

Chapter One



On the night of October 27, 1921, more precipitation fell over Vancouver Island than the rest of the month, combined. Roads became rivers. Meadows became lakes. Sheets of rain reduced all visibility and, at dawn, the rising sun was a grey smudge struggling to shine through a sky of dense flannel. Ditches overflowed and puddles stretched across the farm yard. At the breakfast table, Delbert speculated that Nanaimo's luxurious sports field must now be a swamp; he'd planned to watch the afternoon football match against Ladysmith, but this must surely be postponed. Who'd want to watch the lads chase a floating ball in water up to their knees?

"Of course it's cancelled," Winnie informed her husband, "When she delivered the eggs this morning, Mrs. Paulson said that the south bridge to Ladysmith has fully washed away."

When I heard that, my heart skipped a beat. If all points south of Cedar had been cut off, then perhaps the span northward, over the Nanaimo River, might be in the same dire predicament. Why today, of all days?

But just passed noon, while riding in Delbert's Model T, I spotted a sliver of blue sky hesitantly appear, as timid as a rabbit poking its nose from its burrow.

“Thank goodness for that,” I said.

Delbert followed the direction of my gaze. “What a blessed sight,” he replied, narrowly avoiding a puddle stretching across the road. The motor-car had a leather top, and we both wore canvas car coats to protect our clothes, but the wheel caught the puddle’s edge and a few drops sprayed through the windows as we returned to the left lane.

What could I do but laugh?

“I look forward to being dry again, Mr. Beddington.”

Delbert was short and plump with rosy cheeks and a button nose, and his thin brown hair was only visible on the rare occasions that he removed his trilby hat. His face was dominated by a lush, brown, tooth-brush moustache that ruffled when he chuckled -- an act which occurred easily and often. “I started to fear that my farm would wash away completely, Miss Rose,” he chortled. “We’d have to move onto your boats and live with you folks! Wouldn’t that be a real hoot!”

The tire hit a rut and I clamped my little leather handbag to my lap until he regained control. “You, Winnie, and your delightful children are always welcome,” I replied, “You’ve been so generous to the Circus Salmagundi, how could we refuse?”

Every winter, our circus returned to the Beddington goat farm to enjoy a seasonal break. Winnie Beddington was the younger sister of our knife thrower’s magnificent assistant, Wanda Peacock, so the entire arrangement possessed the same welcoming aura as a family reunion. As the farm abutted Northumberland Channel, we were welcome to moor our three boats – the *Nona*, the *Atropos*, and the *Decimo* – at Delbert’s wharf, which was protected by a rocky outcrop wearing a crown of arbutus trees. No matter how fierce the weather, we were safe and snug with goat cheese to eat and all the goat’s milk we could drink, surrounded by delightful views of farm, strait, and Gabriola Island.

“We love having you! It’s our pleasure,” Delbert assured me. “Your Christmas show brings in a tidy profit, too!”

This was my third visit to the farm. I was starting to enjoy the nomadic rhythms of circus life – spring and summer and autumn on the ocean, perpetually in motion as we visited towns and villages along the West Coast, followed by a winter of hibernation in rural Cedar. Sure, the air smelled of manure and the well-water tasted like sulphur,

but I appreciated the solid comforts that a few months on land could provide. There were plenty of hours to repair costumes, knit socks, practice instruments, or write songs. Last summer, Delbert had raised a new barn for his livestock, and our troupe had been given the old barn as a space for training, storage, and social engagements. We ate our meals together there, at a long plank table made of old doors and sawhorses. The space was rustic but warm and dry, and provided secure stalls for horses, ponies, the bear, and – in his brutish iron cage -- the Geek.

I liked Delbert Beddington. He wasn't your typical goat farmer, if there even is such a thing. Delbert possessed a vitality that one might mistake for childish glee, but in truth, he was lively and confident, brimming with enthusiasm for life's little joys. When a job needed doing, he jumped to it without complaint or hesitation. He embraced modern conveniences, too. With pride, he claimed to be the first farmer in Cedar to purchase a mechanical tractor, and he taught himself how to repair it. With his stylish clothes, one might assume Delbert was a gentleman farmer, play-acting to fulfill some pre-war, upper class, back-to-the-land fantasy, but nothing could be farther from the truth. He was a very accomplished steward of the land. He worked hard to keep his holdings prosperous and his family fed. Delbert embodied the best qualities of rural living: he was resourceful and clever and dashing, too.

"Luck is with us today," he said, noting the road ahead. Just upstream from the estuary, the defiant Nanaimo River bridge stood strong against the raging currents.

"Thank goodness. I was afraid we wouldn't make it to the train station."

"Never fret, Miss Rose!" he assured, patting one hand against the dashboard. "This lovely lady will get us to our destination with plenty of time to spare!"

