

# Chapter One



I hit the ground before I knew I'd been struck.

Two sensations followed: a quick, indignant fury, plus a wickedly sharp pain in my right leg. I let out a string of uncouth exclamations but, as Hector Kane rushed to the roadside and dragged me to the safety of the verge, he immediately shushed me.

"Pull yourself together, Rose! Did you strike your head?" He studied my eyes, measuring my pupils. "What's the date? The year? Who's the premier?"

"September 16, 1922, John Oliver — God damn it!" Hector rolled me onto my back and, in the process, my left knee clocked my right shin, sending fireworks up the limb. I swore again.

"What possessed you to step into traffic?" he scolded. "What were you thinking?"

Indeed, what *had* I been thinking? Three full years had passed since I'd fled Victoria, and I was congratulating myself on my own transformation. I was quite sure that my old neighbours had long forgotten the mousy housewife married to Constable David Irving. After his tragic death by Spanish flu, that timid and miserable woman had vanished completely, leaving no friends, relations, or forwarding address. Time had scrubbed Rosamund Irving from memory.

And that filled Rose Ivy's heart with giddy hope. I'd returned with short red hair, a new name, and countless tattoos of flowers and bees. I was a free woman who made her own money and kept her own counsel. Instead of a dour housecoat or kitchen apron, I wore a hood, a veil, and an exotic robe of billowing blue silk, protecting my decorations for paying customers, and the outfit hid my identity admirably.

Besides, we weren't in Victoria proper but in the nearby hamlet of Oak Bay, and I was certain I knew no one in this distinguished neighbourhood. The morning was carefree, sunny, and dry: as perfect as a postcard. Breezy gardens brimmed with roses and wisteria. Crab apple trees hung heavy with fruit. The salty wind was sharp in the nostrils and the sea lolled with cresting, steel-blue waves, and I was utterly enchanted by the beauty of the day.

And distracted, to my detriment! The whole region had grown since I'd joined the Circus Salmagundi and, caught in a whirlwind of sensations, I'd forgotten that this was a city street and not a country road. The bustle of Victoria had expanded into outlying municipalities; Oak Bay had become the type of place where one must look both ways before stepping into the street. Gertie, Hector and I weren't even two blocks from the wharf when my vigilance faltered. The motorcar traveled at a dastardly clip. It cut the corner and the right wheel-well nipped my leg, and I spun into the dirt as Gertie let out a horrified scream.

Behind Dr. Kane's interrogation, tires screeched to a halt. A stout man jumped out. He started barking orders, which Hector did not appreciate.

"You devil!" Hector accused. "You must've been going 30 miles an hour!"

The driver announced to the gathering crowd, "I'm a physician. I shall assess her."

"You'll do no such thing," Hector replied. "If you doctor like you drive, you're a careless butcher!" He crouched at my side. "Rose, where are you hurt?"

"Lower right tibia," I gasped, palpating my own leg. Tears squeezed from my eyes. "Not an oblique fracture." The pain was nauseating, but my fingertips detected no break line. "Nor greenstick fracture, either," I said, thankful.

Hector swatted my hands out of the way and, reaching under my robes, ran his palms down the length of my thigh, knee, and calf, and for a moment, panic made my pulse hammer in my ears. I recoiled. He said quietly, "I will not hurt you, if I can avoid it." Then his thumb grazed the point of impact, and the pain swelled again until I quite forgot to care about my aversion to a man's touch. I yelped.

"There's a lump rising," he said. "Your leg isn't broken, but this lunatic has done a real number on it!"

The man in question was a gruff, hefty fellow with a thick walrus moustache, salt-and-peppered but neatly trimmed. His driving coat was black felted wool, trimmed with navy blue, which perfectly matched his blue leather gloves and the jaunty blue band around his trilby hat. He might've been in his fifties — the Great War had aged people and sometimes it was difficult to tell — and he possessed a twitchy manner, as alert and responsive as a rabbit. I suppose, striking a woman with a car can make a man jumpy.

"Put her in the back seat," he said. "I'll take her to my office."

