

*The*  
LAST  
GYPSY  
QUEEN

LINDA PAUL



Black Rose Writing | Texas



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For my mom, who knew my heart as I knew hers.  
She would have loved seeing this story come to life.

## Praise for *The Last Gypsy Queen*

“Linda Paul’s *The Last Gypsy Queen* drew me into this unique American time period and place. I reached the end and wanted to know more about the characters, their lives, and the history that inspired their stories. It is a fascinating, beautifully written, and researched novel that speaks to anyone who has ever questioned their future or their place in a community.”

–Georgie Blalock, author of *The Other Windsor Girl*

“A young Romani woman battles discrimination and works toward escaping the oppression inherent to her culture, with dreams of becoming a doctor in this sweeping historical novel.”

–Gail Ward Olmsted, best-selling author of *Landscape of a Marriage*

“This beautifully written novel is perfect for book clubs with its prime-for-debate mix of love against the odds, a strong female protagonist, the fascinating weaving in of tarot card reading, and themes of identity and cultural bias.”

–Susan Coventry, author of *Till Taught by Pain*

“A tale of love, resilience, friendship, and family, *The Last Gypsy Queen* is an immersive treasure.”

–Jenn Bouchard, author of *Considering Us* and *Palms on the Cape*

“In a world at war and an amusement park with dangers of its own, a young Romani woman with dreams of becoming a doctor must choose—loyalty to her people or a love that will change her life forever?”

–Cam Torrens, bestselling author of the *Tyler Zahn* mystery/suspense series

“A summer carnival whirs to life in a quiet corner of a world at war, and the lives it touches will never be the same. Linda Paul's sweeping historical romance pulled me into its world, where a forbidden love transcends cultural barriers. Her authentic portrayal of Romani culture avoids stereotypes. A story rich with humanity and heart.”

–**Tamatha Cain, author of *Song of the Chimney Sweep***

“It is great to see another story where one of us Gypsies is portrayed accurately. Like the Gypsy Queen in this narrative, we had to be resourceful, creative, and resilient. A must-read for all of those in our community.”

–**Gary G. Steele, author of *The Gypsy Family Circus* series and great-grandson of Richard and Elizabeth Stanley Joles**

“Paul presents a nuanced portrait of Romani culture, depicting the Romani as more than martyrs – despite Nazi persecution – and displays varied traits like those in any other group. Engaging characters and a well-realized milieu propel this inspiring narrative.”

–***Kirkus Reviews***

“As a historical fiction author myself, I value books that show authentic historical research, as shown in *The Last Gypsy Queen*. Linda Paul's Romani characters and cultural settings show why she won the Page Turner Awards.”

–**Paula Wynne (Sheridan), founder of the Page Turner Awards**



DURWOOD BOARDING HOUSE



CABINS



SUMMER COTTAGES

BUCKEYE LAKE VILLAGE



ROMANI CABINS



MAIN ROAD



THE DIPS



LITTLE LAKE

BUCKEYE LAKE

CRYSTAL POOL



CRYSTAL BALLROOM

LILA'S SECRET ROOM

MISS BETTY'S SUGAR WAFFLES



MIDWAY

DOC WRIGHT'S PHARMACY



PIER BALLROOM



SUMMER COTTAGES

PARK ENTRANCE



RIDES

BOARDWALK



FREE EVENTS GRASSY AREA



OLD FOUNTAIN

BOAT RENTALS



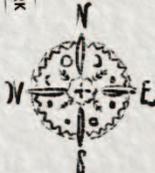
ROMANI TENTS

MARISOL'S TENT

PICNIC POINT



MAIN ROAD



PARKING

OLD TOW PATH

MAP OF BUCKEYE LAKE THE PLAYGROUND OF OHIO 1942

*The*  
LAST  
GYPSY  
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*Romanies have traveled the earth for hundreds of years to escape unwarranted persecution. People commonly used the term Gypsy, especially up through the time of this story. Now, it's acknowledged that it is an exonym—a term imposed on an ethnic or cultural group by outsiders. It is used with care in these pages.*

# CHAPTER 1

## Marisol Mazaria

*The Village of Buckeye Lake, Ohio – June 5, 2014*

Marisol clutches the faded woolen carpetbag against her chest, its shape long gone and sagging. The same one she's used across the years to carry forbidden medicines to the injured, babes, and mummies. It's empty now except for the two framed photographs that clatter when she moves. The bag's usefulness has passed, the same as Marisol's.

It's been since late last summer when she was here at her son Andrew's house. Standing in his driveway beside the towering oak tree, Marisol stares up with no recollection of the structure built into its branches. Her body is constantly stiff these days, and her neck protests as she bends it back. Between the tender leaves that flutter in the early evening breeze, she sees the flicker of a long-extinguished campfire. She hears the crackle and smells the sweet, earthy smoke as it curls up toward the stars. Marisol hates it when her mind plays tricks.

Already dusk, three strands of Edison bulbs sway loosely from the tree branches. They stretch over the patio, creating playful shadows as dollops of light skitter across the yard. The gentle blink of fireflies and the evening cricket symphony remind Marisol once again that the outdoors belongs to them.

Andrew and his wife Sarah stand on either side of her now, in case her unreliable legs give out. The long drive through the honking, aggressive city traffic had been tiring. Only two hours earlier, Andrew hurried from his work to collect her from the hospital where she'd been stuck for the past ten days.

Marisol's body constantly betrays her. She is not resisting finishing her days living with Andrew and Sarah. They are no longer young themselves. The effort and kindness to take her in are more than generous. It is the way of her people, what a clan does. Take care of family, no matter the blemishes or unsavory parts, the circumstances, or what she'd had to leave behind.

"This is the grandkids' treehouse I've been telling you about, Mom," Andrew says, pointing up toward the rough-hewn boards. A floodlight anchored to a branch illuminates the half-closed door. "We planned it together, and they helped build it. Finished it in the fall before the first snow. We can hardly pry them out since they came to visit last week when school ended for the summer break."

"That's a fine hideaway," Marisol says. She can understand its lure. A place for adventure, to let imaginations run free. The breeze carries the faintest lake water scent across her face. It pushes through a wild lock of once-dark and shiny hair. What remains is thin, gray, and as fine as each of her babies' when they were born.

"Jack, Mari, come down here and say hello to Nanna," Sarah calls up. The door creaks back, scraping wood on wood as two children appear. Nine-year-old Mari scurries backward down the slatted ladder and hugs her great-grandmother Marisol's bony knees.

"Goodness, why are you both so filthy?" their Grandma Sarah asks.

Light streams across the open doorway, bouncing against something red behind Marisol's great-grandson. She squints hard to bring it into focus through the white film. Her ninety-one-year-old vision is the latest frustrating ailment, another that she refuses to correct with surgery. Why bother?

"What, what is that thing?" Marisol sputters. "What is that?"

"It's our first treasure, Nanna!" Jack, four years older than Mari, declares. He stands tall atop the platform, his chest puffed forward as though

he's the conquering captain of a pirate ship. "We found it in the woods today near the lake and hauled it back on our skateboards. It's huge! We could barely get it up here! Look! It says CAMEL CORN 5¢."

*What is happening?* Marisol's knees give way. Sinking against Sarah and Andrew's arms, she pushes gnarled fingers into the pinch between her ribs. At once, Marisol recognizes this object. The metal sign has cartwheeled with fury through her dreams for over seventy years, long before the forest claimed its shine. The rust and dents weren't there back then. But she is sure. Buried all these years. No different from her Romani heritage.

"What is it, Marisol?" Sarah asks too loudly with alarm in her voice, as if Marisol has lost her hearing. "Are you feeling okay? Andrew, grab that chair."

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The last thing she wants to do is cause a fuss or be a burden. Though of all the places she's lived, she never imagined that back here, near the amusement park would be the last.

Sarah stands in the bedroom doorway of Marisol's new, final home. "We're happy you've come to live with us," she says. "I tried to arrange your room the best I could. You'll let me know if we've forgotten anything you need, won't you?" This space is plenty. It's as large as the caravan Marisol grew up in. They'd brought all her things from her place while she was in the hospital, and now that house is empty, ready to be sold next week.

"Yes, this is lovely. Thank you for making room for me. I'm sorry about the commotion I caused. It's just...it was probably my mind fooling me." She doesn't believe what she is saying. No need to worry Andrew and Sarah. She knows exactly what she saw.

"Don't be ridiculous. We wouldn't have you living anywhere else," Sarah says warmly. She smiles while graciously ignoring Marisol's reaction to the old park sign. Sarah has always been kind to her. "Be sure to take the pills your doctor sent home with you." Marisol glances at the row of plastic orange bottles and a glass of water on the bedside stand.

Sarah pulls the door shut, leaving Marisol sitting on the quilt. The one she's drug along through life. Its once-bright colors are muted now, and frayed threads have found their freedom from weakened stitches along the patches. Marisol traces tiny flowers with her shaky finger, a piece from one of Mammie's skirts.

She swallows the medications and replaces the bottles beside the two framed pictures. One is in color. Their little family with her husband and two young boys—a summer day at the beach collecting seashells. The other is black and white, though her mind can see the vivid colors of their old Vårdö wagon in the background. She is seventeen, standing in front of it with Gran Rose, Mammie, and Flora.

Marisol pads into the adjoining bathroom, splashes cold water on her face, and changes into her soft cotton nightgown. So much better than the scratchy hospital one. She glances in the mirror. The face that was once plump and full of life now stares back, sunken and wrinkled.

As Marisol crosses to switch off the light, she passes her old wooden jewelry box that sits on the dresser—the one Grandad Henry made when she was ten. She lifts the top, revealing her old heart locket and the shiny purple sequin that is always there. She plucks it up and presses it between her thumb and palm. Marisol closes her eyes and breathes deeply. The gritty, dusty tow path is beneath her thin embroidered slippers. The April sun warms her face.

She doesn't lift the tray but thinks of the tarot card that lies beneath it. The Sun. Marisol replaces the sequin, closes the box, and switches off the bedroom light. She crawls between the crisp lavender-scented sheets and draws the covers up to her neck.

There is a soft tap at the door. "Mind if I come in?" It is Andrew.

"Of course."

Muted hallway light spills across the floorboards as he steps in and settles on the end of the bed.

"I'm honored you've decided to stay with us," he says. "I know it's been hard since Dad died." He pauses. "I want to know about your life."

Marisol gently shakes her head. Their lives had been so full and busy. There was never time to slow down and tell her sons the stories of her past. They'd shown no interest.

"I do. I want to hear about the part you left behind before you were our mother. My day is free tomorrow. You probably haven't heard, but they've restored the fountain at Buckeye Lake Park. I thought you and I could take a picnic lunch."

Andrew wants to hear about the amusement park—her life when she was young. He means *before she dies*. But that doesn't bother her. It is inevitable. Her history going with her into the afterlife is bothersome. She is at last ready to tell him everything.

"Yes, I would like to see the place once more." She won't be shocked, this time, by the arsonist's scars. One last visit. To say goodbye.

Once Andrew leaves, Marisol sinks into the mattress. Her physical body is failing. But her memory is sharp—at least the fragments she now carefully preserves. She is thankful it has not betrayed her.

*Are we not all simply traveling through this life?* she thinks. Marisol calls forward memories of her ancestors more than usual lately, now that they have gone ahead into eternity. She is standing near her journey's end. What remains is small enough to measure.

When the loneliness makes it hard to fall asleep, Marisol summons the lullabies of her childhood. The soulful violins and plucky mandolins blend in harmony. The steady drumbeat on taunt animal skins lyrically weaves it all together. The whirl of embroidered skirt fabric is bright, the voices are cheerful, and the joy of dancing is unrestrained. She lets the dust from the rutted road and the rough wheels of the caravan take her far away.

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The next morning, a family of Carolina wrens sings outside her bedroom window. Their music is loud enough to breach the glass and serve as an alarm. She had a peaceful sleep, dreaming of a summer day splashing in the Crystal Pool.

Marisol pinches her shoulders back and stretches her legs forward, her tight, contracted muscles resisting. She remembers that Andrew is taking her to see the fountain one last time. Of her two sons, he's always been the more introspective, sentimental one.

Andrew helps her out of his car. She braces against the side while he retrieves two folding chairs from the trunk. On her last visit here three years ago, the place was barren, except for industrious weeds poking through the packed-down dirt and random pea gravel strewn about. Only the long-dried-up, four-tiered fountain interrupted the expansive space. Small, jagged patches of once-white paint blotted its mottled gray cement. It is the only remnant that has escaped the relentless march of time. In the glory days, it was the heartbeat of the park. All these years, it stubbornly refuses to succumb to arsonists and the whims of weather, though it can't defend itself against vagrants' graffiti tags. Their language means nothing when compared to what once lived here.

Steadied by Andrew's arm, they walk toward the recently painted fountain. It seems a younger generation does care, after all. The bright white tiers glisten in the morning sun. Though the spire is missing, clear water bubbles at the top from a modern silver pipe, cascading down along the platforms. Tiny rainbows shimmer in the jet spray arches that rain on pennies tossed by the optimistic.

They sink into the canvas chairs as she ignores the surrounding land, tarred black for cars and boat trailers. "There should be a bench here," Marisol says into the breeze.

She peers out across what extends in front of her—a lake, some docks with shiny boats tethered to their posts, and a few modern clapboard condos. People stroll along the concrete sidewalk, once a proper wooden boardwalk, that winds beside the water. Surely none of them are from here.

Everyone comes from somewhere. This is predetermined. It's no more of a choice than eye color or height. There is nothing to be done about it and no decisions to be made. But then, everyone is traveling somewhere. This is the choice—the part people struggle with the most.

When Marisol was young, with the expanse of life in front of her, she didn't think forward to the end. She longed for a different destiny. Not the

one cast upon other Romani women. She wanted more than bearing children and keeping a spotless home.

No matter all of that, life moves along. The months and years blur and fade until suddenly, with little notice, it's all behind. The edges of history, once sharp and stinging, are smoothed out by time. Or are they erased? Who wants to face and remember ugliness? Maybe Marisol's forgotten. It's easier to pretend it never was.

"Tell me about the park," Andrew says.

Her mind can see grass all around the fountain and trees in the distance. The marching bands, high-wire, and juggling acts performed twice each day here at the park's gathering place.

Marisol points. Nothing is between where they sit and the lake but the sidewalk. "Over there, that's where the Crystal Ballroom stood. The famous big bands came from everywhere to play."

Her eyelids fall. Surely, long ago, the final match strikes freed any spirits trapped here. No more tinder roller coasters or food stalls left to ravage. The memories and ashes have been claimed by earth and time.

All that remains is the cement fountain, enduring proof of long-gone summers. She gives in, her memory drifting back. Instead of scorched wood and acrid smoke, the warm June breeze is once more alive with the savory char of hot dogs on a grill, buttered roasting corn, and frying funnel cakes, waiting for their sugar dusting. Her foot taps lightly, the forgotten melodies of the big band's brass and silky clarinets echoing across the lake.

## CHAPTER 2

### Marisol

*Rural Missouri – December 4, 1941*

Tomorrow, on her *abjav*, Marisol will become Levoy's wife. Her leg shakes frenetically from jangling nerves, not the cold air outside. Marisol has spent every night since she was born seventeen years ago inside this wagon or at their small winter home back in Indiana. Tonight will be her last.

This cocoon is her only comfort. Her trembling fingers smooth a non-existent ripple on the soft quilt's patches. Its thickness pads her narrow bed. Muted light illuminates the vibrant colors, though they blur as she blinks back pooling tears.

Marisol presses a palm to her chest, still fighting against believing what is happening to her tomorrow. It's been arranged that Levoy will be her husband. She knows acquiescence is her only path.

It's not that she doesn't understand the purpose of arranged marriages to help preserve the old Romani traditions and identities. She can even accept the honored doctrines when the bride and groom are part of the decision and grow to love one another.

But her own family experiences don't support the objective. She's listened many times as her father, Earl, chastises Mammie Amelia for her inability to bear him sons. Their caravan is so small that every conversation, good or bad, can easily be heard. His confrontations and anger only

increased nine years ago after her sister Flora arrived. When her father spirals into his rages, all Marisol can do is clamp her pillow around her ears.

Everything became real five weeks ago. With many clans gathered for a funeral, her father finally paid the agreed-upon bride price on her tenth birthday, without Marisol's involvement. Back then, he'd made a deal with Levoy's family clan in Mississippi.

For seven years, her birthday wish was to be spared from marrying a stranger, a man she'd never met and didn't love. If only Levoy could find someone else before the marriage ever happened. Until now, it worked. Poor fortunes kept the families from traveling long distances as Marisol grew up.

Until tonight, she'd clung to the hope that something big would stop the wedding. With it now hours away, the possibility of a different future has dissolved like sugar in hot tea.

She thinks one last time about running away. But she is unfamiliar with where they have traveled for the ceremony. Where would she go? How would she survive? She has nothing of her own, and living without Gran, Mammie, and Flora, the only people she loves in this world, would be unbearable. Why bother even thinking about it?

Marisol inhales the lingering scent of fried cornbread and savory rabbit stew Mammie made for dinner. A wind gust rattles a kerosene lantern against the outside wooden wall, and melodic strains of mandolins played by those gathered around the roaring campfire seep in through the gaps.

"Come, my child, don't be so sad the night before your wedding," her *daki dey* Gran says, approaching Marisol's bed. "Here, I've finished the embroidery on your *vala*."

She spreads the lacy veil across the quilt, then sits so close their thighs touch. Marisol lays her head on Gran's shoulder, breathing in the rosewater scent. It's the one she always wears. Born on the first of May, under their horoscope sign of Crown, its symbolic flower is the rose. The bent old woman always honors the traditions and her family. Gran Rose caresses Marisol's ink-black hair, straight and thick as bear fur.

"Levoy...what he did...I should be the purest on my wedding day tomorrow. My future with him. I know it will not be happy." The words catch in her throat. When Marisol told Mammie what happened that day

they met, she and Gran said she must forget his drunken attack. It is not that easy.

Levoy perpetuates the stereotype that the *gadze*, the non-Romanians, whisper. Thief. He stole from her. The worst kind of robbery, to try to force his will. Five weeks later, it still sears in her thoughts.

That night, two hours after their introduction, Marisol stood in the shadows, away from everyone on the opposite side of the roaring campfire. She poked embers with a stick, unable to focus. The different future she'd yearned for was slipping away.

Without warning, Levoy was beside her. No one paid attention as he grabbed Marisol's arm too hard, pulling her toward the horse barn.

"Hey, what are you doing? Leave me alone!" she'd protested. Marisol flinched and thrust out her elbow, trying to escape his grip.

"Shut up, woman," he slurred, twisting and pushing her arm against her spine to move her forward.

The pungent odor of Levoy's sweat assaulted Marisol's nose. She felt his sour, liquored breath against her neck. He was too close. Her mind raced, trying to put order to what was happening. Everyone knew their customs. They should not be touching or be alone together. Not before they marry.

Marisol covered her mouth as acid crept up into her throat. Levoy pressed his palm against the small of her back, then grabbed her other arm and clasped her wrists. Her hair swung loose across her face. It was impossible to see where he was taking her. She focused on the shadowy ground, trying to catch her feet in resistance. But he was much too forceful. Marisol could hear the lively music around the campfire, though they were too far away, enveloped in the darkness.

Once inside the barn, no one could see them. Levoy shoved her shoulders against the wall and pinned her wrists on either side of her head. His fingers dug into her flesh. Marisol's blood pounded in her forehead.

"Levoy, please, stop," she cried, keeping her voice as steady as possible. Her eyes welled with tears, but instinct told her to remain still. "We'll be married soon enough."

“Exactly, you’ll be my wife. Don’t fight me,” he said, releasing one of her arms. Carnal wildness flashed within his eyes, though they also reflected the glaze of liquor. He yanked and wound her long hair around his fist.

Marisol felt the sting of his open palm against her face. A whimper escaped. She held her cheek flat against the wall and looked down at the dirt and hay. Marisol could taste the tinniness of her blood.

Levoy pressed his hand onto her thigh, covered by Marisol’s favorite embroidered skirt. The gift Gran made ten months ago for her seventeenth birthday.

*This can’t be happening. What can I do? He’s so much bigger than I am,* she’d thought. She wailed for Mammie, but everyone was too far away. Her voice was no match anyway for the campfire revelry and music. The sad strains of a lone harmonica drifted in from somewhere in the distance.

Marisol spit out dirt and blood, shaking as uncontrollable sobs escaped. “Please, please stop! I’m begging you!” There was no more music, only blood rushing through her ears. Her chest rose and fell in rapid succession.

“You’ll be my wife,” Levoy challenged. “You’ll do what I want.” His grip tightened around her wrist. The wetness on her cheeks mixed with the stickiness of dirt and hay.

“We’re not married yet. We need to wait,” Marisol pleaded one last time. Her knees were giving way.

She closed her eyes and thought of Grandad. Something she read in one of his medical books. Bending her knee and lifting her slippered foot, she drove it forward with all her might, one hard thrust into his groin. Levoy howled and banged his head against a wooden beam as he unclamped his grip and buckled into a pile of hay.

Marisol ran and ran and ran, the ripped fabric of her beautiful skirt flying out behind her. Her wrists were throbbing as the bruises began to form.

Breathless, she reached the wagon. Marisol jammed her hand against the door, pushed through, and slammed it shut behind her. She doubled over as she released ragged wails, her eyes squeezed tight.

Only Gran was there. She folded Marisol into her arms. “My child, what has happened?”

“He. Levoy. He tried to...” Marisol could not say the words. She heaved sobs and buried her face in Gran’s shoulder.

Hay tumbled to the floor as Gran ran her fingers through Marisol’s tangled hair.

“Let me help you out of your clothes and into your nightgown,” Gran said. She wiped Marisol’s face with a warm, wet rag. Marisol winced and grimaced as Gran cleaned a cut above her eye with liquid from one of Grandad’s brown glass bottles.

When Gran tucked Marisol into bed, she curled in a ball. Her body was still shaking long after her sobs subsided. “I...I can’t marry him. I won’t. I don’t care what Father says!”

Gran sighed and pulled a chair beside the bed. With skeins of thread from her old wicker sewing basket, she stayed beside her until she drifted to sleep, repairing the damage to the beautiful skirt.

In the weeks since, Marisol pleaded and begged Mammie to intervene. Surely, she knew that her life would mirror the cruel existence Mammie endured while married to her father. Now, just hours before the wedding, in these final moments of resignation, Marisol knows her time has run out, and she must face Mammie’s reality: she had no more power than any other woman in their clan.

Marisol knows other girls think she is lucky. She’s heard them say it. To marry and have a path laid out. Why must she be like every other girl, aspiring only to have a husband, keep house, and bear children? Nothing more. Her heart aches for love as pure as what Gran and Grandad shared, but she would rather end up a lonely and husbandless *chaj* than be confined to trudge through mundane paces with a man she doesn’t love. She tries in vain to push away what she’s been told are unnatural thoughts.

Gran wraps a withered arm around Marisol’s slumped shoulders. At all other times, she makes Marisol feel better. She is the most revered, the *phuri* to their people far and wide. Since she is too old now to travel, it’s not uncommon for strangers to show up unannounced at their door, coming from everywhere for her advice and counseling. But tonight, Gran’s well-intended comfort can do nothing to lessen Marisol’s tormented mind.

“Don’t worry, my kitten. You are far stronger than you think,” Gran soothes. She pets Marisol’s hair the same way she did as a child. “Besides, you always have our secret.”

Gran taps a silk-slipped foot against the thin rug covering the floorboards. A signal toward the books hidden in the space below the bed. The ones she and Mammie use to teach Marisol and Flora to read. Salvaged plastic lines the inconspicuous cubby to protect the precious treasure from mice and bugs.

Marisol swipes back a tear, nods, and stares at the painted floor. Yes, at least she can still cling to this thing, which makes her different from the other girls. They are forbidden to progress beyond the lower grades to keep them separate from the *gadze*. To Marisol, this old practice may once have had its place when brought over from Europe, but she sees how it keeps women and many men illiterate. How can that make any sense?

Mammie first introduced children’s books to Marisol on her sixth birthday, when Father was away. “Our secret,” she’d whispered, pressing her index finger against her lips. Marisol had nodded solemnly, eager to look again at the drawings of colorful animals on the pages.

The next time, when she was over in Gran and Granddad Henry’s wagon, a book about butterflies was on the kitchen table. “It’s okay. We can read it together safely here. Grandad is the best reader of us all.” Then she told Marisol about when he was a boy. Everyone thought he would be a great *chovihano*, a medicine man. He was permitted to read books, unlike many of the others. Then he taught himself the *gadzo* ways of healing. He learned the passed-down natural cures and studied the scientific ones. When they married, he taught Gran to read, and in the safety of their caravan, they taught Mammie together.

“I wish Grandad Henry were here. He would stop all this,” Marisol says dejectedly. When he died two years ago, the small chance she might follow in his footsteps went with him to the grave.

Before that, for several years, Grandad and Gran let Marisol tag along on their visits when he was called to care for someone. She looked forward to those trips more than anything else. Many of the Romani people didn’t trust educated doctors and science, but they allowed Grandad to treat sick

mothers, injured children, attend to fevers, and assist with childbirth. In those stressful situations, Marisol witnessed Gran and Grandad's love for each other. Together, they changed what could have been needless, tragic outcomes.

"Yes, he would have stood up to Earl," Gran says confidently. "Henry told me many times how much he saw your natural ability to care for people and to learn how to relieve them from their pain."

"Remember, that night, he let me go with him to deliver a baby because you were still sick with a fever. I can still feel that hope, genuine hope, that things could be different for me. *You'll be my nurse*, he'd said. I did everything he asked. After the baby came, I cleaned up the room just like I'd helped you do many times before."

"I know you did everything you were supposed to," Gran says, patting Marisol's leg.

"I still can't help but feel it was my fault. When Grandad grabbed his chest and collapsed on the floor, I was helpless. His eyes were so empty as I watched him slip away."

"No cure could have saved him. You know I believe that."

Marisol continued retelling the story to soothe herself. Like she and Gran had talked about so many times. Of those dark days after, still trying to make sense of how Grandad's abrupt departure from this earth had reverberated through the clans.

The devastating news spread like fire ravaging a hay barn. Marisol had no way of knowing how his absence would cause their lives to spiral, now left only with her father. Mammie and Gran Rose immediately felt the deep, shocking loss. Marisol could only watch as they moved through the anguishing days as required. They held the sitting-up, a constant family member vigil. It was the biggest one she'd ever seen. In the caravan he and Gran had shared since they were sixteen, they never left Grandad's body unattended. For days, word-of-mouth drew hundreds of mourners to travel long distances and pay their respects.

Finally, just before his funeral, Gran, Mammie, and Marisol stood arm in arm among the many people as his old caravan and all his worldly possessions were intentionally lit on fire in the truest of their traditions.

Only the charred ribs and metal undercarriage remained. The honored ritual freed his spirit, but left Gran homeless.

“I will continue in his place to care for and heal people,” Marisol said to Gran as the final embers dwindled.

A man they didn’t know from a different clan stood beside them in the crowd. “You? That’s impossible. You’ll never be like him. For God’s sake, you’re a woman,” the stranger interjected.

Marisol said nothing. She knew better than to challenge the interloper. Gran was too distraught and distracted by her fate as a widow, with no option but to move into their home.

Marisol wants more than anything to believe that the secret books beneath their feet can change her path. Even in her anguish, before Grandad’s wagon burned, Gran took the forbidden *gadzo* books instead of saving her china. She stored them in the secret compartment under the trap door Grandad built when Father was away.

“I wanted a husband like Granddad.” She has never seen true love like theirs between any others. Certainly not between Mammie and her father. “How can I marry Levoy?”

Gran winces. “I understand. Our ways can be difficult to accept.” Continuing to caress Marisol’s hair, she quietly hums a familiar English lullaby.

Tomorrow begins the wedding ceremonies. The true end of Marisol’s innocence. First, the wedding and consummation night, then two more days of celebration.

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The next morning, Marisol stands inside a beautiful, large church as she grips the traditional golden staff. The metal is cold against her palm, and she presses on it to steady her rattling nerves. Three hundred pairs of eyes bore through her skin. They must wonder why she doesn’t smile like a traditional bride. The hard marble floors mirror Marisol’s heart.

This church had been chosen because of its beauty. Also, for the willingness to allow non-members to marry, and to fit all these people.

There had been no formal invitation. The word of weddings and funerals spreads among the clans, and everyone shows up. When all these people crowded into the sanctuary earlier, Marisol watched the face of the lanky young priest as he was called to do his duty, watching over his borrowed church. She wonders if they would truly be welcome to expand his flock.

Marisol can't bear to meet eyes with the Romani elder in front of Levoy and her as he recites familiar wedding words. "witness this sacred ceremony...bless these rings..." Instead, she gazes beyond his head where the priest stands sentry in the corner. The thick cloth of his too-big white alb sags heavily from the ordained man's shoulders. Marisol stares at the loose rope cincture draped around his waist. She doesn't dare meet his eyes and have the lies of her vows exposed in this holiest of places.

"Marisol Mazaria...Levoy Harris...take each other to be..." Marisol startles with the words. She loves her name. She doesn't want to give any part of it up for Levoy's.

When Marisol was nine, the year before Father sold her future, Mammie told her it was Spanish. When she carried her in her womb, she saw it on a scrap of newspaper, a fancy debutant announcement of a princess touring around the world. To Mammie, the whole name sounded beautiful, though not completely traditional Romani. "You'll have a bigger life, the first one in our family," she'd said to Marisol. It was her secret dream for her daughter. But it turned out the name hadn't been enough.

After an excruciating hour, the ceremony ends. Marisol and Levoy are encircled by elders who bless them with bread and salt. The bitter taste assaults Marisol's lips, and she fights to keep from spitting it on the polished tiles. The church bells ring, the heavy clangs announcing the undesired new union. As the tall carved doors swing wide, Marisol and Levoy emerge as a pair. A fine rain had begun falling while she was inside getting married. It wets the steps descending in front of her and the black pavement below as if it echoes the tears she's holding back.

From the top step, Marisol can see the bakery, the feed store, and the grocery storefront bins laden with fruit. Townspeople stand along the street. The *gadze's* coloring is pale, though some who work the fields are tanned.

Marisol's Romani skin is amber-brown, the same as her ancestors across the ocean. The strangers point in what feels like judgment at the lined-up carriages and autos. Their mouths move. The casual cruelty of prejudice in their whispers floats into the air. These outsiders are not here to celebrate with them, though Marisol doesn't want their blessings anyway.

An umbrella is pushed into Levoy's hand, and he holds it above them. They descend the steps, and someone helps them into an open carriage. The public expectations of this day are complete. They are driven to his parents' trailer, as is the custom. They will sleep together here, allotted one night of privacy. His family will move back in tomorrow before they journey away to where his clan is in Mississippi. Until they can afford their own house or trailer, Marisol and Levoy will live with them, hundreds of miles from Gran, Mammie, and Flora.

Alone here with Levoy, this dreaded moment that consumed Marisol's thoughts all day has arrived. Standing in his parents' doorway, the air is stagnant. The bed is made and waits.

"You ready to lie down?" he asks, less aggressive than in their first encounter. She doesn't even know if he remembers. Today, there is no escape.

Marisol closes her eyes. She smells the manure and tastes the brackish hay. The image of the dirty horse barn where she nearly lost her virtue floods her mind. Clenching her fists, she winces and nods. She doesn't trust her words.

The act is quick and painful. Afterward, Levoy rolls over and immediately falls asleep. Marisol turns away onto her side, lying so still throughout the night that her muscles begin to ache. She stares at the wall, through haze and tears, trying to see into a joyless future.

Before the first light, Marisol clenches her stomach, a pain stronger than last night. She rises, pulls her coat around her nightgown, and slips outside. Beside the well, she crouches on the ice-crusting ground, the churn of acid rising in her throat. She pumps the water, creating noise to camouflage her retching.

When the sun rises, there is knocking on the door. Dressed already, Marisol sits and stares absently out the window. Unfamiliar people have

come to take them. She wants her family, the caravan she knows. Not someone else's clan she doesn't love.

"Why are you sitting there?" Levoy says as he pulls on his celebration pants and shirt.

"I had trouble sleeping." She wipes her eye with her knuckle, then rises to go out the door. She thinks about running, but doesn't know where she is. With a hand shielding red and swollen eyes, she enters the stranger's motorcar and takes her place beside Levoy. She's only been in a car one other time. Her family travels atop horses, in wagons, or on foot.

They are driven to a rented hall for feasting, dancing, and drinking. By the time they arrive, the room is full of people wearing red armbands, symbolizing she had been pure. No one but Mammie and Gran Rose knows this is barely true.

A five-piece band plays with gusto in the corner. The rhythms of familiar songs from an accordion, a guitar, and a violin encourage the dancing and revelry. The instruments fill the space with the mood of celebration meant for Marisol and Levoy, but it is gaiety she cannot feel.

Levoy leaves her side to join a group of loud and boisterous men. They slap each other's backs and talk in animation. Most of them hold drinks, though it is not even noon. Marisol thinks again of the barn. *Why must they drink? I have to go back tonight with Levoy.*

The men wear traditional Romani celebration garb. Some have shed their jackets, and black suspenders press against their shirts. As is customary, everyone wears their finest gold and diamond jewelry, honoring the old ways, even in these modern times. Marisol had watched Levoy put on a large gold ring that morning, a wedding gift from his father.

Marisol pushes back more tears and feigns a weak smile as all these people's eyes bore through her. Children are everywhere, running in and out between adults who pay them sparse attention. She finds Gran Rose, Mammie, and Flora standing along the wall.

"Are you okay?" Mammie asks. She caresses her daughter's shoulder.

Marisol forces a nod, unable to meet her eyes for fear she'll burst into tears. Mammie grasps her hand and squeezes. Marisol's knees falter. The finality of it all sinks in.

The other women in the hall appear happy, dancing in their vibrantly colored skirts as their bracelets jangle together with their movements. The ones beside Marisol chatter about children, rumors of the war in Europe, and how it might affect them.

Across the room, someone has placed a carved-out loaf of bread on a long table. Dollar bills spill out from the well-wishers for the marriage to Levoy that Marisol doesn't want. They can all keep their money.

The rest of the table burgeons with a feast of roasted meats, stuffed cabbage rolls, potato pancakes, pirogi, and fresh-baked cakes. Marisol can't eat because her stomach still protests.

The music has reached a fever pitch. Then all at once, it stops, though the hum of chattering continues.

At the edge of the dance floor, a hulking bald man stands too close to her father. His neck is the width of his head, and he looks as if he's made of granite. Marisol has seen the man before. At first, she can't recall when or where, but then she remembers the two of them had fought over the price of a horse many months ago.

Marisol can't hear what they are saying. But their faces reflect red-faced rage. Her father jams his finger hard into the man's chest.

The stranger raises his fist, a flash of gold. Her father attempts to cut his head sideways, but the man drives his knuckles into his temple. A tirade of hot-tempered shouts rises from other men in the crowd around them. Her father falls back, catching himself on the corner of a folding table. It collapses with a great noise, and a punch bowl shatters against the hard linoleum. Red liquid splashes in all directions and oozes across the floor. Marisol's father comes right back up, wildly swinging his arms. Levoy rushes forward toward the assailant. He is two-thirds the size of the man, but his element of surprise somehow allows him to pin him against a wall with a thud.

A fourth man comes up behind her father, striking the back of his head with a crack, a bottle. As Marisol's father falls to the floor a second time, a shard of punch bowl glass gashes deep into his thigh. He bares his teeth and releases an animal's howl. Grabbing his leg with both hands, blood spurts and flows between his fingers, blending with the sticky punch. Again, Levoy

steps in, leaping on the second attacker's back. Levoy drives his elbow into his ribs. The man jerks his hand up, again, another broken bottle, this time shoved deep into Levoy's throat.

All of this takes place over a matter of seconds. "Mammie, what's happening?" Marisol screams above the frenzied shouts.

A mass of men gather in front of Mammie, Gran, and Marisol so they can no longer see the results of the fight. With her elbows, Marisol shoves her way between them, standing along the edge of the carnage. She has never seen this much blood. It is everywhere, pooling on the gridded floor as it oozes from both Levoy and her father, conjoining.

Within seconds, the celebration turns to panic. Mothers grab their children, pulling their faces against their fancy skirts as they hurry toward the exits. A cacophony of men's shouts and women's wails rises and slashes through the air. Behind Marisol, a woman shrieks.

Men continue yelling. The two who survived the fight run out the door. Others follow as the repeated metal slamming bangs into the air. The last few times the door opens, Marisol hears a siren wailing out in the distance.

Kneeling in their husbands' blood, Mammie and Marisol hold each other's hands against their laps, uncertain what to do. "Grandad would know how to stop the bleeding," Marisol says to Mammie. She is sure, if he were still alive, he would step right to their sides and do the right thing to save these two beasts masquerading as husbands. Marisol watched once as he tended to a man who'd escaped from the nearby prison. She never knew what his crimes were, but Grandad cleaned and dressed the deep, barbed wire gashes, then tied his feet to a bedpost until the men from the jail arrived.

Marisol isn't as charitable. Levoy is sprawled in front of her, his hands grasping at his neck. His eyes are wide and pleading for someone's help. She doesn't move.

Marisol's father lies flat on his back, his lips lolling to the side. Faint noises gurgle from his throat, and his eyes are half swollen shut. Mammie does not move either.

Strange men pull Marisol and Mammie up and guide them toward the exit. "Come on, ladies. We've got to get you out of here." Neither of them resists nor says a word.

Punch mixed with Levoy and her father's blood drips from the hems of their dresses. Marisol's skirt clings to her legs. As the strangers use their strong arms to guide them out the door, their footsteps tracking red, *gavvers* in blue uniforms and ambulance attendants move in.

Marisol stares at the policemen—one has pale freckled skin and bright auburn hair. The other has thick curly sideburns ending above a square jaw. They focus on the carnage within the rented hall. Neither stops to question the women's relation to the dying men.

Back in their wagon, Mammie tucks Flora into bed. She pulls the curtain to muffle their voices.

The three women are alone in the kitchen. They have shed their bloody clothes and scrubbed their tainted skin. Word has reached them that both her father and Levoy did not survive. Their adrenaline has settled, though each now bears the widow's title. One that often does not bring sympathy among their people. What is a woman without a man?

Mammie sits at the table beside Gran. She stares at the salt and pepper shakers, then picks up the old biscuit tin, rattling the few coins inside. "There is no money," she says. She sets down the tin and wipes her hands repeatedly against her thighs. "We will survive," she says stoically, though her shaky voice betrays her.

Marisol paces around the small room but says nothing. She touches familiar objects: the yellow curtain on the window, a crockery bowl on the drying rack, and an apple in the fruit bowl. She bites her lip and doesn't dare say aloud what's on her mind. How cruel it would sound. Marisol knows she should have feelings of sorrow. But there are none.

She thinks how little she knew about Levoy, though he showed her plenty with his temper in the barn. She knew he was born under their horoscope sign the Dagger, the same as her father. It is the sign of the fighters, the impulsive ones.

If horoscopes are to be believed, Marisol thinks theirs, which is based on the sun, the moon, and the stars that are always visible in the sky above, must be the accurate one. Not the *gadzo* one based on planets they can't see out there in a black abyss.

She will figure out what to do. In two weeks, right after the new year, Marisol will be eighteen, born under the horseshoe sign of the helpers.

Of one thing she is certain. Marisol would sooner face an unknown future than one tethered to that horrible man.

## CHAPTER 3

### Will Worthington

*Columbus, Ohio – February 13, 1942*

Before sunrise, the morning of his twentieth birthday, Will Worthington rises, dresses quickly, and secretly slips out the front door of his father William's spacious East Broad Street home. To his right, all the lamps are dark in their neighbor Joseph Campbell's house. Will pulls his coat in tight and turns left, past Governor Bricker's mansion. The lights are blazing there.

He runs his hand through his thick blonde hair and takes long strides on the sidewalk. He has a two-mile walk ahead. That's enough time to confirm his commitment to his destination.

Will isn't afraid of the draft. But William is. He won't be forced to join the family business if he is shipped off to the war. *Father's plan, not mine.*

Before Christmas and with America officially in the war, President Roosevelt amended September's Selective Training and Service Act. In front of all those wrinkle-suited reporters, he ratcheted the draft age down to eighteen only seven weeks ago. Will knows no family name, not even Worthington, is impervious to the conscription's reach. William is hellbent on proving otherwise.

