

Chapter One



A span of two weeks is far too long to remain confined to a cargo bay, especially if it reeks of formaldehyde, sour sweat, and the microscopic dust of a thousand dead creatures.

Let me explain my predicament.

Normally, the Circus Salmagundi travelled on a rag-tag collection of three boats – the retired tugboat *Atropos*, the cargo hauler *Decimo*, and the retired passenger ferry *Nona* – and as the tattooed lady, I enjoyed very few responsibilities. I lived aboard the *Atropos* and, between performances, I'd spend my days by myself, practicing my ukulele. When I required a diversion, I'd read a book or two: perhaps Edgar Allan Poe, or Arthur Conan Doyle, or Lord Byron, or Shakespeare. I enjoyed reading grand adventures, but I had no such presumptions, and knew myself to be merely a minor cog in the grand production of the world.

But in the last weeks of August 1921, the Circus Salmagundi was slowly chugging north along the British Columbian coastline towards the city of Anyox, and recent events had demanded change. Dr. Hector Kane, our purveyor of pickled punks and curiosities, had suffered a dreadful injury in our last port-of-call. Severely wounded, he remained confined to a hospital bed in Port Alberni. Normally, the doctor's chores included caring for our Geek, a frightful hairy ogre in a beastly

iron cage which was transported in Kane's taxidermy workshop, down in the darkest bowels of the *Nona's* cargo hold.

Other than the doctor, I was the only person in our troupe who dared go near the madman, so I'd been moved to Kane's berth to provide the Geek's care while we were at sea. Food, water, empty the buckets. To outside observers, this appeared to be a suitable arrangement. I'd sleep in Kane's bunk, keep the workshop tidy, and no one else needed to go near the lunatic.

But two factors made my present situation unbearable.

Firstly, the perpetual reminders of the doctor's macabre work quickly wore on my nerves. Only a simple canvas curtain separated Kane's bunk from his workbench, the cavernous cargo hold, and his menagerie of stuffed animals -- which shed dusty flakes of dried skin, hair and scales everywhere. No matter how diligently I cleaned, sweeping proved fruitless. Chemical smells permeated my clothes and linen. I was powerless to stop the filth that collected in the cobwebbed corners and, within three days, I gave up.

My only escape from the staring glass eyes was the *Nona's* upper deck. By day, this was fine, but when night came? Cold temperatures fell. Strong winds blew. A cold sea mist bit into exposed flesh. The conditions forced me to return reluctantly to my new quarters with a sense of dread, spurred by the second reason.

In my own berth on the *Atropos*, I enjoyed peace, privacy, and a door with a solid bolt. In the years since my husband's death, I'd slept alone, and I slept securely, pleased with that arrangement. But the cargo bay was the Geek's home. I was a guest here and, while he bore every discomfort with silent fortitude, I couldn't ignore his constant brooding or predatory aura. That decrepit iron cage dominated the space. The man inside, half-naked and caked with filth, hadn't uttered a single word since our departure from Port Alberni, but his presence could not be ignored.

The first night in Kane's bed, I lay with my spine pressed to the wall, painfully aware of every masculine sound echoing from the cage beyond the curtain. Grover Scott, our employer, assured me I'd be fine: after all, the lunatic was locked behind bars. I was perfectly safe!

Except, I knew the lock was broken.

Early this summer, the Geek had saved my life, and in doing so, he'd revealed his secret to me: he was neither witless nor imprisoned. I'd seen him tear living chickens apart with his bare hands and I could attest to his savagery, but he'd proved he was no danger to me...right? Each night, I silently repeated this mantra as I drew the curtain around the cot and slipped between the covers, shivering like a rabbit.

For almost the entire journey, I slept poorly.

Despite these fears, the Geek ignored me completely. He spent each day in mute introspection, staring at the wall.