Gertie continued to wail at the side of the road. Our young trick rider had joined us for a morning stroll, but she'd proven useless in a crisis, dissolving into tears and retreating with clasped hands as I sprawled in the dirt. Hector stood as straight as an officer. "Gertrude, pull yourself together," he commanded. "I'll take Rose to get patched up. Return to the ships and tell the others, I'll bring her back as soon as I'm able."

"Oh, Rosie!" she sobbed.

"I'm alright, Gertie," I assured through clenched teeth. "Only a glancing blow!"

She pressed a wet kiss to my forehead as Hector helped me up, but I cried again when I put weight on my foot and limped to the motorcar.

The open-top Ford had a black lacquered exterior and plush seats in red leather. It was a fine, expensive vehicle with a well-tuned engine that purred like a tiger. I lay across the back seat as Hector took the passenger seat.

The man settled behind the steering wheel. "Dr. Raymond Rogers, at your service," he said. "What a ghastly way to meet." He pulled onto Beach Drive and we rounded the bay at a brisk clip. "I'm on my way to

meet a patient in my home clinic, and I'm a bit ruffled by the whole affair." He looked over his shoulder. "I am sorry, madame."

I was about to tear a strip from the man, but Hector held up one long finger at me, demanding silence. Then he introduced himself, and Rogers gave a start.

"You're a physician, too?"

"I am," came the curt reply.

"Why is your companion dressed as she is?" Rogers glanced over his shoulder at my veil. As if I was mute, he whispered, "Is she a leper?"

"God, no," I replied, pulling down the veil to reveal my scowl.

"We're circus performers," Hector explained. "Our troupe is performing at this year's Provincial Fall Fair at the Willows Fairground, and Miss Rose is our tattooed lady. She hides her artwork when she's not on stage."

Rogers burst out in laughter which, given my injury, I did not appreciate.

"I certainly didn't expect to see circus folk today!" he exclaimed, navigating a corner like a Roman charioteer. "My housekeeper rang the hospital to summon me home. Apparently, the concierge of the Empress Hotel recommended my services to a rather illustrious guest: the wife of an British government official. She suffers from an injured shoulder, but she's reluctant to visit public facilities on account of her husband's lofty position."

"No wonder, you're flustered," Hector said.

"Quite!" Dr. Rogers agreed. "The delegation arrived in Victoria this morning. He is a colonel, you see, and a financial advisor for the British Empire Exhibition. To meet a diplomat's wife and a tattooed lady, all in one day? Isn't that the pip!"

Dr. Rogers hit the accelerator, the motorcar surged, and we climbed the street, heading inland. The boulevard snaked between groves of crooked oaks and stone houses on rambling acres. It was a fine, spacious neighbourhood, and the properties were artful and expensive, but none could compete with the towering mansion on the crest of the hill: a palatial stone construction, three stories high, with an arched gate, hedged lawns, and towering wrought iron fences to keep out the riff-raff.

Dr. Rogers steered us up the curved driveway to the north side of the house, parking alongside another motorcar. He directed Hector towards a pair of double doors leading into the ground level, and I struggled to stand, wincing and sniffing, but Hector was impatient. He was a thin, academic fellow but surprisingly wiry, and I suddenly found myself lifted, carried over the threshold, and transported into a pleasant waiting room of soft chairs, marble sculptures and Tiffany lamps. An oak door led to an interior chamber. At the far end of the waiting room, a wide staircase ascended to the main floor.

On a pink velvet couch sat a couple.

The man had an oval face and clean-shaven features, fishy eyes and lipless mouth, with slicked black hair parted in the middle. The plain, clean, impeccable lines of his dark suit spoke of its great expense. The only flourish was a burgundy cravat around his lean throat, sewn of shimmering silk as dark as blood.

The woman at his side was a little younger than me, with light brown hair cut to shoulder-length, visible under her tan cloche hat. Her dress was sewn of fine ivory gabardine, perfect for a warm autumn afternoon, and around her neck she wore a gold chain and locket. Her features were blunt, and on a girl might be dismissed as 'cute', but the ache in her shoulder had given her a grey pallor which accentuated the creases around her mouth and eyes. Perhaps it was the stiff way she sat, or the manner in which she held her fingers tightly interlaced in her lap, but I immediately recognized a shy woman, timid and cautious but clever and observant. Her attention latched onto me immediately. Despite her discomfort, she smiled in polite greeting.