"I'm still trying to reach the Senator's office, see if I can stop this for you," William said, his chest puffed forward at the dinner table last night. "Before Pearl Harbor, Taft opposed the war."

Will sat quietly, not daring to tell his father he was ready to face whatever happened. For once, he won't let William's power and influence set his course.

Some of Will's friends have already rushed to get in line, their imaginations painting adventure in distant lands. Others embrace the lure of escape from battles raging within their homes. The draft brings both fear and welcome, depending on the man.

Will is like none of them. He resents his lack of freedom compared to others. But he also understands his privilege, built upon the work of his grandfather and father. Though he knows the gains do not always come honestly. He's observed his family, what makes them tick, what makes them successful, and where the cracks are hidden from public view. Some he likes, and some bring on a gnawing, uneasy feeling.

Will trudges along the sidewalks, covered with a fresh dusting of last night's snowfall. He welcomes the slap of crisp air against his cheeks. The sky has changed to the color of rifle steel. Columbus is a big city, Ohio's capital. Draft boards have sprung up everywhere.

As Will approaches the closest recruiting station, he sees that it is in a repurposed high school gym. Someone has plastered oversized posters from all the military branches on the dull, red brick walls. Exuberant messages include the Navy's *Sub Spotted—Let 'Em Have It!* and the Army's *I Want You!* A third one shouts: *The Marines Have Landed!* That image is a terrifying scene to Will: three fatigue-dressed men wearing metal Brodie combat helmets, knee-deep in choppy waters on some distant beachhead. They raise their rifles high in anger as a battleship looms beyond. The poster is far from inspirational.

His breath still puffs into the air once inside the heatless building. He fills his lungs and steps with purpose across the speckled linoleum squares that cover the entry floor. A large arrowed DRAFT SIGN-UP sign directs him down a windowless hall. His boots echo in the space's emptiness as he makes his way toward men's voices.

Will stands in the open doorway, taking in the recruiters seated behind long folding tables spaced along the shiny maple wood gym floor. The basketball hoops on either end flash a thought of irony that in this room

where children play, this system of signing up players is no game. The clamor of the government men booms strongly, working to set an adventurous tone. Their orders, no doubt. Both stale smoke and recently lit cigarettes are pungent in the air.

He is not the first to arrive today. Other recruits have their heads bent over paperwork or are answering the officers' questions. Will thinks most of them look about his age. He wonders if their nerves also gurgle in their stomachs.

Rumors are everywhere that a third lottery will happen soon. Will read in the newspaper that they will pull names of the youngest men ever, aged twenty, all the way to forty-five. The article gave a timeline, that the first selection round was eighteen months ago, and the second one was only last July. They need a lot of men, and things are moving fast.

The nearest chair to the doorway is vacant. From behind the table, the Army man points and says, "Sit here, young man." Will notices that his short-sleeved uniform shirt is not right for February in Ohio. They must have shipped him in from a much warmer climate. Thick, muscular arms protrude from where the pressed creases end at the sleeve's hemline. His black hair is a number-one buzzcut.

Will places his hand on the chair's cold metal back. It scrapes on the floor as he pulls it out and eases onto the seat. Will tries to act calm, though his heart races. He rubs the back of his neck, then puts his hand beneath the table, twisting the watch on his other wrist.

"Good choice," the man says, stabbing his hand forward to shake Will's. He pushes a pen and a clipboard across the table with a form to collect the basics.

Will lifts his eyebrows, surprised at the few blank lines on the paper. All they want is his name, address, and age. His place of birth and birthday. *Today*. Will pauses at the seventh space. *NAME AND ADDRESS OF PERSON WHO WILL ALWAYS KNOW YOUR ADDRESS*. He is certain that means next of kin, in the event of tragic news. Will writes his mother's name, Clara Worthington.

The next two lines are for employment information. Will scrawls *College Sophomore*. The last blank is for his signature. Will places the pen in his other shaking hand, wipes his palm on his pants, and signs the form.

He slides the paper back across the table. “A college man, I see,” the recruiter says with heightened interest. He smiles, nods, and flips the page in a thick black book as he asks more questions. “Any particular work interest, son?” In high school, Will’s class took a field trip to Wright Field Aircraft Museum in Dayton. From that day, he knew what he wanted to do.

“I’d...I’d like to be a pilot, sir,” he answers, straightening his posture.

“Ah. The Army has an Air Corps. But I suppose you already know that. How tall are you?”

“Five foot eleven.”

“Hmmm. A bit tall for our fighter planes, but there are transports. And our bombers—we always need more men for those. How about your eyes, what color? You have good eyesight?”

“Yes, sir, they’re blue, good as any.”

The recruiter asks Will a few more questions about his hearing and weight. One-eighty-five, thanks to his sports activities back at the university. Does he have a wife? There are no females in his life. Only his sister Charlotte, his mother, and Grandma Emma. And then, as quickly as it began, the interview is over.

The officer scrawls a few lines on a wallet-sized card. He hands it to Will. “Keep this with you at all times.” The registration certificate is proof of where he’d gone this morning.

Two hours later, from his second-floor bedroom window, Will scans the driveway below. His father kicks aside a chunk of crusty snow. Vapor escapes his mouth into the frigid air as his belly gapes from the unbuttoned fine wool coat. William heaves the wooden garage door, and it accordions into itself with ease. The space reveals a pristine, bright red Pontiac Torpedo, one of the last to roll off the line four months ago. Now, the factories are retooled to manufacture guns, bombers, and war tanks. *Most days, he loves that car more than Charlotte and me.*

Will and his younger sister talk about this often. How hard they have to work to earn their father’s love. William prattled on incessantly about his

fondness for the car from the moment it arrived. A mechanical thing of beauty, he said, its heart powerful with a straight-eight engine. They'd listened as William Sterling Worthington, railroad tycoon, bragged to friends how ahead of its time it was with a heater, electric clock, and six-tube radio.

Staring down at him, Will isn't sure what concerns him more: the way his father runs his hand over the Indian head hood ornament or the course his life is taking. Will came home from college this weekend to celebrate his birthday with his family, just like he and Charlotte always have. Years ago, anticipation and excitement made birthdays special. He'd thought wistfully that maybe his parents would make that happen, just this one last time, as he leaves his childhood behind and is finally free from his awkward teenage years. It's a memorable rite of passage. If temperaments are right, he might even find the courage to tell his father he doesn't want to work with him in business.

Will's breath fogs the windowpane, confirming another bitter-cold Ohio winter day. His father stands in his gray fedora beside the passenger door, holding it open for Will's mother, who steps gingerly down the front stairs.

He feels suffocated and unlatches the wooden bedroom window frame. Pushing it up, a quick, icy wind stings into his lungs.

Clara raises her eyes upward at the sound. "Come on down here, Will, we're ready to leave."

A half-hour later, the three of them walk past the massive downtown Lazarus department store windows. Behind the large panes of glass, mannequins with odd smiles molded into their plastic faces stare vacantly at Will. They, too, appear trapped in their drab felt hats and sturdy winter coats.

These displays are far different from what Will recalls from when he's been here before. Those few times, it was always near Christmas when Clara brought him and Charlotte as children. The expansive display windows were alive with elaborate scenes from the poem *'Twas the Night Before Christmas*.

The three of them would come to visit Santaland in the store's basement. It was a magical other world, complete with glittering fake snow, silver tinsel, and strings of multi-colored lights. Elves in red and green costumes stood at every turn in a maze of toys stacked eight feet high, leading to the Jolly Old Elf himself. William never came on those visits; always away on business with the railroad.

Will and his parents spin through the store's revolving door. He lags a few steps behind, letting them lead the way. Well-dressed clerks nod and smile politely as they wind through expensive perfume and lighted jewelry counters toward the elevator.

"You know your father and I met here," Clara says, looking over her shoulder at Will.

He nods, as he's only caught bits of the story over the years and never paid much attention. "I've heard a few details," Will replies. Now that he is twenty and thinking more daily about his future, he is mildly interested in how his parents met. Two girls have tried to kiss him, but he has no interest in a relationship with either. Mary Beth at his school constantly flirts and giggles when she is near. Her family has lots of steel money, and it is embarrassingly obvious she is hunting for a husband. It won't be Will; he is sure of that.

"What floor please?" asks the petite elevator girl as the metal of the sliding door clamps shut and the safety gate creaks and rattles after it.

"The Main Dining Room," Clara says. Otherwise, she ignores the girl, continuing to chatter as if they were alone in the car. "I worked in the millinery department during Christmas. It was our busiest time of year. That was the Jazz Age, and no proper city woman would leave home without something covering her head."

"Ah, yes, dear. I was buying my mother, God rest her soul, a Christmas gift," William adds to the story.

They step off the elevator into the restaurant. A uniformed hostess immediately seats them, early before the lunch crowd.

The retelling of the story softens Clara's usually rigid demeanor. Sentimentality fills her eyes as she touches her carefully coifed hair. "Oh, it was a marvelous time for fashion. Wide-brimmed hats trimmed in silk

flowers and real feathers, musketeers with the brims folded up, bowlers, and toques were stacked high in our cases. We reserved the cloche, the most expensive and latest design, for the well-heeled. It was helmet-shaped, with the brim coming down over the eyes. I tried to talk several women out of it, I remember.”

While Will feels pressed to be polite and hear his mother’s story, he isn’t interested in learning about hat fashions from 1921. He adjusts in his chair, forcing his thoughts to keep from drifting back to the recruiting office.

The waitress interrupts. “May I take your orders?”

When she leaves, Clara returns to her story. “I came back from my lunch break. It had been a frustrating morning. I’d seen a rough-looking woman with a big coat milling around my tables. She had a young boy with her as a distraction, I’m sure. I didn’t see her take anything, but I knew she planned to steal one of my hats. Can you imagine? I called for Mr. Brumsley, the store manager, to come and confront her. He spoke to the woman but never made her open her coat. He just let her go. It infuriated me!” Will’s mother’s nostrils flare as if the encounter happened yesterday.

“Clara, that was a long time ago. Does it still matter?” William asks as he pats the top of her hand.

She ignores his admonition. “After the woman left, I told Mr. Brumsley it was not right. I could tell she was a Gypsy by her skin and her dark black hair, and I knew she stole a hat. They should never have let people like her shop in this beautiful store.”

With the tip of his knife, Will presses deep lines on the white tablecloth. “You made such a bold accusation when you saw nothing?” He searches his mother’s face, then his father’s. “Do you have any idea why we’re fighting a war?”

William glares at Will, his nostrils flaring. “Young man, don’t you speak to your mother that way!” he practically shouts as he swipes his hand across the bald patch in his hair.

Will can’t stand to look at them. He presses his lips together and shakes his head. Why did he bother coming home from school for his birthday?

William huffs and redirects the story. “There I was, ready to buy a hat for Mother, one she had seen in the store window around Thanksgiving.

You were coming out of the stockroom, impeccably dressed, with eight hats piled in your arms.” Will keeps his eyes cast downward.

“Yes,” Clara laughs, also ignoring Will’s earlier challenge. “I used my discount for that dress. My toe caught on a gouge in the wood floor, and I tripped, causing the top hat to fall at your father’s feet.”

“I picked up the renegade hat—can you believe it was the very same red cloche Mother had seen in the window? It seemed like destiny.”

“William said I must be exceptionally qualified as a milliner, delivering the exact gift for Lucille at his feet.”

“I still remember how you blushed. Mother loved the hat, so I came back after the New Year and asked your mother on a date. We were married by May, and you arrived in February.”

Will looks back and forth between them once more, incredulous that they so quickly glossed over the earlier display of prejudice. They appear to have repeated their story many times, smoothing it out with each retelling. His parents glance at each other fondly, a sight he has rarely witnessed. William is often away on business, and when he is home, their interactions tend to be mostly cold and cordial. Today, the two of them are more similar than he has ever noticed. His stomach roils, and he swallows hard. It’s what all the fighting over there is about, believing one group of people is better than another.

Silence falls over the table as the waitress delivers the food and steps away. His mother’s earlier comment still rings in Will’s ears. It’s all he can hear. His appetite is gone. His courage is fortified by the sour taste his parents’ behavior gives him. Without taking a bite, he blurts, “I signed up this morning.”

William’s fork clatters as it falls on his china plate. “You what? You signed up for the draft?”

“I did.”

“By God! What have you done?” The veins on William’s neck bulge and pulse like eggplant-colored worms.

Clara lifts her napkin to her mouth, sniveling into the folds.

William stands abruptly. “Come on, we’re getting out of here.”

Will scrapes his chair back, pushes his chest forward, and matches his father's bull-like stance. "Thank you for lunch. I'm going to walk home," he says through gritted teeth.

"You can't do that, son. It's ten miles," William says, clawing once more to control the day.

"I'll be fine." Will yanks his coat off the back of his chair and hurries toward the stairs.

"Dammit! You will not -" The slam of the stairwell door cuts off the last of his words.

Three hours after the disrupted birthday lunch, Will uses his key and steps into the foyer of his home. He'd like to go straight up to his room, but he can't get past William waiting in his study. He throws his newspaper on the floor and heaves his body up. "I told you I would take care of it!"

"Father, I don't need you taking care of anything. I'm a man. I can make my own decisions."

William kicks at the newspaper. "What happens next?"

"They said it is true that there is a third draft happening next month. They'll have a national lottery on March 17th. There could be another in June, depending on how things are going over there. If I'm drafted, after training, I'll serve on active duty for at least twelve months."

Will leaves out what the pamphlet in his pocket says, confirming he is exactly what they are looking for. The Army officer said there would be no way Will would be 4-F, their term for physically unfit for service. If his name is drawn, they'll send him an *Order to Report for Induction*. He'll come back on the assigned date, fill out more paperwork, and pass the physical exam. He should bring enough clothes for three days. That meant induction that very day and being shipped off for training. Then on to the Pacific, Europe, or Africa.

## CHAPTER 4

### Lila Bennett

*Buckeye Lake Amusement Park – March 16, 1942*

Lila slips the old skeleton key into the Crystal Ballroom’s ground-floor main entrance lock and jiggles it left and right. It resists at first, undisturbed since they closed the park last September. It finally surrenders, as if startled from a pleasant dream.

She turns, steps back toward her husband, and smiles. The typical spring sky is pale blue, laced with wispy white clouds. The aroma of the calm lake beyond the building is sweetly familiar, as it glitters in the morning sunlight. “It’s good to be back,” Lila says, inhaling the crisp March air and releasing a satisfying breath.

“Yep. Looks like everything is still standing,” Angus Bennett replies in his relaxed southern drawl, leaning down as she tilts her cheek for him to place a gentle peck. The prickle of his scruff makes her smile. “Time to kick off another year.”

Out of habit and superstition, Lila supposes, they always start here first at the ballroom and two-hundred-foot swimming pool that juts out to the side. These are the main attractions of the park. The wave of apprehension they always experience until all the park building doors are unlocked takes over, before they assess what needs attention after the long, brutal winters. She tips her head back, taking in the expansive second-story ballroom that

looms up above. A wide balcony extends on three sides. The lower openings still have their storm boards nailed in place as protection from the winter elements. That's another job Gus will take care of, having them removed so tired dancers can lean over the rail in the open air, smoke their cigarettes, and peer down upon the swimmers. Here at this lower level, the swimming pavilion with its pool concessions, swimsuit rentals, and public bathrooms is tucked underneath.

Gus slings the fabric bag of books he carries for Lila over his shoulder. "You got bricks in here?" he asks with a wink. With his well-worn cowboy boot, he kicks aside debris and leaves that have settled along the door's edge. The same as he has done each spring for sixteen years. He's a good man, she thinks. We are a good team.

She's used to it by now when strangers here in Ohio first meet Gus, commenting that he is a *tall Texan*. They guffaw at their own perceived wit while he gives them the expected smile, followed by a chuckle. He can appear out of place, more like a lumberjack, towering six feet above.

Sometimes they go on to size her up, knowing that as she stands beside him, she appears small and fragile. Maybe they think she is older than she is, too, her nondescript brown hair streaked with threads of early gray, probably the result of fretting too much. Today, she has it pulled back loosely against her neck. She reaches up and lightly touches the pink ribbon. A quiet reminder of the daughter they'd buried in the little church graveyard near the park. Lila lets her eyelids fall over her pale watery-blue eyes, gives them a squeeze, and resolves for the hundredth time to push the invasive thoughts aside.

The groan of Gus heaving back the ballroom's yellow-painted main entrance door snaps her back to the present. Expected stale, trapped air assaults their faces. A broad staircase ascends in front of them. "Those steps will need sanding and a fresh coat of stain," Gus notes, mostly to himself. Fifteen stairs up there's a wide landing, five more steps, then double doors at the top.

Before Gus heads to mount the stairs two by two, he reaches his hand back for Lila to place a second key in his palm. His long legs move him quickly out ahead with the abandon of a child. Lila hurries to catch up as he

puts his hand against the second knob. He wedges the key into the lock as she reaches his side.

“That’s strange.” Gus furrows his brows. “I’m sure I locked this last September. I checked every door twice, like always.” Out of habit, he moves the edge of his wheat-colored field jacket back and places a hand against the old Smith & Wesson. “Better not be damn kids goofin’ around in here like three years ago,” he mutters.

Gus yanks back the door and steps across the threshold first. “Ha!” he hoots. “There’s our intruder.” He moves his hand off the revolver’s grip and waves Lila forward.

She raises a hand to her forehead, squints, and focuses across the cavernous ballroom to the stage where famous big bands and entertainers will soon play every night. In a few short weeks, everything in this space will explode back to life. She can almost hear the thrum of the drums and the whines and toots of clarinets. It is empty now, except for the statuesque woman perched on one of two cane-back chairs in the middle of the stage.

Between there and where Lila stands, twenty-four tall windows line the walls above the balconies, their arches curving just below the ceiling. Each one streams a ribbon of filtered sunlight across the well-used wooden dance floor. Twelve crystal chandeliers hang motionless above, waiting for the dancers to return.

Lila is surprised that the light from the chandelier dangling over the woman’s head is burning brightly. “Looks like she’s been here a while,” she says. Gus and she were supposed to arrive here first, though the pain in his leg this morning forced them to get a slower start than they intended.

The crystal facets above the woman dapple light across the stage. She raises her chin from the notebook in her lap, and her red hair bobs as she moves. She lays her pen in the notebook’s gutter and straightens.

Gus grabs his hat by the brim and waves it wildly back and forth. “Hey down there, Ruby!” he bellows jovially into the expansive space, greeting her with affection. The three of them are as close as any family.

Ruby O’Rourke is standing now, the leather notebook dangling in one hand at her side. “Dia duit!” she hollers across the ballroom, the traditional

Irish greeting she gives to Lila and Gus when the three of them reunite every spring.

“Dia is Muire duit!” Gus shouts back in his Texas drawl, acknowledging Ruby’s heritage and solidifying the beginning of their fifteenth year as old friends and co-workers here at the park.

Gus takes off across the wooden dance floor. The clunky cadence of his boots echoes his uneven gait. Lila winces at the ever-present reminder of the once badly broken ankle and dislocated hip. The limp he’d acquired at seventeen when a mare dragged him fifty yards with his foot entangled in the stirrup. She’s thankful their lifestyle allows them to live in the warm, dry climate of Texas in the winters, avoiding the pain of cold and wet weather from settling into his joints.

Lila tries to match his strides, clutching a simple bunch of flowers for Daisy’s grave in one hand and the waxy sack that holds their lunches in the other. They reach the lower side of the stage, and Gus ducks through the door that hides the steps. He lumbers noisily up the stairs. “You are really limping. Is your leg okay?” Lila asks as she mounts the steps behind him, worrying already about the strains this job puts on him.

“Yes, I’m fine. Can’t let this bum leg slow me down.”

Gus envelops Ruby in a bear hug and then flings her back just as fast. “Let me get a look ‘atcha,” he booms, releasing his grip and holding her at arm’s length.

She is nearly as tall as Gus. The kind of tall that makes short men uncomfortable, though she wears it easily. It’s useful when forcing the entertainment men to look straight into her eyes. And it also prevents them from looking down their noses at her chosen profession.

“Surprised you beat us. When that door was unlocked, I thought maybe kids messed around in here again over the winter. Did you use your keys at the musician’s stage door?”

“Sure did,” Ruby replies as she nods. “But I had to walk up the main stairs and come in the one you did—my other key is bent. Didn’t mean to give you two a scare.”

Lila brings Ruby in close. She hugs her tight, pressing her cheek against the soft skin on her neck. She takes in the warmth of the woman she thinks

of as the sister she never had. Lila steps back, grasps Ruby's forearms, and locks with her emerald eyes. "Oh, I've missed you so these long winter months. Tell me you are well with all this disruption in the world?"

"Yes, all is good. Happy to be back with you, gettin' this next year goin'. Folks sure do need our entertainment. Everyone back in Boston is antsy about the war." It's where Ruby spends her winters.

Lila liked Ruby immediately the first time she met her, all those years ago with Gus. That year, they expected her to be temporary. The fame bug bit the other entertainment manager, leaving them for Hollywood mid-summer.

Her intuition had been right. She knew they'd be friends for life, which can be difficult to achieve with half of their life spent in Texas, the other half here in Ohio. Lila can't help but admire that Ruby gets things done and doesn't take guff from anyone. She is whip-smart, and her ability to take charge of any situation is exactly what her job helping Gus run the park requires. She is unlike many women who demure into a secondary role when among tough businessmen.

Gus drags a third chair from behind a red velvet curtain in the wings, and the three of them sit close together in a triangle, their knees almost touching. To Lila, when they first reunite, it feels like old friends who reconnect at summer camp, with so much to tell each other and gaps in their lives to fill in. If she and Gus had loads of extra money, Lila would call her every week during the winter.

"Let's eat first," Lila says, pulling ham sandwiches and grapes from the paper sack. "Tell us what's been going on back home."

"They've designated the Boston Navy Yard to build the new Destroyer warships. Everyone is working. All the women are busy, consumed with the war effort. My cousin is making munitions in a factory, and another is planting her victory garden. Others are cookin' potluck dinners for the recruiters. I don't even own an apron," she chuckles. "My skills are better suited here, helpin' people forget their troubles."

"Yes, this is going to be a strange summer indeed," Gus says, plucking grapes from their stems. "I can't be sure if people will stay away, too busy

with their work and worries. Or, if they will pour through the gates in droves, looking for an escape.”

As Lila and Gus traveled from their winter home in Fort Worth over the past three days, they'd discussed his plans for this year's park entertainment. His ringmaster's instinct for what will draw the crowds and grand new ideas keeps things exciting for the hundreds of regulars they count on to return. His connections in the entertainment industry are at the heart of the park's success.

When their daughter Daisy was young, Lila worked as a high school teacher back in Texas. After school let out in June, she would travel with the child by train to Ohio, joining Gus for the rest of the summer. Several years ago, with Daisy long gone, she missed Gus too much and resigned from her teaching job. Now she joins him on the initial March trip to help ready the park for Easter opening weekend. They take the same route every year, hauling their belongings in their old Ford truck. She doesn't mind the beauty of the scenery as they travel east across Texas along the piney woods, through the mountains of Arkansas and Tennessee, up through the horse farms of Kentucky, and then over the Ohio River. She is always glad to be here. Anticipating their entertainment line-up is one of her favorite parts of kicking off a new season.

“Have you had any trouble booking our regulars?” Lila asks Ruby, passing her a waxed paper-wrapped brownie from the lunch sack. Each fall, Gus, Ruby, and Lila write out their wish list of entertainment for the following summer before they leave. Over the winter months, it's Ruby's job to contact and book their regular performers. The marching bands from nearby high schools, the free midway acts, and the local musicians who fill in around the headliners. Gus spends hours calling and writing the managers of the famous big band performers, singers, and main attraction entertainers, booking and filling the weekend calendar from Easter through closing on Labor Day.

Ruby takes care of all the acts once they arrive, and Gus manages the rest of the park throughout the summer. And Lila keeps the traveling entertainers happy. She bakes homemade bread and cookies and solves whatever unusual requests will keep them satisfied. It's often random things.

Watching a pet dog that travels on a tour bus while the owner performs. Tracking down hard-to-find materials for costume repairs. Anything that needs to be done to help things run smoothly.

“I’ve got everything in order. All the marching bands and free acts are booked.” Ruby grins as she straightens in her chair. “And I have great news! After three years tryin’, at last I secured us The Flying Wallendas. I’ve got them locked in for Labor Day weekend. They had an opening, on account of the Ohio State Fair being canceled for the first time because of the war.”

“That’s my girl,” Gus says appreciatively, licking mustard from his finger as he finishes a second sandwich. “I got a hold of my contact at Paramount Pictures, tried to talk him into having the Hollywood Victory Caravan stop here.”

“What’s that?” Ruby asks.

“A bunch of movie stars are traveling across the country by train—Bob Hope, Cary Grant, Bing Crosby. To raise money for the Army and the Navy. My guy said there’s only one stop here in Ohio—Cleveland on May 3<sup>rd</sup>. I couldn’t convince him to route them to the park. That sure would have drawn a crowd.”

“Ah, yes, that woulda been a major coup,” Ruby says. “I’m sure you got others? Who’s planned? Tell me you got the Andrews Sisters—no one can stop singin’ the *Boogie Woogie Bugle Boy!*”

The second the words leave her mouth, Lila and Ruby push their shoulders back on an unspoken cue and pump their index fingers toward the floor, imitating the famous trio. They burst into laughter, pointing at each other. Oh, how Lila wishes they lived closer to one another.

Gus rolls his eyes and shakes his head with mock disdain. “I tried. But no luck. They’re too busy entertaining the troops and filming movies. But I got Glenn Miller and his orchestra for the 4<sup>th</sup> of July weekend. Two summers ago, I had to pay them \$20,000. His fee is higher now that he is so popular.” Ruby coughs at the staggering sum. “Word has it he went to Washington last week and is petitioning to join the Army.”

“He’ll be worth the money, *Chattanooga Choo Choo* and all. People will flock to see him.” Lila pats Gus’ leg, conveying her admiration for his hard work. “Tell Ruby about booking Gene Autry.”

“Yep, I got him signed for June,” Gus says. “I heard his new record *Deep In The Heart Of Texas*. The crowds will love him. Good ‘ol Texas boy. His manager says Gene is also trying to enlist in the Army. All of them want to go over and entertain the troops. Figured I better book him early in the summer. At this rate, we’ll lose all the good ones to the war effort.”

“And Benny Goodman, Gus got him booked for August,” Lila adds, dismissing Gus’ worry. “The newspapers say he’s still feuding with Gene. I think they’re confused with Gene Krupa, but who cares? Anyway, that might get us some publicity, a celebrity fight right here in the ballroom. Anyway, it’s looking like a lively summer if the crowds don’t stay away.”

Gus rubs his belly. “Any of those brownies in there for me?” An oversized silver buckle that holds his faded jeans up presses into his protruding stomach. It betrays his affection for steak, potatoes, and anything deep-fried. Clumps of mousy brown hair curl from under the edges of the Stetson. Deep wrinkles he’s earned from years of outdoor work frame his steel-blue eyes—before on ranches, now at the amusement park.

“Of course, dear,” Lila says, handing the remains of the lunch sack to Gus.

He motions to the dance floor. “The Romanies should arrive soon. I need their help to repaint these rails and light fixtures.” Ruby scribbles in her notebook. “And all the deck chairs for the pool. They were in rough shape at the end of last summer. Please be sure they give them a thorough sanding and fresh paint. Don’t want any complaints of splinters in people’s butts!”

“When does Hal Clements get here?” Lila asks. She purses her lips, hating even mentioning that man’s name.

“The scoundrel’s coming earlier this year. In one week,” Gus says, unwrapping one of Lila’s chewy chocolate brownies.

“How would you be knowin’ this?” Ruby asks, furrowing her brows.

“I got a call from the Summerland Park management before we left Texas. They let the whole winter go by before telling me they had complaints last year. Something about him bothering the booth owner’s girls. There was one complaint at the ticket office from a park attendee’s wife. They said it was their duty to tell me, but they were not concerned. I

don't know what it will take to get rid of him. Six years is enough to put up with his ineptitude. He's only protected because his brother is the park owner."

Lila and Ruby trade looks that stall the lively banter. "What? What did I miss?" Gus asks, looking from one to the other.

"He made passes at me last year, too," Ruby replies. "I didn't bother tellin' you. I think he was deeper into the sauce. But don't you worry, I can handle myself."

Gus scowls and shakes his head. Lila knows Ruby is not the type of woman who often needs protection. Even among the sort that pass weekly through this place. Entertainers, grifters, and womanizers, particularly when they are drunk. Gus only needs to intervene occasionally.

"And that's not all," Lila says as she knits her brows and crumples the lunch bag. The last thing she wants to do is add to Gus' long list of concerns. "Remember Marisol, the young Romani I started helping to read last summer?"

"Yes, what about her?"

"Her mother came to me at the end of summer. Said Hal was harassing the young Romani boys we let work here in the park. Their men said not to say anything. Ignore it. They can't afford to lose the work. But Amelia told me anyway, so it must have been bad."

"Why would he do that? What does it matter to him who we hire?" Lila and Ruby glance at each other again. "Go on," he says.

Ruby speaks up this time. "He wants all the Romanies out of the park. Says none of them have any right to be working here, taking jobs from real Americans. Calls them interlopers, foreigners. They're no more foreign than my family coming over from Ireland. He tries to turn the booth owners against them. I'm sure he'll stop at nothing to have them banned. Says an entire clan of them took jobs in his town back in Pennsylvania. He blames all of them that the only work he could find after his wife left him was working for his brother at Summerland."

Gus shakes his head again. "Someone should have told me about all this last fall. I would've worked to get his sorry-ass fired. It's too late now to get someone else. Summerland won't let us operate without one of their own

men here, be that as worthless as he is. You both come to me if you hear anything. Any single issue. I'll watch him as closely as I can."

"Okay," Lila says, pecking Gus on the cheek and squeezing his shoulder. "Enough of that." She picks up the flowers she'd laid on the floor and shoulders the heavy bag of books. "Ruby, once you and Gus are finished, stop by our cottage later for a cup of tea. I want to hear all about your winter."

Lila leaves them deep in conversation about entertainment plans and worries about the war. She descends the backstage steps and the rear staircase used by the entertainers to get to the ground level.

The Crystal Pool's lake water filter system fills the air down here with the oddly comforting tang of bleach. Each fall, park workers completely drain the half-million gallons of water back into the lake when they close the park, leaving the shell of the pool in silence to withstand the winter snow and ice.

Ada Bertrand stands beside the expanse of public bathrooms. The local woman and her husband, Albert, run a tight ship, managing the pool, concessions, swimsuit rentals, and all the staff needed, not the least of which is an army of muscle-bound lifeguards.

Everyone calls her Birdie. Maybe because of her sharp facial features, but more likely because of her boundless energy. She flits around the pool area from sunrise to sunset with the vigor of a hummingbird, keeping watchful eyes to prevent anything from going amiss.

"Lila, hello! Good to see you, back here from Texas!" Birdie says cheerfully, clasping her arm around Lila's shoulder.

"You too, Birdie. Everything all right here?"

"Yes, firing the old 'gal back up. That filter is giving us some trouble. Making some crunching, clanking noises. I'm not convinced the Summerland people cleaned it properly before shutting it down for winter."

Every year, there is always additional damage to be addressed. It's a weeks-long process to bring the empty pool back to life to be ready for Memorial Day weekend.

"I called over to Etta Durwood's to see if Hal's arrived, but she said not yet. Sounds like she's not looking forward to him as a boarder again this year," Birdie says with a wink. "I'll have to deal with this until he shows up."

“Gus says he arrives next week. We’ve all got a beef with him. Good luck,” Lila says as she waves at Birdie and heads down a hall, going around one corner and then another. She cautiously navigates the narrow passage. Thin shafts of sunlight filter through the uneven tinder walls, scarcely lighting the way.

At the farthest end, the tall pile of empty crates and boxes looms in the shadows. They are undisturbed since Gus helped Lila stack them last September.

Lila sets the books and flowers on the floor. Crate by crate, she carefully dismantles the makeshift barrier. Behind them is the door that conceals a forgotten room. Lila pulls another key from her pocket. This one has a heart-shaped top.

She gathers what she brought and steps into the secret room. Three more and she is beside the sturdy wooden table. It’s not even large enough for four to crowd around. The ceiling is low. She sets down the books with a gentle thud and surveys the compact room. Everything is as she left it. Untouched, still undiscovered by anyone but Gus and her after all these years. Lila closes her eyes and mouth and inhales the scent of lake water-dampened wood. She sighs and releases her breath. ‘Ah, back,’ she says to no one.

The hideaway’s furnishings are sparse. There are three mismatched wooden chairs. Lila runs her hand along one of the uneven shelves that line the wall opposite the door. Gus built them for her years ago from park vendors’ discarded crates and pallets. Faded words like SUGAR and ORANGES on curled paper labels still cling to some. She’s filled the shelves with dozens of books she brings each year from Texas.

Lila discovered the forgotten room in the summer of 1930 when Daisy died, abandoned years earlier by the park’s original traveling performers. Its purpose was as a dressing room for the entertainers. That was long before they traveled with entourages and extravagant wardrobes requiring much bigger spaces.

Daisy died that Independence Day weekend, midway through the park season. It was too soon for Gus and Lila to go back to Texas. Lila wandered among the park buildings in a fog until their obligations ended on Labor

Day, mired in her grief. Once she discovered the room, she sat there alone every day, weeping and longing for her daughter.

Lila walks to the counter along the wall with the window that faces out toward the lake. In days gone by, pots of stage makeup and lipstick tubes laden the counter. Some of the powders are still wedged into the cracks. Lila hardly ever wears makeup, preferring just a wisp of lipstick and a light dusting from her mother's old compact on her cheeks. When this room buzzed from the entertainers' adrenaline, mirrors rimmed with Hollywood vanity bulbs lined the wall. When Lila discovered the room, she found that all were broken or missing except one. She catches her reflection in the mirror, its silver underlayer aged and blotched by oxidation from damp lake water air. Her eyes are less sad than years gone by, the byproduct of time marching forward.

Nothing obstructs Lila's view as she gazes through the small window. From a boat out on the water, it is so minute that it is barely noticeable, melted into the building's side. It's dwarfed by the impressive ballroom windows and balcony on the second story above.

Alone once again in this space, thoughts of Daisy overcome her. She mistakenly thought this time might be easier. Grief for her has been a solitary journey. It has ebbed and flowed through the years. Though this place is now a sanctuary of sorts, the sadness of her loss still sits tender near the surface when she first returns. It used to clang loudly, but these days, thankfully, it whispers.

Lila flips a switch. Gus has pulled electrical wire up through the ceiling and installed the two bulbs that dangle over the table. One flicks on brightly, and the other buzzes until it gains its full yellow light. Lila stacks the books she's brought in two neat piles. When she returns, she will shelve them by category and difficulty.

She's seen enough for today and pushes her trapped thoughts away. Lila closes and locks the door. Gus keeps the hinges well-oiled to keep them silent. It's his contribution to help her keep this refuge protected. She piles some crates back in place, looking down the hall to check that no one is around.

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Lila walks along the shady path toward the red-brick Presbyterian church. The simple spire atop the one-room building pokes through the white birch tree branches. She unlatches the compact graveyard gate, tightening her grip on the bunch of daisies in her other hand. Lila pushes her hip against the wrought iron as it creaks and swings open. She hugs herself, pulling the cardigan tight, as she steps forward to where her only child is buried. Returning each spring allows Lila to visit the grave she'd had to leave behind all those years ago.

On the rare occasions when other visitors are there, they give her a wide berth. She understands no one wants to commune over loss. More often, there is little evidence that anyone remembers these lost souls. Lila glances across the rows of simple stone markers. A few have shriveled bouquets or small American flag sticks waving. She picks up two beer bottles and shoves them in the bag that held the books. What kind of person leaves their garbage on a person's final resting place?

She steps carefully between the headstones, respecting each who was once someone else's living child. Just beyond Emmet Dawson, the young soldier who died in 1917, is Daisy's grave.

Lila drops to her knees and rests her hand against the dirt to be sure it is warming in spring. The thought of Daisy lying in the cold, hard winter ground always makes her shudder. Lila loosens the thin pink ribbon from her hair and ties it around the delicate bunch of flowers. She traces her finger over the raised cherub on the flat gray stone and lays the bouquet on Daisy's engraved name. The hot, familiar tears prick, and she lets them fall. There's no way of stopping them, anyway.

There is little time left for Lila and Gus to have another child. She places her hand on her belly and wishes it would swell with sustained life. In whispers, she tells Daisy about the sibling she lost this past winter, hoping they have found each other in heaven.

## CHAPTER 5

### Marisol

*The Village of Buckeye Lake, Ohio – March 18, 1942*

How naïve Marisol had been, standing in their kitchen the night Levoy and her father were murdered. In the dark days since, it's Gran, Mammie, and Marisol against the world. She's aware that her math skills and counting are far behind those of *gadzo* girls her age. But she can list the old ideas of what being a widow means to many in their culture.

First, some people they'd known all their lives cast them aside, as if they carried a contagion that kind words or actions could transmit. Second, money to survive dried up. And it was even more impossible to acquire. Paid work is for men. Women are relegated to cleaning the house, mending clothes, and tending to the children. And third, many tasks require physical strength, well beyond what most women have. Some men can provide it, but many of their wives object. Marisol doesn't have close friends, other than Brigid at the park. But if she ever does and they have no man, widowed or otherwise, she wouldn't treat them with such cruelty.

The journey from their winter home in Indiana has been more difficult than expected. Being allowed to join the caravan traveling east back to Buckeye Lake Park has been tenuous. The men organizing the trip made no bones about the perceived burden of including horse-drawn wagons, especially one with only women. Mammie was forced to agree to take in

more mending without compensation in exchange for their inclusion on the trip. No one else had to barter services simply for the right to travel down a road. Another penalty for navigating without men.

Marisol and Mammie have taken turns steering their old horse, Rusty. Gran is much too frail, and Flora is too young. They felt certain they could manage on the journey when they started. Their old-fashioned wagon and five similar ones were relegated to the last places in the caravan.

As soon as they pulled out, the rain began to fall. The inclement spring weather is barely a bother for those who pull trailers hitched to motor cars and pickup trucks. There is no such luxury for Mammie, Marisol, and Gran Rose. The unforgiving country roads take their toll on the Vanner horses, causing frequent stops that hold the entire entourage up.

Three different times, unfamiliar men from other clans heave and push their wagon out of mud-slicked ruts. Once, when her father was alive, he flew into a rage over the wagon's weight. He'd smashed some of Mammie's favorite china on the ground. As he tore through the wagon, he almost found the books. It was the closest they ever came to losing their hidden cache of knowledge.

As the men try to help, their wives stand nearby with hands planted on their hips. Their pursed lips and angry eyes communicate that they have no empathy.

On the third delay, Marisol overhears one woman grouching to the others. They stand in a cluster, monitoring their husbands working to free the wagon. "Where are their men?"

"I heard they were both killed in a fight," one stranger responds.

"Just what we need. Our own people feeding old misperceptions that we all fight," says another.

The first one chimes in again. "We shouldn't have allowed them to join us. They should get their own men."

Marisol can't take the ugly, disparaging words from the strangers a moment longer. Talk about perpetuating old behaviors. What about the custom of shunning widows? These women are no better. Who will stand up for Gran, Mammie, and Marisol's honor if it isn't her? She moves closer

to the women and stares them directly in the eyes, one after the other. Inside, she is shaking, but she works to steady her voice.

Marisol presses her hands against her hipbones. “We have every right to be here, same as you. I’m sure we appear to be interlopers in this caravan, but we have been included and accepted on this trip many times.” She wants to mention Grandad and his legendary caregiving, but it seems pointless. His memory is probably already fading for many. All these women care about is what’s right in front of them. Marisol forces back the tears that prick from their cruelty. She will not give them the satisfaction. “We’d appreciate your understanding.” One of the women makes a tch noise, and the others purse their lips and shake their heads.

That evening, the old wagons and the modern campers circle a roaring campfire in an abandoned field where they’ve stopped for the night. The sun sets low as guitars and violins blend old favorite melodies into the chatter of separated clusters of men and women. Children play hide ‘n seek, freed from being trapped inside the vehicles. A lone young man tends the open flame, a whole hog roasting on a spit, its aroma causing everyone’s mouth to water. The women sit on tree stumps, gathered on one side to visit. A woman from their clan, Eliza Thomas, whose family drives a modern car, joins Mammie and Marisol.