Why did he persist in living the life of a prisoner? He was content for the world to consider him a nameless lunatic, less evolved than a gorilla, but for what reason, I didn't fully understand. He'd shared that his name was Einar, but beyond that? It wasn't my place to ask questions, and it was much too dangerous for us to converse on the boats. The constant traffic of crewmen on the upper deck made the risk of discovery too high. If the Geek dared not reveal his personality or acumen to the wider world, I would respect that. The most connection I received was the touch of a finger to my own when handing him dinner -- just enough warmth to show, he appreciated my cooking.

This combination of solitude, sleeplessness, and frayed nerves induced a weary homesickness for my berth on the *Atropos*. More surprising, I found myself pining for Dr. Kane's dry wit, card games, and droll observations. Frankly, I missed him.

Day in and day out, our stalwart vessels plugged steadily towards Anyox. We'd never strayed so far from our circuit. In the last two years, our ports-of-call had revolved around the Strait of Georgia and the Puget Sound: Esquimalt, Union Bay, Nanaimo, Powell River, Vancouver, and Seattle. These were bustling commercial centres, only a day's travel from each other, and effervescent with eager customers. The Circus Salmagundi had fans in every port.

But Anyox was different. This time, we'd be far from any road or rail station. I knew nothing about the community or the circumstances drawing us here. The Granby Consolidated Mining, Smelter and Power Company had offered any price for entertainment, and our boss Mr. Scott was happy to accept their proposal, but would we find families with eager children? Or only an army of work-hardened men, looking

for an excuse to get rowdy? Or, worse, a bunch of bachelors willing to pay a little extra for the company of easy women? More likely, the mine officials were using us as a diversion to smother labor troubles; it wouldn't be the first time a corporation tried to distract their employees and stifle any whispered plans to unionize. Were we entertainers, or pawns?

My anxiety swelled like an unrelenting tide.

Two nights before our arrival, I dressed in my cotton nightgown and prepared for bed, but slumber did not come. Kane's squeaky cot complained. I stared at the steel beams that bisected the ceiling as the *Nona's* metallic music crept through my imagination.

Of our three ships, the *Nona* was the most talkative. The *Atropos* had started life as a wooden tug in California and her low, soothing creaks were as warm as a southern sun. The *Decimo* was an old Victorian cargo ship, originally designed to haul goods up and down the St. Lawrence Seaway, and she spoke in a voice that was hard and firm, as frigid as an easterly gale gusting over Lake Huron. In comparison to her sisters, the *Nona* chattered and ticked, hummed and sang. She'd once been a ferry with the Mosquito fleets and, late at night, she liked to tell stories of her youthful adventures with a full vocabulary of pops, creaks, and groans.

The racket made me toss and turn. I was hot, then cold, then cramped. The pillow's lump refused to relent to my fist.

And then,

"Rose?" The Geek's faint whisper fished for a reply. "Are you unwell?"

My bare feet hit the floor. I swept the curtain aside.

The Geek sat with his back to the bars. Behind him, a shaft of silver moonlight speared through the open bay doors, and his face was hidden by the shadow of his wild black hair. His voice was softer than the creaking shipboards.

If a crew-member heard him, his act would be ruined, so I crept close.

"I have a bad feeling about Anyox."

Boots on the deck thumped in the still air; someone is always awake on a moving ship.

“We mustn’t talk,” I reminded him.

He said nothing in reply, but reached out to the iron lock and gave it a sharp shake, popping the shank open with a click. The cage door cracked open. His invitation was clear.

I hesitated momentarily, but the metal floor was so cold, it burned my bare soles. I swallowed my fear and crawled inside to sit next to him.

“Tell me about your bad feeling,” he whispered. His Icelandic accent gave his voice a thoughtful quality, as if every word was carefully considered.

“Just a suspicion, but...” The sensation was familiar but groundless. “It feels like we’re walking into a trap.”

“We have done nothing wrong. Kane would scold you for being ridiculous.”

“And he’d be right,” I replied. “I am!”

The Geek’s presence was surprisingly calming. I didn’t even flinch when his elbow brushed mine. “Tell me about this place we go.”