"Good afternoon," she said. The English accent was polished, the voice melodic and soft.

"Hello," I replied with equal discomfort as Hector dumped me on a chair by the door.

To the man, Hector said, "You're the colonel?"

The woman glanced at her companion in surprise, then said, "Goodness, no! This is my secretary, Mr. F. W. Bates. He drove me out to see the doctor. My husband remains with the delegation." She held out her left hand, favouring her right shoulder. "I'm Agatha."

“Lovely to make your acquaintance,” said Hector. He was about to introduce me when Dr. Rogers interrupted, bowing his head to her.

“I’ll see you first, madame, but give me a moment to put my office in order.” He hung his driving coat on the coat rack, popped his hat on a hook, and removed his gloves to show strong hands with thick skin. “I wasn’t expecting patients in my private practice today. I fear I’ve left a mess of paperwork on my desk.”

She nodded and Rogers disappeared into the interior room.

“And you are?” she said, delicate eyebrows arched.

“I’m Rose.”

“You look about as healthy as me,” she replied.

“My leg needs tending. I hear you’re suffering a wrenched shoulder.”

“Goodness, yes! We spent two weeks in Hawaii and I learned how to surf. One stands upright on a polished plank of wood, flying through the air on a rolling wave, experiencing the same wild freedom as a seabird, and my shoulder bothered me but it was so delightful, I couldn’t stop. Now I fear I’ve done myself permanent damage.”

“Surfing sounds remarkable!” I said.

“Damn foolishness,” Hector grumbled.

Agatha, ignoring him, said, “If you try it, Rose, I promise you’ll be hooked.”

“It sounds like some outrageous scheme Rose would attempt,” he replied. “She already plays the ukulele.”

“Do you?!” Agatha asked.

“It’s part of my act,” I said, and pushed up the sleeve of my robe to display vines and flowers encircling my bare arm.

Her eyes sparkled. “I’d love to hear you play!”

A matronly housekeeper emerged from the doctor’s office. She was a prim, rigid figure with a hard-set face and flinty eyes, wearing a white apron over a dove-grey dress. As she examined the four of us in the enclave, chatting amicably, her nose wrinkled with disapproval: we’d become too chummy, too quickly, for her liking. “Dr. Rogers has asked me to invite you all to stay for lunch as his guests,” she said without warmth; this change in plans was a great inconvenience. “He claims he’s never had such a collection of interesting people in his home.” Her

mood warmed and the slightest smile softened the stern mouth. "His niece, Louisa, would treasure the opportunity to host both a tattooed lady and a novelist at the same time."

I glanced at the other patient, amazed. "Not only do you surf, you wrote a book, too?"

She blushed but, before she could answer, her secretary leaned to her ear and said, "We can't stay, ma'am."

"Of course we can, Francis," she replied firmly. "One must not be rude." She turned to me. "You'll stay as well?"

"Absolutely," I replied. Hector scowled but didn't argue; in our business, you never pass up a free lunch.

The housekeeper gave a clipped nod and mounted the stairs, hurrying to organize a generous luncheon, and almost immediately, Dr. Rogers appeared in his office door.

"Right, then, I'm ready for your examination, madame," he said to the young lady.

She stood, wincing again with the motion and favouring her arm.

"I do appreciate you for seeing me on such short notice, Dr. Rogers," she said. "I'm terribly sorry for any inconvenience I might have caused."

He chortled. "Inconvenience! None at all, I assure you. Don't let fussy Mrs. Fitzsimmons put you off; she'll pull together a feast, and I'm ecstatic that you'll all stay to dine with us." A little colour warmed his cheeks. "My niece will be thrilled. Louisa is a true fan of the arts but she's too frail to attend public performances, and I think your appearance at our table today will earn me a few points in her favour." When he chuckled, his walrus moustache shivered. "Goodness, what a strange and fascinating day this has become!"

"It's not how I intended to spend the afternoon," Hector grumped.

"Nor I, but we shall have a merry time, I'm sure," said Agatha, throwing me a wink.

"I plan on it," said Dr. Rogers, standing to one side of the door to let her pass into his office. "Now, then, Mrs. Christie, tell me how you came by your injury. I heard some mention of *surfing*?"