Delbert dearly loved his Model T. He stored it under cover in the shed nearest the house, protected from the elements, and polished it weekly with waxes and potions. The leather seats were soft, the springs were a little squeaky, the tires were rotated monthly. He swept the floors after every trip with a horse brush stashed under the back seat, and the only objects he kept in the glove box were the car's logbook and a sharp pencil. For Delbert, these were items of supreme importance. Every

driver recorded distances travelled and fuel used – if not, one could get in real trouble – but a peek in Delbert’s pages revealed the mileage religiously tallied, along with little embellishments like the day’s weather or the condition of the roads. *Too much construction by Decourcy Beach. Deep mud by Cranberry School. Loose cow on Wilkinson Road.*

The motor-car trundled over the bridge, which shuddered and shivered as chunks of swirling debris struck the footings. On the opposite shore, the roads improved. Houses appeared more frequently as we travelled along the Victoria Highway, then we cut through the fine neighbourhood of Nob Hill, full of lovely homes and leafy gardens. By the time we ascended the hilltop park at its heart, the timid patch of blue had spread to encompass an eighth of the sky, and we were afforded a fine view of distant Gabriola Bluffs. Delbert cut up Albert Street and turned northwest along narrow Kennedy Street, skirting the edge of Nanaimo’s Third Chinatown, by which time the rain had reduced to a middling drizzle. We turned down Franklin Street toward the train station, but discovered the roads clogged with detours: raging torrents swept down steep Fitzwilliam Street, and Wentworth Street was completely closed, owing to a rush of floodwaters surging up through a manhole. Still, Delbert remained undeterred. He told me to hold onto my hat, and we wove a deft track through a labyrinth of alleys, dog-tracks, and short-cuts.

We reached the station just as the E&N locomotive appeared around a curve in the track.

Delbert and I stood on the platform as the engine chuffed to a stop. Clouds of steam billowed. Sizzling rain drops struck the hot metal wheels and stacks. The warmth of the machines emanated broadly, which I found very pleasant in the autumn chill, and we watched as passengers disgorged, struggling with carpetbags and weary children, and porters scrambled in every direction with boxes and crates. The station became a bustling carnival. Conversations filled the atmosphere around us as lovers reunited, businessmen shook hands, and toddlers squealed to see once-absent fathers.

From the chaos appeared a familiar face.

Dr. Hector Kane had always been a lanky, stooped, and ghoulish character. With his drawn cheeks and a dark suit, he normally haunted

the lower decks of the *Nona*, crafting grotesque creations out of animal parts and human teeth, but when I'd left him in Port Alberni in August, he'd been confined to a hospital bed, grey-skinned and stitched up, partially sedated and moaning about his uncertain future. Since then, his cheeks had filled out. His frame was more robust. His shoulders were not quite as stooped, his gait not as shuffling. He wore a tailored charcoal-grey suit with a purple silk cravat, and on his head was a fine felt bowler with a matching band. I'd expected an invalid, hobbling with a cane, uncomfortable from his injuries and doubly cantankerous, but to my surprise, Kane looked... well, frankly, Kane looked marvellous.

Of course, his expression remained as dour as ever.

"Miss Rose," he said upon approach, "I should have known you'd be here. Always sticking your nose where it doesn't belong."

"You'd rather walk twelve miles to the farm, doctor?" I said, "It can be arranged."

His lips pinched into a smirk. He shook Delbert's hand, but he did not shake mine. This was not rudeness, but quite the opposite: Kane knew better than most, I preferred not to be touched.

Delbert left to find a porter and arrange the transfer of luggage, leaving Kane and I to stroll slowly towards the car park.

"It's good to see you, Hector! How are you?"

He emitted a groan. "I cannot believe how much food Charlotte whipped up for me, and of such fine quality," he complained. "Butter, cream sauces, more types of French cheeses than I could count. Frankly, Rose, I haven't eaten so well since the army. Give Mademoiselle Arsenault a reason to cook, and that woman becomes an unstoppable force."

"And your belly?"

"Other than an added layer of blubber?" he moaned, tapping his fingers to his torso, "My stitches are almost fully healed, with no infection or complications. That Alberni doctor was a merry idiot, but I managed to heal, in spite of his incompetence." Hector's smile was genuine. "It's lovely to see you again, Rose. I trust you've been well?"

I stifled a cough with one hand. "It's good to be back in Cedar. We all need the rest."

Kane had only minimal luggage: a single leather suitcase, along with a modest traveling trunk of books and curios that he'd accumulated

during his convalescence. These fit neatly into the back seat of Delbert's motor-car. I offered Kane the passenger seat, then continued to the front of the vehicle to give the driver a hand.