“I heard those wretched women earlier when we stopped to free your wagon from the mud. I didn’t realize it until too late, or I would have sent my husband to help you.”

“Narrow minds, old-fashioned thinking.” Mammie doesn’t measure her words.

Eliza nods. “I agree. Please, if you need any help at the park, let me know. We’ll be staying in our trailer over at the designated campground.”

“Thank you,” Mammie says. “Marisol and I have been talking about our old customs and how difficult many of them are to uphold in these modern times.”

Eliza lets a beat of silence pass. “When we return to Indiana in the fall, I’m going to apply for a factory job. We could really use the money. They need skills I have for sewing uniforms.”

Mammie raises her eyebrows. "What does your husband say about that?" Marisol stays silent. So, it's not just Mammie and her discussing these things. Why must they continue to suffer in poverty instead of working at real jobs?

"I haven't mentioned it yet." Eliza stares at the fire. "Why should I stay at home when I can help with the war effort? And earn some money. I will tell him. Soon."

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Halfway through the journey, Mammie and Marisol sway atop the wagon's bench. Mammie sits tall, refusing to let near hopelessness bend her posture or let the defeat they all feel be exposed to the others. Traveling back to the amusement park is their only option. The same as the past eleven years, they'll have work telling fortunes, even though they'd rather not. They don't believe in seeing into the future, but dukkering with tarot cards at the park is accepted and is a means to a steady income. Her father's gambling and heavy drinking left them nearly destitute. What scant money they have scraped together by selling his tools and taking in extra sewing is almost gone. They ration what remains the best they can.

Out here in the open air, no one can hear them. "I love our family, our clan. But the bindings of our customs will hold you back, as they have done to me," Mammie says. "I'm conflicted in advising you against our ways," she continues. Mammie's poor match to her father sealed her fate. Marisol is keenly aware she has barely escaped the same.

"This isn't making sense. All I've ever heard is that Flora and I have no choice. We must be wives and mothers. You're saying you don't believe this anymore?" Marisol asks.

Mammie's long-extinguished desires reflect ruefully in her voice. "You heard what Eliza said. Women are getting government jobs. Joining in the war effort." She pats Marisol's knee. "We can't keep ignoring the world changing all around us."

Marisol reties the scarf around her long, dark braid and shakes her head. "How can I do anything different? I'm just one of all the others. I look the

same, I dress the same. My future is the same.” She thinks of her brief marriage to Levoy, how it would have bound her to him like Mammie had been to her father. And then the image of him lying dead in his blood floods her mind. *I’m already a widow.* “I’m worse.”

“I don’t know. In my heart, I have always felt you’re meant to live a different life,” Mammie says tenderly. “We must watch for signs.” Signs. Horoscope signs? Signs in the heavens? Marisol has seen no sign that a different life is possible since Grandad died.

Mammie’s smile registers false confidence. Her optimism is the only thread they have to cling to.

On the last night of their journey, Gran, Mammie, and Marisol sit around the kitchen table. They’d tucked Flora into bed behind the curtain. “Tell me again about the time you and Grandad saved the boy bitten by a rattlesnake,” Marisol says. She’s been thinking more about the possibility of being a caregiver after her conversation with Mammie, like she did before Grandad died. Gran loves to talk about the adventures she had helping Grandad in his healing.

“The poor boy. When we arrived, his mother knelt at his side. Everyone else stood around wringing their hands as if that would get the venom out.” Gran shakes her head. “Grandad stepped right in. Made a cut on his ankle where the fang marks were reddening. Put tobacco in his mouth and sucked out the poison, then spit it to the ground. He put more tobacco right on the wound and wrapped it up. Boy was running around in no time, as if nothing ever happened.”

Gran spent so many years by Grandad’s side. Since he died, many have reverted to the old, passed-down natural cures. They avoid modern medicine, placing hope in herbs as their remedies.

“I always went along as his helper,” Gran continues. “He called me his nurse, like he did you. Our partnership was a gift to both of us. Other men would never allow a woman to help them with their work. He loved having me by his side. Seemed to make the women calmer, especially the ones having babies.” No one dares to let Gran take his place, especially without him.

“More useful work than staying home mending clothes,” Marisol says. She knows now it was a luxury they’d let her tag along all those years. It was cut much too short that last day when she went with Grandad to help deliver the baby. He might have helped her continue learning about the scientific side of healing. Now there is no one. And it would be impossible to do on her own.

Despite all the obstacles, they keep up with the caravan. On the final morning, their wagon is in line behind the Hendersons’ old one, last in the convoy. They are a family from their clan who have been kind. The man’s mother lives with them, the same as Gran does.

Marisol and Flora settle onto the wagon’s bench. She takes up the reins and calls to Mr. Henderson as he checks his undercarriage. “Would you mind looking at our axles? I have a bad feeling we might have a problem.”

“Of course.” He lies on his back and shimmies beneath the wagon. “Yep, trouble’s brewing. You need to have it looked at soon as we’re at the park. If it holds out that long.”

“Thank you.” If they don’t have their wagon to stay in, they’ll be left to scramble for one of the cabins. There might not even be one available this late. How to pay for it will be another problem entirely. “I’ll let Mammie know.”

The familiar route takes them below Columbus. Marisol has a clear view of all the close-built houses and low-slung buildings on the outskirts of the downtown area. They pass near a commercial bakery, and the buttery, fresh-baked bread aroma wafts out into the air. Saliva floods her mouth.

“I’m so hungry,” Flora says, tilting her head against Marisol’s shoulder.

The last opportunity for their stomachs to be full was at the wedding feast. However, with the events of that day, Marisol had missed that chance as well. “Me too,” she replies. It has been months since they tasted a piece of fruit. There is no butter or fresh meat. Their sustenance now is onions, broth from bones cooked clean of nourishment, and crackers made from cornmeal. They dig up an occasional tuber from abandoned fields to make potato pancakes. The hollowness in the bellies is not her fault, but Marisol can’t tolerate her family’s suffering much longer. The park’s opening day is

Easter weekend, and the ability to earn money reading tarot cards can't come soon enough.

Marisol continues to steer the carriage toward the lakeside village. The landscape is changing and more familiar, with only an hour more to go. This view is welcoming. Despite the arduous trip and an even more challenging winter, a calm settles over her. She allows her shoulders to relax. Tall grasses sway in the breeze for miles, pushing away the oppression of the rain and mud they left behind. New life is all around them. Sturdy mares graze in the fields, their wobbly foals tucked underneath as they suckle their mother's milk. Maybe things will be better here, Marisol thinks. Although it's hard to believe, with their recent run of bad luck.

As they reach the village entrance, the convoy ahead slows along the two-lane road beneath the canopy of hundred-year-old trees. Some are full and leafy, while others push green buds out from their limbs. It's a world hidden from the nearby towns and highways. A person would drive right on by without a single thought if they hadn't heard about the amusement park.

They cross under the tall, arched sign and can see the large grassy area to the right, just outside the park gates. "Welcome to Buckeye Lake Park." Everyone calls it the playground of Ohio. The familiar and generic welcome soothes Marisol.

They've stalled in front of a row of resort cottages. Each one boasts a neatly trimmed lawn, as if plucked from a factory production line. Two lanky teen boys slap white paint on the flower boxes beneath the windows. The wealthy city people will soon arrive to rent them for the summer. It is freeing to be back in this different world, though Marisol's skin prickles with an awareness of how bedraggled and worn their old wagon appears beside these fancy cottages. She imagines momentarily that they will live and relax in one of these for the summer, instead of working to survive.

Marisol first understood the contrasts last summer between herself and the girls whose fathers work in fancy offices and rent these cottages for their families. Arm-in-arm, those summer girls strolled carefree down the midway. They giggled and chattered in their shorts and seersucker blouses. Each one had a ribbon looped in a bow around her ponytail. Their skin was

taut and dewy, like models in a magazine. To Marisol, they look like sisters from one large, happy family.

Though it might have made her jealous, it is the opposite. Seeing them exhilarated Marisol. She can never disappear among them, but the chance to be with people other than her clan stirs something deep. She tries to suppress the feeling, sure it would be frowned upon. With both hands, she pulls her long, thick hair up the sides of her head, holding it there for a moment. The idea of working among the *gadze* isn't so bad, even if it would be forbidden.

"Things will be better here. Lots of work for everyone," Marisol says to Flora as she pats her knee. She must put up a brave front. "People outside our clans don't care if we are widows." She wished she believed her own words.

The park operations require so many people that it is truly a refuge for those in the caravan to find employment, along with many others, if only for five months. Mammie and Marisol will tell fortunes – the only jobs Romani women are allowed. The men will work running the Guess Your Weight booth, the Strongman game, the rides, and helping with repairs.

In this place, they can pretend the heartache and chaos in their lives back in Indiana don't exist. Despite the trope portrayed in *gadzo* books and movies that make people think the Romanies wander haphazardly, their destinations have a purpose and a pattern. They come back to welcoming places.

At last, the vehicles and wagons in front of them move again, and they pull forward to a cluster of one-bedroom rental cabins. The local man who owns them stands waiting with his clipboard. A flock of birds dips and curves above, the first creatures acknowledging their return.

Marisol jumps down from the wagon, releases Rusty, and hitches his rope to the tree-log corral fence. She walks back to stand by Mammie and Gran as they talk to the man, negotiating to secure a cabin. Though they've traveled to the park for over ten years, they've never rented from him, their old wagon serving as their temporary home in the campsite.

"I don't have any money right now," Mammie says, forcing a worried smile.

“I understand, Mrs. Mazaria, times are tough for everyone. How can I rent you a cabin if you can’t pay?” he says, keeping his eyes averted to his clipboard.

Gran Rose takes one step closer. “Sir, you have my word. We are good for it. We’ll pay by May first, less than two weeks away. I swear it on Henry’s grave, God rest his soul. You see, there are three of us right here in front of you who will take in all the work we can.”

The man looks from one of them to the other, outnumbered. “All right, two weeks. But I need payment no later than May first. Agreed?”

Marisol could hug him, but of course, that would not be appropriate. “Thank you,” the three of them say in unison.

Mammie, Marisol, and Flora drag their belongings across the path into the sparsely furnished cabin. They don’t know what to expect, but it doesn’t matter. They have a place to stay. Marisol cranks the metal windows open and allows the cool breeze to push out the mustiness of dormant winter air. She inhales the familiar and comforting lake water scent.

Mammie and Gran Rose will share the queen bed. Flora flops on the lumpy mattress that lies beside it on the floor. “We’ll be plenty comfortable here,” Marisol says, collapsing beside her sister. Anything is better than sharing a bed with Levoy.

They are exhausted from their journey, but they have no time to rest. The hard work of setting up their fortune-telling tents is still in front of them. They’re already behind the others in their caravan who are unloading to secure a good place along the tow path. With no men to help and little money, it’s one more hurdle.

The screen door slaps as they gather on the porch. “Flora, you and Gran drag these empty crates down to the tow path. Try to save us space for our two tents as close to the grassy area and park entrance as you can. Sit on them and don’t move for anyone, no matter how much they push,” Mammie says.

This year, for the first time, they decided that Marisol would have her own tarot card reading tent. She will use Gran’s beautiful old purple and red striped silk one. The two of them have practiced during the winter.

“Hurry as quickly as you are able. Before everyone takes the good spots,” she says with urgency. “Marisol and I will have to find help to haul all our other things.”

Marisol scurries between the trailers and other cabins, knocking on every door. They are empty, or no one will answer. Almost everyone has gone off to inquire about work or is on their way to the tow path. Finally, the woman from their caravan who berated them along the road swings her door wide open.

“What do you want?” she asks, hands again planted on her hips.

“Mammie and I need help taking our things to the tow path.” Why couldn’t it have been anyone who’d answered the door besides this wretched woman?

“More help? Haven’t we given you enough? How on earth will you survive the summer?” The woman steps back and slams her door in Marisol’s face. The few other strangers who remain in the Romani encampment area meet her with suspicion. They cross their arms or turn their backs.

“Hardly anyone is left. And those who are won’t speak to me, Mammie.” Marisol stares at a curl of paint peeling on the porch floor.

Mammie collapses into a rocker and pulls her apron to her eyes. Marisol lays a hand on her shoulder. Surely this is not the thing that will break her mother. They have journeyed so far to get back to the park where they can finally earn some money.

“I’ll go try again. There’s got to be someone who will help us.” As she descends the stairs, an old man shuffles toward her up the path.

His skin is the same ruddy dark as theirs, and his face is a map of creases, like a well-used leather saddle. “We’ll help you,” he says. He gestures toward a young boy behind him, who pulls a wooden cart. Marisol does not know this man. But the pain in his eyes communicates that they are kindred spirits. Castoffs. “I owe Henry. He saved my daughter’s life.”

Marisol bites her lip to hold back the urge to cry at hearing someone speak of Granddad. Someone remembers his tireless work.

“Thank you,” Marisol says. She touches the thin gold bracelet on her wrist. The one Granddad gave her on her sixteenth birthday, a few months

before he died. *Be brave*, he said, and kissed her on the head. Marisol closes her eyes and feels his presence. "You don't know how much this means to us."

The two women, the old man, and the young boy pull the tent set-ups from their wagon and load them on the too-small cart. They are an indiscriminate group hobbling together as they near the tow path. They clutch and grasp to keep everything from toppling to the ground. The old man contributes to the effort as much as any of them, though his body is frail and his work-worn hands are dry and split. Marisol thinks about how much he has seen over the years living on this earth. Modern changes must be difficult for traditional Romanies like him to accept.

Marisol tries to move their group along, but the ground is uneven and their cart is overflowing. The old man can't walk any faster.

The area designated for the Romanies is on an offshoot of the old, narrow tow path, a remnant from many years ago when young boys pulled the boats along the lake. The enterprising traders then delivered groceries and supplies to the village founders.

From where they are, she can see the Romani area is already filling with colorful and vibrant tents, from their clan and several others. Some will sell trinkets, carved animals, and various park souvenirs.

Strong men, cigarettes dangling from their mouths, work diligently erecting the tent city. By the time Marisol's group arrives, as Mammie predicted, it looks as if others have taken all the best spots.

They inch the overloaded wagon near the positions closest to the edge of the grassy area surrounding the park entrance, past piercing eyes. *Please be there*, Marisol thinks, hoping Gran and Flora have been successful. Their shoes, the wagon cart, and everything teetering in it are now dust-covered. The path is not yet tamped down by the hundreds of visitors who will soon walk along it every day.

One thing has gone in their favor. Gran and Flora sit atop the crates, daring anyone to encroach upon their spots. Marisol exhales in relief.

The inexperienced group gets to work, setting the tent poles and securing the guy ropes with stakes into the ground. The small boy struggles,

trying to help them drape the silky sequined fabrics in place. Two hours later, they finally finish the setup.

The old man rests upon a crate, wiping sweat from his forehead with a handkerchief. Marisol wishes they had something to pay him, but there is no money to spare.

She steps inside her tent and reaches into a crate. Marisol carefully pulls out a cloth-wrapped vial. It holds a precious salve for healing that took her many hours to collect ingredients and concoct. She used Grandad's complicated recipe of pig lard, rosemary, comfrey, calendula, and beeswax. One he'd taught Marisol to make in secrecy. She plans to sell the salves to the Romanies who aren't afraid of buying from a woman.

Marisol takes the old man's wrinkled hand and turns it over. She slips the vial into his palm, curling his fingers tight against it as she gazes into his weary eyes. "My grandad's salve, for healing. We won't forget your kindness," she says and blinks away a tear.

## CHAPTER 6

### Lila

*The Village of Buckeye Lake, Ohio – March 23, 1942*

Lila clicks the graveyard gate behind her. It's the third time she's visited Daisy's grave since returning to the park last week. How many times will it take until the ritual is unnecessary? Can she ever fully make peace with the stolen dream of a home filled with her daughter's laughter?

The springtime air is cool against her face as she walks along the road's pavement beneath the canopy of trees. It's too early for all the summer people. A single boy on a bike passes her during the four blocks to the cottage she and Gus have rented for the past twelve years. He zigs and zags his bike haphazardly without a care.

Daisy was once like that little boy. She would have turned eighteen next month. By now, they'd be having conversations about her going to college and maybe about boys. If Lila had been the kind of mother her daughter would have confided in. But there have been no college applications. Or a young man standing at their door with a wrist corsage trembling in his hand.

As she arrives at the cottage, Gus is standing on the porch. She climbs the three cement steps. "There you are," he says, pulling her in close by the waist. He plants a gentle kiss on her lips and strokes her hair. "Where have you been?"

“Over to visit Daisy,” she answers, her head still nuzzled against his chest.

“Of course. Any better?”

“Yes, less raw each time,” Lila says, exhaling. She appreciates his steadiness and patience, knowing that he grieves quietly in his own way.

“I’m headed into town to meet the people at the bank. Get all the park accounts fired back up. Anything I can get you?”

Lila leans down and pokes her fingers in a flower pot’s dirt. “Could use something bright to fill this.” No use letting it languish empty and lifeless.

“I think picking out flowers is best left to you,” Gus chuckles. “I’m not so good at decorating.” He pecks her cheek, then whispers in her ear, “Tonight, we need to rechristen this place.”

Lila swats Gus’ backside as he lumbers down the steps. Their summer home is modest but comfortable, only blocks from the lake. An easy walk to the park. Anything to ease the strain on Gus’ lame leg. It’s unlike the fancier lakeside cottages that sit further away from the daily hubbub and noise of the park. It’s perfect for Gus and Lila, with its living room and wall of windows exposing the back porch. There’s no lake view because it faces the trees, but it affords them the privacy and calm needed every evening.

She fills the porcelain teakettle that came in the cottage with water. The burner clicks as she turns the knob and sets it on the bright blue flames. The gas stove’s white enamel is chipped in places, but its silver Kenmore bar still shines along the top.

There’s a tapping on the doorframe as she reaches for the teacups, the steam just beginning to whistle. “You in there, Lila?” a voice floats through the screen. She turns toward the creak of hinges that ring throughout the compact kitchen.

Ruby pokes her head between the gap. Lila’s friend smiles broadly, exposing the narrow space between her two front teeth. Her pale, round face is sprinkled with freckles across high cheekbones.

“Come on in, just making tea.”

Ruby steps into the kitchen and folds her in a hug. Lila misses her companionship over the long winter months. She has plenty of friends back in Texas, mostly from her teaching days. But there isn’t anyone she feels

comfortable confiding in so deeply as Ruby. As much as her routine of visiting Daisy amplifies her loss, reigniting this bond each spring helps mend her fractured heart.

Lila carries a tray of tea and biscuits to the porch, following Ruby. Her friend is wearing her usual outfit: a pressed green blouse, which suits her and helps Gus spot her in a crowd. And pants for their practicality in her work and for the protection they afford against men's undesired advances.

Ruby settles into a wicker chair. "Have you visited Daisy again?" she asks, as Lila pours boiling water over the tea bags.

Lila offers the bowl of sugar cubes to her friend. "Yes. I told her about the one I lost this past winter," she replies, patting her stomach. So many years have passed. She never talks to anyone but Ruby about the scars of her lost daughter or the unrelenting dread of life without a child.

When it's three o'clock in the morning and Lila lies staring into the dark, she worries about growing old. What if Gus dies before her, leaving her utterly alone? He is nine years older. Will she go crazy, puttering around an empty house, with no children coming to visit?

"Each month I hold my breath," Lila says. She cradles her warm teacup in her hands.

Her time is running out. The years race by as she faces thirty-nine.

"I'm sorry to learn you lost another." Ruby sets down her spoon and touches Lila's hand. "Soon, I feel it." She pushes at the compact pile of curls on her forehead that are swept up the sides at her temples. Her remaining thick waves have settled on her shoulders.

"Your hairstyle is so fashionable," Lila chides her friend, diverting the conversation away from her worries.

"Yes, finally, who would have ever thought these natural curls would be all the rage? I get to avoid the tedious task of pin-curling before I go to sleep."

"And your mother, is her health any better?" Lila asks. Over the many years of their friendship, they've had long conversations about each other's backgrounds. Ruby's remaining Irish Catholic family is rooted where they settled a hundred years ago. Her grandfather fled the Great Hunger on a coffin ship with his wife and a brood of children. The O'Rourkes are hardy stock.

“No, her mind is worse. Most often, she doesn’t recognize me.” Steam rises from Ruby’s teacup as she brings it to her lips. “It was harder to leave her this time. But my brother and his wife are there to look in on her while I’m away. They know I need this work to save money for the winter months.”

It was Ruby’s fiery spirit that first bound the two of them together. Of course, Gus depends on her friend, too. The demands from the Summerland Park Company, the amusement park owners, increase every year. He works too hard as it is. Lila often wonders how long their nomadic lifestyle is sustainable.

Ruby has never married, though Lila often thinks she’d be a wonderful wife to someone. To this point, work has been her husband. Her striking appearance demands attention and as much respect as a woman is afforded in a work world built for men. Confident and bold, her temperament is ideal for dealing with difficult celebrity managers who never expect to find a woman in her role. More than one overly confident star has made a pass at Ruby. Some even take it further with unwelcome roving hands. Over stronger drinks than tea, Ruby has regaled with stories to Lila of her practiced rebuffs. She is skilled at wagging her fingers and brushing off offenders with no more than a hearty laugh.

After they finish catching up, they rise, hug once more, and Ruby leaves back through the screen door. Lila stands in the doorway, leaning against the frame. “Come back for dinner tomorrow. I’ll make your favorite Irish stew.” Ruby waves over her shoulder and disappears on the path into the woods.

Before she turns to go inside, two young dark-haired women are bounding arm-in-arm up the shady lane. It’s Marisol and her best friend, Brigid. She has watched them grow up since 1931, when the Great Depression still gripped the entire country.

“Let me look at you both!” Lila says. “You have both grown so tall. No longer little girls!” She ushers them into the kitchen.

It’s not hard to remember the young women as girls that first summer when the Romanies showed up desperately looking for work, which was sparse everywhere. The clans came to Gus, requesting to set up tents along

the tow path. They asked if their strong men could help with heavy lifting and operating the rides. Anything to earn their keep.

As it turned out, the park was busier than ever because Summerland had built and opened The Dips roller coaster, the largest ride ever in the park. Its novelty drew crowds from hundreds of miles away. For the nominal price of a ticket, the visitors sought a modicum of joy in their otherwise dismal lives.

But Lila still remembers the huge debates that ensued among the locals and other booth owners about whether these people with behaviors different from theirs should be allowed to work at the park. Narrow minds and inaccurate newspaper reports fueled the flames of gossip as people filled in their gaps of knowledge with unsubstantiated fears.

These days, thousands ride the famous coaster every day, and thankfully, all of that is long forgotten. Everyone works in harmony, except for the occasional buffoons like Hal Clements. Gus, Lila, and Ruby need the extra hands for the ever-burgeoning crowds and welcome the clans back every year.

Lila ushers the girls in from the porch. She hears Marisol's stomach growl and watches her push against it, which makes it grumble even more. The embarrassment flushes in her cheeks.

"Sit, sit down here, girls. You must be starving," Lila says nonchalantly, pulling chairs out from the yellow Formica table that's pushed against the window.

Lila slides up the rolltop breadbox and removes a fresh loaf of bread. She slices two thick slabs and lays them on plates. She sets them on the table along with a heaping bowl of fresh strawberry jam. "Eat up. There's plenty," she says.

"Thank you!" Marisol and Brigid say in unison and slather their bread with the gooey jam. Lila sips her second cup of tea, then smiles, happy they have both returned safely. She worries about their difficult lives when they are apart during the winter.

"Brigid, how are those brothers of yours? How old are they now?" Lila asks.

“They are all fine, Miss Lila. Isaiah is six, Luther is thirteen, and Ezra is sixteen. They eat like horses! Seems I finish cooking one meal, and I’m starting on the next. I could be the cook at one of those restaurants outside the park if I had to.”

“That’s a lot of responsibility. I’m sure your father appreciates your help. Is Ezra ready to run one of the rides this year?” Lila asks.

“Yes, Ma’am. That’s all he’s talked about for weeks. How Mr. Bennett promised last summer he could give it a try. Father told me to find out when he wants Ezra to meet him at The Dips.”

“I’ll check and have Miss Ruby stop by your cabin to let him know.”

After she finishes her slice, Brigid jumps up. “I have to go do the washing. Thank you for the bread and jam.” Marisol and Brigid hug like sisters, and she hurries out the screen door.

“Now, my sweet one, how have you been?” Lila regards Marisol’s face and posture. “You seem sadder than when I last saw you.”

Marisol lowers her eyes to the empty plate, swirling her finger in a glob of jam, then licks it off. With her knuckle, she wipes away a tear. “Things are bad. So much has happened since last summer.”

Lila stands and rests her hands on Marisol’s shoulders from behind. “Come, let’s go sit on the porch swing, and you can tell me everything.”

Marisol sways gently back and forth with Lila. Her story tumbles out in fits and starts as she recounts Levoy’s assault in the barn, the wedding, and the fight the following day. After all these years of confiding, Lila is familiar with most of the confines of Marisol’s culture that restrict women from earning an income. But she has never heard about the customs of shunning widows.

“Now more than ever, Miss Lila, Gran, Mammie, and I will do whatever is needed for money. Gran and Mammie can take in sewing if you hear of any needs.” Marisol lowers her chin. Her cheeks redden as she picks at a thread on her skirt. “Gran still insists my way forward is with reading and learning, but...”

“But what?” Lila asks.

“I took Flora with me to the market in town to buy some flour. She never gets to go back home. When we were standing in the aisle, she asked me what some words on the packages were. Two local boys overheard us. I could hear them making fun, calling us stupid Gypsies who don’t know how to read.” Marisol sighs but continues. “It’s not like I’ve never been called stupid before. But Flora, I try to protect her from cruel words.”

Lila pats Marisol’s knee. “Some people behave ignorantly. They are the ones who are stupid and myopic. I try to believe it’s the outcome of limited exposure to the world. You and Flora have traveled and seen more of it than those boys, I suspect.” She hates it that these girls must experience so much intolerance so young.

“Yes, I suppose. But it’s not just that.” Marisol pinches her blouse’s sleeve between her fingers. “I know we look different. I know our customs are unusual, and Gran and Mammie work hard to teach us to read in secret. If our people knew, even they would not approve. I appreciate what you, too, have tried to do the last few years, but I’m sure I’m far behind all the others my age. I don’t know how I will ever catch up.”

“Just because someone doesn’t look or act like them, they assume they are inferior or less intelligent. People say whatever they like, with no facts to support their words. Your learning—don’t you worry. You have a great start. I am a teacher, after all.” She’ll have her reading better than anyone her age in no time. Marisol only lacks the opportunities those boys have had.

“Oh, thank you, Miss Lila,” Marisol says. “I’ve been trying to improve my reading with Mammie and Gran over the winter. I brought more of Grandad’s books today. They are the hardest ones he had.”

“Let’s get started again right away. When are you able to meet me?” Lila asks.

“I don’t know, now that I am in charge of Gran’s tent. Maybe early mornings before the park opens?” Marisol says.

Lila thinks how unfair it is that Marisol carries so many burdens. She, too, is missing out on college applications and high school dances. “Perfect. Let’s meet every morning at seven o’clock. I’ll give you readings for your

evenings. We can steadily increase our progress.” Then Lila adds, “I checked on my secret room last week. Just be sure no one follows you.” She means for Marisol’s protection. But also, Lila needs to keep her sacred place undiscovered to mourn the loss of Daisy.

“Miss Lila? Why are you so kind to me? All these years?”

“I had a daughter. Daisy. She loved books like you do,” Lila whispers. She had never talked about Daisy with Marisol because she always seemed like a child. But she is a young woman now, just as her daughter would have been. “She died here at the park twelve years ago.”

Lila buried Daisy that sweltering summer when scarlet fever raged throughout the park, attacking the children of locals and visitors alike. The rash started on Daisy’s tiny chest and spread quickly across her arms and legs. There was nothing anyone could do to save her.

“Oh, Miss Lila, I am very sorry,” Marisol says.

“It was a long time ago. She would be your age now.” They’ve stopped swinging. For a moment, the only sound is a woodpecker rat-tat-tatting high in a tree.

Lila thought she was seeing a ghost when she first saw seven-year-old Marisol playing in the dust along the tow path the summer after Daisy died. The child reminded her so much of her daughter. Her soft eyes, dark hair, and frame were tall for her age. Daisy had been taking after Gus. Halfway through the summer, Lila summoned the courage to take one of Daisy’s dolls to Amelia, asking if she could give it to Marisol. From that day forward, their bond formed.

“I read to her every night before she went to sleep. She loved the stories about animals. The plights of ducks with broken wings and bunnies caught in barbed wire, how country veterinarians fixed them.” Lila lays her hands against her lap and slumps her shoulders. “I imagine she would have become one if she had the chance.”

“I’m sure she would have, with a mother as encouraging as you.” They sit in silence for a moment. “Thank you for teaching me to read,” Marisol

says, leaning her head on Lila's shoulder. How it might have felt if she were Daisy, Lila thinks. She lifts a hand and touches Marisol's hair.

Lila rises from the swing before she cries. "Of course. Let's start tomorrow."

As Marisol prepares to leave, Lila takes both her hands and pulls her forward, the first time she has ever hugged her. "Oh, how I've missed you!" With a finger, she touches away a tear on Marisol's cheek. "Everything will be all right, you'll see."

## CHAPTER 7

### Marisol

*April 1, 1942*

The park opens in three days. Every morning, Marisol rises in the early darkness. She dresses quickly and slips out, walking in the pale first-gray light through the woods to the still-sleeping park to meet Miss Lila in the hidden room before going to the tow path tents.

This morning, Flora is still fast asleep on the mattress, and Gran Rose is in the bed. But Mammie is already gone. She can see two women through the screen, sitting on the rockers. Their voices float in through the open window.

Marisol can hear Mammie. "I'm embarrassed that I don't miss him. Sure, there are things that are harder without a man. But we are better off. I've just got to get on my feet. My mother and father always said I was as smart as any man. I refuse to let the label of a widow define the rest of my life."

"It's admirable the way you take care of your daughters and your mother. What you need is a way to make money, to give all of you a better life," the other woman says.

Marisol pushes through the screen door, and they stop talking as the hinges squeak.

Mammie and the woman have empty tea cups, and she catches the glance that passes between them. They have been here a while.

“You remember Eliza Thomas, don’t you, Marisol?” Mammie asks.

“Yes, Ma’am, nice to see you again.” She is the woman from their clan who spoke kindly to them on the journey here. The one who said she planned to take a traditional job in a factory.

“You also, Marisol,” Eliza says. “I should be going. My family will be waking. I need to return to our trailer. Thank you for the tea.”

As Eliza slips away down the path, Mammie picks up a ripped shirt from the sewing basket by her side. There is not enough sunlight yet for the tedious handwork.

“Do you and Miss Eliza visit often?” Marisol asks.

“Yes, she stops over several mornings each week. We’ve been talking about work. There are a few others who are trying to muster the courage to tell their husbands they plan to take factory jobs.” Mammie smiles slightly. “Of course, that’s one problem I don’t have.”

Marisol chuckles. There is a benefit to being a widow in their clan.

“Off to see Miss Lila?” Mammie asks.

“Yes. I started reading this book last night.” Marisol taps the high school textbook cradled in the crook of her arm. “It’s about biology.” Late into each night, Marisol lies next to Flora in the cabin’s corner and reads whatever book Lila gives her to study. Until this point, she hasn’t been allowed to make decisions about her life. Everything has just happened to her. Even reading tarot cards is out of necessity to survive. For the first time, continuing learning is her choice. Her mind is being flooded with new knowledge. She is certain it would make Grandad happy.

“The time Miss Lila gives you is a gift. She and her husband have their hands full with the demands of this park.”

“She makes a lot of effort to help me.” Marisol sits in the empty rocker. “I have nothing to give her in return.”

“I’m sure her work as a teacher fulfills her. She is giving you the knowledge to grow your mind. It’s worthwhile work. An honorable thing.”

It’s impossible that all *gadze* can’t be trusted, as everyone told her when she was a child. It is a risk, according to their customs, for her to meet with

Lila. And an even greater one for learning to read in secret. But Lila's unselfish goodwill gives her hope she'd only known with Grandad. She once thought she'd learn everything from him and work right beside him. Marisol nods and resolves to share her knowledge with Flora.

Mammie folds and refolds the torn shirt in her lap. "Eliza and I are going to figure out how to get to the factory together. We can't keep living the way we are."

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After meeting Miss Lila each morning, Marisol sits in the tent that, until last year, was Gran Rose's. She spent the winter reading *The Key to the Tarot*. Gran told Marisol that Grandad had given her the guidebook and a set of cards as a fortieth birthday gift soon after its publication. Other Romanians couldn't even read such a book. Gran's skills and knowledge of dukkering through tarot, passed down through generations, were enhanced by the additional perspectives. Marisol handles the book like a newborn baby. Thirty-two years of wear and tear have tattered and yellowed the fragile pages. She has studied the myriad of meanings within the major and minor arcanas, the cups, the swords, the pentacles, and the wands. It will be their means of producing income and survival.

On the first day of their tarot reading practice, Gran sat across from Marisol at the compact table in the tent. "I am your querent," she'd said. "Your customer."

Today, Marisol slips the well-worn Rider-Waite deck from the silken pouch Gran stitched years ago. She had been clumsy at first with the bulky seventy-eight-card stack. Each day as they practice, as Marisol shuffles and shifts the cards, the movements of her fingers become more fluid.

Holding the thick pile in her left hand, she pulls a section from the middle with her right and then places it on the top. When she senses they are best mixed, Marisol fans them in a semicircle toward Gran Rose.

"Select the card that speaks to you," she says, as Gran has taught her.

Each time, Gran pulls her card from a different location in the arc. She flips it. Her choice is almost always the same card. The printed letters on it

read *The Hierophant*. “*Le Pape*,” Gran says, referring to the old Tarot de Marseille name from a deck she learned with when she was Marisol’s age. The colorful illustration is of a red-robed man. He is perched high between two seated acolytes, his students. Gran smiles. “Tradition...Teacher. And three vestments—our three different worlds.”

Marisol separates Gran’s card and gathers the remaining deck in one smooth sweep. She shuffles them some more, then sets the stack on the table to Gran’s left. She divides it into three equal piles. “Point to the one that makes you feel something.”

Gran taps one confidently. Marisol collects the stacks back together, placing the chosen one on the top.

“The more cards you lay out, the more complex your querent will expect your reading to be,” Gran said the first time. “Start with six. Eventually, you can move up to ten when you’re more comfortable.”

Marisol randomly turns the first six cards face up on the table, making a cross with two in the center. The cards are a painter’s palette of vibrant colors. Some designs are elaborate, and some are quite simple. Most of them have people, although there are a few with animals and a couple with objects as their main features. Others have wands, swords, and cups.

“As you know from studying, the cards can have many meanings, depending on how they fall,” Gran said in the beginning. “More than just what you know to be their meaning, listen carefully to what’s on your querent’s heart. Hear what they are telling you.”

Marisol’s favorite is The Wheel of Fortune. *La Roue De Fortune* Gran calls it. It’s the only one in the major arcana with no human character as the focus. “Change of fate...each person chooses their path...destiny,” Gran Rose says. Marisol practices on and on.

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Marisol wakes early, the same as each of the past ten days. Today, she can go back to sleep until the sun streams through the window. Mammie agreed yesterday that she could take one day off from practice to spend time with Brigid.

“I missed you so much over the winter.” Marisol hugs her best friend again before they begin to walk along the wide wooden boardwalk beside the lake. Brigid’s youngest brother, Isaiah, is clinging to her hand. “It’s long and lonely without you. I wish we lived closer. Remaining among our clan has been hard since Father and Levoy were killed. Sometimes, I think we shouldn’t go back. There’s nothing waiting for us but the past.”

“I’m sorry they are mean to all of you,” Brigid says. Her family is from another clan, one that travels from the rivers of Mississippi, where they make their winter home. “When my mother died, no one treated Father badly. They all came around, ensuring we were fed and cared for. At least at first.” Her mother died giving birth to Isaiah when Brigid was twelve years old. Her father is in no hurry to marry her off, as Marisol’s had been. Brigid has confided that he would be lost without her, unable to handle three growing boys without her help.

Isaiah breaks her grasp and runs ahead. It is Brigid’s responsibility to look after him while the two older brothers help their father earn money doing repair work in the park.

Marisol enjoys that they are often mistaken for sisters. Their skin is the same, as is their dark hair, which today they both wear long and cascading freely across their backs. The most noticeable difference is Brigid’s bright blue-gray eyes, which are the same color as her father’s. Marisol’s dress is more worn than her friend’s. It’s easier for a man and two strapping teenage boys to find steady work to pay for new fabric.

They walk toward the food stalls that buzz with activity along the boardwalk. Everyone scurries with a purpose to ready the park for opening weekend. Fresh cool air blows against their faces, carrying the scent of lake water mixed with boat fuel.

Isaiah crouches at the water’s edge, then leans over the seawall’s cement curb. He traces his fingers in the water as Brigid and Marisol catch up. “Hey, get back! You’ll fall in!” Brigid says. She grabs the six-year-old’s collar as a fat yellow-green bass breaks the water’s surface and flips into the air. Its iridescent scales shimmer in the sun. Brigid pulls Isaiah to his feet. She ruffles his shaggy hair as they continue toward the stalls.

A man stands on a ladder beside his hot dog stand. He tips his tweedy newsboy cap, revealing his quite bald head. "Hello, ladies."

They smile and nod as he dips his brush into the yellow paint. He returns to painting diagonal stripes along the booth's outside wall. A young girl inside wipes the counters.

In the next stall, a plump woman sweeps the floor of her much smaller booth. A sign above shines with a fresh coat of paint. The red letters read "COTTON CANDY 5¢". The proprietor hums and rocks her head as she works, never looking up.

Marisol and Brigid can't keep up as Isaiah runs further ahead. He finally stops at a stall painted in pastel colors. Large glass jars with lids line the counter's front edge. Each one is half-filled with blue, pink, and yellow puffs twisted inside waxy papers. Marisol feels sorry for him as he licks his lips with the candies at his eye level. The truth is, she would like one, too.

"What are those?" he asks, gazing over his shoulder at them.

"They're saltwater taffy kisses," the woman behind the counter answers. She smiles but does not look away from the taffy-pulling machine. She tends and coaxes a green-tinted glob as it twists and flips into itself around the rotating silver bars. The scent of warm vanilla and buttery caramel floats into the air. "I'm working on my season-opening batches. We'll sell so much this weekend."

"Isaiah, don't touch." Brigid taps her brother's forearm.

"It's fine, Miss," the booth owner says. She glances at them quickly but reverts her eyes back to the dangerous-looking machine. "Choose one that is your favorite, young man."

Isaiah points at the blue jar and looks up hopefully at Brigid. "Thank you, but we can't. I'm afraid we don't have any money to spare," she says.

Isaiah lowers his eyes and slides his finger off the glass.

"Oh, don't worry. No need to pay. You can be my tasters. Please, each of you take a different color."

Marisol reaches into the jar and pulls out a pink one she knows Flora will like. The woman's generosity draws a lump in her throat. Her eyes flood, and she wipes them on her sleeve before any of them notice. The pain of being shunned for the last few months has been more than she can bear.

She untwists the milky paper and bites half of the soft candy. The sugary texture melts like warm liquid in her mouth. Marisol has never tasted anything so delicious. If only she could feel this happy every day.

Marisol re-wraps what remains and tucks it into her pocket. She will give it to Flora later.

They go past stalls that will sell candied apples and roasted peanuts. A man is painting an elf on a sign that reads NORTH POLE FROZEN CUSTARD.

They arrive at a booth with tall stools at the counter anchored firmly into the ground. The sign above reads FRESH SQUEEZED LEMONADE. Overflowing crates stamped FLORIDA LEMONS sit on the ground. Instead of customers, the seats of the stools are piled with plump sacks of sugar as big as toddlers.

“Father, we’ve brought you and the boys a sandwich.” Brigid hands him a worn cloth bag.

