other. She looked like an ill-tempered grocer. Woe to the shopper who crossed the likes of her! With that nasty blade, she was just as likely to cut off your legs as measure out your cabbages.

"This is Justice," said Magda, "What a powerful card to fall in this position!"

"What does it mean?"

Magda chose her words carefully. "My dear Rose, you might soon find yourself in the middle of a great upheaval. You will be set upon the scale and measured."

"I don't like the sound of that."

"Nor should you. A dispute is coming. Your honour will be scrutinized, your actions will be tested. But through all that is coming, you must remain truthful and courageous, and willing to act in the best interest of yourself; only then will you be able to act in the best interest of all."

I furrowed my brow. "What does that mean?"

"Your character will be called into question."

"But I haven't done anything!"

"Not yet, no." She drummed her fingers over the card. "But remain committed to the truth, Rose, even as fear and uncertainty appear on your horizon. If you can do this, perhaps you'll be just fine." She smiled as she said this, but then her fingers flipped over the last card. Her smile vanished. In a whisper, she said, "Oh, dear."

The final card showed a castle tower reaching high into a storm-tossed sky. From heaven above, a golden bolt of crooked lightning fell. It struck the pinnacle of the turret, casting out shattered stones and plumes of fire, and on either side, the flailing figures of unwitting victims plunged to their deaths. The foundation of the castle was crumbling. All was in chaos. Divine and inescapable forces pressed down upon the mighty citadel, and it could withstand them no longer. The spire was falling to pieces and destined to take all with it.

Matty peeped over my shoulder and gave a little gasp of fright.

"Oh! The tower!"

"Is it bad?" I said, looking between mother and daughter.

Magda glanced at me. "It's sure not good."

"The tower is the card of destruction," said Matty as she sat next to me. "It means turmoil and sudden upheaval."

Magda held up one finger to silence her oldest daughter. "Ah, yes, it does mean all that, my poppet, but there are deeper forces here at work. Remember as I taught you: we must look at all the cards together and pay attention to where they fall." She looked to me. "The tower represents disaster, but it can also be transformative. It warns of a radical and momentous change. Perhaps we will come to see our world in a new and exciting way. We will be terrified, we will abandon the beliefs to which we cling or hold precious, and through that cathartic process, we will rebuild ourselves into something more resolute and powerful."

To be honest, my heart sank. The last five years had been nothing but chaotic. I'd fled to the Circus Salmagundi looking for a safe place to hide from the terrible past, and this little tin-pot circus -- as Calliope had so cruelly dismissed it -- had become a blessed haven. My life here was free from constant reminders of hardships faced or lives lost, and the thought that it could no longer shelter me from the challenges looming on the horizon? Well, it was almost enough to make me weep.

I slumped in my chair and closed my eyes to block out the dreadful image of the crumbling tower. "Was the Great War not enough?" I said, "Losing my husband? The pandemic, the deaths, the injuries, loss of everyone and everything in my life... wasn't that more than enough to bear?"

I felt skinny arms around me. Matty pressed a kiss to my cheek.

TRULY THE DEVIL'S WORK

"It'll be okay, Rosie," she comforted me. "You just watch. Everything will turn out dandy."

Magda reached out to pat her palm against my cheek. "The cards hint at our future, they do not set it in stone," she reminded. "All I can tell you is this: trust in intuition, Rose, and never flinch from being true to yourself."