"With yesterday's storm, I feared the Alberni trunk line might've washed out," said Delbert as he retarded the spark switch beside the steering wheel, then joined me at the front grill.

Kane spoke out the window as he adjusted his long legs to find a comfortable position. "A bridge at Cameron Lake has collapsed. I heard the bridges at Old Shingle Mill and the Arlington Hotel are both damaged, too."

"Prime the pump, Miss Rose," said Delbert, gesturing to the ring-pull under the front grill. I did as requested, pulling it four sharp times just like he'd shown me. Then, to the doctor, he said, "Bridges are down in Ladysmith, too. Would you mind toggling the fuel switch, Hector?"

Kane leaned down, reached under the steering wheel, then sat upright again. "Done," he reported. "I tell you, Del, it was an Act of Providence that the rail lines are unharmed."

"Praise God," Delbert said. "Step back, Miss Rose, while I flip the choke. If I've forgotten to turn off the ignition switch, it could snap back with enough force to break your arm." This warning was said with a smile. A man of Delbert's meticulous nature would never forget a step.

Two sharp pulls with his entire body and the engine grumbled to life. I jumped into the backseat next to Kane's luggage. Delbert hopped in his own seat, pulled the level, and engaged the throttle. We pattered onto Selby Street, narrowly missing a mule cart, and the doctor smiled at the fun of it.

"I'm amazed you fetched me," Kane said. "I figured you'd be mired in a bog."

"Wasn't that deluge the pip!" Delbert agreed. "In all my years, I've seen nothing like it. The worst on record, I'd say." He slapped his hand against the wooden dashboard. "But like I told Miss Rose, nothing keeps this little lady down!"

"The Model T really is a wonder," I agreed.

Kane turned in his seat to study me. "And you, in that car coat, looking like you belong in a rally," he teased.

"Maybe I do," I replied with a cheeky grin. "It sheds the rain

wonderfully – but look now! The clouds have parted fully. I'll hardly need it.”

Kane tipped his nose to the clearing sky. “The storm is over,” he mused, “It’s as if nothing happened --”

Delbert slammed on the brakes and bellowed, “Good God!”

Tires squealed. The car skidded sideways to a halt at the intersection of Selby and Fitzwilliam, which coursed with tiny rapids pouring downhill to the harbour. Kane’s hand went protectively to his torso. I struck the back of the seats, giving a shout of surprise.

As if carried by Fitzwilliam’s current, a dark green motor-car careened down the hill, swerving back and forth across the full width of the road. The horn honked wildly. The car narrowly missed the hood of our own vehicle, struck a newspaper box, and bounced off. Then it roared down the hill, tires biting ruts into the mud. Pedestrians scattered for safety, umbrellas whirling.

Delbert, without thought or consideration for our own safety, stomped his foot to the floor. We launched after the frenetic juggernaut, splattering through puddles and ponds, throwing up great shimmering curtains of water which soaked everyone we passed.

“Jesus, man!” Kane howled as he gripped the door.

“Hold tight, friends!” Delbert replied.

We tailed the car down Fitzwilliam, over a viaduct crossing a reedy slough, along cramped and cobbled Bastion Street, as far as the harbour. Delbert drove like a maniac! Clearly, he assumed the green car was out-of-control.

But it lurched to a sudden stop in Dallas Square, next to the new cenotaph. The car’s rampant descent hadn’t been the result of faulty brakes, but purposeful.

The cenotaph stood under a tarp at the centre of the square, waiting to be unveiled on Poppy Day. What an act of disrespect, parking within striking distance of the memorial to our veterans! Both men were offended for all the friends they’d lost overseas. Adrenaline amplified their emotions. Delbert swore under his breath, and Kane hauled himself from the passenger seat, yelling at the green car, “What are you thinking!?”

Three men in expensive suits disembarked, and Delbert shook his fist. “You madmen!”

Two of the men, heads down, ignored him completely. They jogged with grim determination towards the Canadian Pacific pier, where a large white steamship had moored.

The third man, the driver, had a narrow face like a weasel and wispy grey curls sprouting from under the brim of his bowler hat. He’d gotten out to examine the scratch on the side of his motor-car, but Delbert jabbed his finger at him in accusation. “Where did you learn to drive, you menace!?”

As I left the back seat, I noticed people assembling on the dock, their faces stony. Every woman wore a nursing uniform.

“Delbert –” I interrupted as I joined him on the sidewalk.

But he would not be calmed. “You could have bloody killed someone!” he continued to shout, oblivious to the swarming crowd. More vehicles arrived with important passengers and crates of medical supplies.