Because the rest of the performers considered him to be an imbecile, no one informed the Geek of our plans or destinations, and I realized he must be completely ignorant of our schedule. He remained at the whim and mercy of us all. “The entire town is owned by the Granby Consolidated Mining, Smelter and Power Company. It’s a huge operation – Anyox was established in 1912, and the Great War was very lucrative for them -- but they were hit hard by Spanish Flu and the town lost dozens of residents. The company sent a letter to Mr. Scott, informing him that they’re in dire need of our services, promising to pay any amount if we made the trip so far north. The mine managers need to keep the workers happy. They hope we’ll give them something to fill their evenings.”

“This does not sound so bad, *ju?*”

“No roads or rails connect Anyox to the outside world.”

“We have boats,” he reminded me, his accent swapping w’s and v’s. “We don’t need them.”

But my dread persisted. I shivered -- not from the night air.

“I miss Dr. Kane.”

“Me, too,” he admitted.

“I hope he’s healing well.”

“I’m sure he is,” the Geek assured me.

“I’d rather he was here, with us.”

“But his replacement is competent, *ja?*”

My own berth on the *Atropos* had been loaned to Dr. Richard Carson, whom we’d picked up in Port Hardy. A short, gregarious, somewhat goofy man with a puerile sense of humour, he went by the preferred nickname of ‘Dickie’. Our ringmaster, Alex McGee, thought Dr. Carson made a delightful addition to our troupe, but I found the gentleman easily distracted. He didn’t impart one with confidence. He always had a joke or a quip handy, and he liked to prank the ladies to get a rise out of them, which he considered the pinnacle of comedy. His latest jest included a dead mouse stashed under a pillow; Magda had shrieked like a seagull when she laid her hand on it, rushing from her berth in only a silk slip to dance and squeal across the stern deck. Upon discovering the “joke” – a word I’d put firmly in quotation marks -- she was mortified to have been witnessed in her undergarments by the coal trimmers, and her profound, teary embarrassment only heightened Dickie’s delight.

“He’s an ass.”

The Geek chuckled. “You do not like him because Magda gave him your berth.”

“He’s a dandy,” I replied. “He’s more interested in Honoria’s curves than providing quality health care.”

This made the Geek snort. “Oh, you are jealous!”

“Of Honoria Gibson?!” Our vaudeville songstress was almost as much of an ass as Dickie. I rolled my eyes. “Oh, please!”

“No, you are jealous of Dickie,” he clarified. “We do not need another doctor on board. You are better.”

“That’s very generous of you to say,” I replied, “But I’m not technically a doctor. I have no license to practice, and I’d rather keep that part of my life firmly in the past. Still...” I crossed my arms and looked up through the open cargo doors. A thin covering of high clouds obscured most of the stars. “Dr. Carson gets under my skin.”

“He will not be with us long,” said the Geek, “We are in Anyox for..?”

“Five performances.”

“Such a short time!” He seemed genuinely astounded. “A month of travel for only a few days?”

“Granby Consolidated paid all our travel expenses, plus a generous bonus for our inconvenience, plus coal for the return voyage. They’ve covered every expense, plus enough to get us through winter. I’ve never seen any town so desperate for a diversion.”

“And Grover is desperate for cash,” the Geek added. “It has been a lean year. I see why he jumped at the opportunity.” He glanced down at me. “And why you are nervous: poor decisions are made when one’s options narrow.”

“We do need the money.”

“And that puts us...what is the saying? In a tight squeeze.” He folded his hands over his knees. “I intended to calm your anxieties, Rose, but you have only sparked my own.”

The churning engines filled the pause in our conversation. It growled and groaned as propellers pushed us ever-closer to that strange, remote, mysterious town, a place of which we knew so little and had no easy escape.

“Do not worry, Rose. Anyox will prove to be charming.”

“And I’m sure Dickie is a competent physician.”

We swapped knowing glances. Clearly, neither one believed the other.