The man and two teenage boys have unrolled a large vinyl awning on the ground. Most of its yellow and white stripes are covered in dead bugs and cobwebs. The areas the boys have scrubbed with brushes dipped into a sudsy bucket are clean and bright, drying in the sun.

“Thank you, girls,” he says. He removes his hat and holds it against his chest. “Marisol, good to see you. I am sorry for your family’s recent losses.” Of course, he doesn’t know about the secret cruelties inflicted by her father and Levoy. It’s understandable that people think they are in mourning. “Will you all come by our cabin for dinner one evening?”

Marisol dips her head politely. “We would like that.”

“Brigid, you can leave Isaiah here with me, since we have the heavy lifting done. He can help scrub.” He pecks his daughter on the cheek, and they leave as the boys pay them no attention, digging hungrily into their lunches.

They continue down the path, the long wooden pier and attached ballroom stretching out across the lake up ahead to their left. The sign on the locked gate reads:

PIER BALLROOM  
DANCE ALL DAY 10¢

“I want to dance out there someday,” Marisol says.

Brigid chuckles. “We both know that’s impossible unless you find a way to sneak in.”

“Maybe I will!”

There’s one last stall on the lakeside boardwalk, directly across from the pier. It’s the largest one of all, standing at the crossroads where the path turns to the right onto the midway. Peeling black letters say HAMBURGERS | FRENCH FRIES | SHAKES. Curiously, there is no activity at this one. The service opening is boarded up. Even so, Marisol’s mouth waters as she remembers the greasy, deep-fried potatoes from last summer. She imagines the crunchy texture, the salt, and the sweet vinegar tang as it lands on her tongue.

Marisol and Brigid turn right, passing underneath the arch that stands tall as a building. Four different men are on ladders, painting the white columns and preparing to refresh the four-foot curved red and yellow letters that read MIDWAY.

As soon as they cross under, there is buzzing activity on either side. To the left are the rides, and to the right are the carnival games, and beyond that, the Crystal Ballroom and attached Crystal Pool. Even further in that direction is The Dips roller coaster. The park entrance is up ahead. The wonderment is not here yet, but soon, it will arrive.

Marisol and Brigid skirt around even greater activity than on the boardwalk. Men and young boys hammer and repair the damage caused by winter. Some carry crates and boxes marked with prizes for the Penny Pitch, Break The Dish, Guess Your Weight, Skee Ball, Fun House, and Balloon Darts. Toolboxes and tools are scattered everywhere on the ground. Awnings have been pulled out, and their rusty chains are being oiled.

Marisol grabs Brigid’s hand and pulls her toward the park entrance. “Come ‘on, let’s go say hello to Mrs. Durwood.”

As they head up the midway, Marisol stops in front of Wright’s Drugstore. Though all the other businesses inside the park close for winter, Doc Wright prepares his store before people start returning. He opens it every morning during the weekdays until the park is open full-time.

Baskets of every size, piled high with trinkets, fill the display windows. Marisol and Brigid shade their eyes with their hands and peer inside the glass at souvenirs for the park visitors.

Marisol recognizes a variety of salves for burns, the popular new Band-Aids for cuts, and aspirin tablets for headaches. She wants to learn about the medicines this man dispenses, just as Grandad would if he were still here. How she'd love to step inside and take a closer look. She thinks about Lila's daughter Daisy, who died of scarlet fever, and of the new disease she's heard about called polio.

A local woman opens the glass door and moves out onto the empty midway. "Ma'am," Marisol says, stepping aside to let her pass.

The woman looks from one girl to the other and pulls her handbag close against her pressed blue day dress. She shakes her head, passes her judgment in silence, and walks away without a word.

Every day, querents will come into Marisol's tent and pay money to have their fortunes told. But when some of them meet in settings like this, they treat them differently. Their behavior is confusing to understand.

Marisol and Brigid look at each other, then push away the slight. They continue to the entrance and beneath the welcome sign.

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As Marisol and Brigid approach Durwood Boarding House, a man all the Romanies know stands in the driveway next to a dented Ford Standard. They glance at each other, and Marisol brings a finger to her lips. She points to the ground, and they crouch low beside the path, parting the tops of the bushes to get a better view. It will be the second time today she'll be eavesdropping.

The Summerland Park company man, Hal Clements, wears a once-crisp white shirt beneath a rumpled tan tweedy jacket. His paunch pushes forward between the strain of his suspenders.

Hacking out a cough, the effort rattles his too-small head. He hawks and spits onto the ground, then wipes his mouth against his sleeve. Poking a fat cigar into his mouth, he clenches it in his teeth. With his hands free now,

Hal smooths both sides of his greasy Brylcreemed hair. His mousy-colored mustache juts from his lip like the bristles of a Fuller brush. Nothing about Levoy was appealing, and this man is almost as bad.

A scrawny tabby cat ventures against his leg and cries out a meow. Hal yanks his cigar from his mouth and shouts, "Git!" Marisol shudders at the first sound of his voice.

Jamming the stogie back between his puffy lips, he heaves an old Oshkosh suitcase from his trunk and slams the lid. It topples over on the uneven gravel, and he gives it a kick, adding dirt to the cuts and slashes in the worn leather. He snatches it by the thick handle and strides toward the front porch that's in desperate need of a coat of paint.

Marisol watches as he mounts the five steps covered in a dull green runner that ends beneath the upper step. The once-thick carpet is frayed along the edges where it's tacked down at various points. The places it rolls up over each step, the pile and green color completely worn away by the many who come and go, dragging their belongings up and down the entry stairs.

Something stings Marisol's arm. She yelps and then covers her mouth as Hal squints back toward the bushes. "Dang it!" she whispers as Bridgid and she duck lower.

Hal turns away and takes one last drag on the cigar between his thumb and forefinger. He blows a lazy smoke ring, admiring his efforts as it floats into the air. He stamps and grinds the cigar into the handrail and tucks what remains into his jacket pocket.

The wooden screen door creaks as he yanks it open. Before he can step in, Etta Durwood emerges. She's a portly woman and towers at least a foot over Hal. Her hair is more gray than brown, pinned up in an erratic cluster on top of her head. Uncontrolled strands fly out of the edges. The pockets of her worn day dress strain taut below her ample waistline.

"Mr. Clements," Mrs. Durwood says stiffly, not bothering with a smile. She touches the orange pencil that is jammed atop one ear and looks past him, frowning at his haphazardly parked car.

"Afternoon, Mrs. Durwood. How are you after the long, cold winter?"

Hands on her hips, she adjusts her gaze back to Hal's face and glowers at him through round wire glasses, showing no interest in small talk about the weather. Etta shakes her head.

Hal tries again. "Same room as always? I've had a long drive over from Doylestown, lots of rough roads before I got out of Pennsylvania."

"I'm afraid I don't have a room for you this season," Etta replies flatly. Marisol knows this isn't true because she overheard people talking about the vacancies in the little grocery store.

"How can that be? My brother's people at Summerland booked it for me a month ago."

"I understand, but I had complaints last year. I can't afford to lose good customers." Etta straightens her shoulders to take up more space in the open doorway. It's not just Marisol and Mammie who must stand up to buffoon-like men.

"Now, whatever do you mean? I am a model guest."

"That's not what I hear," the boarding house's proprietor says. "The locals say they saw you sneaking around the ladies' bathhouse showers."

Marisol and Brigid trade looks but keep still, crouched behind the bushes. There are plenty of stories among the Romanies of Hal working to intimidate them.

"Surely, they were mistaken. You know my job is to inspect the buildings and the rides. I must go into all the nooks and crannies to be sure our park guests are safe. There's nothing I want more than our success every summer. I love all the locals and wouldn't do anything to bring them harm."

"Well, they claim otherwise. I also heard from booth owners, you were pestering their young helper girls. And the Romani boys who work at the stalls. I know these folks well. They have no reason to make up false stories."

"Are you going to believe local gossip or take the money from the fine company that owns this park? You and I both know it can't operate without them." Hal pulls out a bulging wallet and fingers through the bills. "Here. Times are tough. I'll pay double my usual rate." Hal's eyelids flicker as he flaps the wad of cash at Etta.

She sighs, letting her eyes fall to the money. Etta snatches the stack he's offered and shoves it into her apron pocket. "All right, but if I hear even one complaint, I'll boot you out of here."

"Much obliged." Hal hoists up his suitcase and pulls the screen door back wider as he follows Etta inside.

Minutes later, Hal blusters out through the screen door. He clomps noisily down the porch steps and turns toward the path. He stomps directly toward Marisol and Brigid, still crouched in the bushes. Marisol covers her eyes and holds her breath as he trudges toward the park without even noticing them.

## CHAPTER 8

### Lila

*April 1, 1942*

Lila and Ruby head down the midway toward the cluster of rides. Gus limps four steps ahead, grinning and waving his Stetson at familiar faces. He slaps an old friend on the shoulder.

The entire area is teeming with activity. “I love it when the park comes back to life,” Lila says.

“Yes. I sure hope the war worries don’t keep visitors away,” Ruby says as she sweeps her hands out toward the busy workers. “Plenty ‘a people here need the work.”

Scores of men and boys trek back and forth between the midway and the roller-skating rink building, where disassembled rides have been stored from the elements all winter. They stack the unwieldy shapes on flat carts and wagons and push and pull until it looks like an explosion of metal parts strewn on the ground. Once they retrieve everything, the work of reassembling the rides begins, like complicated jigsaw puzzles.

A man steps into their path. Lila thinks she recognizes him as someone from the local village. “Mr. Bennett, could I have a word with you about this ride?” he asks, pointing toward the large half-moon carts and masses of parts scattered in what seems a haphazard manner. One seat lying on its side displays the words “TILT-A-WHIRL”.

“Sure, be right over,” Gus nods as the man scurries back to his crew assembling the ride. He hands Lila his hat and runs his fingers through his hair. “Here we go. No different this year. Trouble with the Summerland Park Company’s big rides, I’m guessing. Short-sighted fools, they are. Without these big rides running, we won’t even attract half the crowds,” he mumbles as he heads over to the ride.

Once Gus finishes talking with the man, he rejoins Lila and Ruby. Lila brushes dust from the back of his shirt because at one point, he was down on the ground beneath the ride’s underbelly.

They never have trouble with the smaller rides owned and operated by the locals. At least they can count on them to take pride in those and keep them in a safe condition.

The three of them continue down the midway toward rows of wooden signs splayed across the ground. Workers carried them out of a separate building. Most of the signs are drying in the sun after someone hosed them down. Four young boys playfully swat at each other, waiting for the wooden signs to dry. Their pants and shirts cling to their bodies, thoroughly soaked through. None of them seems to mind, even in the cool April air.

“Good work, men,” Gus says to the boys. They stop and direct their attention to him. “Let me have a look at these before you start painting.” He leans over and inspects the boards of the first row, poking at the wood on each – ROCKET SHIPS, DODGEMS, THE WHIP, THE BUG, THE PRETZEL, and BOAT RENTALS. “These are fine. Go ahead and re-paint them.”

Three more large signs lay off to the side in the dirt. These are for the big park rides, the ones that belong to Summerland. MERRY-GO-ROUND. TILT-A-WHIRL. THE DIPS. “These look okay, too,” Gus says.

“No thanks to Hal,” Lila says, letting out a frustrated sigh.

“If these were left to him, they’d be rotting away, good only for firewood,” Ruby says.

They move on down the midway, almost to the point where it intersects with the boardwalk, then go left past the Crystal Ballroom and pool, toward the enormous swooping tracks of The Dips. As they reach the wooden roller coaster, Lila surveys what the locals call Little Lake, a cove partitioned from

the larger one beyond. The water level is lower than normal, ahead of the spring rains that will fill it up. Even at capacity, most of it is only a few feet deep, though it's a thrill for passengers when the cars loop out across the water. Part of the coaster's underpinnings and trusses rise from the shallows.

She steps forward near the water's edge, parts a clump of the cattails just beginning to bloom, and squats beside the trusses. "Look, Gus, this section has some rot," Lila says as she reaches forward and jabs her fingers against a soft section exposed by the receded water. If she had Hal's job, she'd never stand for this. These park visitors don't think twice about the safety of the rides, and they shouldn't have to.

Gus hovers above her and peers up, scanning the rails. He slaps his hand against one of the wooden braces. "She's eleven years old now. There's wear and tear on all of it from these harsh Ohio winters," he growls. "That damn Clements! I told him to get this all inspected and repaired last fall." He continues running his hand along the trusses while he swats away mosquitoes with his hat. "I bet he did nothing."

"Where is Hal, anyway?" Ruby asks. She shields her eyes from the sun and looks up and over toward the underbelly of the highest towering loop. "I thought he was supposed to meet us here to talk about a better daily system for checking the ride safety."

"Late as usual." Gus clenches his jaw. "As much money as this park rakes in, it's unbelievable Summerland won't send us someone better than him." He scuffs the toe of his boot against the dirt and presses his hand on the front edge of one of the metal passenger cars from a row that's been left on the track. It rocks unincumbered, creaking and groaning on its rusty hinges. He checks his pocket watch and folds his arms across his chest.

Ruby cocks her eyebrow and lights a second cigarette. "Some things never change."

They use the time while they wait for Hal to run through the long list of tasks in Ruby's notebook. Forty-five minutes later, Lila points down the boardwalk. "Here he comes." She stares as his short body waddles toward them. A fat cigar dangles from his mouth. He keeps his head pinned straight ahead, not acknowledging any worker who crosses his path.

Gus straightens as Hal reaches The Dips. "You're late. We've been waiting almost an hour."

"I've been trying to get someone out here to have a look at that pool filter," Hal says. His incompetence grates on Lila as she squints at his indifferent, beady eyes.

"Let's get on with this. Lila, Ruby, and I have a million things to do today," Gus grunts with a scowl.

Hal turns toward Ruby and leers at her ample chest. "Nice to see you," he says with a click of his tongue. Ruby clears her throat but says nothing. She takes a draw on her cigarette, tips her head back, and exhales the smoke above her head. Lila watches as she rolls her eyes. Hal doesn't acknowledge Lila.

"Clements!" Gus barks. Hal winks at Ruby and turns back toward Gus.

"We talked about this last fall," Gus says, pushing on the rocking coaster cart again. "This ride. It's not safe. It needs a lot more attention with its age." He rubs the back of his neck.

"It's fine. They build these things to last at least fifty years." He rests his hands against his belly with the cigar still teetering between his thumb and finger. "You wind yourself up like a tornado."

Gus shakes his head. "Even if I believed what you say, anyone can see it's taken a beating. Ruby and I estimate there were over ten thousand riders last summer. Multiply that by the brutality of the winter elements, and it's a recipe for disaster. See here, some of these metal braces and joints have rusted. They need to be replaced."

"That there's Pittsburgh steel, the finest made anywhere. No way a little snow and ice are going to damage it. Besides, Summerland never refurbishes these big coasters before at least fifteen years in operation. This one's got four years to go." Hal's eyes haze with disinterest in the conversation.

"I don't care what Summerland does with coasters at other parks. Right now, I only care about ours and what I see with my own eyes."

"Look, no one's going to approve higher maintenance costs for this park than any of our others. Three men, walking the rails twice a day, looking for loose bolts, nails, and boards, that's all anyone gets. Just because you're antsy

isn't reason enough for special treatment. Those are high standards, if you ask me."

Gus cracks his knuckles. "I'm not asking you. I'm telling you. Get some professional men out here to inspect this ride, or I will shut it down!" He rips his hat from his head and chucks it to the ground. "It's clear you blatantly ignored my instructions when we closed down last summer!"

"Simmer down there, Cowboy," Hal cuts in. "You have no authority to shut any of Summerland's rides down. Besides, you and I both know we can't possibly draw the crowds without them." Hal smirks, then takes a slow drag off his cigar. He lets smoke seep out of the corners of his mouth and then puffs the rest above Lila's head.

"I'll be damned, Hal Clements!" Gus shouts as he takes two long strides toward Hal. "I will not let you put our park visitors in danger." His face is red and his fists are clenched. Lila moves toward him, but she is not fast enough. In one quick movement, Gus grabs the smaller man's shirt at the collar, bunching it in his hand while pressing his knuckles into the rolls of fat beneath his chin. He nearly lifts Hal off the ground, bringing their faces inches apart. "I want an inspection report on this ride by Friday. Otherwise, I'm calling Summerland. I'll call your brother directly." Hal's lip quivers, and a bead of sweat shimmers on his forehead in the sunlight.

Gus releases Hal on his feet, picks up his hat, and limps back toward the boardwalk, kicking up dirt and mumbling to himself. Hal stumbles slightly as he regains his footing. He straightens his jacket, jams his cigar between his teeth, and stalks through the grass back toward the Crystal Pool.

"This isn't good. I can feel it," Lila says, rubbing her forehead.

Ruby frowns. "Agreed. Those two won't last another season working together."

"Gus is right," Lila says. "If anything ever happened, it would be the end of the park. We could never forgive ourselves."

## CHAPTER 9

### Will

*Somerset, Ohio – April 4, 1942*

From William's backseat, Will stares out the window at clumps of indigo dirt. They are nearly identical, piled one after the other in the recently plowed fields. An occasional saltbox farmhouse built far back from the road and big red barns graying from the weather interrupt the landscape.

Once a month, when he is not traveling for the railroad, William appeases Clara and drives them all out to visit her mother on the farm where she grew up. Though it is open land and a free way of life, it is monotonous to Will. These days, everything makes him feel trapped.

The arguments about Will's future have continued since his birthday. Each one echoes in his ears. William's endless pressure to join him in the family business when he graduates from college is unbearable. He is still furious with Will for signing up for the draft. Despite his efforts with local politicians and his cronies, he has been unsuccessful in undoing it.

It's fine by Will. For once, his father's controlling ways have been thwarted. Nothing gets resolved as each disagreement ends in stalemate silence.

The latest round of arguing picked up again last evening when Will arrived home from college for the weekend. It continues on this morning as if nothing Will says is being heard.

“You should transfer to Ohio State. That way, you’ll be closer. We can get you started learning the business. We’ll see if you can graduate sooner,” William says. “I know Howard Bevis over there in admissions. He owes me a favor.”

“What? No, I’m not going to transfer.” Will’s tone magnifies the frustration that consumes his thoughts. Even so, it comes out more petulant than he intends. He wouldn’t retract his words if he could, though. How much more of this badgering can he take? He wants to yank the door handle and fling himself into an open field.

Will’s eyes fall to the space between him and Charlotte. He runs his fingernail along the pinstripe wool upholstery. Charlotte intentionally bumps her shoe against his. Her eyes widen with a familiar look that communicates *Now you’re in trouble!*

The anger burning in William’s eyes reflects in the rearview mirror. “Young man, you will not speak to me that way! Not while you’re still under my roof. Do you understand?”

“Yes, sir,” Will mumbles, giving the obligatory response. William is the one who should retract his words. Other fathers would be proud that their son is not a coward.

“Please! Can we stop this incessant bickering?” Clara asks. “All I wanted was a pleasant time visiting Mother and to enjoy the park opening weekend. Is that too much to ask?” She jams the tiny triangle vent window open. The wind whistles into the car and blows back against Will’s face.

He recalls his mother’s words at his birthday lunch. He hasn’t been able to strike them from his mind. This entire year, his emotional swings have been wild, and he can’t seem to control them. It isn’t like he can confide in either of his parents about the unrelenting drumbeat in his head. To help him understand all these questions about the world and what his place is meant to be within it.

William shakes his head. “Fine, dear. But this conversation is far from over.” Red rises up his neck and overtakes his ears. He grips the steering wheel with white knuckles. Everyone’s body jolts as William grinds the gearshift and punches his foot hard against the gas pedal.

They continue toward Grandma Emma's farmhouse in silence. Will is thankful for the reprieve from the constant debate about his future. He's sure he will never be able to tell his father he wants to be a pilot. He'd block his applications with his powerful connections.

Will is suffocating. He would crank his backseat window down, too, if it were possible. He continues staring out the window as they pass through the town of Somerset. In the center, a basic two-story red brick courthouse with an out-of-place-looking center spire stands watch. A massive bronze horse and rider rear and rise in the middle of a traffic circle. Will supposes it's a commemoration of some hometown soldier long ago. A flagpole flanks one side, a common statement of small-town patriotism he's seen in many of these Ohio towns. Undoubtedly, they are a good place to live, but Will doesn't belong here either. Would it be so terrible if he flew airplanes? Did his part in the war effort? He's been reading in the newspapers about the Germans and the attack on Pearl Harbor last December. He thinks again of the recruiting office and the officer who encouraged his actions. It's more than he can say for his father.

They leave the town's main street, round a bend in the country road, and arrive at Grandma Emma's farm. The permanent fruit stand is empty beside the mailbox. Will knows by late summer that it will be brimming with tomatoes, strawberries, and sweetcorn to sell to locals and strangers passing through.

William navigates his car up the winding driveway. Will and Charlotte's grandma, Emma Grayson, is waiting on the porch. A round-looking woman, she wipes a hand against the red cherries printed on her ruffled apron and pulls a handkerchief from its pocket. She blots her brow along the silver hair drawn tightly in a bun. Her other hand rests on a cane Will's grandfather carved from a hickory branch when her knees showed the first signs of trouble.

"Look at you two!" their grandma says as she extends a sun-spotched arm toward Will and Charlotte once they clamor out of the car. She reaches up and pats Will's cheek. The callouses on her palm are rough, the outcome of a lifetime tending to the rural farm. "You grow like weeds."

“Yes, Ma’am,” Charlotte says, planting a kiss on the doughy center of her grandma’s cheek. The old yellow Labrador Charlie rises and stretches in the spot where he’d been curled in the sun. He lumbers over to Charlotte and rubs against her leg, waiting for her to scratch between his ears.

“Hello, Emma,” William says stiffly as he hoists two suitcases from the car trunk.

“Hello, William. Difficult drive over from Columbus?”

“No, other than my son’s disrespect.”

Will notices that his grandma throws a sideways glance at Clara, probably questioning why the men are at odds once again. “Come on inside, everyone. I’ve got a pot roast in the oven and I just iced an apple cake. Let’s sit down and eat. There’s a fresh pitcher of lemonade. I’m sure it will melt away your travel troubles.”

After dinner, Will climbs the stairs with Charlie padding behind him, up to Clara’s childhood bedroom. It’s where he stays when they come to visit. The dinner conversation had been tense, with William attempting to cajole his grandma into agreeing that it was practical for Will to transfer to Ohio State and live at home with the uncertainty of the war.

“Come on, old boy,” Will says to the faithful dog as he pushes open the door and encourages him to lead the way. He scans the room. Nothing has changed since he was here last, or for that matter, since his mother, an only child, left for college. It’s feminine and simple, the walls papered with old-fashioned chains of flowers that grow from floor to ceiling. County fair ribbons cling to a cork bulletin board with dulled silver thumbtacks. A thin layer of dust coats them as they curl and hang limp, confirmation to Will that life here, too, is static and trapped.

The room, though, is a welcome sanctuary from William’s badgering. Will sprawls across the bed, propping a pillow behind his head against the wobbly wrought iron headboard. He pulls a book out of his bag and lets one leg dangle off the side. Charlie nuzzles under his hand, and Will smooths back his ears before opening the study guide about the mechanics of flying an airplane.

Will scans the page of wing types. Though his college doesn’t offer specific aeronautical classes, he’s been taking every physics and engineering

course they offer. There must be hundreds of young men like him who want to fly planes in the war. Will suspects those boys' parents are proud.

He is reading about the physics of air movement when there's a quiet knock on the door. Will rights himself, sits on the edge of the bed, and jams the book beneath his thigh.

"May I come in?" his grandma asks.

"Sure." Will scratches Charlie's head again.

Her apron is gone, and she's holding a piece of the apple cake on a plate, a fork stabbed into the middle. "Thought you might want a bit more," she says with a wink as she sets it on the bedside table.

The mattress springs creak when she eases onto the end. It was originally intended for a child. "Looks like you're too long for Clara's old bed," she says.

"I don't mind. It's more comfortable than my dorm mattress."

"Even so, this room is girly for you. Clara loved it, though, when she was growing up. It's plain by today's standards. Life was much simpler then. I remember that first Christmas when she came home from college. We had a huge fight. She said all the other girls wore much nicer clothes and shoes. We told her she should get a job if she wanted to wear fancier things. But Edward worked extra that spring, helping neighbors plow their fields in addition to ours. It nearly killed him." She's gazing toward the window. "The shift I noticed in her personality took me off guard."

Will frowns as he imagines his mother envying what others had and demanding it from his grandparents. He furrows his brow and wonders when and where her biases and bigotry took root, much worse than wanting nicer things. He supposes it started then, too, when she went away to college. Though by the time he and Charlotte came along and were still young, they knew her to be soft and patient. After years of society lunches and vacations, leaving Charlotte and Will home with caregivers, his mother is someone he hardly recognizes anymore. She and William even sleep in separate bedrooms. He would never want to do that with his wife, if he ever has one.

"I hate seeing my favorite grandson troubled," his grandma says, patting his knee. Will smiles at her endearment like he always does. He's her one and only grandson.

“Father and I have been at odds ever since I signed up for the draft on my birthday.” *At odds, or more accurately, fighting.*

“You did?” she gasps, her eyes widening. “I hadn’t heard.”

Of course, she didn’t know. His parents forbade him from telling anyone, while William worked furiously to undo his actions with his power and influence. They can call his name tomorrow, and he’ll catch the first ride available to the induction site.

“Yes. It seems wrong to enjoy a carefree life when I could do something that matters toward the war effort. Besides, I don’t want to work for the railroad like Father. Every time I try to talk to him about it, he shuts me down.”

“I understand. It’s an admirable thing, doing what you are able. Of course, I will worry nonstop. But it’s part of a parent’s job to let their children spread their wings.” His grandma has never talked to him like William does, as if he were an insignificant child. With every statement he makes, he expects Will to adopt his views without question. She gives him hope that maybe he can have a choice in what influences his mind. “Whatever you do, I know you will be successful. Your age is difficult, so many choices,” she says empathetically. “I tried to get Clara to see that when she was your age. Now, tell me, what do you want to do?”

Will sighs. He knows he can trust his grandma, but he hasn’t told anyone other than Charlotte about his plans to become a pilot. He slides the book out from beneath his leg and hands it to her.

A smile spreads across her face. “That’s exciting. A fine career. I can’t imagine why this would make William unhappy.”

“I don’t dare tell him. He has one thing in mind for me, and it isn’t flying airplanes.”

## CHAPTER 10

### Marisol

*Buckeye Lake Amusement Park – April 4, 1942*

Marisol finishes tying back the gold-fringed flaps of Gran's fortune-telling tent. She trails her fingers along the purple and red-striped fabric. Over many years, hundreds of querents from every walk of life have passed through.

The park's opening day has arrived at last. It's a perfect spring morning with the air crisp and clear. The sky is a spotless blue. The motors of lacquered Chris-Craft boats hum as they skim back and forth, cutting wedge-shaped wakes across the lake. The bright morning sun bounces off the ripples, creating what looks like diamonds sparkling on the water's surface.

Yesterday, Marisol and Brigid walked the entire park again. All the booths down the midway and along the boardwalk are ready, with baskets of bright flowers hanging from many of them. The games and rides are open, and both ballrooms have their wood floors freshly polished, waiting eagerly for dancers. Everything is clean and refreshed. The anticipation of the five months of the park being open and summer stretches out ahead.

A steady flow of people streams along the tow path. Their chatter is filled with expectancy of what's inside the park. "I'm going to ride The Dips first!" a young boy declares. "I'm starting at the skee-ball," says another.

Though they walk on the path between the Romani tents, no one is interested yet in stopping to have their fortunes told. It's still an hour until the entrance gates will swing open.

Marisol goes inside her tent and begins to change into her costume. Gran eases into the querent chair and flaps her hand. "Go on, stand inside the gate with Brigid." She absentmindedly picks up the deck and begins shuffling. "I'll stay in the tent until you come back. Being part of the park opening every summer is one of my favorite memories."

The atmosphere is like a party as Marisol and Brigid make their way toward the narrow, hidden entrance reserved for park workers. Marisol grabs Brigid's hand and pulls her forward through the crowd. "This way." It overflows with eager visitors congregating outside the main entrance.

The women are dressed differently from Marisol and Brigid. They don't appear to have a care in the world in their crisp cotton dresses and low-heeled sandals with polished toenails poking out the front. None of them looks hungry or in want of anything. The men wear new straw hats with pleated bands. Children fidget, pushing up on tiptoes to strain their gazes beyond the gate. Some pull forward as their parents struggle to keep them tethered to their hands. Everyone, even the adults, behaves as if they've been freed from school for summer break.

Marisol and Brigid slip through the private entrance. Once inside, two food stalls stand just beyond the ticket booths. They entice patrons to part with their money when they arrive and also when they leave. Both signs are tall and easily visible behind the gates and from the tow path.

They squeeze among a crowd of other workers who stand beneath the red metal sign that reads CARMEL CORN 5¢. Marisol can hear the kernels popping. She closes her eyes, inhales the buttery scent, and licks her lips. She can almost taste the sweet and salty treats. It will be the first thing she spends money on once she earns it.

Marisol points across the midway. "Look, it's Miss Lila and Miss Ruby." They wave at the two women who stand beneath the vibrant yellow soft drink sign.

Marisol listens to the other workers' chatter as it mixes with a crackly recording of *Beale Street Blues* by Guy Lombardo and Kenny Gardner that

pipes from speakers anchored above. “Look at the size of that crowd...bet it’s the biggest ever opening day...war hasn’t kept them away...we were worrying for nothing...they want to forget the war.”

The ticket line snakes long across the grassy lawn. Marisol pushes up on her toes, trying to count the heads, but there are too many. She hears the clanking as the ticket booth operators unlock their gates. In orderly rows, the crowd queues into lines behind the shiny copper turnstiles that advance them forward onto the midway, one after the other.

The first ones through the gates immediately begin to assemble along the sides in rows three deep. “These people all seem to know what to do,” Brigid says.

“Gran said it’s mostly regulars who attend the opening festivities. They all know about the parade that’s coming.”

Gus and another muscular man pull back the wide exit gates beside the ticket booths. They stand guard on either side, discouraging potential freeloaders.

Within minutes, Marisol and everyone else turn their heads toward the high school band that marches toward them down the midway. The crowd lets up a cheer of pent-up energy as the drum major moves closer, facing backward as he raises his knees above his waist. “Right—left—right,” he shouts above the clarinets and trumpets. He marks the beat, waving his long silver baton to the rhythm of the snare drums. Eighteen majorettes spin, their knees kicking up short skirts that glitter in the bright sun. Their batons twirl high above their heads and fall back down into their hands with practiced precision.

“No wonder Gran loves this part!” Marisol yells above the music and excited chatter. The steady drumbeat thrums within her chest.

Behind the band, a tall man on stilts ambles past. He tosses wrapped candy from a cloth bag slung diagonally over his shoulder. The children squeal and break free of their mothers’ hands, scampering to collect the treats. The girls’ pigtails and boys’ shirttails fly as they scramble to scoop up the sweets.

Next comes a fire engine. Marisol and Brigid cover their ears and smile at each other as the driver blasts the siren when it is directly in front of them.

The whoops elicit cheers from the crowd. An American flag that's been anchored to the ladder flaps in the breeze. Behind the truck, three contortionists in sparkling orange costumes twist and fold their bodies into unlikely shapes.

"Here comes the elephant from the circus Miss Lila said Miss Ruby arranged!" Marisol points at the enormous gray beast lumbering toward them. She has never seen an animal this large. Between her smooth flaps of ears and down toward her long-lashed eyes, the fringe along the edges of her caparison flutters with her pounding steps.

The elephant's frontman walks backward six steps ahead and tosses orange sections onto the ground. With each new handful, she lifts her trunk into a curl, lets out a trumpet blast, and then dips low to scoop up her reward. Every five steps, the frontman shouts a word, and the cow stops. She stamps one foot and blows a gust of air at an unsuspecting man, sailing his straw hat into the air. The crowd roars each time and claps with glee as the hat is captured and passed back to the owner, who invariably smiles and takes a bow.

Flippo and Floppo the Clowns skip along the edges of the midway, skillfully stepping around elephant dung piles with their oversized red shoes. High white arches are drawn above their eyes, and exaggerated smiles are painted around their lips. They wear orange curly wigs under black top hats and paint-palette-colored pants with stretchy suspenders. Each one holds the strings of an enormous cluster of balloons in every color of the rainbow, the same as their pants, handing one to every child they encounter.

The parade continues until a second marching band brings up the rear. Marisol recognizes the *Liberty Bell March* as some in the crowd sing the words. She reaches for Brigid's hand and squeezes, overcome with the feeling that at this moment they are part of all these people, free of any judgment or shame. The slide trombones and clashing symbols echo above the cheering crowd and float out across the lake.

A voice from the loudspeaker booms into the air. "Look! Up in the sky! Flying Phineas will drop from that plane into Little Lake!" All eyes turn heavenward as a single-engine aircraft buzzes overhead. A man in a red jumpsuit leaps out of the open flap. He stretches his arms and legs outward

like a snow angel and floats down toward the water. His parachute inflates with air, and he splashes into the lake, landing near the waiting rescue boat idling beneath The Dips. The crowd claps and roars. They dissolve onto the midway, clutching long strips of flimsy red tickets as they wander toward the games of chance and rides manned by Romani men and other traveling workers. Some move on to the dance halls while others walk over to the boardwalk to the food stalls to sample the hot dogs and sticky puffs of cotton candy.

The smells, the sounds, the air—everything combines. Suddenly, there it is. The long, drab winter is banished. Marisol's heart races. She is more content in this place than she has been with her clan for the past six months. Closing her eyes, she allows herself to anticipate the summer days to come.

Marisol, Brigid, and all the other vendors hustle back to serve customers as they disperse across the park. As they reach the tow path, there stands Hal Clements, his legs spread wide to block their passage.

"Ladies." Hal removes his straw hat and taps it against his belly. "You in a hurry to be somewhere?"

Marisol smooths her skirt and trades a worried look with Brigid. Many times around their campfires, people retell stories of this man's predatory ways. Just four days ago, she'd overheard Mammie and Etta Durwood talking about his harassing the Romani boys who work the park rides. She clears her throat and points. "Just behind you."

"Yes, I see your tents all set up here at my park. Seems like there are more of you people than ever. Where do you all come from?"

Marisol doesn't answer.

A smile plays at the corners of his mouth. He points behind them toward the entrance. "Can I bring you anything, perhaps some hamburgers and fries?"

"Oh, no, thank you. We've got plenty."

"Just let me know. I'm always around." Hal slicks back his hair with his palm. "I'd love to have my fortune told. Maybe I'll come visit you soon."

Marisol flinches. Surely not all men are this unsavory. She shudders and her skin crawls as she reaches for Brigid's hand.

Hal stands staring at them. Behind him, Mammie is approaching. Sunlight glints against the sequins of her skirt, and it jangles with each step closer.

“Girls, come quickly and change into your costumes. We’ve got customers arriving already,” Mammie says. Hal spins around and takes her in. Only then does he step aside, so Marisol and Brigid can hurry by.

“Good day, Mr. Clements,” Mammie says with a polite, measured clip in her voice. As Marisol and Brigid pass beside her, headed toward the tents, she spits onto the dirt.

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Marisol hurries to her tent. Her new sign is propped beside the opening. She crouches down and presses her thumbprint lightly into the bottom corner. A fresh coat of paint is still tacky to the touch. The sign was Gran’s before, and the outlines of her letters are faint under the coat of paint

WORLD FAMOUS ROMANY ROSE  
FORTUNE TELLER

Marisol’s words on top are simple, bright red with yellow letters that say

TAROT READINGS  
LOVE FATE DESTINY

Mammie’s tent is right beside Gran’s. Her sign reads

MOTHER AMELIA  
READER AND ADVISOR

with a simple drawing of an open palm.

Gran stands guard in her old, colorful dress at the tent’s tied-back flaps. She waves Marisol inside.

The querents expect a certain popularized look that the Romanies oblige if they want to draw the crowds. It's only a costume. While Marisol intends to do her best to explain the tarot cards she's been studying, she accepts that people have expectations when spending their hard-earned money. Pleasing them is their path to survival.

While other readers will pander to the made-up movie images and dip their blouses low, Mammie refuses to go this far. Hers is a fresh white peasant style with long flowing sleeves. Over it, she ties an aqua corset around her waist atop a ruffled skirt. The effect is striking and beautiful without perpetuating the inaccurate image and inviting unwanted advances.

Marisol slips into a similar blouse that Gran has sewn. Her three-tiered skirt is red, purple, and gold, and Marisol painstakingly stitched the seventy-five purple sequins all along the bottom hemline and a few on her sleeves. She slides into black slippers Gran embroidered, feeling the threads of flowers and vines against the top of her feet. She finishes her look by securing Gran's shiny chains on top of her head. The coins drape across her forehead and emit a light tinkle as she moves to the table.

"Look at you, my sweet girl," Gran says, clasping Marisol's cheeks into her hands. "You are the picture of beauty and ready for *drabarimos*." Marisol knows this is her old word for the game of fortune-telling.

"Thanks to you, Gran, I feel as ready as I suppose I'm going to. You've made me look like a queen. Your handiwork is divine." Marisol fiddles with one of the gold coins as she narrows her eyes.

"Ah, don't be nervous. These people come mostly for entertainment. Some will expect you to solve a problem. You'll know what to do. As I've taught you, always listen carefully. Pay attention to the faces and their reactions as you speak. Just like I told you, you'll be back here in the *ofisa*. I'll be right up there in the first room, listening to hear if you need any help. I'll do the negotiating of the price for now, but I'll send the first one in for you to collect it as we practiced."

There's a rustling in the other room. Someone has entered the tent. "Hello, is there anyone here?" a voice calls out.

Gran walks back through the beaded curtain. "Yes, may I help you?" she says to the visitor.

“I would like a reading,” a woman says. Marisol hears them discuss the options and agree on a price. She eyes the back exit flap. It would be disgraceful if she abandoned Gran Rose.

Three ornate boxes, each holding a metal lantern and a thick burning candle, cast dim light and angled shadows around the tent. Rose-scented incense fills the small area. Marisol tugs on the edge of her veil so that it falls across her face. It is translucent, with gold threads woven into the fabric that shimmer in the candlelight. It’s so thin, she can observe her querent’s eyes and try to read their expressions. Marisol slips the tarot deck from its pouch.

A woman’s dainty hand parts the shiny bead strings as if they are water, their soft clicking melodic. She is petite and has wispy, fair hair that makes her appear almost like a child. She tentatively steps forward as her eyes dart around the tent.

“Please, come in. Have a seat.” Marisol opens her perspiring palm toward the empty chair. *Make them feel comfortable immediately*, Gran’s words ring in her head.

The woman is about thirty-five years old, Marisol assesses. She is dressed as if she’s stepped in from a summer picnic. She perches like a frail bird in the chair and sets her woven handbag at her feet. “I’ve never done anything like this,” she says, her voice wavering. She opens her fist, holding out her money.

Marisol points to the space between them. “You may lay it there.” She tries to steady her trembling hand and passes it over the coins, picks them up, and tucks them into her skirt pocket.

Marisol begins to shuffle the cards, now able to shift them from one hand to the other in waves without ever looking down. Through the veil, she studies the woman’s pale blue eyes, attempting to guess why she is here. Her cheeks are flushed, as if she is uncomfortable with eyes on her. “What are you seeking to learn?” Though she is queasy, Marisol asks gently, trying to put her querent at ease as she’s practiced.

“I...I am troubled by some information. I want to know if I should share it with others. And I’d like to know about my future.” The woman drops her gaze onto the cards.

“Of course. Let’s see what the cards say about these things.” Marisol fans the deck across the table. “Choose a card. This is where we begin, selecting one that represents you.”

The woman keeps her hands pressed in her lap and stares at the seventy-eight cards. “I don’t know. Maybe I shouldn’t have come here,” she whispers, almost to herself.

“Take your time. Look them over and tell me the one that speaks to you.”

The woman raises her delicate hand. She touches the card at the end of the arc.

“You may remove it. Turn it over in front of you,” Marisol says.

The woman slides it away from the others and flips it over on the table. It is the Ten of Wands. In the picture, a young man has a bundle of long sticks gathered in his arms. His head is buried in the wands, trying to move the great amount forward. “What does this mean?”

“Ah, yes. You carry a heavy burden.” Marisol gathers the remaining cards back together and begins shuffling again. The woman shifts in her chair, drops her hand back into her lap, and pulls her elbows in tight.