I grew up in a mining town, and I know when the aura of disaster hangs in the air. Nanaimo’s harbour was protected from the open strait by a circling of small islands and a peninsula of rugged granite, and it was often crowded with fishing boats and dories, but the large ship currently moored in its centre did not belong. It dwarfed the other vessels, and sailors barked orders as they ran the length of the pier, preparing the large ship for departure. Like a slap, I recognized it as the steamship *Capilano*, her white sides gleaming in the first shafts of returning sunshine. She ran a route along the mainland coast from Vancouver to Selma Park, and we often spotted her when sailing through those particular waters. What was she doing in Nanaimo’s harbour?

The elderly driver rounded on Delbert. The gentleman was in his 60s, older than Delbert but stubborn and full of vinegar. Very little could intimidate a man of his fortitude.

“Killed?” The thin lips peeled back from long teeth. “Half of Britannia Beach are already dead or missing, friend.”

Kane was at my elbow. “What’s happened?”

“All this heavy rain, followed by chinook winds? The snow melted on the mountains and brought down a flood that tore Britannia Beach

in two,” he replied. “A cloudburst hit at nine o’clock last night, and a wall of water rushed down from above, and swept away fifty houses. Washed them out to the sea! Who knows how many men, women and children are lost?”

“Dear God!” Delbert gasped.

I glanced through the gap between Protection Island and Gabriola Island, across the Georgia Strait to the gigantic Coastal Mountains. The little hamlet of Britannia Beach lay in their purple shadow. It was a mining town, too, but much smaller than Nanaimo, and comprised of only a hundred houses. The instant loss of fifty would decimate the community!

“You’re sending supplies to the mainland,” I surmised, “And the *Capilano* was the closest ship that could be commandeered?”

“That’s right,” said the elderly man, “A few fishing boats, too, are loaded with food and medicine. That whole section of the mainland is cut off by road and rail from Vancouver. There’s no way to get to the disaster site by land.”

Kane was already grabbing his suitcase from the back seat. “Take my travel trunk back to the farm, Miss Rose. I’ll return as soon as I’m able.”

“Don’t be stupid,” I replied, “You’ve hardly recovered, yourself!” Kane’s burst of bravado had already gotten the better of him, plus our mad race down the street hadn’t helped; his skin looked waxy and his knees trembled. “Lean against the car and rest, Hector, before you fall and split yourself open from stem to stern!”

He glowered but complied.

The *Capilano* was loaded and launched with impressive efficiency. In a matter of minutes, it pulled away from the docks, creating a foaming, frothing wake that made the smaller boats dance. Delbert whistled low as the great ship surged out of the harbour. He muttered, “Isn’t that a hell of a thing!”

The man stood with us in respectful silence next to our motor-car as we watched the great ship leave. Once she pulled passed Gabriola Island, he turned to Kane.

“You’re a doctor?”

“I am,” said Kane.

“Maybe it’s best you stayed,” he continued. “I’ve just sent the

majority of our medical staff to Britannia Beach. Should something happen on this side of the strait, it's a comfort to know I still have a doctor within reach." He reached out his hand to shake. "Wallace Kirkwood, head of the Hospital Board."

"A pleasure. I'm Dr. Hector Kane. This is my associate, Rose Ivy."

Kirkwood noted my tattoos and scars but did not point them out. He shook my hand without hesitation. "Good to make your acquaintance, madame. Where are you folks staying in Nanaimo?"

"With our friend, Mr. Beddington," I said, and introduced Delbert.

"I'm astounded you kept up with me, sir," said Kirkwood. "Where did you learn to drive?"

"In service to his Majesty," Delbert replied, "I drove with the Canadian Army Medical corps, and learned from the best."

"I'll keep that in mind!" Kirkwood said, impressed. "The Western Fuel Company is often looking for new ambulance men to join their private service." His mouth crooked into a pert V of a smile. "I assure you, Mr. Beddington, I only drive like a maniac when lives are on the line."

The gentleman wished us a good afternoon, and promised to contact us should he need any assistance over the course of the next few days. We climbed back into Delbert's vehicle, each of us wrapped in quiet reflection, and it wasn't until we'd reached Cedar's pastures that Kane said, "What a way to start the off-season!"

"Those poor folks in Britannia Beach," Delbert said. "I hope our medical staff can be of some help, but what can any mortal do when facing a disaster of such terrible magnitude?"

"They'll do their best," said Kane. "It's all any of us can do."

Delbert nodded sadly. "I'll say a prayer tonight for those poor lost souls."

Kane half-turned in his seat to face me, wincing a little. "At least Kirkwood has you and I, should anything go terribly awry."

I scoffed. "What could possibly go wrong in the next few days? He won't require our services." I turned my head to admire the drenched, sun-dappled October scenery. "I'm quite sure we'll never hear from Mr. Kirkwood again."

Oh, how wrong I was!