Before I saw Anyox, I smelled it: a pungent effluvium of rotten eggs and putrefied meat, with an acidic twist that burned the throat and prickled the nostrils. We left the open Pacific coastline on the morning of Sunday, September 11, 1921, and spent the whole day in progression along Observatory Inlet, following Hastings Arm. On either side of the inlet, the majestic forests thinned, then became brown and brittle and sporadic, until no living plant covered the dusty ground. The closer we drew to Anyox, the more dire and desiccated became the land. Nothing thrived in this wretched air. In the distance, great U-shaped valleys had been carved by passing glaciers, scouring out steep-sided mountains of various heights,

and their bare pinnacles were already dusted with snow. Our three painted boats were the only dots of colour in a vast, ashen landscape, like the riotous plumage of jungle birds alighting on a field of bones.

The stench was all-encompassing. The only relief came in the form of cool ocean breezes, which swept the polluted vapours away from the shore and into the beleaguered mountains. From the prow of the *Nona*, I watched the devolution from lush wilderness to barren civilization, and my angst flapped around my ribcage like a canary in the throes of suffocation.

To starboard, I noticed Magda and her children clustered on the *Atropos*'s bow, pointing out landmarks to each other, but even this little tableau of familial bliss didn't cheer me. Magda Scott, the owner's wife and our fortune-teller, was dressed in a crimson gown with a black linen apron, and her braid coiled on her head like a dark, glossy serpent. The honest beauty of her outfit was only enhanced by Baby Dee, who had been swaddled and bound to Magda's generous bosom with a length of black cotton. The eldest daughter, Matty, and middle daughter, Mary, had cleaved together to keep warm against the wind, and the eldest son, Hugo, was tossing stones into the waves. The youngest son, Harry, was still only a toddler; he clung to Hugo's teenage knee like a barnacle. The small boy was entranced by the sight of the shore sliding by, and he let out peals of laughter whenever a rock splashed against the sea. Instead of cheering me, the sound made me homesick for my own vessel.

"What a sight!" chirped Dickie as he leaned against the railing beside me. The man was small but energetic, and as always, he stood a little too close for comfort. His scruffy, dark-brown hair bobbed in the wind. His smile was broad and toothy. He wore a crisp white shirt and brown suspenders, sleeves rolled up; when the roustabouts played poker in the ship's dining room, they insisted that Dickie prove he had no hidden cards.

"You must've won a game or two, to be so jolly," I said.

He let out a bellow of a laugh. "Hah! How'd you know I was playing cards? Oh, you wicked spinster... you see more than you let on!" He laughed again. "I won more than I lost, so I better watch my back. Those poor saps might keel-haul me."

I suppressed a little smile at the thought.

Dickie swept out one hand. "Have you ever seen anything so marvelous, Miss Rose? The triumph of industry over brutish nature."

"It smells terrible," I replied.

"That's the perfume of progress!" He hooked his thumbs around his suspenders and took a deep breath, and when he saw my disapproval, he teased, "There's no need to be sentimental, madam: trees grow back."

Not in this disgusting miasma, I feared. It would be a long time before nature held sway over this landscape again.

On a promontory, a red beacon warned ships of submerged islets, calling us forward. As we approached, the air thickened into a fog, and the glow became the eye of a crocodile, winking in murky waters.

Then we circumnavigated a finger of land and, quite suddenly, Anyox slid into view. The town faced east across the inlet, and a gigantic smelter dominated the rocky southern end of Granby Bay, pumping dense smoke from a series of immense brick chimneys. In front of the smelter stretched long flat fields of slag, shimmering blue-black in the evening light -- the excreta of industry, steadily purged into the sea until it rose to become barren land, like an infertile delta fanning out below the beastly factories. The slag heaps intruded upon the outflow of two rivers, neither one particularly large, which created a natural boundary between the industrial quarter and the downtown core. Two long bridges crossed these rivers, and each was choked with people and goods, hurrying to finish the day's business.