Marisol divides the deck into three nearly identical stacks. “Point to a pile, the one you are drawn to.”

The woman hesitates. Eventually, she points to the middle but does not touch them. Marisol dips her chin and collects the piles, placing the chosen one on top. One by one, she flips six more cards over. Marisol releases an undetectable sigh of relief. She knows what to say at once.

Marisol begins the reading. She brushes her finger over the Two of Pentacles. The figure in the center holds two golden coins, suspended within a figure eight of a band. “This one, we can see juggling, a struggle with two opposite things. You are trying to maintain some sort of balance. It is quite uncomfortable for you.”

The woman opens her eyes wider, nodding. She bites her lower lip.

Marisol concentrates on the woman’s face. “Does this sound correct, that there are two issues in your life?” She seeks confirmation, as Gran has taught her.

“Yes.” The woman inhales deeply, then places her hands on the edge of the table. Her right hand taps and jitters. “My husband. He works for a bank. He has stolen a great sum of money. It’s hidden in our root cellar. He is...paranoid. Acting erratically.”

Marisol parts her lips but hastily recovers and presses them closed. Gran warned she would hear many people’s secrets, but she hadn’t expected embezzlement from her very first querent. She paints stoicism across her face and peers into the woman’s eyes. They are moist, and the stranger swipes them with her knuckle. In closer observation, Marisol detects a bruise on the woman’s cheekbone, newly exposed beneath a thick makeup powder layer.

Marisol touches another one of the upturned cards. “The Eight of Cups.” A figure is walking away from eight stacked cups with the moon hanging overhead. “It tells us you might abandon things that are not emotionally fulfilling. You may be considering a trip to live elsewhere?”

“Yes,” the woman says again. “I have two little boys. I must keep them safe.”

Marisol taps another. “This one, the Page of Wands. You will have decisions to make, and there will be a new beginning.” Laying her two fingers on one more, pressing them there, it is the Two of Swords. She says, “You will be safe. You will be unafraid.”

The woman shifts in her chair again and straightens. She nods. “You are right.” The woman pulls another coin from her pocket and lays it on top of the Ten of Wands card. She picks up her handbag and moves to the strings of beads, then turns back toward Marisol.

“Thank you for showing me what I have known I should do all along.”

The querent disappears through the beaded curtain. The woman’s genuine appreciation for this seemingly meaningless work takes her by surprise. Marisol presses the corner of her eye with her veil.

## CHAPTER 11

### Will

*Somerset, Ohio – April 5, 1942*

On Sunday morning, Will steps into the kitchen. Grandma Emma is standing at the stove, holding a spatula in mid-air. “Good morning!” she chirps as she glances his way. “Can I get you some breakfast?” She’s dressed for Sunday services. The old apron he’s seen her wear a hundred times before offers protection to her lavender Easter dress. From the radio on the counter, Louis Armstrong belts *When the Saints Go Marching In*.

“No, thanks, I’m not hungry.”

His grandma flashes him a smile but says nothing, returning to her hot griddle. Her empathetic words last night were encouraging. If only he had at least one parent who understood him like she does. Will doesn’t feel like he was born to either of them. A father who is controlling and a mother who cares more about society life than her children.

The music from the radio stops abruptly. Static crackles, and then an authoritative man’s voice booms out, another war announcement. His grandma reaches over to click it off, though Will wouldn’t mind hearing the update from the war front.

William has his head buried in a plate of biscuits and gravy. Will notices a bowl of pastel-colored Easter eggs placed in the center of the table. He

supposes his grandma dyed them by herself. William grunts and does not look up from his breakfast.

Will continues toward the back screen door. "I'm going outside to wait beside the car." He pushes the door open and steps out onto the driveway.

Will stares intently across the wide expanse of fields. A tractor sputters, even though it is Sunday. "A crop must get in when it can," he remembers one of his grandma's sayings, with farming always teetering at the whim of the seasons. He knows when the fickle weather breaks, everyone must be ready and hurry to plant the seed.

Since Will was seven, their Easter Sunday routine has been to drive over to Somerset to Grandma Emma's church. Then they all go together to Buckeye Lake Park for the summer season opening. Before that, he remembers the excitement of riding the electric Interurban train from Columbus to the park. They would hop on the Buckeye Lake traction, part of the train system that undergirded the foundation of William's railroad fortune. Now, all of the regional lines have been taken out of service. These days, everyone drives their Fords and Plymouths to the park. And William drives his Torpedo, which is not nearly as fun.

Will checks his wristwatch, a high school graduation gift. Fifteen minutes have passed as everyone clamors out the door and piles into William's Pontiac. His grandma squeezes between her grandchildren in the backseat.

"Mother, you really should ride up front here with William. Let me sit with the children," Clara says, though Will is certain she'd rather not.

"Nonsense, I'm happy to be back here with them," she says, patting both her grandchildren's knees.

Will lays his hand on hers and squeezes. At least his grandma remains the same as she's always been. He might as well be from another family. He isn't close to anyone but Charlotte and his grandma.

Will remembers when Clara was much softer, when she'd hold Charlotte's and his hands as she walked with them through the zoo. Back then, there was no need to rush as she'd stay until they closed the gates so they could visit every exhibit. She'd bend to pet a puppy at the park. These days, when his mother speaks to them, her voice is sharp and clipped. *Sit up*

*straight. Hang up your jacket.* Before he left for college, Will asked if he was a disappointment to her and his father. “Of course not,” she’d said. “Our positions in society are quite demanding. I wish you would try to understand.” Will doesn’t care about putting on airs or fancy parties. It is adventure and flying that call to him.

The thought occurs to Will how much easier it would be to live here on the farm than back in Columbus when he’s home from school for the summer. It’s so uncertain when the Army will call him up. Maybe any day, maybe not until fall. From what he’s heard from others, everything seems random and chaotic.

In the front seat, William has one hand on the steering wheel, the other flapping in the air as he talks with animation about a recent business trip, but Will isn’t listening. Instead, he stares at miles of empty cornfields as they continue winding along the narrow country roads. Around a bend, then rising in this most unlikely place, they approach St. Joseph’s Church. The old brick entrance sign claims its honor as Ohio’s oldest Catholic church. Will wonders again what makes people change, to leave behind the roots that bore them.

“Our first Easter without Edward,” his grandma says to no one in particular as Will heaves back the stately sanctuary door. He has been in this church many times with her, including the funeral service of his grandpa, who passed away last October. Although he had never gone with them to church, except for Christmas and Easter, and only then to please his wife. Will can’t recall ever hearing them argue about it, so she must not have forced her will on him.

They step into the aisle as the sun streaming through the tall stained-glass windows bathes them in the ethereal light. The colors are brilliant, cast in all directions. Will takes in the stately interior frozen here in time, locking it into his memory that he might want to call up when he is far away from home. A magnificent white arched ceiling reaches toward the heavens. Will keeps quiet throughout the service. *This world is so confusing,* Will prays. *Help me to understand. What am I meant to do with my life?*

After the Easter mass, they drive back to his grandma's and change their clothes. Will and Charlotte wait in the driveway for everyone to gather for the ride over to the amusement park.

"You're lucky," Will says, scuffing his shoe against the gravel.

Charlotte taps her hand against her chest. "Me?"

"Yeah." Will drops his chin. "Father won't force you to do the kind of work he does because you're a girl."

"You're right about him. But Mother is already talking about making me come out as a debutante," she mumbles. "As if we're not in the middle of a war. I don't want to be a society girl, anyway. I want to go to work, do something with meaning."

"I didn't know." Will reaches for his sister's hand. "Guess we're both trapped."

"I'm sorry Father's so hard on you. I wish there was something I could do," she says.

Will wraps his arm around Charlotte's shoulder and squeezes. "We have each other. We'll figure something out."

"I don't want you to join the military. But if you stay here with Father, you'll have no choice in your future," she says. "What are you going to do?"

Will kicks the Pontiac's tire. "I'm going to the war. They need thousands of us."

It's early afternoon when they pull up to the park entrance. William blusters and complains about the full parking lot. Along with everyone else, they are forced to find a spot along the road near the guest hotels and restaurants. Once he carefully parks his car, they fall into step with the crowd of other latecomers walking along the tow path.

William and Clara are in the lead, with Grandma Emma and Charlotte trying to keep up. Will lags behind. He sizes up a man walking with his family up ahead of them, wearing his army fatigues. Will thinks again about the draft. It could be him soon.

Before they reach the wide grassy area and the park entrance, a rainbow of fabric tents and stalls is ahead on the path. Their signs declare they are Romanies. It makes Will remember again the insensitivity of Clara's cutting words at his birthday lunch.

“Emma, hold tight to your pocketbook,” William shouts.

“Children, stay close,” Clara adds over her shoulder.

“Clara!” Will’s grandma admonishes. “Don’t be ridiculous. There is nothing to fear. These are people just like you and me. Don’t fill these children’s heads with nonsense.”

“I am not ridiculous, Mother. Remember those Romanies that would come to our fruit stand when I was a girl? That one woman and her child were trying to steal our apples. You came out and gave them a whole bagful. And a jar of tea. And quoted to them from the Bible.” Clara sniffs with indignation. “The ones that came after would have pilfered our entire crop right under our noses if I hadn’t run them off.”

Will’s grandma stops and plants her hands at her waist. “Clara Grayson Worthington, whatever has gotten into you? I didn’t raise you like this.”

William and Clara keep on walking as if she had said nothing. Will’s blood pulses hot within his neck. He stares at the backs of his parents’ heads and clenches his teeth. It takes everything he has to hold back the words formed upon his lips. Instead, he slows his walk, putting additional steps between them. He watches his family pass the last tent in the row and step into the grassy area.

As his parents get closer to the ticket gate, Will lingers on the tow path among the tents. He needs some time and distance from his parents before he blurts out something he regrets. Will ducks between two tents, one of them purple and red striped. Its gold tassels sway calmly in the breeze. He bows his head, closes his eyes, and presses his fingers against his forehead. Why can’t they recognize their prejudice?

Will inhales and opens his eyes. The early afternoon sun glints on something shiny on the ground. Crouching to investigate, he picks a tiny flat disc out of the dust with his fingernail. Its iridescent purple reflects sunlight toward his face. Still bent down toward the path, he turns the object over in his palm. He doesn’t know what it is. From the corner of his eye, he sees something move in the grass. He realizes they are strange embroidered slippers.

The breeze stirs again, and there’s a faint tinkle somewhere down the path. A fly buzzes by Will’s ear, and the zap of a lone cicada slices through

the air. He raises his eyes upward from the shoes and slowly stands to take in a beautiful young woman. She's frozen in her place, the same as him. Her skirt jangles, and a chain of gold coins is draped across her forehead.

He so rarely looks closely at a girl, but he can't help himself with this one. Her face is soft, the skin darker than his own. Her lips are pink and full with the faintest trace of a smile.

Their eyes lock. Hers are green and brown with flecks of gold, a color he's never seen. For that fleeting moment, they stand motionless, the noises from the park and the shimmering lake caught in the air, the warm midday sun holding them in its grasp.

Will senses that something in the universe has adjusted itself. He smiles and nods, but when he opens his mouth to speak, there is nothing. The woman drops her eyes, dips her chin, and then hurries around behind the striped tent. Will swipes his hand through his hair as he regains his composure. "Miss? Miss?" he calls out. He tries to follow, but she has vanished.

"Will? Where have you gone?" Charlotte's voice slices into the moment. He can hear it getting closer as she walks back from the entrance. He shoves the purple disc into his pocket and steps out from between the tents. "Come on, hurry," she says, beckoning him with her hand. "Father is angry that you're keeping us."

## CHAPTER 12

### Marisol

*Buckeye Lake Amusement Park – April 5, 1942*

Marisol can't catch her breath. Once back inside Gran's tent, she puts her hand against her mouth and peeks through the fabric's gap. The strange man's eyes search toward the tent, but the back flap is disguised to blend into the walls. When they stood four feet apart, she saw they were the color of the cornflower she finds growing in the fields. His skin is pale, his jaw is angled, and his thick blond hair is tousled in a curly pile. He is handsome and far different from the Romani men she knows.

She'd watched him pick up the sequin from her dress. Why didn't she say something as he stood beside her tent? Of course, she knows all the rules about not speaking to *gadzo* boys. But why is it okay when the people are querents? A double standard. Regardless, something about him made her speechless.

"Hey, what are you looking at?" Brigid asks. She's entered through the beaded curtain.

"Oh!" Marisol startles. She turns swiftly toward her friend and touches her lips. "This...this young man. I went outside for fresh air before my next querent. He was standing between Mammie's and my tent."

"A *gadzo*?" Brigid narrows her eyes and tilts her head. "Why do you look so funny?"

“I do?” Marisol asks and blinks. “He just...he didn’t look like anyone I’ve ever met.”

“Lots of strangers here.” Brigid plops into Marisol’s querent chair. “You’ve been busy?”

Marisol sits across from her at the table. She forces herself to recover and pushes thoughts of the boy away. “Yes, it’s been a constant flow. I’ll be exhausted by this evening.”

“If it slows down, maybe we can walk the park before it closes.”

“I’ll ask Gran if she’ll take over the tent for the final hour.”

“See you in a while.” Brigid jumps up and moves back through the strands of beads, blowing a kiss over her shoulder.

Marisol continues the readings with no time for further breaks. It’s just as well to keep lingering thoughts of the strange young man at bay.

Customers arrive from every walk of life—a woman who runs a bakery and can’t escape her mother’s constant meddling. A man who drives a bus has recently learned that he has cancer. And a young teacher who is desperate to find a husband. With only one exception, Marisol is able to share meanings about the tarot cards that fall for each of them.

“A very good day,” Gran says. She smiles and jingles the velvet pouch tied with a ribbon at her waist. “Though we’ll have to stretch each weekend’s earnings until the park stays open every day come May.”

“Would you mind taking over the last hour? Brigid and I would like to walk around.”

“Of course. I used to love slipping out onto the crowded midway at night with Grandad,” she says wistfully. Gran loosens the ribbon on the pouch. “Take these.” She presses two coins into Marisol’s palm. “We can spare them, and you’ve earned it.”

Marisol tucks the money in her skirt pocket and hugs Gran Rose. She’s survived her first two days of dukkering.

Changing from her costume, Marisol’s dress is much more worn than any of her querents’ clothing. It’s too tight, but it will have to do since there is no money for fabric to sew a new one.

Marisol steps outside the tent. There is no sign that the *gadzo* had ever been there. Is it possible she imagined him?

She walks down the path to the open awning where Brigid and her father sell good luck charms. Brigid's youngest brother, Isaiah, sits atop a crate, trailing a stick through the dirt.

"Let's go," Marisol says as she locks her hand around Brigid's wrist, tugging her back up toward the entrance. They pass a few *gadzo* women concealed between the tents, sneaking cigarettes in private. They're enjoying the stolen moments and pay Marisol and Brigid no attention.

The park will close within the hour, though the midway still swarms thick with opening weekend visitors. People move leisurely among the stalls, playing games, and enjoying park delicacies. Some carry prizes of glass bowls and plaster of Paris dolls. A few of the food stalls have lowered their wooden closures, signaling they've sold out of their treats.

"Let's stop here first," Marisol says, pointing toward the sugar waffle booth.

"I wondered when you two would come to see me," the booth's owner, Miss Betty, says as she lays a fried pastry on a waxy paper. Her hair is tied back with a red bandana, and her face is shiny-slick from steam.

Betty tips her chin and smiles at them. Marisol knows she, too, must be exhausted, having stood over the hot grease vat all day.

"Here, I'll make another real quick," Betty says, waving the metal rod with a rosette shape welded on its end. She dips the mold into a tub of creamy batter and back into the grease. Marisol licks her lips as she hears it sizzle and then watches it release and bob along the top. Miss Betty plucks the waffle out with her tongs, and it's golden brown, the same as all the others. With a shake of her metal sifter, she dusts white powder sugar on the treats.

Marisol and Brigid slide their coins across the counter. Miss Betty hands each girl a perfect waffle. "The freshest for you." She pulls a handkerchief from her sleeve, blots her forehead, and tucks it back in place. Betty dips her hands in a bucket of water and wipes them with a fresh cloth.

The paper is warm and greasy in Marisol's hands. Her mouth waters. She breaks off a crispy edge, pops it in her mouth, and licks the lingering powder from her lips. "Thank you, Miss Betty. I have been thinking about your waffles all day long!"

“You’re welcome anytime.” Miss Betty is already busy making another waffle. “Brigid, if you would send your brother over tomorrow, I sure could use his help to lift some heavy bags of flour being delivered.”

“Yes, Ma’am,” Brigid answers.

They finish their treats, then turn and are swallowed up by the crowd. Excited voices and laughter cut into the air. Several barkers call out the merits of their games of chance. A few tired children are scooped up onto their father’s shoulders. Music escaping from the Crystal Ballroom serenades them all.

“Want to go watch The Dips?” Brigid asks. The tide of people sweeps them along as the half-moon’s light reflects across the water. They head down the midway toward the boardwalk intersection as Marisol hears the roar and rattle of the massive roller coaster. It towers in the distance, past booths of lined-up games on either side of the midway. Gus and Ruby stand beside the Ring Toss, talking as they scan the crowd.

“Evening, ladies,” Gus says, tipping his hat.

“Evening, Mr. Bennett,” Marisol replies.

“How was business today? Do the fortunes tell us it will be a good summer?” he asks, sweeping his arm toward the sky.

“Very good. The winds of fate are favoring us,” Marisol answers with a smile.

Ruby winks at her and nods. She moves in closer. “Marisol, Lila told me ‘bout your family’s troubles. You be lettin’ me know if there’s anything you need while you’re here at the park?” she asks in a lowered voice.

“Yes, Ma’am, thank you. It has been difficult, but maybe our luck is changing. We all appreciate you and Mr. Bennett welcoming us here at the park.” Marisol stares at her worn brown leather shoes. “We don’t find that everywhere we go.”

“All right then, where you headed?” Gus asks.

“Over to watch The Dips before they shut it down for the night. And to find my brother Luther. He’s probably underneath the rails, scavenging for lost wallets and wayward coins!” Brigid chuckles.

“No harm there. Did it myself when I was a kid,” Gus replies. “Evening, then.” He touches the Stetson’s brim again.

Marisol and Bridget continue past the games and turn left. The roller coaster looms ahead, its lights twinkling and aglow against the inky sky as it dips and curves out over Little Lake. They are close enough to hear the chattering of the winches as the row of cars is pulled up the creaking timber rails. Within seconds, the rhythmic click-clack and jubilant high-pitched squeals echo into the night air as the coaster plunges down and around the tracks. Even from where they are, Marisol can see a line of at least fifty people snaking from the ticket taker. She already knows there's no way they all will get a ride tonight.

Before they reach the roller coaster, they approach a dimly lit section of the path. Something rustles in the bushes to their left. They freeze, their wide eyes staring at each other. Neither says a word. They move closer to one another as Marisol strains to peer into the brush. She catches a whiff of something unnatural and out of place and recognizes it as whiskey.

Suddenly, a man stands up, unsteady on his feet. He shuffles out to block their passage. "Hello, Ladies." It's Hal Clements, the same man who stood in their way on the tow path yesterday after the parade.

"Err, hello," Marisol says, grasping Bridget's forearm behind the layers of her skirt. "Stay calm," she whispers, though she fights the urge to flee. It's difficult to look at him, but she forces herself to meet his bloodshot eyes.

"Those waffles are mighty tasty on this fine evening, aren't they?" Moonlight glints against a shiny silver flask dangling in his hand.

"Yes," Marisol answers, trying to steady her voice. Her stomach sinks with the realization that he's been following them since they were at Miss Betty's booth. He is notorious for creeping in the shadows. And who knows what else. Marisol points back toward the well-lit boardwalk. "We need to be going."

"You just came from there. I know you wouldn't lie to me, being as honest as you are." Hal wobbles two steps closer so that his rancid breath nauseates Marisol. "Is this the time you are usually done swindling and taking money from our park guests?" He slides the flask into his pants pocket and wipes his hand across his chest. His shirt is half tucked in, and his hat has fallen to the ground. "I'm sure you people have already started stealing the game prizes, just like last year."

Marisol's heart is pounding, and her mind races with what he is accusing them of. She'd yell for help, but the noises from The Dips and the midway make it impossible for anyone to hear her. "Brigid's brother is looking for us," she lies. She can feel sweat beading on her forehead.

Hal swipes his hand forward, and Marisol is not quick enough to escape his touch. He locks his hand around Marisol's wrist, his fingers pressing into the flesh beneath her sleeve. She gasps with the shock of someone touching her again against her will, especially a *gadzo*. He pulls his face so close to hers she can see his nose hairs in the moonlight.

"I've built this park into what it is. Surely you know how powerful I am. I can have all of you Gypsies banned for good. I've done it at other parks and I can do it here, too."

Marisol stares into his vacant eyes, knowing that no one can afford to lose these jobs. She calculates Hal has had far too much to drink, and if she can break his grip, Brigid and she can easily outrun him.

Over the loudspeakers, the soothing melody of *Goodnight Irene* fills the late-night air. Hal must know, as everyone does, it's the universal signal that it's eleven o'clock and the designated time to close the booths and rides. Within moments, the path they're on will flood with people returning to the boardwalk from The Dips. All the booth owners will head over to the park office to secure the day's ticket and cash intake.

Hal teeters, and Marisol sees a flash of acknowledgment in his eyes. She knows this is their only chance. "We can't stay, Mr. Clements. We are due back any minute." She swats his hand away and yanks Brigid's arm hard enough to pull it from its socket. They take off running back toward the busy, lighted boardwalk, their skirts flying behind them.

"Dammit!" Hal yells.

Brigid and Marisol don't slow down until they reach the crowded boardwalk. "Excuse us! Excuse us, please!" they call out. They squeeze and cut between the casually meandering people. Breathless, they lean doubled over against the tall, arched Midway sign. Clarinets and saxophones croon the familiar melody as *Moonlight Serenade* floats out from the Pier Ballroom. It's the customary last dance each evening before the park closes.

Marisol's adrenaline slows. "What a schmuck!" She dares a glance toward The Dips to be sure Hal hasn't followed them again.

"That's twice," Brigid says, releasing a nervous laugh. "We'd better figure out how to avoid him."

Marisol sighs as she hears the last run of The Dips pull away from the platform.

## CHAPTER 13

### Lila

*April 6, 1942*

Lila left Gus sleeping in their cabin. She scans the bookshelves of the hidden room. The sun is rising across the lake through the little window.

The past two days of the opening weekend have been frenetic. It's a positive sign that it will be a busy and profitable summer for everyone at the park. Lila and Gus had tallied the few minor issues they'd needed to resolve: a broken lap bar on the Tilt-A-Whirl ride; a box of prizes reported stolen from the Skee Ball game; and one sprained ankle from a patron of the Crystal Ballroom. Lila knows it will be the same as every year, with routine injuries increasing after Memorial Day when the pool opens: sunburns, skinned knees, and bee stings. And of course, inevitably, children end up at Lost and Found near the entrance ticket gate. She is called to comfort them before they successfully reunite with their parents.

The little girls who visit the park set in motion Lila's memories of Daisy. She can't help but notice and feel an emptiness as the children hold hands with their mothers, their eyes agape as they take in the marvels. They run about in their eyelet dresses and black Mary Jane shoes.

When Lila had shared her lingering sadness with her pastor back in Texas, he counseled her to allow the memories to come forward into the present. He'd encouraged her to read an essay by Sigmund Freud about

mourning. He said she should let the feelings flow rather than repress them, regardless of whether they are happy or sad.

The pastor repeated several times, "Grief has no timeline." She knows this is accurate. Lila admits that his advice has helped when she returns to the park. Every year is easier. If this year is similar to last summer, by Memorial Day, her sadness will seem less present, and she will be able to smile at the girls having fun.

Lila pulls down the chemistry book that she will read with Marisol today. It's one she brought from Texas, intended for high school seniors. She lays it beside the paper application. Walking to the cupboard, Lila removes a metal canister.

Someone taps on the door. "Come on in."

"Hello, Miss Lila." Marisol releases the stack of books in her arms onto the table.

"It's great to see you. I assume everyone is as tired as we all are?"

"Yes, but we are thankful for it. It's been a long, lean winter. We were worried, with all the talk of the war."

"We were, too. I'm glad you all are settled." Lila notices Marisol looking nervously toward the door.

"Is everything okay? Has anything unusual happened in the last two days?" Lila asks, intending to make idle conversation to put Marisol at ease.

"Well...yes...there was something."

Lila raises her eyebrows. She watches Marisol tap her fingers on the books.

"Sit. Tell me all about it before we begin reading." She reaches into the canister and hands Marisol a biscuit from the batch she baked yesterday morning.

"That park man, Hal Clements. He followed Brigid and me from the midway. Jumped up from the bushes near The Dips. Scared us half to death!" Marisol pushes her hair back from her forehead with the palm of her hand. "I told Mammie about it. She said I should tell you and Mr. Bennett."

"Ah, I see." Lila furrows her brow as heat rises in her cheeks. "Don't you worry. I will talk to Mr. Bennett. He will deal with Hal." As much as she doesn't want to burden Gus with one more issue, they need to take some

action. But she knows their efforts will be in vain. The Summerland Park Company is based in Pennsylvania and only cares that the park produces a steady stream of profits.

Lila has always had a bad feeling about Hal, but she won't share this with Marisol. She and Gus know his brother protects his job. Summerland started sending him to oversee the park standards six years ago, after the previous man left to work at Cedar Point. At first, he'd show up three times each summer, staying only two weeks at a time. Beginning last season, he arrived in early March and remained until the park closed on Labor Day, and it seems that's his plan this year as well. Lila has often wondered if he even has a permanent home. According to Etta Durwood, his wife left him for a banker the year he started working at Summerland. Word also has it that's when he'd turned to the bottle. Whatever his troubles, it is no excuse to prey on young women.

Marisol shakes her head. "I don't know if he should," she says. "Last year, others in my clan heard Mr. Clements say he plans to force us Romanies from the park. He said the same thing to me last night. We'll have nowhere to go if he does that. It's too late to find summer work at another park. We need the money."

"He can't make you leave the park." Lila hides her frustration, but is annoyed that Hal is threatening and intimidating the Romanies. "Enough of that. What have you brought today?"

Marisol glances at the top book and touches it gently. "This was Grandad's."

"Let's have a look." Lila taps the paper application. "Then I want to talk to you about this."

She can see that her grandfather's book is old and unusual. It has a worn, homemade cover and wasn't bound together by a printer.

Marisol pulls it off the stack, pushes the others aside, and lays it between them on the table. She opens it in the middle, exposing the yellowed pages unevenly stitched into its spine. Lila smells the aroma of age as it wafts from the pages. Each one is covered with rows of methodically hand-written words. The letters are even and meticulous, though the parchment is rough.

Charcoal and ink drawings of plants and leaves accompany some of the entries.

“Would you help me learn some of these strange medical words?” Marisol asks. “I understand Grandad’s notes about the ingredients in our traditional natural cures. It’s the names of many of the maladies I can’t make out.”

With the tenderness of a mother handling her newborn baby, Marisol turns the fragile pages. She stops on a sketch with various leaves. “I can read these first lines. They say boiled bark from a willow tree will cure a headache. This, this says leaves from a chestnut tree, but what is after it?”

“Bronchitis. It’s a terrible cough with a painful sore throat. Creating an extract from the leaves will treat it.” Lila reads out loud. She thinks about Daisy’s scarlet fever.

“Oh, yes, the year after Grandad died, one of Mammie’s friends got a horrible cough. Gran remembered Grandad’s cure and made an extract for her tea. I took it to the woman, but her husband and son stopped me. Said no woman was going to administer anything to his family. I’m sure they would have let Grandad give it to her. They refused to seek any medical attention, and the poor woman suffered for five more weeks. Mammie worried she might die.”

“More ignorance. It’s all around us.” Lila sighs. His book is a treasure for Marisol. “What other knowledge is in his notes?”

“Here. The lily.” Marisol flips to another page and touches the drawing of a flower. “Does that say for the heart? What is that next word?”

“Palpitations. Heart palpitations signal a precursor to a heart attack. Then next, the vinca flower for diabetes, a disease often caused by a poor diet.” She thinks of Gus and his fondness for the park’s hot dogs and funnel cakes.

“Yes, the failing heart. That’s what my uncle has recently died of. We must go for two days next week to travel to his funeral in Dayton.”

“Why Dayton?” Lila asks. She’s unfamiliar with the town but knows it’s likely three hours away by car.

“It’s where Woodland Cemetery is. Many of my ancestors are buried there. They settled in this Ohio area over a hundred years ago when they

arrived in America on ships." Marisol puts her hand on her heart. "Gran says their vision into the future was fortuitous, with Hitler's persecution over there in these modern times."

"I think I agree with her." Lila shudders. "He is a madman." She tries to avoid thoughts of the war. Gus talked last week about reports of Hitler rounding up Jews, homosexuals, and the crippled. And thousands of Romanies, sending them to gas chambers.

"Grandad is buried in that cemetery." Marisol picks up his book and trails her fingers over the ink of his handwriting. "He's right here in these pages." She closes his homemade medical volume, clutches it to her chest, and nestles it on her lap in the fabric folds of her skirt. "Thank you."

"Of course. Now, let's have a look at what I have for you." Lila pushes the paper across the table to Marisol. "It's an application for a physician school charity program for women. It's highly coveted. You would complete your undergraduate studies first, then, assuming your grades are up to par, you would have a place reserved in the medical school. There is only one charity position a year at a hospital in Columbus."

Marisol picks up the four-page application and turns each paper over in her hands. It's covered with typed rows of questions and blank ones for long essay answers.

"Over one hundred applied last year. I'm going to write out several of the essay questions for you to take with you. Work on them, then we'll fill it out together sometime next week."

"I don't know, Miss Lila. Many will be much better than me. Do you think I have a chance?"

"Of course. Why not? You're as deserving as any other woman. And Lord knows, it's what you truly want."

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After Marisol leaves, Lila closes the secret room door and stacks the crates. As she walks out onto the midway, Ruby is standing with a stranger. Her arms are crossed, and she shakes her head as the man gestures and talks. She wears her usual slacks, and a peach-colored bandana holds back her hair. The two shake hands, and the man walks away.

“Who was that? What was that all about?” Lila asks as she approaches her friend.

“Same ‘ol thing. He is Gene Krupa’s manager, trying to negotiate a higher fee after the first two days. He thinks he can strong-arm me. It’s true, everyone loved Gene over the past two days. But I know he’s trying to get his career goin’ after his blowup with Benny Goodman. We all heard about it.”

Gus had been lucky to book the famous bandleader and popular drummer to play in the Crystal Ballroom the first two park weekends. Ruby had her hands full dealing with the demanding entertainment folks.

“We’re payin’ him fair,” Ruby continues. “Did you have a chance to hear them?”

“Yes, I stood in the ballroom yesterday when they played *Drum Boogie* from that movie last year. The place was packed, and everyone went wild. I could feel the floor shake! I’m sure the Fire Marshall wouldn’t have been pleased.” It’s not the first time Lila has worried about the integrity of the ballroom floor. When the dancehall is filled beyond capacity, the building tremors as if it, too, is scared.

“Where you headed?” Ruby asks Lila as she picks up an empty cardboard French fry boat and tosses it into a trash can.

“I’m going to wake up Gus. He was exhausted last night. Didn’t get to bed until three a.m. This job isn’t getting any easier on him.”

“Yep, I understand,” Ruby says with a sigh. “Even when I laid down, my mind raced with all we still need to do around here. I’m headed over to check on the pool.” Ruby gestures toward the entrance to the Crystal Pool that juts out beside the ballroom.

Lila nods. The pool is a huge park attraction. The dancers in the ballroom above love to lean against the rails when they take a break and gaze down upon the swimmers.

“Only a month left before we open it, but I think ‘ol Hal’s been cutting corners on keeping the filter system in tip-top shape. It was groaning and clanking like a locomotive the other day when they fired it up.”

“Birdie mentioned the same concern a couple of weeks ago,” Lila says. The state-of-the-art system filters lake water, so it’s clean enough to swim

in. That is when it's taken care of and working properly. "Speaking of our resident nuisance, you see much of him this past weekend?"

"Come to think of it, only once. He whistled at me right after the opening parade on Saturday. I could have strangled him and lived with the consequences. I would have thrown my soda on him if there weren't customers around. It crossed my mind to push him in front of the elephant, but..." Ruby pauses and winks. "Too many witnesses."

Lila smiles, but then adds with seriousness, "Marisol said he followed Brigid and her last night. Jumped out of the bushes over by The Dips."

"Can Gus do anything about him? He's more of a menace than he is useful," Ruby says. "Would be better if we hired our own safety man."

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Gus is sitting on the back porch when Lila arrives at the cottage. "How are you feeling this morning?" She eases into the rocker beside him.

"Fair enough. This old park needs a lot more repairs than I anticipated. I've got to go find Hal and take care of some things."

She presses her lips together. "Do you think we could get the park company to send someone instead of him? Or what if we just keep some of the daily intake and hire our own man?"

Gus meets her look and wrinkles his forehead. "What's happened this time?"

"He harassed Ruby at the opening parade. And followed Marisol and Brigid, scared them half to death. Threatened again to have the Romanies banished."

"I've called Summerland three times and left messages. Never heard back. I'll go up to the park office after lunch and call again." Gus exhales a sigh. "I can't help but wonder if there isn't another reason he's focusing on the Romanies to get rid of."

Lila lifts her face to Gus's, and he softly kisses her cheek. "You're a saint, helping Marisol the way you do," he says. Gus wraps his arms around her shoulders. She presses her body close, nuzzling the side of her face against his neck. "You will make a big difference in that young woman's life."

## CHAPTER 14

### Marisol

*April 14, 1942*

Marisol stares at their carriage driver Ernie's back. His shoulders strain inside an embroidered vest as he steers the chestnut mare. Someone has affixed a plume atop her bridle. With each clip-clop against the pavement, the horse's feathers dance as their procession snakes toward Woodland Cemetery.

A family in their clan was kind and gave them a ride from the park to the funeral in their motor car. At first, when it was time to depart, Marisol was hesitant to get into the back seat.

"Come on, we don't want to hold them up," Gran said as she patted the leather.

Looking inside the car made Marisol nauseous. "This reminds me of Levoy."

"Put him out of your mind. No good will come of it," Gran said. "Think about something pleasant." Marisol envisioned the young man who picked up the sequin that had come loose from her costume.

When they arrived three hours later in Dayton, carriages were lined up and ready for the funeral procession. The organizers led Gran, Mammie, and Marisol to one near the front of the cortege.

Together, they sway gently, perched on the wooden bench that's wide enough for three. They are rosy-cheeked, relying on each other for warmth on this unusually chilly April day.

"Whoa there!" soothes Ernie as their horse prances and rears up. She snorts, throws her head from side to side, and releases a high-pitched whinny. The carriage jerks forward as she tries to break free again. Ernie pulls the reins to bring her back in line and calls over his shoulder, "Sorry, Misses, she's itching for a trot." The horse knickers in response.

Marisol understands. This animal is restless from the long funeral walk and the struggle to stay on the same path for so long. For all her eighteen years, Marisol's done the same. Like the mare, she wants to veer off the course controlled by others. It is unnatural, Marisol knows, that she does not want the *tacho Romani drom*, the true Romani path. But the same as with this horse, there has been no choice. Her future has been cast.

Gran, Mammie, and Marisol are behind the coffin carriage pulled by twin appaloosas, their red silk blankets and golden headpieces designating them as the lead. Next come the flat-bed wagons transporting floral tributes—the Vacant Seat, Gates of Heaven, a pillow of roses to rest her uncle's head, and stacks of other wreaths. The single horse-drawn carriages are lined up after, including theirs, followed by the sturdy Vanners towing the heavy caravans. The intoxicating mix of flower scents wafts back. Finally, at the rear are the modern motor cars. Their engines rumble, and they spew exhaust fumes into the air.

Marisol closes her eyes. Her thoughts should be on paying proper respect to her uncle up ahead as he passes into the afterlife. But the reminder of death brings Levoy's and her father's violent ending to the present. There was no funeral for them like this one or Grandad's. She clutches the skin at her neck and tips her head against Gran's shoulder.

"Hard not to think of Papa Henry, isn't it?" Gran pats Marisol's hand. Blue veins pulse under her papery skin. She dabs the tail of her silken headscarf against the corner of her eye and releases a sniffle.

"I think about him all the time," Marisol answers. This funeral procession is almost like Grandad's two years earlier, the grandest Marisol has ever seen.

Those Grandad healed arrived for days at the cemetery, where they are headed. Nine hundred mourners journeyed to see the Romani Elder laid to rest.

Marisol understands what drew Grandad to the curing life. She keeps feeling the pull herself.

Today, for over an hour, their procession winds along. They go by the stables, the fields, and the places that held meaning to her uncle in the coffin up ahead. It allows him to go past his favorite places one last time.

An old green tractor sits stalled among stubs of cornstalks. A few weeks remain before the dark earth will be plowed and turned into itself to accept seeds in straight rows. A few abandoned pumpkins dot the fields. Interruptions to this otherwise drab post-winter Ohio landscape are still straining to awaken. The contrast of the Romani's beautiful, colored wagons and funeral garments is a visual feast to the unaccustomed. At the same time, they mark the mourners as different. Strangers.

Only as they reach the town, progressing by the tavern, do they encounter potential trouble. "Steal them horses, did ya' Gypsies?" yells a drunk lying slack against a bench. His flopping arm waves an empty gin bottle lazily in the air. The man in the carriage in front of Marisol throws down his reins and leaps onto the pavement. He shoves a palm against the drunkard's shoulder, bucking for a fight. Three other Romani men jump down from their carriages and are immediately at the two men's sides. Heaving under the offended man's armpits, two of them drag their friend back to the carriages. The other Romani leans over and retrieves the *gadzo's* hat, slapping it against his thigh to brush off the dirt. He places it back on the drunkard's head. "We'll be on our way." They'd passed a *gavver* earlier in his patrol car. There is no need to draw his unwanted attention.

Marisol stares at the townspeople as they reach Main Street. The air is filled with their curious excitement. They line the compact streets, standing in front of their clapboard houses in their dungarees and aprons. The *gadze* crane their necks as if it is a Mardi Gras parade. They gawk and point at the colorful wagons, majestic stallions, and richly colored clothing, all of it a spectacle to them.

Marisol averts their eyes, though she can't help but sense their glares. She has experienced the judgment on their faces many times before. Mothers tighten their hands around the children as they pass. There is no immunity to the words that float and mix into the air as the procession winds along. *Thief...curse...steal...lazy...dirty*. Derogatory words that cut, as if the Romanies have no ears. Marisol only connects with the wide-eyed children who are too young to sort people into groups.

Marisol tucks a strand of hair beneath her cape. All three women wear vibrant-colored scarves, traditionally knotted at the side. It's impossible to go unnoticed.

On this important day, these rituals mourn death and celebrate the afterlife. It's the necessary way to send loved ones off. Their Romani funeral is as peculiar to these people as her wedding ceremony had been.

The sweet and acrid scent of burning leaves permeates the air. It mingles with the pungent sting of horse manure and funeral flower fragrance. Marisol inhales the jumbled mix of life and death.

They pass through Woodland Cemetery's expansive stone entrance. The townspeople are far behind them. Everything looks the same as it did two years earlier. Though really, what would change here? Only additional worn-out bodies are being laid down in the dirt. A curious red cardinal swoops in to examine all the commotion of the horse commands rippling down the line. *Hey. Ho. Whoa. Easy girl*.

The burial grounds are huge and lovely in the most solemn way. It's already a century old, carved into the Ohio Valley hills. "How many people can be buried here?" Marisol asks Mammie.

"Over one hundred thousand souls," she whispers.

The labyrinth of paths winds in and out among the arboretum of stately oaks and elms. Though only some new leaves have sprouted, the dense branches still create a somber, peaceful canopy among tall Virginia pines, sprawling for miles as they cocoon them.

Gran points at the Egyptian-style receiving vault that stands at the first fork in the path. "There. There is where Matilda Stanley lay in wait," she says reverently, repeating the familiar story passed down. "She died of cancer in Mississippi. Her husband, Levi, ordered the finest casket available from

Philadelphia and had her body sent by train here to Dayton. The *gadze* and the newspapers called her the Queen of the Gypsies, but of course, that's their made-up terminology. To us, she was one of our most respected, and for seven months, her family entered that temporary tomb and placed petals on the casket."