To the right of the rivers, amid humps of bare soil and blackened stumps, sat neatly-plotted rows of new houses. There were more than I could count at a glance, all square and clean in perfect lines, and each painted brick-red with white trim. They matched the school, shops, bunkhouses and administrative buildings, as well as a gigantic, 3-story hotel flanked by tennis courts. At the north end of the bay, the concrete façade of a massive General Store leapt into view, and behind, a coke plant marked the edge of town. A broad industrial wharf stretched around the waterfront on tall pilings, flanked by deep-sea freighters, barques and cargo ships that flew flags from many nations. Men hurried to load copper ingots. It looked like miserable, back-breaking work.

All of these elements -- wharf, smelter, houses, stores -- were bound together by a network of raised boardwalks and gravel tracks, but there

were no gardens, nor flowers, nor lawns: only dark, dry, sooty dirt between the freshly-constructed buildings, clinging to the dismal shore. The beach was bleached and dead. Naked boulders jutted up like crooked teeth, and heaps of black coal swelled against the buildings like rotten gums. Rocky slopes rose sharply behind the town, unadorned by farms or fields. There was no hint of green at all.

A god with a grudge against all that was good in the world had swept the table clean with the back of one hand, then plopped down a complete settlement in the midst of turmoil, and painted it all in an uninspired palette of black, grey, brick-red and brown.

But as our boats approached that mighty wharf, a line of bright colours swirled out of the grey fog: a little parade of pinks, blues, and pale yellows. The smoke cleared, revealing a gaggle of eight happy children, dressed in their Sunday best. They clustered around a tall, middle-aged man in a battered top hat, his long hair flowing over his shoulders in messy, grey-brown curls. Like the children, he was impeccably garbed in a white shirt and black trousers, with a pink bowtie around his neck. Truly, being clean was no small feat in a place so shrouded in pollution!

Dickie emitted a surprised bellow.

“Bless my word!” he said. He waved his hand in wide swoops.

The polite children waved back, but the man who accompanied them gave an astonished shout, and his face contorted into a severe, triangular smile.

“You know him?” I asked.

“That’s my eldest brother Jim!” came the exuberant reply. The *Nona* drew alongside the dock and Dickie shouted, “You old codger! I hoped I’d find you here! What luck!”

Jim shepherded the children around him like a hen with chicks, keeping them safe while crew members secured the *Nona*. “What the deuce are you doing with a circus, Dickie?” he shouted back, “Jasper will never believe it!”

Dickie bowed his head to me. “That’s my other brother.” Then, returning his attention to Jim, said, “Jasper’s with you, then? Good lord! Won’t Mother be relieved to know, someone’s tending the great ape!”

Too curious for my own good, I followed Dickie as he rushed down

the gangplank. The men embraced on the wharf. With my long blue robes and silken veil, I must have made quite the impression, because the wee children watched me with round eyes and parted lips, and when the men released each other, Jim doffed his hat with aplomb. “Madame,” he said deeply and bowed.

“A pleasure to meet you, Mr. Carson,” I replied, “How wonderful to discover, one already has friends in a strange place!”

“This is Miss Rose Ivy, our tattooed lady,” said Dickie, “She covers herself up to keep her tattoos for her paying customers.” Then he glanced over the children’s heads. “These aren’t all yours, are they, Jimmy? Good lord, you’ve been busy swiving!”

“No, of course not, you ridiculous twat,” said Jim, “I’m the school teacher here. This is my class. Children, say hello to my brother.”

In a practiced chorus, they chanted, “Hello, Mister Carson.”

“It’s ‘Doctor Carson’, my dears,” Dickie corrected them. A fleeting look of surprise crossed Jim’s face, but it was quickly eclipsed by a hearty laugh from both of them.

“And your other brother,” I said, “What does he do?”

“Not much of anything, if he can help it,” said Jimmy, then to Dickie, he added, “The oaf has decided to write a memoir. Can you imagine? He’s a laze-about; there’s nothing to record!”

“A volume of blank pages,” Dickie added.

Jim guffawed, then in a mocking impersonation which involved drawing his chin to his chest and crossing his eyes, he droned, “Over thirty-five years, I have perfected the art of lying upon the couch, plucking lint from my navel. My collection rivals that of the Louvre.”

They both started giggling, which got the children giggling, too. My own laughter must have put the children at ease, because the smallest one – a sweet boy no more than five, with straight brown hair and limpid brown eyes, wearing dusty knee-length trousers and a red vest – reached out to take my hand. The grasp of his tiny fingers struck a chord of deep nostalgia. It made my heart melt.

“It’s lovely of you to bring your class to greet us,” I said.

Jim sobered and dropped the volume of his voice. “I felt it best. I needed to speak with your group before you came ashore, and the class provided a good cover.” He glanced around to ensure no dock worker

was in earshot. “I had no clue Dickie was among you, but that’s good fortune; perhaps you’ll listen to what I have to say, and not dismiss me as quickly as others have done. Is there a quiet spot where we can have a word?”



Jim Carson requested a quiet place to meet, and Grover Scott was happy to provide one. The company had sent a car for Mr. Scott, but before leaving, the dwarf pulled me aside. In his fine grey suit and silk tie, our employer was the very picture of respectability, and remarkably intimidating for a man of such diminutive stature.

“Everyone knows, you’ve got a real knack for listening, Rosie,” he said on the sly, “I gotta meet the manager of operations, so take notes and tell me everything this fellow claims.” Then he threw me a wink and departed.

Jim, Dickie and I retired to the lounge of the *Decimo*, along with Magda and the personable Alex McGee. Stella the bearded lady offered to take the children down to the mid-ship stables to meet Cosmo the bear. I saw how eagerly Jim jumped on this idea. He desired privacy.

As befitting a Victorian freighter, the lounge was cramped with a low ceiling, walls of white enamelled steel, and small portholes along the starboard side, but it had been made cozy with velvet furniture and tasselled pillows. A turquoise rug warmed the metal floor. In the corner sat a battered piano, long ago painted an obnoxious shade of yellow; it was much loved and kept us entertained during long voyages, but it sang out-of-tune.

Once the children and Mr. Scott were gone, Jim settled himself in a chair. He glanced to each of us -- weighing our character, by the looks of it -- as Magda sat across from him, toying with the silver rings on her strong fingers. Dickie leaned against the piano. Alex, our handsome Scottish ringmaster and Grover’s business partner, sat next to me on the couch.

Magda asked Dickie, “Who’s this fellow?”

“My eldest brother Jim.”

Mr. McGee was not wearing his regular Hussar’s uniform but, even

in a tattered sweater, he commanded the room. All faces turned to him as he gave an astonished laugh. “What a bonny coincidence!” he said.

“Not really,” said Dickie, “My brothers came north a year ago, to settle in either Anyox or Ketchikan.”

Jimmy removed his top hat to hold in his lap. “By God, I wish we’d chosen Ketchikan,” he muttered.

I leaned in. “What’s happened here?”

“What has the company told you?” he asked in reply.

“That the town needs cheering-up,” Magda said, “The Great War hungered for copper, and workers pulled long shifts in the mines, then the Spanish flu pandemic killed many of them. This place has been covered with a pall. Any distraction is appreciated.”

Jim scoffed. “That’s true, but...” He shook his head. “There are darker forces afoot here, madame, of which you’ve been left ignorant.”

He toyed with the brim of his hat, clearly conflicted.

“Go on, Jimmy,” Dickie encouraged, his boyish smile returning. “What mess have we gotten ourselves into?”

Jim grew resolute: his spine straightened and his chest swelled. He looked to Magda, then Alex, then me, and in his eyes, I saw fear – real, tangible, palpable fear. He attempted a stammered reply, faltered, and tried again. Speaking words gives power and form to formless things, and he was reluctant to fix his thoughts to sound, thereby giving a history to that which haunted him. In a singular instant, ice water flooded my veins. My anxiety, which had steadily risen like a slow and silent tide on our voyage northward, suddenly gushed through my limbs with the force of a tsunami. The chill that crossed my shoulders could only be described as evil. I suddenly, fervently, wished to be far away, safely back in sunny Port Alberni with dear Hector Kane.

Jim leaned forward.

As quiet as a confession, he said, “Jasper and I arrived a week after the first child disappeared.”