"How many people came to pay their respects?" Marisol asks. She knows Matilda's final resting place is perched high on the winding hill ahead.

"Twenty thousand. The largest ever in this cemetery. Clans traveled thousands of miles. There were dozens of chiefs from across the US, Canada, and even from England. Her husband Levi, himself a respected elder, didn't die until thirty years later in Texas, but a train brought him here, too, to rest beside her."

They climb upward around the turns toward the Stanley Family plot, the highest and most beautiful spot in the two-hundred-acre cemetery. "All of this," Gran says, fanning her arm across the surrounding land, "belongs to us for our final resting place. Owen Stanley bought it almost a hundred years ago when they immigrated from England. Over fifty Stanleys alone are buried here."

The procession slows as it nears the sacred grounds. It passes Matilda's granite monument, towering twenty feet above hundreds of moss and lichen-covered ledgers and headstones. Every person in every carriage blows kisses toward her grave. The carved angel and calla lilies atop her marker protect all who visit and those who rest here for eternity.

Their carriage stops as they reach their destination. A grave has been dug between the Requarth and Kalbfleisch family plots. A cry of mourning interrupts and echoes through the trees. Strong men lower the heavy coffin into the vault. Women place candles along the edges to light the way into the afterlife. Young boys toss coins and packs of cigarettes on top for Marisol's uncle's journey and admittance beyond. A child places a photograph along the coffin edge for all to remember his likeness. She blows kisses down while her mother pats her head. Mourners file by the floral arrangements brought from the wagons that are positioned all around.

Marisol wishes badly that Grandad were still alive. She takes Gran Rose's hand and whispers, "Let's walk over to Grandad's grave."

Gran nods and allows Marisol to steady her at the elbow as they walk across the uneven ground. Some headstones are simple and pressed flat into the dirt, but many are several feet tall, beautiful works of heavily carved art. They walk by the stone of Clark Dietrich. His six-foot-tall granite marker is carved in the shape of a tree trunk, with an axe, a gavel, a dove, ropes, and plants—all important things to him in his time here on earth.

They reach Grandad's marker. It's a beautiful white stone. A space for Gran is barren for her to lie beside him when her time comes.

If he were still here, Marisol is certain he would help her find a way to learn modern medicine. "He was teaching me so much. It's not fair that he left Earth too soon."

"The woman at the park, Lila Bennett. She is the answer. He would have wanted you to continue learning from her." Gran sits on the ground, spreading her skirts across where her husband lies beneath. "This is the first time since he died that I've been back to his grave. It reminds me how weary I am of this world without him." Gran lets out a diminutive cough, then another with more force that rattles in her chest.

"Can you feel his presence here?" Marisol asks, laying her hand against the raised caduceus carved in the stone. She traces the winding snakes and spreads her thumb and fingers across the wings.

Gran coughs again, this time nearly a fit. "No. He has gone to the afterlife. I know he waits for me." She breathes in and exhales.

Marisol raises her eyebrows. Gran has never spoken with such resignation in her voice. "Should I look for a remedy for your cough?"

Gran smiles, and a light laugh escapes. "What ails me can't be cured. I had my great love on this earth, and I was lucky to have him as my partner. It is nearly time to go on to where I'm headed next, where Henry waits for me." She doesn't appear to be sad.

Marisol smiles, too. The peaceful solemnness of Woodland Cemetery can't help but remind her of the fragility of life. Among all these people who have come and gone, their life on earth is nothing more than a brief moment. "I don't feel him here either. But I felt his spirit last week when Miss Lila helped me read from his medical cures book."

“I know you wish for so much more than this life,” Gran sweeps her arm into the air toward the Romani graves that surround them. She takes a breath and places a gentle hand on Marisol’s shoulder. “He would want that for you, too.”

Marisol is unsure how many minutes go by as she and Gran are both lost in their thoughts. Finally, she notices Mammie walking toward them from the fresh grave of her uncle. “It’s time to go.”

## CHAPTER 15

## Will

*April 18, 1942*

It's dark outside Will's dorm window when the wind-up alarm clock rattles. His roommate groans and rolls over in his bunk, tugging a blanket over his head. Will dresses and grabs the duffel he packed last night, shutting the door noiselessly.

The streets feel abandoned except for the occasional stray cat. Streetlights cast an orange glow on the wet pavement as Will walks the half-mile to the bus station near his school. Only the milk delivery trucks and the newspaper boys are out at this hour.

"One round trip, Buckeye Lake, please," Will says to a tired-looking woman behind the metal grate of the ticket window. He pulls coins from his pocket and lays them on the counter. "Back Sunday night."

She slides a ticket through the gap. "That one over there, beside the red post," she says as she points toward an idling bus.

He is alone, except for two other passengers asleep in the farthest back row. Will chooses a seat halfway down the aisle and sinks onto the vinyl-covered cushion.

His head bobs against the window glass as he dozes for two and a half hours. The sleep is fitful as the bus occasionally stops. The driver calls out

each station, and they steadily pick up new riders. Hardly anyone ever gets off.

Suddenly, the bus lurches forward and jolts Will from his haze. Its brakes screech and hiss as it jerks to a stop. Mid-morning sun pours through the windows.

“Buckeye Lake Bus Depot,” the driver calls back. The once-empty bus is packed with passengers. Everyone rises with his words, likely headed to the park. Will rolls his neck and peels himself out of the divots in the seat. The people ahead of him collect their things and shuffle forward down the aisle. He grabs his duffel from the overhead luggage rack and slings it on his shoulder.

Once away from the stale air trapped inside the bus, Will stretches his arms and legs and falls in with the small crowd moving toward the amusement park entrance. The bright April sun glints off the lake water in the distance. Everything is the same as it was thirteen days ago. Before Easter Sunday, all he could think about was the draft and becoming a pilot. He hadn’t expected to meet a woman who could reorder his thoughts. Well, not exactly met. But he will change that today if he can find her.

The cluster of bus riders continues walking toward the entrance, but Will stops at the towering white cement fountain in the grassy area outside the gates. He lets his duffel drop to the ground. His face is clammy from the bus ride, and he leans over and splashes cold water onto his cheeks. He pulls a monogrammed handkerchief from his pocket, dries his palms, and wipes his beaded forehead. Then he dabs the rest of his face and wads the handkerchief back into his pocket.

Will pulls out his wallet and removes the flat purple disc. The sun immediately pings against it. He doesn’t even know what it is. With his thumb, he presses it into his palm. What about it pulls him back to this place?

Since being enrolled in college, numbers and formulas are what occupy his mind. But the day he found the object between the tents, thoughts of the captivating woman crowded their way in. All he knows is that he must find her and talk to her. Will has no idea what he’ll say when he does. His

experience talking to women, other than his teachers, is embarrassingly limited.

Will grabs the handles of his duffel and glances back toward the entrance gate. It's already bustling with people, though it isn't even noon. His stomach rumbles in response to the intoxicating French fry smell. He turns toward the tow path and walks until he is standing in front of the purple and red striped tent. Two customers are waiting. Sweat beads his forehead again.

After thirty minutes, it's finally his turn. He ducks through the tied-back flaps, steps into a room, and releases the breath he's been holding. The scents in the tent fill his nostrils, a mixture of sandalwood incense and rosewater. Several painted crates turned on their ends are positioned around the perimeter. They hold metal lanterns with burning candles. There are no chairs except one along the fabric wall where a slight, gray-haired woman is seated. She's fully clothed in bright green and gold fabric with layers of her skirt fanned around her legs. The woman raises her scarf-covered head and meets Will's eyes.

"How may I help you?" she says as she rises and steps toward Will, her eyes falling to the duffel dangling in his hand.

"I...I'd like my fortune told." He isn't certain this is where the girl had retreated, but he thought she'd gone behind this striped tent.

"Of course. Have you ever had a reading?"

"No, Ma'am."

The woman's face is weathered, but at the same time, it is kind. They agree on a price, and the roughness of her skin brushes against his fingers as he places coins into her hand.

"Go through there." She points behind her at a beaded curtain in the center of a dividing fabric wall.

Will hesitates. The tiny stones are smooth and cold as he pulls them back. They patter against each other as he steps through into the second room. The bead strands continue swaying and tinkling behind him when he lets them fall away from his grasp.

It's her, the young woman he'd seen a couple weekends ago. Although her eyes are hidden behind a shimmery veil that almost reaches her mouth,

he's certain it's her. She sits at a round table with one empty chair across from her.

Will's voice cracks. "I...Miss..." His hand wobbles as he gestures toward the tent wall. "It was you I saw out there."

She lifts the translucent fabric and tucks the edge beneath the chain wrap on her forehead. The hazel eyes he remembers flicker in the candlelight as they connect with Will's. "Yes. This is my tent." The young woman's dark eyelashes flutter briefly before she lowers her gaze to an oversized stack of cards, though she doesn't pull the veil back down.

Will pushes his turned-up palm forward and unfurls his fingers, revealing the purple sequin. "I think this is yours."

"Yes, I suppose it is," she laughs lightly, but she doesn't reach forward to take it. "I guess my sewing skills aren't the best."

Silence hangs between them, and Will shifts his weight from one leg to the other.

"Would you like me to read your cards?"

"Yes, maybe so."

"Have a seat, please."

Will walks the two steps toward the chair, sits down, and sets the duffel on the floor. He wipes his sweaty palms against his pants. "I've never done this before."

"I understand. Most people who come here haven't."

The mysterious woman's voice is velvety and gentle. She begins to shuffle the oversized card deck. A few purple sequins, like the one Will found in the dirt, dangle from the edges of her sleeves. She keeps her eyes cast down. "My name is Marisol," she whispers.

"I'm Will."

"Will, what are you seeking to know today?" This time, her voice is slightly louder. She lifts her chin, and their eyes connect again.

He doesn't believe in non-scientific things like fortune-telling, but he's come this far to find this woman. "I want to know what to do with my life." He can't help but think about his father. His school. The war.

The woman smiles again, radiating kindness. She nods, lowers her eyes, and continues moving the cards from one hand to the other. "That's a big question. What do you want to do?"

"I want to fly airplanes. To be a pilot," Will blurts out, surprising himself at his candidness with this stranger. He realizes he has balled his fist against his stomach.

"Ah, the call to travel and explore. Is there a reason you can't pursue this?" Marisol probes gently as she stops the shuffling and gazes up.

"Well, yes. My father wants me to join him in the family business after I finish college." He thinks about how angry his mother would be if she knew he was sitting with a Romani woman. How she would say something rude out loud. Marisol tilts her jaw. Her eyes are questioning.

"Let's see what the cards tell us," Marisol says, fanning the deck across the table between them. "Pick one card that speaks to you. Turn it over. It will be your card."

Will selects one from the middle of the arc and flips it over. A naked infant rides atop a white horse. The child holds a red flag beneath a smiling sun and sunflowers.

"Oh. The Sun," Marisol says, raising her eyebrows.

"Is it bad?" Will asks. He scans her face. His only plan earlier this morning was to find this woman. How is he now sitting in front of her, telling her personal things? Letting her tell him something he doesn't want to hear?

"No, actually, it's very good. Some say it's the best card in the deck. I've never had anyone draw it as their card." With a sweeping motion, she gathers the remaining cards into a pile. She shuffles a few more times, then divides them into the three stacks. After Will selects his pile, she collects them all and turns six more face up.

Marisol is silent as he watches her study the seven turned-up cards. Finally, she points to two of them. "This one, The Ace of Wands. You will have success. And this one, the Ace of Cups, tells us your time is coming, to trust your instincts. Together, they mean you will have adventure, and courage will guide you."

Will thinks about his birthday. Courage. He'll need it if his name is pulled in the draft.

She touches another card. "Here, though, The Chariot. You should use caution."

Marisol points at a man in a uniform and a helmet riding in a carriage that two white sphinxes pull.

"What does it mean?" he asks, gamely participating, though he can't help thinking about the war.

"Disagreements. Fighting. A journey." She touches the remaining cards and says more things about their meaning. "That's it. It appears you have an exciting future ahead of you, Mr.?"

"Worthington. I'm Will Worthington. Thank you for your words. I feel much better than I have in a long time." He means because he's been successful in finding her. He lifts his chin and searches Marisol's face to see if she's as curious about him as he is about her.

"It's my work," Marisol says, passing her hand across the cards. "I hope you can tell your father you want to fly airplanes."

The old woman's voice drifts in from the entry space behind the curtain. Marisol glances toward the strands of beads, then turns her eyes to Will. "I need to take my next querent," she says, motioning toward the beaded passageway.

Will stands. "Can I visit you again?"

"I...I'm not supposed to talk to you outside my tent," Marisol says in a lowered voice as she pulls the veil back down over her face.

"Why not?" Will asks. He's come all this way.

"It's our way. To stay away from those who aren't our people." Marisol shifts in her chair.

"Then I'll come back here to your tent. Next Saturday evening, before the park closes. Would that be all right with you?"

The question hangs between them. Before she can answer, the old woman parts the beads. Will stares at Marisol. She barely nods as she scoops all the cards into a stack.

Will walks back toward the park entrance, tucking the purple sequin into his wallet. What force draws him to this woman? It's an unfamiliar

feeling. It's strange, but at the same time, he's sure it's what's causing the warmth in his chest.

He wanders around the park for a while. A man with similar skin coloring and hair to Marisol stands beneath a sign that reads FUNNY PHOTOS. Bright-painted plywood cutouts of people are propped on angled boards. They wear old-timey swimsuits from the 1920s, and holes are cut out where the faces should be.

"Step right up. Have your picture made, a souvenir for the folks back home from your time here at the Playground of Ohio," the barker shouts.

Will buys a lemonade and walks back to the bus station to travel on to Grandma Emma's. He can't stop thinking about Marisol. And the words she said about his future.

## CHAPTER 16

### Marisol

*April 18, 1942*

*Goodnight Irene* plays through the park's loudspeakers. Marisol slips her stack of cards into the silky pouch, folds her arms on the table, and lays her head against them. Her stomach rumbles. With all the querents today, there was no time for lunch. Her thoughts linger on a single visitor. Will Worthington. She has turned his name over and over in her head. It took everything she had to force her attention to each paying querent who came after him.

Brigid steps through the back flap. "Are you all right?" she asks.

Marisol lifts her head, eases upright, touches her flushed cheek, and blinks quickly. "I'm fine."

Brigid drops into the empty chair and knits her brows. "What happened? You look strange."

"Will." There's a flutter in her chest as his name rolls off her lips. "That's the young man who found my sequin last weekend. He came back today. I read his cards this morning. His card was The Sun."

A grin spreads across Brigid's face. "Look at you! Have you switched from reading medical books to love stories?"

“Stop it!” Marisol lays her hand on top of Brigid’s. “I’ve never met anyone like him. You probably haven’t either. He was so calm. So sure of himself that his life will have a purpose.”

Picturing him again, he seemed like a good man. Will Worthington showed no signs of a temper. Marisol thinks of her dead husband. She felt Levoy’s rotten core the moment they met before he ever laid a hand on her.

“How have I missed seeing him twice? What does he look like?” Brigid asks.

“Like the Greek God Hermes. Thick blond curls, a chiseled chin. Eyes the color of the cornflower.”

“Hermes, hmm? You’re conjuring the protector of our people in this boy? Now I’m sure you’ve been reading other books besides the anatomy ones.”

“I’m telling you, that’s what he looks like!” Marisol smiles and crosses her arms across her chest.

“Still. He’s a *gadzo*.”

“Who’s a *gadzo*?” Gran asks as she enters through the beads, jangling her bulging pouch of coins.

Brigid purses her lips and shrugs her shoulders as she and Marisol exchange a look.

Marisol hesitates, but she has never lied to Gran Rose. “The querent who carried the duffel this morning.”

“I wondered about someone lugging around their belongings at an amusement park. What of him? Did he say something inappropriate? I told you to come get me immediately if that ever happens.”

“No. No, nothing like that. He was a gentleman. He wants to fly airplanes.” Marisol considers whether she should say the rest. “I...I can’t stop thinking about him.”

Gran’s weathered face softens. “Good for him. The new-fangled way to move about. But Marisol, don’t go letting your head be filled with thoughts of a handsome *gadzo* boy. Keep your focus on those medical books. That’s the way to find your *tacho drom*.” Her true path.

“Yes, I know. I’m working hard with Miss Lila. Please, please don’t tell Mammie about this.”

Gran clicks her tongue. "I'll think about it," she says, a mischievous smile on her lips.

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Monday morning, Marisol rises early and heads to Lila's secret room. Now that the park is open every weekend and she's comfortable with querents, she no longer needs to practice readings with Gran. Instead, she has secured additional work cleaning the public bathrooms beside the Crystal Pool for Birdie and her husband. Marisol's expected to report to her at nine.

The crowds were even bigger this past weekend than the first two. Trash bins overflow all along the midway. Industrious birds pick at dropped French fries and wadded burger wrappers. The winged scavengers already seem aware they must be quick if they want to partake of the bounty. Local kids Ruby hires will soon collect all the trash and spray the pool building floors with hoses. As she passes near the concession stand, Marisol grits her teeth, feeling the sticky drink residue clinging to the soles of her shoes.

She sees the crates stacked in front of the secret room's door. Something is wrong. Lila is always here at the agreed-upon time. Marisol wedges her application essay answer sheet under the bottom crate, pushing it as far back as possible. She certainly can't take it with her to clean the bathrooms.

She walks back down the dark hallway in search of Birdie, even though she is an hour too early for her cleaning job. Marisol finds her standing beside the large mechanical pool filter. Two repairmen in gray work jumpsuits kneel on the concrete. They have the machine's metal flap splayed open and are tinkering inside. Parts are strewn about haphazardly.

Two other men Marisol has never seen are talking quietly with Miss Birdie. One has a *gavver's* badge clipped to his belt. Birdie has one hand pressed against the hip of her culotte skirt and swipes the other through her atypical cropped sun-bleached hair. Marisol stands back, waiting for their conversation to end.

When the men leave, she steps forward to Birdie. "Is everything okay? I've been looking for Miss Lila this morning."

Birdie appears distracted. She's staring at her rubber-soled shoes. "There was an accident late yesterday. The king pin on one of the Tilt-A-Whirl cars snapped, and the car came off its track. It crashed into another, then went over the railing," she says somberly. "One of the heavy cars kept a boy's legs trapped for nearly an hour. Lila, Ruby, and Gus have been with the family over at Licking Memorial Hospital all night." Then she adds, "They are still trying to find Hal Clements."

"That's terrible! I hope he's all right." Marisol thinks of Brigid's young brother, Isaiah. Of course, he wouldn't have been on the ride. But the thought of a child injured puts a lump in her throat.

"Yes, I do, too. Those men are with the local police. The boy lost a lot of blood. Albert and I have been complaining to Summerland for two years. We need a proper ambulance for the park—the hospital in Newark is too far away. They finally took him in someone's car. Only news so far is that his leg is badly broken."

Birdie monitors the repairmen. Marisol imagines the boy lying on the crisp hospital bed sheets, his leg strapped above his body in a contraction device she's seen pictures of in a book.

They stand in silence momentarily, and then Marisol ventures with her question. "I'm ready to clean the bathrooms. I also wondered, Miss Birdie, do you know of any other work? I really could use it." Marisol lowers her eyes. "Money has been tight for my family."

"Go see Mrs. Durwood, honey. Word has it she is desperate for help cleaning the guest rooms. One of her regular local girls ran off with her boyfriend. Left Etta in a pinch."

They walk together back to the pool house. A sign Marisol has never seen before is mounted on the wall. It reads CAUCASIANS ONLY. She presses her neck and shudders. Marisol wants to ask Birdie about the sign, but wordlessly accepts the mop and bucket she holds out.

The bathrooms reek like an outhouse despite the fully modern plumbing. The rows and rows of toilets and stalls are putrid and nasty, having served several thousand patrons over the past two days. Marisol mops and wipes until her hands are red and raw. After five hours, her skirt is filthy. She was starving earlier, but after this, she can't bear the thought of food.

She washes her hands and goes to find Birdie for the money for the day's work. She is wiping down the concession stand counter.

Pointing at the sign she noticed earlier, Marisol asks, "Miss Birdie, why is that sign posted?" She has seen many Blacks enjoying the park.

"Awful, isn't it? I've been arguing with Hal and Summerland about it since they started putting them up three years ago. It has no place here. There's one by the Crystal Ballroom door, too." Birdie points to the dancehall above and then draws her hand back against her heart. "And one outside the Pier Ballroom as well. Albert helped Gus pry them off after Hal left last year, but they reappeared the day before we opened Easter weekend. Summerland can't keep the rides in good repair, but they have plenty of time to post these horrid signs."

"So, you mean, they'll take their money for food and games and rides, but not allow them to swim or dance?" She'd had an elderly Black woman querent in her tent yesterday, worrying about her grandson who had just enlisted in the Army.

"I'm afraid that's right."

"The war in Europe." Marisol crosses her arms. "I've heard about the things they are doing to my people. To the Jews. The crippled. Gas chambers. Sterilizing women. It's horrific to imagine."

Birdie's face is pained, and she moves closer, putting her arm around Marisol. "I know, my child."

## CHAPTER 17

## Lila

*April 20, 1942*

Gus jams his foot on the brake pedal and stops his Ford in front of Ruby's cottage. She and Lila are squeezed beside him on the truck's black vinyl seat. It's well past breakfast time as bright gold sunlight pours through the windows. Lila rubs her bleary eyes. The last fifteen hours at the hospital, worrying throughout the night about the boy trapped beneath the Tilt-A-Whirl car has zapped everyone's energy.

A man wearing a white t-shirt and denim overalls sits on the top porch step. His work hat is sandwiched between his hands. "Who's..." Lila begins to say, but Gus interrupts.

"I'm going to find that lowlife if it's the last thing I do!" He slams the gearshift into park and pounds his hand against the steering wheel.

"Gus, you need some rest." Lila pats his thigh, though she knows nothing will deter him from hunting down Hal.

"Sleep? That's the last thing I want to do. That child could have died. It's a wonder they stopped his head from bleeding in time, and that he won't lose his leg. Hal should be feeling the pain, not that poor boy."

Ruby gathers her sweater and pocketbook from the floorboard. "I agree. But come inside first. Let me make you some eggs and toast." Last night's

dinner time and this morning's breakfast came and went while the three sat vigil in the hospital waiting room.

"A good plan. We can all go together. But let's eat something, as Ruby says."

As they pile out of the truck's cab, the man on the porch rises. He's narrow across the shoulders, tall, and wiry. He moves down the steps and extends his hand to Gus.

Lila tilts her head and looks quizzically. Color is rising in Ruby's fair-skinned cheeks. A shy smile flashes across her lips, then disappears as quickly as it arrives.

"Gus, Lila, this is Stewart Grady. He's the boat engine repair man from Millersport I was tellin' you 'bout, has been working on getting those motor boats back in shape."

"Pleased to meet you, though sorry, under the circumstances. The entire park is talking about the accident. Call me String Bean, everyone does." He lays a gentle hand on Ruby's forearm and meets her eyes. "How is the lad? I guessed you'd be with him, so I came here to wait."

Ruby clears her throat and straightens. "He'll be fine. Sunday night bein' a bad time in a hospital. They set his leg in surgery this morning early. Could've been much worse."

"Good to hear." String Bean squeezes Ruby's arm, lets his fingers slide down her hand, and replaces the hat atop his shaggy, light brown hair. "I'll be takin' my leave. Need to get back over to the docks. Pleasure meeting you folks." He strides hastily down the path, turns right onto a shortcut through the woods, and heads toward the lake.

Ruby scurries up the steps and through the screen door. Lila taps her back and tugs on her blouse. She whispers, "Ruby. Ruby. You've forgotten to tell me something, I think."

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While Gus mops a second piece of toast through the yolks of his eggs, Ruby goes to her bedroom and changes clothes. Lila downs her second cup of tea. "You look exhausted," she says, pressing her fingers to her eyelids.

“You do, too. We’re all getting too old for this.”

Ruby comes back dressed in a fresh green blouse and brown twill pants. Gus pushes back his chair and rises. “Let’s go get us changed, too, hunt down that S.O.B.”

He lets the screen door slam as Lila and Ruby hurry to gather the dishes into the sink, then follow. He heaves himself up into the truck’s cab and pushes the stick shift into gear with more force than needed. They drive to Lila and Gus’ cottage in silence.

“I’ll wait out here,” Ruby says.

Gus and Lila emerge freshly changed. “Let’s walk over to The Dips first, before going to find Hal,” Gus says. “If the little Tilt-A-Whirl can have an accident like that, there’s no telling what could happen with the largest one.” The Dips is always their biggest safety worry. Gus repeated three times last night while they waited at the hospital that he wanted to check the cars’ rusty pins.

They approach the chicken wire fencing that surrounds the coaster’s scaffolding. Yellow and black “NO TRESPASSING” signs are bolted to the fence every fifteen feet.

“How long has this been here?” Gus growls as he passes his hand along a gashed cut and bent back hole, large enough for a person to crawl through.

“Looks like the pranksters have returned since we were here three days ago.” Ruby scribbles words in her notebook. “It amazes me no one has ever fallen into Little Lake or the brambles.”

Several times each summer, they discover these breeches. It’s always restless teens drinking beer and daring each other to climb as high as they can on the braces. When the men check the rides daily, Hal’s instructions are to have the wire cuts covered and repaired within a day of being discovered.

“I’ve had enough of babysitting this inept man. What does Hal take me for, an idiot? I’m going over to Durwood’s—he better be there with a good excuse for why he’s been missing the last twenty-four hours.” Gus takes off, limping toward the park exit as Lila and Ruby follow ten steps behind.

“Stewart, err, String Bean, huh? What’s this all about?” Lila asks quietly, though she would have to be blind to have missed the obvious chemistry in the interaction at Ruby’s cottage.

“Uh, just sort of a nice man. A widower. The yacht club recommended him to clean and repair all the rental boat engines.”

Lila tilts her head and smiles. “Nice how?”

“Nice to me.”

“Ruby O’Rourke, I never. Good for you!”

“I don’t know what’s come over me, the truth be told,” sighs Ruby, fanning her face with her notebook. On her pale skin, a blush is impossible to hide.

As Gus pulls his truck into the drive at Durwood Boarding House, Hal’s Ford Standard is parked at a haphazard angle, taking up the spaces meant for two vehicles. Stepping out, they see Hal sprawled across the front seat through the side window. Gus pounds on the windshield with his palm. Hal startles and sits up. He blinks and shakes his head like a dog waking from a nap.

“Goddammit!” Gus shouts. He yanks on the door handle. His Stetson tumbles to the ground as he jerks Hal out of the car by his shirt. As Hal steadies his feet to gain balance, a four-inch bootleg comic with a crudely drawn Mae West on the cover falls out of Hal’s pants pocket. “Where the hell have you been all night?” Gus spews as he glares into Hal’s bloodshot, droopy eyes.

Hal averts his gaze and mumbles something unintelligible. He twists his shoulders, freeing himself from Gus’s grip. “Leave me alone.” He picks up the eight-pager, then strokes his hand across his two-day scruff. “Once again, I’m sure you’re making a big fuss over nothing. You Texans blow everything out of proportion. Nothing but hot air.”

“Are you kidding me? That kid could have died! His blood would be on your hands.” Gus kicks his hat across the pea gravel. “You’re useless. Can’t Summerland send someone who gives a damn about our park?” His eyes are hard, set above his tight lips.

Hal tucks the comic into his back pocket and hooks his thumbs under his suspenders. The two men stand inches apart, nostrils flaring as they stare each other down. Lila and Ruby don't move.

Gus breaks the silence. "Come with me. We're going to walk this entire park and inspect every single ride. Then I'm calling Summerland with a full report." Gus adds through clenched teeth, "Understand?"

Hal huffs and drops his hands. "Yeah."

"All right then, let's get after it. I can't bear another accident."

"Let me get my things." A scrawny tabby cat has sidled up beside the open car door. Hal grabs a half-eaten tuna sandwich lying on the floorboard and tosses it to the scrounger. "I can't catch a break, either, bud," Hal mutters.

For the next five hours, the group tromps through the park, inspecting one ride after another. Gus continues swearing, Hal makes excuses, and Lila notices Ruby wringing her aching hand. She is furiously recording the needed repairs in her notebook.

Near dinnertime, they finally trudge back to the pool. Lila squeezes her bleary eyes shut, having gone more than twenty-four hours without sleep. Repairmen are crouched next to the pool filter, surrounded by tools and parts spread all over the concrete, as they have been for days. When operational, the machinery removes debris from the lake water three times a day as it enters the Crystal Pool, though everything is currently stagnant. When properly filtered for swimming, the clear water laps at the blue tile edges. Today, bits of leaves and tiny creatures float in six inches of murky brown muck at the bottom of the two-hundred-foot-long pool. Lila doesn't see Birdie anywhere in sight.

Gus removes his hat and wipes his brow with his sleeve. Lila knows that not an ounce of patience is left in her husband. Who can blame him? It is their responsibility to keep the park and its visitors safe.

"Hal, you know this pool and the Crystal Ballroom are our gems. We spoke about this the day you arrived. One more thing to add to our list today." He waves his hand toward the water and at the dance hall observation decks above. "I've got the Miss Central Ohio Beauty Pageant lined up here in ten weeks. Publicity is already out, being broadcast on

national radio. My men will build a platform right over the water for fifty girls to parade around. If this filter fails, it will be a disaster. This park can't survive all your incompetence."

Sobered now, Hal is slightly more compliant. The two men stare at each other for a long moment as Gus shakes his head. "Got it." Hal passes his hand through his greasy hair. "I'll stay with these men here until she's up and running."

"Bumbling fool," Gus grumbles with the last of his energy as they leave Hal standing idle with the repairmen.

"Come on, Gus." Lila tugs on his arm. "Let's walk over to the pier and calm our nerves before we go back to the cottage. We can check on how things are going with Daring Davy's box." Lila refers to the idea Gus dreamed up over the winter for a new attraction. They are building a waterproof box for a man to live underwater all summer. Customers can pay five cents to look down a tube and talk to him. Lila will be responsible for cooking and sending food down three times a day. A college boy from Ohio State University has already signed up for the job.

As they move down the wooden pier, tools and pieces of wood for constructing his box are strewn about the decking. Lila puts her hands on the rail and peers down into the water. To unknowing eyes, it appears deep. In reality, it's only twelve feet up near the piers. The man's escape hatch is being tested. He will easily be able to use it and swim to the surface in case of trouble.

Lila falls behind Gus as they walk along the narrow track that surrounds the Pier Ballroom. This dance hall is less fancy and smaller than the Crystal Ballroom. In years gone by, particularly during the Great Depression, dance marathons were the cheapest entertainment anyone could afford. No one, especially Lila and Gus, has forgotten how the revenue sustained the park, and they are all thankful those bleak days are behind them.

Lila steps on one of the trap doors that remains. It always makes her smile. Lore has it that liquor was smuggled up through them during prohibition, brought here in rowboats in the dead of the night. If it was true, it was going on right under Gus and her noses when they were so new and green at operating the park.

“I’m gonna leave you two,” Ruby says. “Got to get over to the post office and mail this. Missed dropping it off this morning.” She taps the manila envelope in her hand. “Get some rest.”

Lila watches Ruby walk toward the arched midway sign. The late afternoon sunlight is bouncing against her red hair so that it seems on fire. She knows the envelope contains money from her paycheck, which she sends every week to her mother back in Boston.

## CHAPTER 18

### Marisol

*April 20, 1942*

She is filthy. Marisol's stench is worse than the bathroom's when she arrived. She walks to her cabin, still distraught about the sign nailed against the pool house wall. Marisol changes her clothes and walks over to Brigid's family's cabin.

Her best friend sits beside her brother in porch rockers. They're snapping peas into a bucket. "Birdie told me Mrs. Durwood might have work cleaning her rooms. I'm going to ask about it. Want to come, too?" Marisol asks.

"No need now. Father found extra work for me, cleaning tables over at Vernon's Restaurant."

"All right. I'll see you tomorrow. Don't forget about Saturday."

Brigid closes her eyes and pretends to swoon. Marisol bursts out in laughter and shakes her head as she leaves down the path.

Marisol arrives at Durwood Boarding House ten minutes later to find a young Black girl sitting on the edge of the porch that runs the length of the house. She's a year or two older than Flora. The girl chomps on an apple, swinging her legs and staring at her shoes that look like a boy might have been the previous owner. She wears a shabby apron that's been washed so

many times, barely any print remains. Beside her rests a bucket and a dingy rag draped over the side.

“Hi, Miss. Is Mrs. Durwood around?”

The girl looks up, touches the curly hair tied back with a yellow cotton headscarf, and scans Marisol from head to toe. Without a word, she puts her thumb over her shoulder toward the screen door. She moves her eyes back to her shoes and continues humming.

A bell anchored over the door tinkles, and the screen slaps behind Marisol as she steps into the foyer. She’s never been inside a boarding house. Everyone knows Durwood Boarding House is the only one for miles.

No one is around. Marisol contemplates the right thing to do. The clatter of dishes emanates down the hall, and the savory aroma of pot roast makes her mouth water. “Hello? Mrs. Durwood?” she calls as she moves cautiously toward the noise and heavenly smells.

“Back here,” a woman’s voice replies.

As Marisol steps through the propped-open kitchen door, Etta Durwood clutches a fistful of silverware and stands next to a long wooden table. “Ah, hello Marisol,” the woman acknowledges her with a nod, though she continues her work of laying the forks and knives beside each empty plate that lines the perimeter of the faded blue gingham tablecloth.

“Hello, Ma’am,” Marisol says.

“I wondered when I’d see you and Amelia back here at the park.” Mammie takes in sewing every year for Mrs. Durwood’s guests. “I’m just setting up dinner for the boarders. To what do I owe your visit?” she asks, moving around to the other side of the table.

“I heard you might be needing some help cleaning guest rooms. I could sure use the extra work. While the park is only open on the weekends, I can come every weekday.” Her stomach gurgles, and her eyes dart to the stovetop as she inhales the rich aromatics of beef and onions that fill the room. “It’s been a rough winter for my family, Ma’am,” she adds, shuffling her feet.

“Ah, yes, I was sorry to hear of you and Amelia’s troubles.” Etta finishes laying the silverware beside the mismatched plates and puts her hands on her hips.

“Thank you, Mrs. Durwood.” Marisol licks her top lip as she stares at the fresh loaves of bread resting in baskets down the center of the table.

“Yes. Yes, I could certainly use your hands. I guess it’s my good fortune word travels fast in our little burb,” she says with a chuckle. “Every one of my rooms is booked clear through summer. Let me finish this table, and then I can give you a quick tour of the place. Call me Miss Etta.”

Marisol steps to the counter and hands Etta the glasses and pitchers of water for the table. As soon as they’ve finished, Marisol follows as she leads them back to the front entry and up the too-steep wooden staircase. A dull runner is threadbare and frayed at its edges.

“We have twelve guest rooms up here, four downstairs, including mine.” Etta walks down the long, narrow hall toward the end. Trailing once-red roses on the wallpaper have faded to pink, and the background is yellowed with age. The corners curl away along the ceiling. “There is one bathroom up and one down. Everyone shares, so it’s quite a scramble in the mornings. Good reason to be an early riser.” Etta releases a tired laugh, re-pinning a stray strand of hair beneath her scarf. She points at the wide wooden door of the communal bathroom, the floorboards worn clean of stain.

Etta continues to the last room on the right as Marisol trails behind. “In the winter months, when the park isn’t open, I’ll take renters for a month, a week, even a night, my situation being what it is, since it’s just me.”

Marisol recalls the circumstances Etta refers to. Three summers earlier, the gossip about Mason Durwood spread through the park like wildfire. He’d owned and operated the boarding house for eighteen years until 1939, when he ran off with Lottie King. She was one of the regulars, dancing in the marathons that kept people coming to the park through the depression. Rumor had it she was barely twenty years old.

“I don’t care, can’t be choosy, as long as they pay up,” Etta continues. “I can handle all the cleaning for them by myself. But in the summer, I keep all the rooms rented steady. Lucky for me, my boarding house was the only one that didn’t get mowed down a couple of years ago when the urban reformers’ movement swept through.”

Everyone knows that Etta is now the sole proprietress and matron and provides the cheapest room in town to those working in the park all

summer. Marisol doubts anything has changed since Mr. Durwood abandoned his old life. She once heard Mammie tell Gran Rose he had few redeeming qualities, anyway, except for his contribution to keeping this place in good repair. Since his abrupt departure, her constant flow of renters has probably taken its toll on the cavernous wood-slatted building.

They've reached the end of the hallway. Marisol stands in the doorway of the last bedroom. Etta walks to the window facing the backyard, gazing into the dense tangle of tree branches. "This room was my mother's until she died last year, God rest her soul. My only long-timer. I had a fire escape installed down this window, just in case," she says as she places her hand flat against the glass. Etta sighs and straightens, turning back toward Marisol. "My renters get this basic double bed, nightstand, and a lamp. A couple of my rooms are slightly nicer, like this one, with my mother's dressers and rugs. I cook 'em up breakfast and dinner for those who have an interest. I see most in the morning, especially the wily ones, with their boardinghouse reach. But many of them work in the park until closing, so the dinner table is usually almost empty. If I'm lucky, everyone minds their own business and doesn't bring me any trouble."

Marisol brushes her hand against one curtain, disturbing the clinging thin layer of dust. Etta Durwood is a kindred spirit, trapped in her situation and left to manage all this alone.

"I can pay you by the day to clean the rooms and baths. The girl on the porch, Sadie, she helps me clean the kitchen and dishes after meals. My niece Mary helps me cook, tend the chickens, and weed my vegetable garden. Only way I can afford to feed all these mouths. Mary's been helping clean the rooms since her friend Dorothy ran off to California last week with her boyfriend, but I need her in the kitchen and in the yard. Daft girl left me high and dry, without so much as a goodbye." Etta shakes her head and rubs the back of her neck.

"Thank you! Thank you, Miss Etta! I'll be here tomorrow. When the park is full open, I read fortunes in my tent on the tow path, but I'll talk to Mammie, see if I can come here a few hours each morning. I won't let you down." Marisol impulsively hugs Etta, then releases her abruptly, remembering others in her clan wouldn't approve of embracing a *gadzo*.

Walking back down the path, it sinks in to Marisol that she's agreed to a lot of work. Going to read with Lila each morning before sunrise, cleaning the park public bathrooms on Mondays after the busy weekends, and cleaning rooms for Etta Durwood. Then she reads cards all day in her tent until the park closes. But she must make money while she can.

For the next three days, Marisol cleans the fifteen boarders' bedrooms, Etta's, and both the well-used baths. A few guests are tidy, but she finds the majority are sloppy. She learns many of their secrets with her job more intimately close than she'd imagined.

Each day, she cleans Etta's mother's bedroom last, pausing to look out the window and think about her future. There seems to be a single woman who rents it, although Marisol hasn't learned what her work is in the park. Her clothes are tailored from fine materials and are well-constructed. She has several pairs of nylons, a luxury in these war times.

The one Hal Clements occupies is easy to distinguish from all the others. His clothes and shoes lie haphazardly strewn about the floor, and his old leather suitcase lies splayed open. Marisol drops at least one empty liquor bottle into her trash every day. On her hands and knees, she picks up cigar butts and scrapes ground ashes from one of Etta's mother's rugs.

At first, she is curious about the brown cardboard boxes Hal has stacked in the corner. It seems to grow larger every day. Words like "*TEACUPS*," "*DOLLS*," and "*CHALKWARE STATUES*" are stamped on most of the boxes.

On Friday, Marisol looks up and down the hallway to be sure no one is around. Usually, she leaves the bedroom doors wide open while she cleans, but today, she shuts Hal's behind her. She walks to the corner and reaches for the knife in her apron pocket that she brought from the kitchen. Marisol wedges it beneath the flap of one of the heavy boxes, daring to pry it open. Inside are ten dolls' faces staring up. She opens another. It's full of chalkware statues. The third one has rows of teacups and saucers cradled in padding. She lifts a set out and turns it over in her hand. These are boxes and boxes of prizes for the Midway games, where many Romanies work alongside the booth owners. She doesn't understand why Hal would have so many of these

in his room. She knows he is in charge of the park rides and safety, but has nothing to do with the games in the park.

Then she remembers many accusations last summer from booth owners of prizes that came up missing. And suddenly, Hal's words when he followed Brigid and her dawn on her. He is sabotaging the Romanies.

A door slams down the hall, and it startles Marisol from her thoughts. The teacup wobbles, and she watches in horror as it topples from her hand, like it's in slow motion. She swipes to catch it, but only grabs at the air, and the saucer tumbles, too. The cup cracks against the sharp edge of the wooden dresser and sprays blue shards of glass across the room. The saucer breaks into three pieces.

Marisol stands stock still as she can hear voices in the hallway. When they finally move away toward the staircase, she removes the teacup box from its stack and sets it on the floor. With all her strength, she lifts the much heavier one below it. After replacing it with the one missing its broken cup and saucer, she heaves the heavy one back up on top. It wobbles, threatening to fall over, but finally, it settles to a stop.

On her hands and knees, she does her best to pick up the broken glass from under the bed and every corner of the room. Maybe she should leave a few. If Hal stepped on one with a bare foot in the night, she wouldn't mind at all.

The next day, Hal Clements stumbles up the porch steps as she reaches the path. Marisol stops and crouches low behind the bushes. She waits, giving him ample time to reach his room. His will not be cleaned today.

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Finally, Saturday evening arrives. Marisol should be exhausted from her heavy week of reading lessons with Lila, cleaning for Mrs. Durwood, and seeing her days' querents. But somehow, she isn't. She hurries through her last reading and says a silent thanks that it's an easy one. With no more people lined up, Gran Rose says Marisol can leave the tent.

Brigid enters through the back flap and stands in the opening. "What's the plan?"

“I’m going to take off my costume, go over to the bathrooms at the pool, and wash my face and hands. I can’t meet Will here. Mammie and Gran will have a fit. You wait for him, bring him to the caramel popcorn stand. I’ll meet you there.”

“All right.” Brigid shrugs but smiles slyly. “I hope we don’t get caught.” The secret meeting is the most exciting thing that’s happened to either of them all week.

Marisol sheds her costume and hurries across the grassy area. She slips through the worker’s gate and blends into the crowd. When she arrives at the pool house, beautiful band music floats out from the open walls of the ballroom. She holds her thick black hair up in a wad atop her head, letting the lake breeze cool her neck.

Inside the bathroom, Marisol rakes her fingers through her hair and tames it with a bright red scarf she’s folded into a headband. She ties it in a knot on the top, the same way some of her querents wear their scarves.

Ten minutes later, Marisol approaches the side of the caramel popcorn stand where Brigid is standing behind it. Will Worthington is there, too. The red sign is a beacon, illuminated by the bright park entrance lights. “You’ve met Brigid. Our lookout,” Marisol says with a nervous laugh.

“Yes, she was kind enough to guide me here, though I don’t understand why I had to follow ten feet behind her.” Will tilts his head, raises his eyebrows, and smiles. “Why do we need a lookout, anyway?”

“Remember, I’m not supposed to be with you?” Marisol lifts her hand and places her fingers against her lips. How can she explain her clan’s culture to this stranger? Her cheeks are warm from hurrying down the midway and her increased heart rate upon seeing Will again. “It’s complicated.” Her voice trembles.

“Are you okay?” Will asks with gentleness in his voice.

“Yes. I just...I feel like I’m sneaking around. Forgive me.”

“I’m going to leave you two,” Brigid interrupts, waving and already walking away.

Will shuffles his feet. “Where should we go?”

“Let’s walk along the water to the rowboat rentals at the far end. It’s usually deserted this late.”

They blend into the midway crowd and turn onto the boardwalk. Marisol exhales with relief as her plan to meet Will unnoticed seems to have worked. She glances at the people around them, but they are all strangers who mind their business. Marisol savors the feeling of disappearing anonymously into a crowd.

After ten minutes of walking in silence, she tentatively ventures to speak. She's never had an actual conversation with a *gadzo* man her age. "Where are you from?" Blood rushes to her cheeks with her uncharacteristic boldness. She knows most of the visitors from the park are not local, traveling from all over Ohio and beyond. His life must differ greatly from hers.

"Columbus."

"What is that like?" He probably thinks she means the city. But she is curious about his home and his family.

"Noisy, I guess." Will shrugs his shoulders. "Not peaceful like out here in the country."

Marisol tries again. "You said in your card reading that your father wants you to join him in his business. What is that? Are there others in your family besides him and you?"

"Oh, you mean how I live. My father works for the railroad. He travels a lot, leaving my sister Charlotte and me with our mother. When she is not out with her high society friends, which is often these days. My life is safe, predictable, calculated." He shoves his hands in his pockets. "Not that I'm ungrateful. It's just..."

"Just what?" Marisol's life is anything but safe and predictable.

"Most others I know at college are studying to do work they want to do. They decided what path they will take. But everything has been planned for me. Even what I'm supposed to do when I graduate. It was that way for my father with my grandfather, and he's decided it will be that way for me, too." He looks over at Marisol and meets her eyes as they keep walking. "That is, unless I get drafted."

She barely remembers any of her querents' readings, but hasn't forgotten even one word of Will's. "You said you want to fly airplanes. That's what you want, instead of working for the railroad? You're willing to go to war

instead of doing what your father wants?" Marisol asks, surprising herself with the need to know this stranger's desires. She has hardly shared her own with Gran, Mammie, and Brigid. But it is the thing that draws her to him. Marisol is so different from this man, but deep down, she suspects they are very much alike. She sensed on the day of his reading that they both longed to do important work that is forbidden.

"It's more what I don't want. My father is a powerful man. He loves Charlotte and me, but loves his work more than us. Like I said, he's already planning my future, taking over his business."

"And you still haven't told him about being a pilot?"

"I planned to on my birthday in February, but I lost my nerve. They moved the draft age down, and I felt pulled to join the war effort. He and my mother are angry that I signed up." His voice is heavier now. "He's trying to get my name withdrawn from the pool. I hate that more than anything."

They reach the rowboat docks. "Should we go out on one?" Will asks.

Marisol nods, looking back to where they came from. She's never been in a boat.

Will walks to the rental booth and hands the man some money. "Take any of them," Marisol hears him say as he waves toward the boats. The man hands him a lit lantern.

Will chooses one with a yellow stripe and red oars. It's tied to a brass ring screwed into the dock. Water laps against all the other boats, wobbling them in an uneven rhythm. There are many larger lacquered and polished Chris Craft boats secured to the docks for the night, with their canary yellow tarps stretched and bound across their open hulls.

The rowboat rocks gently as Will steps inside. He grabs the edge of the dock with one hand to steady it and holds the other out to Marisol. "Here, let me help you."

Darkness almost envelops them. Moths and mayflies flit in the glow of the light anchored on the pole above. It shines on Will's golden curls and glints in his eyes. Marisol lays her hand into his palm and feels its security and the sensation of his skin. It's like nothing she's ever known. A shock shoots through her chest as it steals her breath away, something that feels dangerous and pleasant all at once. Their gazes lock for the briefest moment.

Marisol gathers her skirt from her ankles and allows Will to steady her balance as she steps forward from the dock. They are so close that his skin's fresh soap scent is magnified by his measured breathing.

Once she has both feet planted in the boat, he allows her hand to fall away. Will eases onto the bench and leans toward the dock to untie the tethered line. He puts the lantern on the floorboards and takes up the oars. Squeals and bursts of laughter from park guests enjoying the rides float through the air.

Marisol is still standing, and he motions toward the bench across from him. She sits on it, facing Will. She grips both sides beside her skirt. Other than in her quarent readings, she's never been alone with a *gadzo* man. Even then, Gran is always just beyond the jeweled curtain. She feels a wave in her stomach, uncertain if it's fear or excitement about this new experience.

Quietness settles between them. The only noise is when Will dips the oars in a smooth rhythm, gently slicing into and back up out of the water. Within ten minutes, they reach the middle of the lake. Will rests the paddles of the oars inside the boat. The water is still and they are far from the shore and the lights of The Dips. The charcoal sky is a canopy, a punched tin lantern as a million stars twinkle above their heads.

Will breaks the silence. "What about you? Where are you from?"

Marisol smooths her skirt across her thighs. No one has ever asked her such a thing. How can she respond to such a difficult question? To someone who can't possibly understand her way of life? She lifts her eyes from the dripping oar she's been staring at. Will's eyes are soft and kind.

She blushes, thankful that her end of the boat is darker. "I'm lucky, in some ways. I have my Gran Rose, my Mammie, and my sister Flora. I love them all so much. In the winter, we live together back in Indiana. We travel here to work at the park in the summers."

"Only you four women? You live alone?" Of course, he must wonder why there aren't any men.

"Grandad had a heart attack and died two years ago. He and Gran were..." Marisol searches for the right words. "They loved each other very much. It is not always that way in my culture. Most marriages are arranged. My Mammie's was to my father, Earl. At first, they say, he was good to her.

But alcohol got a hold. By the time I was born, it was not a good match. It only got worse.” Marisol’s words hang as her gaze drifts across the water to the lit cottages that dot the shoreline. Will does not interrupt.

“And me.” By now, their eyes have adjusted to the darkness. She turns hers back to Will’s, forcing the next words out. “My father arranged a marriage for me to a man named Levoy.” She leaves out the part about the barn. It is impossible to describe, and she has never spoken of that night since. “We had a wedding ceremony. The following day, there was a fight. Both Father and Levoy died.” Marisol recounts the facts of both men dying as if she were reading from a script. She is devoid of any sadness or grief.

“Oh, wow. That must have been shocking. Difficult.”

“I know it sounds horrible, but my father was a tyrant. In the short time I knew Levoy, he showed me the same traits.” How can Will understand her words when they are so wildly inappropriate?

“Are you all okay, then, the four of you?”

They are not okay. The past six months had been hard. But not more than a life with Levoy would have been. Of this, Marisol is sure. “Yes.” Suddenly, she is embarrassed by how destitute they are, but continues talking. “We are struggling to make money. The unwritten law is that there is little work women are allowed to do. We are invisible to everyone in our clan. But honestly, the men dying freed us.” Marisol is astonished that she let those last words escape her mouth. Though they are the truth.

To Marisol’s surprise, tears prickle in her eyes. Not from sadness at speaking about the two men’s deaths, but from the heavy burden she feels trying to find a better way for Gran, Mammie, Flora, and herself. She sets her jaw, holding back the dam.

Will reaches across the space between them and touches Marisol’s cheek. An unfamiliar warmth spreads through her chest. Will turns his fingers over and traces them along her jaw, and then drops his hand into his lap. His touch tingles on Marisol’s skin.

Will clears his throat. “My apologies if that was improper. I...I don’t want you to cry.”

She wants desperately to say something more. To explain her suppressed feelings and desire for real love, not just a marriage of convenience. She’s

seen an example of what she longs for, one time, between Gran and Grandad. The words seem inappropriate to tell this stranger she's only recently met.

"Thank you," Marisol whispers. "You are very kind."

Will lifts the oars and dips them in the water, paddling the rowboat back toward the shore and the multi-colored lights of the amusement park. "Do you feel safe with me?" he asks.

"Yes, I do. What makes you ask?" With all she has told him, maybe he thinks she fears all men and that she is too damaged to open her heart.

"I've noticed you looking all around. As if something is lurking in the shadows."

Marisol lets out a diminutive laugh. "I guess I seem like an anxious cat."

The conflict Will has noticed overtakes Marisol's thoughts. Why should she live her life always looking back instead of focusing on what lies ahead? She feels a rush of jumbled emotions: fear, sadness, and an unfamiliar craving for Will's touch again. She brushes away a lone tear, hoping he doesn't notice this time.

When they reach the dock, Will expertly tosses the line around the pole, ties a knot, and hoists himself onto the dock.

Will holds out his hand for Marisol. His grip is firm as he helps her up onto the decking. This time, he does not let her palm slip out of his hand. A warm sensation shoots up the length of her arm. They are alone in the glow of the dock lights, and she can make out the soft smile playing at the corners of Will's lips.

Marisol drops her eyes to the gaps in the gray, weathered dock boards. Sensing his gaze, she straightens and lifts her chin, allowing her eyes to settle with his.

The night is quiet, far away from the boardwalk, except for the distant waltz music wafting in the air. Will reaches forward and touches Marisol's hair. Before she knows what's happening, he pulls her into his chest. She lets it happen, though she knows she should resist the urge to be this close to him. She can feel his heart beating through her blouse as his chest presses against hers. It seems as fast as her own. The sensation is thrilling and terrifying at the same time.

Will suddenly steps back and releases Marisol from his embrace. "I apologize. I don't know what came over me," he stammers.

"It's okay," she whispers. She straightens and mindlessly smooths her skirt. "Thank you for this time together. It's been a wonderful evening. But you should go." She darts her eyes around the dock. "Without me, so no one sees us," she adds.

"Are you sure? Leave you alone here in the dark?" The lanterns along the dock flicker questions in Will's eyes. "I can't walk you back safely?"

"No need. I know this park as if it's my home. I'll be fine."

"Can I see you again after my school is out for summer?" Will asks.

"I would like that. I could meet you here by the boats on Decoration Day, that Saturday night, before the park closes."

"I'll be here." Will grabs her hand and brings it to his cheek, brushing his lips against the top. Before she can speak, he turns and walks toward the intersection where the boardwalk and midway intersect. His shadow stretches long behind him. A young couple with their arms linked strolls past Marisol. They don't notice as she stands still like a deer in the shadows, trying to process what she has done. She lifts her hand and places the spot where he kissed it up to her lips.

That night, as she lay on the mattress beside Flora, she stares at the ceiling lit by the shadows of the moonlight. She can feel the rocking of the boat as if she is still floating out there on the lake with Will. There is no denying he stirs something deep within her. He makes her feel what she has never known before. She closes her eyes and tries to see into her future. Is there a chance a man like Will can be her destiny?

## CHAPTER 19

### Will

*May 29, 1942*

Will bends and checks one last time beneath his bed. He closes and clicks the lock of his dorm room trunk. It will be shipped to his home in Columbus. Today is the last official day of Will's sophomore year.

He plucks up the payphone receiver out in the hallway, drops change into the slot, and dials a number he has memorized. An operator connects them. "Hello, Grandma." Her voice comes back through the wire, clear and cheerful.

"Yes, I'm happy to have this school year finished. Would you make sure the back door is unlocked? It will be late when I arrive."

After his final class, Will is on a bus once again. This time, he is awake and alert. Diesel fuel and a previous passenger's perfume co-mingle in the air. He settles into a window seat halfway down the aisle. Rows behind him, a young couple is canoodling in the last seats near the exit door. They whisper, and the girl lets out a giggle. Will thinks of Marisol again as the bus rumbles to life.

City buildings and compact townhomes pass as he stares through the raindrop-splattered window. The street lamps flicker to life. Their glow casts gold bands across the rain-dampened pavement. The bus shares the road with only a few other vehicles this early Friday evening. Until now,

Will wouldn't have noticed any of it, his existence to this point a dull blur. A foreigner traveling in his own life, his actions and reactions to William's control, and doing what's expected cloud the view of his future.

Six weeks ago, the park changed everything. He can't stop the pull and urgency to see Marisol again, even if he wants to.

Will dreams of her every night since they drifted out on the lake together. They walk hand-in-hand, free from her worries of being seen together. In his dreams, he caresses her cheek. Last night, he'd kissed her on the lips. He will finally see her again tomorrow.

When Will wakes early Saturday morning in his mother's old bedroom, the clattering of pans breaches the wooden door. He pulls on his pants and shirt and heads toward the mouth-watering smell of frying bacon.

Grandma stands at the large white stove, turning scrambled eggs in the old cast-iron skillet. "Come, give me a hug." She lays the spatula in the pan and wipes her hands against her apron. "You must have arrived late."

"The bus had a flat tire when we were still an hour away. I was lucky to find someone to give me a ride from the station; otherwise, it would have been a long walk."

"Well, you're here now, safe and sound. What are your plans today?" She returns her attention to the stove as the bacon sizzles and pops. "You already know your mother and father are driving over tomorrow morning, I assume?"

"Yes, when I told Father on the phone last week that I planned to come here once school let out, he told me they were coming." The wooden chair scrapes across the floor as he pulls it out. He feels like a dog on a leash, even though he is a twenty-year-old grown man. He has no doubt William intends to take him back to Columbus to work the summer job he has lined up with a crony.

His grandma sets a plate of fluffy eggs and two slices of warm toast in front of Will. She sits across from him, traces a cross on her chest, and murmurs a blessing over the food.

Will butters his toast, salts and peppers the eggs, and stabs them with his fork. "Grandma," he says, drawing in his breath. "I was wondering. Could I stay here with you all summer? I've got a job interview later over in Heath

at the small local airport. It would be fueling planes and doing odd jobs. A buddy of mine back at college, his father lined it up.” Will relaxes back against the chair’s spindles, now that the words he’d been practicing since yesterday have tumbled out.

“That would be wonderful. I would welcome your company!”

“And of course, I could help you around here with things that need attention since Grandpa passed away.” Will reaches forward and lays his hand on hers.

She nods. “My dear Edward.” She whisks away an immediate tear. “Yes, I could use some help. You are welcome to use his old truck. It sits idle in the barn. Not good for it, I’m sure.”

Will jumps up and hugs her from behind. He presses his cheek against her plump one. “Thank you! You don’t know what this means to me.” He returns to his chair and wolfs down the rest of the toast and eggs.

A wave of guilt pushes forward. Will lays his fork on the empty plate. He should tell his grandma the full motivation for spending the summer on her farm.

Will clears his throat. “And there’s another reason I want to stay with you.” His voice cracks as heat rises in his cheeks.

His grandma lifts her chin and raises her eyes to Will’s.

“I.” He hesitates. “I met a girl.”

A smile curls across her lips, and she leans forward. “Oh, a girl,” she repeats, tilting her head. “Now tell me all about this.”

He hasn’t spoken about Marisol to anyone and hasn’t said her name out loud. He certainly can’t talk to his parents. And there has been no chance to confide his secret to Charlotte.

“We met at the amusement park up at Buckeye Lake. She’s one of the Romanies.” He lets his words settle, observing his grandma with intensity.

“Wonderful.” She raises her hand to her heart.

“I haven’t told Mother or Father. They...they’ve said things that make me think they would never approve of her because she is Romani. Please don’t tell them yet.” Will checks her eyes for confirmation that his secret will be safe. In a rush, he adds, “Things have been strained with us for a while.

They don't know I plan to get a job at the airport. Father will be angry if I don't work for the railroad."

She nods. "I understand. You know, your mother was not always the way she is now. When she was young, I taught her to cook and sew. She worked in the garden, like every other country girl. Her job every summer was to tend our fruit stand out by the road. Those were lean times for farmers during the Great War." Emma's eyes are distant. "I don't mind telling you, now that you're a man, I don't understand how Clara has abandoned her roots so easily."

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Twelve hours later, Will approaches the boat docks. Marisol stands at the water's edge, gazing across the lake. Trombones and trumpets of a spirited jazz tune sound like a party, echoing in the air. The lake's surface is like a mirror.

"Hi," Will says as he nears, a paper bag in his hand. Lights have flickered to life all around them.

Marisol turns, her eyes seeking his. She holds a three-inch spiked branch in her hand. "There you are. Hello," she says, smiling.

"It's been too long since our boat ride." Will swallows hard as a blush warms his cheeks. He is not used to expressing his thoughts about a woman out loud. She is more beautiful than he remembers. He smiles, abandoning his normally guarded demeanor.

"Yes." She holds her hand forward. "Here, I've brought you some rosemary. It will protect you, give you courage."

Will wants to grab and kiss her hand, but instead takes the herb and brings it to his nose. He inhales the pleasant, earthy scent. "Thank you. How thoughtful." He tucks the sprig in his shirt pocket.

Boats tied to posts bob lazily as rubber fenders protect their lacquered skins. The docks are deserted where they are standing. The scents of lake inhabitants, boat fuel, and French fries blend into an oddly intoxicating aroma.

The young couple on the bus last night flashes in Will's mind. They were younger than Marisol and him. Unlike them, Marisol and he can't wander carefree in the park. As different and difficult as it is to understand her explanation of why they can't be seen together, he accepts that it seems the only way to see her.

"Should we sit here along the dock? I've brought some sugar waffles from the booth back there." He points toward the midway, the bag dangling in his hand.

They settle on the edge, hanging their feet over the sides. Once they've shared the pastries, Marisol asks about his last days at school. She seems curious about every detail and is listening intently.

Will scans out across the lake, then turns his face toward hers. "I got a summer job this morning, over at the airport in Heath. Tomorrow, when my parents come from Columbus, I will tell them. My grandma is going to let me stay with her." He grazes the inside of Marisol's elbow with his fingers. "So, I can come see you."

Marisol's neck flushes, and she touches her throat. "Oh, Will. That will be wonderful. I've...I've thought of you many times since our boat ride." She drops her eyes to her lap.

They talk about the weeks they've been apart. Marisol tells Will about Lila teaching her to read medical books in the secret room beneath the Crystal Ballroom and the charity program application. And about some of her more unusual querents.

The Pier Ballroom's band has started up a waltz. "Would you like to dance?" Will asks.

"Here?" Marisol asks.

"Yes." He gazes from side to side. "We look to be quite alone." He stands and offers his hand, steadying Marisol so she can rise, though he does not release it once she is on her feet.

Marisol glances nervously around the dock expanse. It is empty. Everyone is inside the dance halls, strolling along the boardwalk, enjoying rides, or playing games on the midway. She adjusts her blouse into the waistband of her skirt with her free hand. "I'm afraid I'm not dressed for a party."

“You look perfect to me.”

Marisol laughs, allowing Will to settle his other hand lightly on her waist. It is narrow, and the sensation is unfamiliar beneath his hand. He moves his feet to the rhythm of the waltz and gently leads her within a compact area tucked into the shadows. “You are lithe on your feet,” he whispers near her ear as they glide together easily. It’s as if they have done this many times before. He has gained his proficiency at school dances and cotillions at his mother’s insistence.

“My people, we dance. Though often with more spirit than this,” Marisol says with a nervous laugh.

The song ends, but their feet continue shuffling against the dock in the quiet evening. The band slides into another waltz. Will pulls Marisol closer at her waist and brings his hand clasping hers to his chest. She hesitates, then timidly presses her cheek against his shirt. Her head is beneath his chin. They continue the dance like this, though their feet only move inches.

Strains of the melody end, and Will stops dancing, holding Marisol firmly in place. The night air is still, save for the gentle lapping of lake water against the dock. He takes in the warmth of her body, and her rosewater scent has a mesmerizing effect. Squeals from The Dips’ passengers sail across the lake, breaking into the bubble of the moment. Clarinets toot and whine as the band takes up an energetic swing. They stay bound together until the music ends.

“I should go. It’s late, and Mammie will be worrying. Thank you for another lovely evening,” Marisol says.

“I understand. Can we meet next Saturday? Here again?”

She releases herself from Will’s grasp. “Yes,” Marisol says and smiles as she begins walking back toward her cabin.

“Wait,” Will calls out when she’s a few steps down the boardwalk.

Marisol stops and turns back.

Will closes the gap between them and reaches into his pocket. He opens his hand. It has a simple heart locket on a chain. “I brought this for you.” He takes her hand and presses the necklace into her palm. He’d seen it in an antique store window as he walked to his dorm from the bus station after the last time they met.

Moonlight bounces off the gold finish. "Do you like it?"

"It's beautiful." She traces her fingers on the scrolls and around the outer heart shape. "No one has ever given me something this lovely. But I can't accept it."

"Please, you must. Something between us you can wear and keep with you all the time. To protect you and give you courage, too."

He wants to wrap his arms around her and kiss her pink lips. Instead, he watches her turn and walk down the boardwalk; the locket clasped in her hand as the chain dangles loosely between her fingers.

Once back at the farmhouse, Will lies awake until the old rooster crows just before daybreak. His mind races in every direction. Less than two months ago, he was trapped by a planned future working for Father at the railroad company. Now he's signed up for the draft. He's held a woman in his arms and doesn't care if his parents will forbid her. He pushes those thoughts aside and turns his pillow over. Pressing his cheek against the side, he focuses on Marisol's face and drifts into a peaceful sleep.

A couple of hours later, Will wakes with a jolt. The old alarm clock ticks beside him on the nightstand as he stares at the ceiling. He pictures giving Marisol the locket.

Voices are coming from the kitchen. William's and his grandma's. He grabs his clothes and slips into the bathroom to brush his teeth and wash his face.

"There he is. Sit down and have some pancakes," his grandma nods toward an empty chair.

"Sleeping your day away, son. Nothing good comes of that." William shoots a disapproving look at Will. There's no hello or good morning.

William pulls an envelope from his pocket and waves it in the air. His nostrils flare, and his eyes are icy. Will tries to meet his mother's eyes, but she averts them to the untouched food on her plate.

"This came for you." William flings the envelope across the table so hard it skitters and falls to the floor. He crosses his arms in front of his chest.

Will rubs his forehead with his palm. He leans over and picks up the plain white envelope. It looks ordinary, though its flap has already been unsealed. Will turns it over and reads the tall black letters in the corner.

SELECTIVE SERVICE  
OFFICIAL BUSINESS

His fingers tremble as he moves the flap and slides a folded letter out. It has been crumpled and then smoothed. An official-looking seal is stamped at the top. Will reads the words:

ORDER TO REPORT FOR INDUCTION

The President of the United States,

To

<u>William</u>	<u>Edward</u>	<u>Worthington</u>
(First name)	(Middle name)	(Last Name)

*Greeting:*

Having submitted yourself to a Local Board composed of your neighbors for the purpose of determining your availability for training and service in the armed forces of the United States, you are hereby notified that you have now been selected for training and service in the

Army

(Army, Navy, Marine Corps)

You will, therefore, report to the local board named above at Columbus Armory at 5:15 am on the 7<sup>th</sup> day of September, 1942.  
(Place of reporting)

He must report on Labor Day.

“Look what you’ve done. I knew this would happen,” William blusters as Will stares blankly at the paper.

## CHAPTER 20

## Lila

*June 18, 1942*

Lila furrows her brow. Something is different about the positions of the crates. She's sure they are not in the order she stacked them yesterday. Pushing the last one away with her foot, she glances over her shoulder down the shadowy hall. Surely her forgotten room has not been discovered, after all this time, abandoned in obscurity.

She fishes in her pocket for the heart-topped key. Lila will feel awful if teaching Marisol in secrecy has been discovered. Marisol hasn't mentioned lately the other Romanies shaming Gran Rose, Amelia, and herself for being widows. Lila prides herself on being open-minded, but even this old custom is hard to understand. How can widowhood be a woman's fault? Why should it prevent them from moving forward? Maybe with the busyness of the park, the others have moved on. If the secret of her tutoring Marisol stirs things back up, it's the last thing she wants to do. Even more, this room is her private sanctuary. It's the haven where she feels most useful, teaching Marisol, and where she keeps the sadness of Daisy's loss locked away.

Lila jiggles the key in the old lock, swings the door open, and shuts herself inside. The table and chairs appear undisturbed. She runs her hands along the most difficult medical books. A chemistry volume is pulled slightly

forward, and as she questions if it is out of place, Marisol is behind her at the door.

“Good morning, Miss Lila.”

“Hello, come on in. Sit down,” Lila says, dismissing the suspicion that an intruder has breached her room’s sanctity.

“I’m sorry to have missed the other mornings this week. I hope you got the word I sent. Mrs. Durwood has needed extra help cleaning rooms, so I had to go much earlier every day.” Marisol plops down in a chair. “Gran agreed to oversee the tent until after lunchtime, so I’m free now. Sometimes I think she misses doing all those tarot card readings.”

Lila sits across from Marisol and studies her face. It’s gaunter than when she arrived in April, if it’s possible. Marisol’s collarbone is poking through the top four inches of her blouse, peculiarly unbuttoned today. A heart locket she’s never seen before rests atop her skin. It’s none of her business, but she can’t help wondering if it is from the boy Will that she mentioned.

Lila sets a thick algebra book on the table and opens it to the page where they last left off. Sometimes they study the medical books, but Lila’s learned that Marisol’s lack of education has missed many of the basics. It’s a gap that will show up if she’s accepted into the program.

“How are you doing now that our park is in full swing?” Lila asks. “You look tired.” She knows that Marisol is working many hours between the boarding house and reading tarot cards.

“Oh, I’m fine. It’s good to have so much work. I want to earn as much money as I can this summer in case, by some miracle, I’m accepted to the charity program.” Marisol reaches into her pocket and pulls out folded papers filled with writing. She lays them on the table. “And I brought this second set of application answers.”

“I’m sorry again that you had to redo these.” Lila picks up the pages. “I can’t imagine what happened to the first ones you left beneath the crates. It still perplexes me.” She draws her mouth straight into a line, bites her lip, and swallows. The feeling of being watched when she comes to this hidden room, or that someone might even be entering, is disturbing. Who would be inclined to bother? A shiver rattles across her shoulders even though it’s warm and humid.

“It’s okay. My second set might be better, anyway.”

“I will look these over and make notes. We can finalize the application after surviving the 4<sup>th</sup> of July weekend. I’m sure the crowds will be the largest ever, if it’s anything like our first four weeks have been. The deadline to mail it is July tenth.”

They finish practicing the standard formulas. Marisol’s stomach rumbles. Lila snaps the book closed. “Let’s go to lunch. We can sit at the drugstore counter and have a milkshake and a sandwich.” She stands and motions toward the door. “My treat.” Marisol had mentioned her curiosity about what was beyond the store’s windows. She said she’d never dared to enter, even though the Romanies weren’t banned. Certainly, Doc Wright, his wife, and daughter would never make her feel uncomfortable. That would likely be the out-of-town park visitors. Today is the perfect day for Lila to introduce Marisol to the wonders behind the storefront and reaffirm that she has the right to go into any place she chooses.

“Miss Lila, I would love that!” Marisol says.

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A bell tinkles above their heads as Lila holds the glass door of Wright’s Drugstore for Marisol to enter. The artificially cooled air blasts their faces. It’s one of the few buildings in the park with the new modern luxury. Twelve-inch black and white linoleum floor tiles are laid out like a checkerboard.

The same as every day, the place is abuzz with activity. Lila has been inside many times, fetching something for someone. It fills everyone’s needs, from visitors hunting for souvenirs to locals and park workers needing various comforts and sundries. She scans the racks near the doorway, positioned for visitors’ impulse purchases. Spinning wire fixtures are filled with postcards. Keychains, Yo-Yo toys, packs of chewing gum, and cigarettes are slotted on narrow wooden racks. The air is rich with scents of peppermint and tobacco.

Marisol touches a finger against an oversized brass cash register anchored on the end of the counter. "This is beautiful. I've never seen anything like it."

Lila agrees, though she's never noticed the intricate scrolls and elaborate design. She pats a red-topped vinyl swivel stool. "Have a seat here." Marisol's eyes widen as she surveys the wall behind the lunch counter. Lila smiles as she watches her take in the rows of brown glass bottles and cardboard boxes. They fill every inch up to the ceiling.

A woman in a pink uniform dress saunters toward them and plucks a pencil from behind her ear. She licks the tip and pulls an order pad from her apron pocket. "What will you ladies be having?" She smacks her gum, not bothering to look up.

"We'll have two cheese sandwiches and two chocolate milkshakes. With whipped cream and a cherry," Lila orders, winking at Marisol.

Further down the counter, a plump, balding man in a white lab coat is busy at his station. He wears thick black-rimmed glasses that rest partially down his nose. As the waitress walks away, Lila can't help but notice Marisol staring at his busy hands. He meticulously counts and scoops pills into prescription bottles. He must sense their attention as he lifts his head and smiles.

The pharmacist steps toward the soda fountain area where they are seated. "Afternoon, Lila. Who's this with you?"

"This is Marisol. I thought it was about time she saw your place, Doc. She wants to be a doctor."

"Is that so? Can't say I know of many programs around here for women. But then, I've been out of school a long time."

"I've learned of a newer one over in Columbus. It's for an undergraduate degree and then on to the medical program at Grant Hospital. We're filling out an application for a spot in their charity program. Might like to add your recommendation, if you see fit."

"Of course, would be happy to oblige. Let me know the specifics," the pharmacist says. "Pleased to meet you, Miss Marisol. Best of luck. I've got to get back to work on all these piled-up orders." He rubs his forehead and returns to his counter to fill more bottles.

The waitress is back and sets the sandwiches and frothy brown concoctions in front of them. Marisol's eyes widen. She touches the damp, cold glass. "I've never had one of these, Miss Lila."

"Here, like this, you eat the cherry first." Lila grins and plucks out the shiny orb. She puts it in her mouth, pulling off the stem.

"Thank you for asking him for that. I didn't even know a recommendation was necessary," Marisol says, as she bites into her sandwich.

"Anything extra can always help with these kinds of things. I don't know how many people will apply to the charity program, with the war going on. In peaceful times, I'm sure the competition would be thick. And frankly, the other people who have the money for medical school or are even accepted could all be men. Old norms are changing everywhere, but not fast enough." Lila has never considered herself part of the feminist movement. The field of teaching has always been open to women. But the more she reads and learns about barriers to work that women are allowed to do, she understands how unfair fields like medicine are.

It's early afternoon when they finish and walk out onto the midway. The crowds are thin but will grow steadily by evening. Lila wedges her fingernail beneath the red tape string on a pack of Wrigley's Spearmint gum. She unwinds it and peels the top away, handing two sticks to Marisol. "Take one for Flora, too."

"Thank you. Another first today." Marisol folds the stick into her mouth as Lila does and tucks the second one in her pocket.

"Look me in the eye, boy!" someone shouts.

Fifteen steps ahead, the owner of the Milk Bottle game stands beside his stall. He clutches the collar of a boy about twelve years old in his meaty fist and pins him against the wall.

Lila, Gus, and Ruby know every booth owner. Most are pleasant people and run legitimate operations. That is, except Mr. Oxbrow from Zanesville. Over the years, they've fielded many complaints that he operates a gaffed game. There has never been any concrete proof that he uses cork-filled balls or weights the bottles. It's the usual tactic to make winning one of his bright-colored stuffed bears impossible. Rumors around the park are that he has two sets of pins and manages to switch them before he is ever caught.

“Peter!” Marisol calls out as they reach the crowd of onlookers gathered beside the stall. “That’s one of Brigid’s brothers,” she whispers to Lila.

The man jerks around and stares at Marisol. Peter shakes his head frantically, terror in his eyes.

“This boy is trying to steal from me. Caught him sneaking around behind my booth.” He still grasps the boy by the collar and yanks it tighter.

“Mr. Oxbrow! Release that young man,” Lila demands.

“I didn’t take anything. I promise,” the boy whimpers, a tear rolling down his cheek. He drops his eyes to the dirt as the booth owner shoves him toward Marisol. Peter is less than a foot shorter than she is. She puts an arm around his shoulder and squeezes the top of his arm.

“This is how it starts. First, it’s the game prizes they think no one will miss. Then they work their way up to fruit and potatoes in the market. Before long, they’re pinching wallets and straight-up cash, spending it on liquor and gambling,” Mr. Oxbrow accuses.

Lila ignores the booth owner. “I believe you, Peter,” she says calmly. “Can you tell me what you were doing back there?”

“Father said he noticed some stalls need paint on their backsides. That rainwater will damage the wood. He sent me out to look. Said I should report back about any that might bring us some work.”

“I understand,” Lila consoles. She pulls out another stick of gum and hands it to Peter. “Run along. No need for you to stay here. I’ll take care of this.”

“Harrumph!” Mr. Oxbrow huffs. He gestures wildly toward the gathered crowd and points his finger at Marisol. “Careful, folks, this one will put a curse on you,” he barks as he spins and stomps into his booth.

“Well, I never! Mr. Oxbrow!” Lila is on his heels, matching him step-for-step. “How dare you be so rude! You owe them an apology.”

“I’ll do no such thing.” He keeps his face turned away. “You’re trespassing. Leave my booth before I call a cop.”

“I’ll remind you, Mr. Oxbrow, you don’t own the land your booth sits upon. No cop would side with you if we told them about the game you run here. You’re lucky we let you continue operating.” Lila walks out of the back of the booth and examines the peeling paint. She steps around to the front on the midway. The bystanders have wandered off, and Marisol stands with

her hands to her sides. Lila pats her forearm. "Ignore that buffoon. His words can only hurt you if you let them."

"I know." She raises her eyebrows and smiles. "I wish I really could put a curse on him. No such thing, though. It's made up. There's only good fortune and bad fortune."

They continue walking down the midway. "Thank you for lunch, Miss Lila," Marisol says. "I loved seeing inside the drugstore."

"Of course. You've worked very hard. I'm proud of you." Once again, she thinks of Daisy. What a beautiful young lady she would be. Full of hope and promise.

"You've been generous with your time." Marisol hesitates but continues. "Would you mind something else? I wondered if you would get Brigid and me into the Crystal Ballroom one time. I can't afford a ticket, but we sure would like to see all the dancing that goes on inside."

Of course, Marisol and her friend wouldn't have the extra money. And she knows it's not a place her people would want her to visit, filled with only non-Romani visitors. She's sure they would frown upon it. Lila's desire to teach Marisol has expanded beyond reading. Who else will expose her to things outside of her cultural guardrails? She respects their right to do things a certain way, but it nags her that Marisol has no idea she has every right to be in places like the Crystal Ballroom or Wright's Drugstore. She'll be woefully unprepared if she's accepted into the charity program.

"That's an easy thing to do. Let's see. Saturday evening won't be good. The air base is doing a training mission out above the lake. They've demanded an *all-lights-out* for ten minutes before the park closes. Gus tried to get them to do it on a weeknight when we're less crowded, but they refused." Lila shakes her head. "They insisted it was better for people to practice following orders, even at an amusement park. Managing the crowds will be a challenge. Who knows what can go wrong in ten minutes of darkness? Can Brigid and you meet tomorrow, at the ballroom, an hour before closing?"

## CHAPTER 21

### Marisol

*June 19, 1942*

After her last querent's reading and changing from her costume, Marisol hurries to the Crystal Ballroom. She stands at the bottom of the entry steps, waiting for Brigid. Singles and couples arm-in-arm climb the wooden stairs. Each time the top doors open, silvery smoke floats out, and the gaiety inside blasts into the air. Marisol closes her eyes and allows the memory of the dance beside the lake with Will to color her thoughts. She hasn't been able to label how she felt in his arms, but can't deny it was more than she ever dared she'd know. Together, it all amplifies the anticipation of seeing him tomorrow night.

It's been three weeks. He'd come once to tell her the demands of his work at the airport were making it difficult to get to the park with any predictability. She'd had a line of waiting customers, and her grandmother had been stationed in the front area of the tent. He'd found Brigid and told her he could finally come back tomorrow. Between her work cleaning Mrs. Durwood's rooms and reading tarot cards, every day since she has seen Will drags by painfully slow.

Brigid is beside her. "You're early," she says, grabbing Marisol's arm.

"So are you." Marisol motions up toward the thrumming music muffled behind the double doors. "I can't wait to see what goes on in there!"

“Anything new happening at Durwood’s?” Brigid asks while they wait for Lila. She always asks questions about the *gadze* who come and go.

“Nothing much. Other than I met the woman staying in Mrs. Durwood’s mother’s room. A college woman, can you imagine? Attends Denison University over in Granville. She’s one of the beauty queens in the upcoming pageant. Mrs. Durwood said her father is a rich doctor in Connecticut. She rents the room, so that technically she is a local resident until the pageant. There are plenty of nice hotels around. I don’t know why she is staying at the boarding house.”

“Maybe she’s hiding from something,” Brigid offers. “Or someone.”

“Ready, ladies?” Lila interrupts as she appears behind them. They nod in unison. “Let’s go.”

Lila climbs the stairs, and Marisol and Brigid follow. The music pulses louder with each step toward the landing. The lively swing dance tunes are more intense up here than what floats out from the ballroom’s open sides. A young couple bursts through the doors, laughing and falling against each other. Marisol squeezes Brigid’s arm and grins as trumpets blare into the air. They take the last few steps, and then they, too, are swept into the music.

The melange of odors from ladies’ perfume and Lucky Strike cigarettes fills the air. An owl-faced man stands guard. Immediately acknowledging Lila, he pushes his black-rimmed glasses up his pointy, beak-like nose. His eyes reflect the shards of light that cascade from the sparkling chandeliers, making them appear as yellow as a canary as they dart around the crowd. He wears a pinstripe suit and a narrow mustard-colored tie.

With his skinny arm, he waves them through, then he replaces it to rest atop a tall, clear glass box. Inside, a mountain of paper tickets is piled to the top like a red snow drift. He clasps his other hand around the silver metal clip at the end of a long crimson velvet rope.

Marisol and Brigid hold hands as Lila leads the way. The elbow-to-elbow crowd laughs and talks above the music. No one pays attention as Lila, Brigid, and Marisol press forward and squeeze along the side above the Crystal Pool. They move past black wrought iron tables positioned around the dance floor’s spectator perimeter. Amber brown beer bottles and silver metal ashtrays dot each one.

Every chair is taken. Lila, Brigid, and Marisol pass behind ballroom guests who lean over the railing. Cigarettes are pressed between their fingers as they chatter and look down upon the pool.

Marisol tugs Brigid's hand, and they linger beside the railing. Everything looks different from the perch up here, as if it were a movie scene she had heard about. The expansive pool area is lit like it's daytime. Swimmers frolic in rented suits from the bathhouse, lifeguards sit on tall white chairs, and mothers lounge poolside with one eye on their children.

Lila commandeers an empty table in the corner and smiles at her prowess. She points at the two vacant chairs. "Have a seat here. Don't get up or someone will slip into your chair before you turn around. I have to leave you to check on Daring Dan. Have fun, you two!" Before they can thank her, she disappears into the crowd.

Glimmering crystal chandeliers dangle from the wooden rafters high above the dance floor. A cross breeze continually moves the cigarette smoke out of the open sides.

Marisol's eyes are wide as she takes in the instruments of the ten-piece band on the stage. A slender woman stands at a microphone wearing a dress that follows her every curve. Light from the chandelier pings against the deep green jewel-encrusted fabric. It sparkles the same as her dangling earrings. With both hands around the metal stand, the woman closes her eyes and belts out a familiar song. "She's beautiful," Brigid sighs.

The sea of people who pack the dance floor and drift and dip to the band's rhythm mesmerizes them. Along the spectator barrier rail, near the corner where they are seated, a woman in a flowing pale blue dress twirls as she gives a waltz lesson to a young couple.

The song ends, and the ballroom erupts with claps and whistles. A few shout at the sultry singer. "Evelyn! Evelyn! Encore!"

"Thank you, thank you," she mouths as she tips her head and blows kisses to the crowd. She steps back from the microphone, and the band leader places a glass of water in her hand.

The man from the ticket booth walks along the edge of the dance floor as he unfurls the velvet rope. "All clear, all clear," he barks with authority. He pulls it taut when he reaches the band's stage, sweeping away any

lingering dancers. The wooden floor is quickly emptied, ready for another crowd. The bandleader waves his white baton and announces the last dance.

“I guess it’s time to go,” Brigid sighs. They rise and make their way toward the ticket taker.

Out on the boardwalk, they blend into the thick, meandering crowd. “That was amazing!” Marisol says.

“That woman, she was incredible. What a life she must live,” Brigid says with longing in her voice. They’ve paused beside the water’s edge. “Your *gadzo*, he’s coming tomorrow night?”

Marisol nods. “I’ve never missed anyone so much. What will happen to us when the summer ends?” She lifts the weight of the locket around her neck into her palm. She never takes it off and mostly keeps it hidden beneath her dress. Gran and Mammie have never noticed it. The only other gift she’d received that meant more was the jewelry box Grandad made.

“Do you need me to be a lookout?”

“No, we’re meeting behind the caramel popcorn stand near the entrance, after I change my clothes. Mrs. Durwood gave me some fabric remnants a guest left behind to give to Mammie. But I kept them, and I’ve been sewing a new blouse and skirt in the beauty pageant woman’s room for weeks. I hid them in one of the swimsuit rental baskets at the pool.” Marisol blushes at her scheming.

“You’ve really planned this out. It’s risky to meet him in the open. You are smitten!” Brigid says. She smiles and gives her friend a gentle push.

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Early Saturday evening, Marisol finishes reading a querent’s cards. The man was a newspaper reporter from Mount Vernon. When he revealed his line of work, Marisol’s first thought was that he had paid for a reading under false pretenses to gather one-sided details about Romanies. Newspapers often print disparaging stories to support their readers’ misconceptions—that the *gadze* should fear them for thievery of their horses and children. Marisol learned long ago that the Romanies are judged by their appearances, not their hard work and customs of keeping to themselves.

Her fears were put to rest when he said his son had recently been shot down in Europe, after just three weeks over there. The man was one of the few querents who cried right there in her chair.

“Fire!” someone is yelling as they run past Marisol’s tent. “Fire!”

Marisol gathers the thick folds of her costume skirt and hurries out onto the tow path. Beyond the entrance gate, black smoke swirls from somewhere along the midway. She takes off, running toward the acrid, greasy odor.

It seems like the entire midway is on fire by the smoke and smell, but as she gets closer, it’s Miss Betty’s sugar waffle booth that is ablaze. Marisol scans the chaotic crowd. It seems like Gus or Ruby would be here, but there are only park guests getting in the way.

Floppo The Clown’s curly wig lies discarded on the ground. He holds a red metal fire extinguisher, the short tube pointed at the booth. He battles the thick orange flames that shoot three feet into the air as best he can with the small device. Marisol guesses the sizzling and popping are from the grease fats. A lanky man beats sparking embers with a broom as they fall from inside the roof down onto what remains of the counter.

Every worker, including Marisol, knows it is imperative to arrest the tiniest of sparks. The greatest threat to park structures is fire, even more than rain, ice, wind, or vermin. The dry, weathered timber of most of the buildings is stronger than a tent, but can’t withstand a carelessly tossed cigarette or the ravages of time.

A crowd of gawkers stands close to the flames, clustered as if this is part of the noontime entertainment. Others have banded in a circle. Some of the women wring their hands, some murmur, and others point at something on the ground. Men hold their children firmly behind their legs to shield their view, but they continue rubbernecking at whatever they are staring at. Instinct tells Marisol someone should take charge.

She parts the sea of bodies. Like a rag doll, Miss Betty is sprawled out on the ground, her head lolling back and forth. Marisol kneels beside her. The woman’s hair has come undone from its bun and clings around her face, matted with grey ashes. Marisol pushes it away and strokes her forehead. Miss Betty’s eyes are wild, and the black centers fill her pupils.

“Amanda! Where is my daughter? Amanda!” she cries out as she writhes in pain. Marisol’s never seen Miss Betty with children in her booth. She’s probably going into shock. Her charred sleeve is torn, and Marisol can see that her right hand is badly burned. She gently lifts it from the dirt and lays it across Miss Betty’s stomach. Pungent odors are all around.

“Try not to move, Miss Betty. Help is coming,” Marisol soothes. She raises her eyes to the crowd of strangers encroaching from above. “Someone, go get the first aid kit from the pool. Hurry! And please, move back and give her room.” She hears her authoritative voice, though it seems outside her body.

Marisol assesses the burn. The color of Miss Betty’s hand is not right, as if she wears a cherry-tinted glove. Hot oil must have touched all of it. The burns seem mostly first-degree, though half-inch blisters have risen on her thumb and first two fingers. The wounds mercifully do not appear too deep, which Marisol knows from one of Lila’s medical books will determine their severity. And that this will be the greatest factor in the degree of possible recovery.

“Could someone please bring me a bucket of cool water? Some clean rags?” Marisol shouts, frustration in her voice. The crowd has barely moved, and she waves her hand as if to push them further back.

There’s not much she can do until someone brings the first aid kit. If she had her natural cures to work with, Marisol would apply a salve Grandad used to concoct from honey, olive oil, and wormwood to ease the pain. She thinks she’s seen a modern topical ointment inside the kit. It will lessen Miss Betty’s pain and stave off infection until she can be transported to the local hospital for proper care.

What seems like an hour is less than five minutes. A ticket taker from the entrance gate pushes through the crowd and stands over Marisol, the white metal box dangling in his hand.

“How bad is it?” he asks, quickly crouching down beside them and setting the box in the dirt.

“Pretty bad. Burns are terrible pain, that much I know.” Marisol fishes for the tube of salve and a sterile cotton pad. “Here, hold her arm still.” She dabs the wounds as gingerly as possible. There’s nothing more she can do.

Finally, the bucket of water and a rag appear. She wipes Miss Betty's soot-blotched face and lays another cool, damp cloth against her forehead. Her eyebrows are singed away. She hears the wails of a fire engine in the distance, like the one at the opening day parade. "Hang on, just a few more minutes. They're on their way." Marisol says with steadiness in her voice.

Miss Betty's eyes are closed now, and she rocks her head from side to side. She moans incoherently, no longer calling out her daughter's name. "Can someone give me their sweater?" Marisol asks without looking up. She remembers from a book that Miss Betty's jaw must be elevated to prevent her from swallowing or choking on her tongue.

Two sweaters are thrust forward, and she grabs one and wads it in a ball. She carefully lifts Miss Betty's head and piles it beneath her neck. So far, she's breathing steadily.

"This is all I can do until help arrives," Marisol says to the ticket taker. "You stay here beside her and make sure she doesn't move. I'm going to check on those other men."

She stands and stares at the too-close crowd of gawkers. They part like water as she moves toward the burned-down waffle booth. Floppo The Clown has put the fire out and is sitting on the ground, his bald head cradled in his hands. "Are you okay, sir?" she asks, placing her hand on his back.

"Go help him," he says, pointing with his thumb behind him.

The lanky man, who had been beating back the embers with a broom, is doubled over beside the charred remains. He hacks out a violent cough.

Marisol rushes to his side and taps his back with her palm. He hacks and coughs again and spits out a glob of soot. Half of it lands in the dust, and the other slides down his chin. "Sir, sir, are you alright?" He aggressively shakes his head, clutches his throat, and collapses into the dirt and ashes.

"String Bean!" shouts a woman.

Marisol raises her head as Miss Ruby shoves away the bystanders. She lowers herself onto the ground beside the man. "Stewart!" she cries as she curls her legs and places his head against her lap. His breath is labored, and his face is blue in the places where it isn't covered in black smudges. Ruby strokes his ash-filled hair. "Marisol, what can we do? He's taken in too much smoke!"

Marisol reaches forward and touches his clammy arm. He, too, appears to be going into shock. "Someone, please, more fresh water." From behind, a paper cup appears.

String Bean hacks out more violent coughs, then his head goes limp against Ruby's lap with the effort. "Here, Miss Ruby, hold his head like this." He moans when she lifts his head. "Just do the best you can," Marisol says.

She stands and looks toward the entrance gates. Finally, they are swinging open, and three cars for Miss Betty, Floppo, and String Bean part the crowds as they drive across the midway.

"Here, here, help her first," Marisol shouts to the drivers as she stands above Miss Betty. "Careful, please, she's in shock." Men lift and load Miss Betty across one of the back seats first. They load String Bean in another, though he is so tall they must bend his knees to make him fit. Ruby climbs into the passenger seat and stretches her arm back at an unnatural angle to touch him. Marisol wipes her sleeve across her forehead as the three cars drive away.

Finally, the fire truck pulls up beside Miss Betty's stall. It's a smoldering pile of rubble. Local volunteer firemen in drab olive jackets and red molded helmets swarm out of the truck like soldiers showing up for battle. They poke their axes into the piles of ashes to disrupt and extinguish any hidden embers. Charred timber boards jut out at irregular angles. The metal oil troughs and Miss Betty's steel rosette sticks are the only recognizable things remaining in the pile of detritus.

Everyone who remains from the dissipating crowd chatters about the fire. "Lucky it wasn't worse," one man says. "You see that man trying to put it out with a broom?" says another, spitting tobacco juice on the ashes.

The sun has begun to set, and Marisol leans her head back and shuts her eyes. Mammie is now beside her. "You were wonderful, taking charge like that." She licks her thumb, swipes black soot from Marisol's cheek, and pulls her into her arms. "Grandad would have been proud."

"I only wish there was more I could do." Marisol had been calm throughout the panic and urgency, but now her body trembles involuntarily. She is suddenly self-conscious among the park visitors. The

white blouse of her costume is marred with black, and her skirt is smudged with dirt and ash.

“No, you did all anyone could do. Come back to the cabin. Let me help you clean up and get you dinner.”

All at once, Marisol remembers her planned meeting with Will. She doesn't know how much time has passed with all the chaos.

Marisol inhales and straightens. “I'm going over to the pool pavilion. Try to clean off this mess there. Miss Birdie won't mind.” She feels a tinge of guilt for omitting the details of her original plan inside the Crystal Pool's bathhouse.

As Marisol approaches the pool gate, Birdie stands just inside. “Marisol, I've been told about the remarkable job you did attending to Miss Betty and String Bean.” News travels fast.

She grabs Marisol's hand and squeezes. “We're lucky you were nearby. Gives me comfort if we ever have a more serious injury at the pool.”

“Thank you. Nothing anyone else wouldn't have done.” She allows herself to admit she doesn't feel like Marisol Mazaria, a tarot card reader. Or Marisol Mazaria, a widow. She is someone who helped two people with her knowledge in their time of dire need.

Marisol knows she looks a mess. “I thought I might clean up over here, if you don't mind.” It's another small deception.

“Of course. The least we can do,” Miss Birdie answers.

Marisol retrieves the new clothes from the obscured swim basket and slips into the public bathroom. With a cloth she stored beneath the skirt and blouse, she washes her face in the sink and steps into a stall. Marisol peels off her soiled costume, wipes her body, and changes. She can still smell the acrid scent of smoke in her hair, but there's certainly no time to wash it. In the mirror, she pulls it back with a silk scarf folded into a narrow band. She stuffs her sooty clothes into the basket and hurries back outside to the pool rental area. By now, the sun has set, and the park has come to life with twinkling colored lights.

Her adrenaline has settled, though her stomach rumbles. She hasn't eaten anything since this morning. But she's too nervous, anyway.

Marisol steps onto the midway. Everything is the same as always, as if the fire and injuries hadn't happened only an hour ago. She hears people chattering, children laughing, and barkers calling out to people at their booths. Marisol stares at the women as they pass. They seem carefree, strolling in their crisp white blouses and pastel cotton skirts that graze against their knees. She can't help but think, even in the new outfit she is proud of, how different she must appear. Marisol's shoes are brown and worn and suddenly feel clunky. They are at least one size too small. She doesn't wish to look like these women, but less different.

Marisol slips between two booths. She tugs the folded scarf from her head and lets her hair cascade around her shoulders. Twisting the silk into a rope, she draws her hair into a ponytail and pulls it back against her neck.

Will smiles as she approaches the caramel popcorn booth. "I thought you might have decided not to come."

Marisol's heart flutters as she takes him in. He is handsome, still in his airport uniform. His mussed flaxen curls fall softly across his forehead. She rubs the goosebumps on her arm.

"Of course not." She turns her head and scans back down the midway past a couple of the stalls. Miss Betty's is covered with a dull brown tarp to keep the curious at bay. She points toward the pile of rubble. "There was a fire earlier at one of the booths. I rushed over..."

Before Marisol can finish recounting the earlier disaster, an announcement blares from the loudspeakers. It's the same one that has been repeated throughout the day, although this time it gives a warning. *WELCOME TO BUCKEYE LAKE PARK, FOLKS. THE PARK WILL OBSERVE AN ALL LIGHTS OUT IN FIVE MINUTES PER MILITARY INSTRUCTIONS. FIVE MINUTES.*

Will stares up at the speaker and nods. "They were talking about this all day at the airport."

"We should stay here until it's over. Lila and Gus are worried that there may be panic. That's why they keep announcing warnings."

Will takes Marisol's hand and pulls her behind the stall. They are tucked among the shadows, away from all the people. "You look nice," he says.

Marisol blushes and reaches for her necklace. His eyes follow her hand. She touches the empty place below her neck. In all the earlier commotion, it must have come unclasped. “Oh, no! My locket!” With the adrenaline rush earlier during the fire and now this, Marisol’s eyes pool. How could she have lost Will’s gift?

He pulls a white handkerchief monogrammed with a *W* from his pocket. Will reaches forward to touch her cheek with his fingertip, dabbing away a tear. At that moment, the park lights go out.

The voices all around them buzz louder in the darkness. Will runs his hand along Marisol’s arm until he finds her hand. He brings it to his lips and holds it there as they both squint, adjusting to the moonlight. He releases her hand and places both hands on her shoulders.

Their faces are inches apart. Will pushes his mouth forward and connects it with hers. Marisol lets out a tiny gasp as he presses his lips hard and then draws in her breath. He moves his hands to both sides of her face, keeping her lips against his.

At first, her thoughts roar, but then they melt to nothing as his kiss lingers. Her heart is beating everywhere—her lips, her fingers, her throat—as she fights back the unfamiliar desire for more. A jolt moves through her body. His cheek is warm and slightly rough against her own. She recognizes the earthy fragrance of expensive oiled leather. Without thought, Marisol places her hand behind his head and weaves the soft blond curls between her fingers.

Will moves his mouth beside her ear. “That’s the first time I’ve ever kissed someone on the lips,” he whispers. He grazes the edge with his teeth. Heat rises through her body. “Marisol,” he says. “I’ve wanted to do that since the day you did my reading in your tent. You don’t know how much I miss you when we are apart. I haven’t been able to stop thinking about us on the boat and our dance.”

His words are so quiet that Marisol hardly catches them. He presses his mouth back to hers, and the kiss this time is soft and tender. It’s passionate and gentle all at once, as if she is the most important person on earth. He pulls Marisol into his arms, and she responds with her hands against his

back. She can feel his hard muscles through the uniform shirt. Her mind is floating, as if it's left her body.

Airplane engines rumble above, eerie but also powerful. The crowd cheers, though Marisol scarcely notices.

As suddenly as everything went black, the park lights spring back to life. Marisol and Will blink their eyes. They are still locked in their embrace. Marisol takes in the desire swimming in Will's eyes. Though she is flustered, she must say something. Confess her mutual feelings. "I...I feel," Marisol begins.

A man clicks his tongue. "What have we here?"

Marisol breaks free of Will's embrace and stumbles back. Her eyes meet Hal Clements' glare. Her shoulders sag, and her eyes dart back to Will.

Will straightens, pulling on the bottom of his airport uniform shirt.

"Good evening, Mr. Clements," Marisol murmurs.

"Thought you pikeys weren't supposed to cavort with other folks," he snickers. He pats his belly. His plump sausage fingers hold the final nub of a cigar.

"Watch your foul mouth!" Will shouts as he plants his body in front of Marisol.

"I can say whatever I want. This is my park. Who the hell are you anyway, boy? You look like some rich city kid to me. Fancy school ought to teach you to be smarter than these other pigeons handing their money to the likes of her. Don't you have better things to do than hacking around with all these carnies?"

The back of Will's neck is red. He takes a step toward Hal, but Marisol lays a gentle hand on his shoulder. She feels it rise as he draws in a breath. "Why don't you leave us alone?" Will's words are clipped with restraint. "We're not bothering you." His hands are balled into fists.

"I am bothered. By my way of thinking, her kind should keep to themselves. Keep with their own people. And not here."

"Ignore him. I don't care what he has to say," Marisol blurts out, loud enough for Hal to hear. She presses her fingers into Will's tense muscles and shoulder flesh.

Hal throws the cigar nub onto the ground. The end still has a reddish glow. He drags his fingers down his mustache and whistles as he turns and walks away.

“Jerk. I would have punched him.” Will grinds Hal’s cigar into the dirt with his heel until it’s flattened.

“It would only make things worse. He knows we need these summer jobs.”

“Who does he think he is?” Will asks, frowning his brow.

“Really, it’s nothing I haven’t heard before.”

“That doesn’t make it any better. No one should have to listen to that. Idiot!” Will grabs Marisol’s hand. “Is there anywhere we can go? Somewhere away from all these people, where it’s quiet so that we can talk?”

Marisol had discovered a secluded cove with a bench anchored at the water’s edge. It’s about a fifteen-minute walk from the park. During the day, picnickers often spread their blankets and fill the expansive grassy area behind the cove. She knows it’s deserted in the evenings.

They walk hand-in-hand, another risk, but after the kiss, she needs to feel his touch. Marisol looks into the faces of the few people they pass, but no one seems to care. Her gaze drifts to her shoes. They are a stark reminder of their different worlds. She can’t deny that Will is the kind of man she wants to build a life with. It isn’t as if she doesn’t desire to be someone’s wife. Just not Levoy’s. Not someone she doesn’t love. But how can having a man like Will Worthington ever be a possibility? Good things don’t come her way. She’s never been that lucky.

“Will? Will Worthington?” the man coming toward them calls out. Marisol drops Will’s hand from hers.

“Yes,” Will replies.

“Warren Fox.” The man thrusts his hand at Will to shake. “I used to broker railroad parts with William. I don’t think I’ve seen you in five years or so. This is my wife, Muriel.” Marisol feels the woman’s gaze redirect to her.

“Sure, yes, good to see you, sir,” Will says, stepping forward to the man, attempting to let Marisol fall into the background.

The two men make idle pleasantries for a moment, then the couple moves on down the path. What was she thinking, being so bold out in the open?

“Do you think he saw us holding hands?” she asks.

“Probably not. It’s shadowy over here. Don’t worry about it. He’s just someone my father used to do business with a long time ago.”

They keep two feet between them and continue to the secluded bench that sits at the end of a jugged piece of land. Once they settle, he picks her hand back up and laces his fingers between hers. He rests their clasped hands against his thigh, with his leg pressed against hers. Marisol’s culture would not approve of this closeness, and certainly not the two kisses back on the midway that still linger on her lips. She thinks of Mammie’s words on their long journey to the park. *The bindings of our customs will hold you back.* They sit in silence, both lost in their thoughts as the park noises drift out across the lake.

Eventually, Will squeezes her hand and speaks. “Tell me. What is your life like? I’ve wanted to know so much more than what we talked about on the boat.”

She expected Will to have questions; even so, she is not prepared. Marisol remembers Mammie’s words again. Is Will a sign she spoke of? Is it safe to tell him everything, or will it frighten him away?

“My world,” she begins. “It is much different from yours.” Should she choose her words with care? Would Will Worthington judge her as everyone does, and then everything will be ruined? He is like no one she has ever met. And he just kissed her. The most exhilarating thing she’s ever felt. The risk of telling him all of it is huge.

What is she clinging to? Levoy had never bothered to ask her a single thing about the life she lived before they met. She is certain Gran and Grandad never kept secrets from each other. She’ll have to let him see all the parts if there is any chance for her. She knows love, like she yearns for, must be built on a solid foundation.

Marisol lets the happier part of her history unfurl like a bolt of cotton fabric. She begins by talking about her grandparents. “Gran and Grandad, their love was true. He was a respected caregiver, and Gran was always by his

side. Many people in our culture are still hesitant to trust modern medicine. Together, they saved many people from suffering.” She tells him she can’t bear the thought of being trapped in a traditional Romani wife’s life. And how Gran, Mammie, and Lila help her. Marisol knows it must be strange for someone as educated as him to hear about the secret reading lessons.

“That must be amazing, having a parent who supports your passion and helps you achieve it,” Will says. “It’s something I don’t have.”

“I guess I am fortunate for that.”

More quietly, Marisol tells Will things she has never entrusted to anyone, except Brigid. She divulges details she wasn’t comfortable sharing in the rowboat. About her father and his temper. And those dark December days. The anger in her voice is dense from speaking the reality of her past out loud.

Eventually, her words become unsteady, her eyes still fixed on a point far across the shadowy lake. Raw fury churns within her stomach, still frothed below the surface. She describes Levoy’s assault in the barn last November and is overcome with shame for something that was never her fault. “I didn’t lure or provoke him. I can’t understand why some men take what they want without a second thought.” She dares to look into his eyes. She wonders for a second time if she is too damaged for this man.

Will presses her hand again and brings it up to his lips. Relief floods Marisol, to have every lurid detail of her life revealed, and he still regards her with such tenderness.

A long strand of hair has come loose from her scarf, and he pushes it behind her ear. He puts his hand beneath her chin and caresses the skin lightly with his thumb. “You deserve so much better,” Will whispers. Marisol releases the air that’s been held tight within her lungs.

Will tells Marisol more about his desire to break free of his father’s plans and how he hopes he can make his way as a pilot. His hands are shaking as he grips her curled fist against his knees.

“And there’s something else.”

Marisol searches Will’s face, but he won’t meet her eyes.

“Both my parents. They are just like that man, Hal. Prejudiced and narrow-minded.” Will pulls one of his hands from Marisol’s and swipes the back of it across his forehead. “I promise you, I am nothing like them.”

Marisol takes in his words about his parents. But Will has already shown her his true heart. They are both tormented by their own people’s words and actions. They sit a long while on the bench in silence until it is time for him to go.

## CHAPTER 22

### Lila

*July 6, 1942*

Gus snores lightly as the first streaks of morning sun filter through their cottage bedroom curtains. Lila lies motionless, waiting for the familiar reeling stomach to greet her. At first, she thought she might have eaten something past its prime. But with two missed cycles, she prays it's the better outcome. Still, she doesn't dare tell Gus her suspicion. If it is another disappointment, she'll keep this one to herself. Too many demands already burden his mind.

Sleep has been fitful for them the past two and a half weeks since Miss Betty's fire. It renewed fear of the always-present danger. Everyone is being more vigilant about what could instantly snatch their livelihoods. Everyone, that is, except Hal Clements. His casual attitude toward the park's safety—his job — frustrates Lila, Gus, and Ruby more than ever. The responsibility of protecting park visitors and the workers weighs heavily, especially on Gus as the manager.

He tosses and turns toward the wall. Lila wonders if the care required of this park has finally become too much. The efforts for cleanup will take days, after the swarms of people who visited this past weekend. It will be another busy week.

Lila listens to Gus' shallow breath and caresses his muscled shoulder. He shifts again and curls deeper into sleep. She dresses, then packs a breakfast for Daring Dan and a sack lunch for herself. Before she leaves, she kisses his forehead and props the new cane she'd bought near the front door. He has only used it once when his hip pain was too great. Otherwise, he's embarrassed by the need to be seen as less than strong.

The early morning is pleasant as she walks along the path, atypically cooler weather for July. She leans down and picks up some litter. An empty popcorn box and a hamburger wrapper. It's rare for park visitors to be on this path.

Morning is her favorite time of day, before everyone else is awake. By August, the humidity will be unbearable. Lila walks around to Ruby's back porch. She is sitting at the white wicker table, stirring a sugar cube into her tea.

Lila slides into the chair across from Ruby. "I wondered if you'd be up. I'm on my way to take Daring Dan his breakfast, and thought I'd stop by in case I might find you out here. You should be sleeping in with the weekend we had."

"I wish I could sleep. But Ernest rasps and wheezes from the damage to his lungs from the smoke inhalation. After three nights in the hospital, the doctor still wouldn't tell us if it was permanent. I don't know if he will ever fully heal." She shakes her head. "I can hear him all the way out in the living room."

Once Ernest was released from the hospital, he needed a week of bed rest. Lila was the one who suggested he move in with Ruby. Since all the cottages are fully rented this time of year and he has no next of kin, there weren't many options. Scandalous by all appearances and fuel for the gossipmongers, but whose business is it, anyway?

"I'm guessing you're also not sleeping well on your sofa."

"No, but I insist he take my bed. And now, on top of everything, he's having nightmares. His home burned down when he was five. A younger brother... he didn't make it. You can imagine that he's terrified of fires. But what else could he do? Stand by and watch the whole damn park burn down?"

“Oh, Ruby, I am so sorry,” Lila says, bringing her hand against her mouth. “That makes all of this even more traumatic. You’ve been so good to him.”

“I’ll admit, at first, it was strange to have someone in my house. Single all my life, you know,” she chortles. “But he was terribly weak and depended on me so much at first, I came around to enjoying his company. He and I are very much alike. I thought after a few days we would tire of each other. But it’s the opposite. He listens intently when I talk. Even when I’m prattling on about the entertainers’ managers or the local marching band’s music. Surely, he is bored half to death. Instead, he makes me feel like my work is important.”

“You are needed, trust me! Gus and I don’t say it enough. This park can’t run without you. Ernest is lucky to have you as his friend.”

A smile tugs at the corners of Ruby’s lips. She drops another sugar cube into her teacup and stares down into the inkiness. The spoon clinks as she stirs it much too hard. “Turns out, he’s become much more than a friend.” She blinks, raising only her eyes, and peers at Lila. “I was scared to death when I saw him lying there on the ground.” She sighs, looking up and pushing her hand to her chest. “My heart was pounding. He’s my chance at happiness in this crazy, jumbled traveling life I live. If something terrible had happened to him... I don’t know what I would do.”

“He should never have been put in the position of extinguishing a fire with a broom! After that park visitor’s cigarette sparked last summer’s fire in the dry brush and brambles under The Dips, Gus wrote a scathing letter to Summerland management. He insisted we need a fire plan. How can anyone forget the Dreamland Park and White City Fires. That could be us,” Lila says, wringing her hands.

“I can’t think about what would have happened if Floppo didn’t grab the only extinguisher from the park office,” Ruby says, downing the rest of her now-cold tea.

“Ernest, too. Their bravery saved us. Hal was supposed to install thirty of them this year. Gus is furious about Miss Betty’s fire. This park is a temporary tent, not a permanent place. Dried up wood, lath, and plaster, not a scrap of steel like the buildings in the city.”

Lila thinks back to the pre-opening weeks. Year after year, everything is disguised with fresh layers of highly flammable paint. The permanence of this place is only a sleight of hand. The visitors, even some locals, have no idea how patched together all of it is.

"I'll never understand Summerland and Hal's lack of safety concern," Ruby says. "Sure, there's a war going on, but despite that, laws or regulations should keep the visitors who pass through our gates safe."

"Yep, all they care about is ticket sales." Lila pats her hand. "Well, my friend, I'm happy something good has come of this. You and Ernest have found each other. What's better than that!"

Ruby refills her teacup and then meets Lila's eyes. "What do you hear from Betty's family?"

"The waffle booth is a total loss," Lila says. The space between the stalls reminds her of the gap left behind when a child loses her first tooth. Evidence of the booth's existence has been wiped away. A few black patches are ground into the dirt, but only those who'd seen the charred pile of rubble would recognize the scant remains. "I visited her at the hospital last week. They were to release her on Friday. The entire ordeal has left her traumatized. She won't have her booth rebuilt and isn't returning to the park."

Lila can't blame Betty. Work at the park can be exciting, but it is also back-breaking, and dealing with the crowds isn't always a picnic. "Her daughter, Amanda, and her husband are taking her back to Michigan to live with them," Lila says. How many years are left that she and Gus can endure the rigor? Especially with the weight of insufficient safety measures that the Summerland park people insists are not a problem.

"How many people came this past weekend?"

"Gus said the ticket office told him over fifty thousand during the last two days, our largest Independence Day weekend ever." The fireworks had been a hit, popping and fizzing as they exploded over Little Lake and lit up the sky above the treetops.

"I'm not surprised. And Glenn Miller's manager confirmed the rumors are true—ours were his last two shows since he's volunteered to join the Army," Ruby says. The famous big band leader and his orchestra had played

long into both nights as the headliner in the Crystal Ballroom. “Summerland will be thrilled with the earnings from the massive crowds. I guarantee they have plenty of money to keep people safe.” *Chattanooga Choo Choo* and all of Miller’s hits rang throughout the park, piped out by the mounted loudspeakers.

“I better take this breakfast to where it belongs,” Lila says as she rises and turns back toward the path that leads into the park.

Ten minutes later, she’s squinting down into the pipe along the pier. Daring Dan is gone, but it’s no surprise. Everyone in the park knows he sneaks out in the night and sleeps comfortably in a local hotel room. Some people even report seeing him in the bars. The ruse is fun for everyone, just the same.

Lila uses the pulley system and lowers his food into the tube. She walks back across the pier toward the Crystal Ballroom.

She nears the arched midway entrance sign. Hal is half-sitting against one of the hamburger stand stools with his hands flat on the counter. He is leaning toward a young girl, one Lila knows is the stall owner’s daughter. The girl’s eyes are cast down as Hal says something unintelligible.

“Mr. Clements,” Lila says briskly.

He startles at her voice and turns abruptly, catching himself against the counter to avoid losing his balance. Relief floods the girl’s face as she moves back into the stall. As Lila suspected, it is evident he has no business with her this morning.

“Mrs. Bennett,” Hal replies. He adjusts his feet wide to take up more space, though he is at least six inches shorter than Lila. She chuckles to herself at his bravado. Though he may intimidate the young girls who need the work here in the park, his false machismo has no effect on her. She supposes he must once have been good, but obviously, something has made him this way.

Lila’s eyes shift to the back of the stall. The young girl’s head is down, busying herself with a task. She considers asking Hal what he said to her, but figures he would make up a lie, so why bother? “I trust you heard the pool filter was struggling to keep up again over the weekend. The beauty pageant is less than two weeks away. The men will start building the platforms over

the water three days before. Gus needs your word that everything will be working and ready.”

“All will be fine, I’m sure. I’ve never seen people worry and fret as much as you do. But yes, I will check it again tomorrow.” Hal trails his thumb and finger through his mustache in a V. “Speaking of struggling. That Gypsy girl. I’ve heard you’ve been spending a lot of time with her. By my understanding, her people wouldn’t take too kindly to her learning about the ways of the world. Though, what do I care? I’m going to have them banned by next season, anyway.” He licks his puffy lips and sniffs.

Hairs prick the back of Lila’s neck. She clenches her jaw, preventing Hal from seeing the effect his words have on her. She knows now he’s the one who broke into her secret room. Hal has the keys to every building and door, the same as Lila, Ruby, and Gus. But why would he care about how Lila spends her time? He’s clearly hellbent on drumming up any reason to eradicate the Romanies from working in the park.

“Hal,” Lila ventures. “Why are you so insistent about the Romanies? What have these people ever done to you?”

“You want to know? I’ll tell you.” Hal has raised his voice so that a few nearby people look their way. “One of them who came to work back in Doylestown, where I’m from, stole my wife. Pretended he was doing odd jobs around our farm, and the next thing I know, she’s run off with him. So, yeah, they’ve done something to me.”

At least now Lila knows why he carries such vitriol for the Romanies. She wants to try to reason with him that the fact that the man who broke up his marriage was a Romani has nothing to do with the people here. That he shouldn’t paint everyone with the same brush. But she can see by the fury in his eyes that too will be pointless.

Before she can respond, Hal turns and shuffles down the boardwalk without a word. All she can do is ask Gus to change her room’s lock to keep the pest out.

Ten minutes later, Lila is inside her hidden room. She scans across the wooden walls and shelves and rubs her neck, pushing aside the disturbing image of Hal in her private space. A fine layer of dust coats the counters and table. The weight of the crowds on the dance hall floor above and the

customers' steady stomping often sends particles floating down from the timber rafters on busy weekends. She wipes it all away with a cloth. This room has no chance of survival in a fire.

Marisol will arrive shortly. There is much to do this morning if Lila is to mail the charity program application tomorrow.

Before she can worry anymore, Marisol is standing in the doorway. "You must be as exhausted as the rest of us," Lila says.

"Yes, the tow path was packed all day until the lights of The Dips went out. It's hard to believe more than half of summer is gone. But we are thankful for the work."

Lila brings the charity program application to the table and sits across from Marisol. "Did you hear one of the nuns fell in the lake?" she says. "One went right over the edge of the boardwalk. It's only three feet deep there; nevertheless, the sight of her habit ballooning up around her neck like a kite must have been comical."

"No!" Marisol laughs.

"Apparently, they had too much lemonade. Or maybe wine from their mass. By luck, Gus was nearby. He had to jump in and retrieve her as she flailed around, though he knew she wasn't in any danger. It must have been quite the entertainment!"

"Mrs. Durwood keeps three rooms for the nuns. They rotate in and out every week. I've seen them travel in flocks around the park. Brigid said once she saw two of them in a cart on The Dips!"

"Speaking of people who do good works." Lila taps an envelope beside the application. "Your quick actions to help Miss Betty and String Bean have not gone unnoticed. Everyone here in the park is proud."

Marisol blushes. "I'm glad my instincts kicked in. I heard Miss Betty is moving back to Michigan. I don't blame her. String Bean is the man with the broom? How is he?"

"He is healing, thanks to Ruby's care, but slowly. Though..." Lila pauses. Her eyebrows raise, and she smiles at Marisol. "You must keep this to yourself. I think they are in love! He hasn't moved out of her cabin, and I'm happy about it." Some people would gossip that they are reckless and scandalous if they were privy to this information. And the nuns would be

aghast. Lila wonders if her conversations with Daisy would be intimate like this.

Why shouldn't Ruby find love and spend time with a man if she can? Life is too short to pay attention to idle busybodies. Lila is thrilled Ruby is so happy.

She pushes the envelope across the table. "Here. Open this."

Marisol lifts the flap. Inside is a thick stack of bills.

"It's almost five hundred dollars," Lila says. "Nearly everyone in the park contributed. Especially String Bean and Ruby."

Marisol's eyes fill with tears. "This...this. I've never seen so much money."

"You earned it. And it will help your mother and grandma if we get you into this program." She pushes the application in front of Marisol.

"I don't know what to say."

"You don't have to say anything. You did all the work." Lila has been so intent on helping Marisol study and take advantage of the opportunity that she hasn't considered the consequences if she is successful. What will become of the rest of her family if she's admitted into the program? Marisol's life is hard here in the park. It must be doubly true back in Indiana. Her skin prickles at her short-sightedness. "What will your grandmother and mother do if you are accepted?"

"Mammie and I have talked about it. She's going to take a factory job when we get back home. We can't keep living like we were. No matter what our people say, we have to make money to survive."

"All right. Let's finish this and put it in the mail. It says we should hear by the end of August."

Lila watches as Marisol fills in row after row of the application. Her handwriting has improved tenfold and is neat, and her attention to details is impeccable.

While she waits, her mind again drifts to the absence of a daughter in her own life. If she is carrying a baby, she desperately needs it to survive. She doesn't think she can take the heartbreak of losing another. If only she can hang on to the child she suspects is rooted in her body. An unwelcome feeling tells her this is the last chance.

When Marisol finishes, Lila picks up the application pages, folds them into thirds, and slips them into an envelope. She goes to the bookshelf and pulls out two books wedged between a narrow collection of Daisy's old children's books.

"I picked these up at a bookstore. Your huge accomplishment should be celebrated with a little gift. The first is a children's book that just came out. I know it might seem silly. It's *Uncle Wiggily and The Peppermint*. Daisy would have loved the story. It's about an old rabbit who has rheumatoid arthritis. He sets out on an adventure to the local drugstore searching for peppermint for his housekeeper's upset stomach. Something about it made me think of your desire to help people heal."

Marisol clutches it to her chest. "Thank you! I will treasure this."

"And the other," Lila says, easing back into her chair and pointing at a leaflet. The title reads *Medicine as a Profession for Women*. "That's a lecture published by Elizabeth Blackwell. She was the first woman in America to become a doctor. She had many things to say about the path you're trying to take."

Marisol nods. "Miss Lila, I would like you to meet Will. The boy from Columbus that I've told you about. He's important to me." She raises her eyes to meet Lila's.

"Of course. I would like that." Marisol had only shared snippets about this boy. And there was the locket she'd noticed two weeks ago. But Lila didn't know it had become serious so quickly. And likely dangerous, if other things she knew about the Romanies were true. "So, you've been seeing him more here at the park?"

"Yes, he got a job at the airport in Heath. He comes every weekend when he can get away. We sit on a bench at Picnic Point once I finish with my querents. He..." Marisol lowers her eyes to her hands that still hold the leaflet. "I like him very much."

"I'm sure he is a fine young man if you have chosen him."

"He is coming again the night before the pageant. Could I bring him here to your room, around nine o'clock?"

Lila suspects Marisol might be keeping the budding romance from her grandmother and mother. She doesn't want to interfere, though she should

probably tell her not to keep secrets from them. But she stops herself. Marisol is a grown woman. "Of course," she says.

Lila smiles and touches her stomach low, so that Marisol doesn't notice. Does she dare to dream? She's never kept anything from Gus, but this, she's still keeping to herself until at least another month has passed. Lila knows it's too early to feel the stir of the new life inside her, but she allows the hope it brings to seep in.

## CHAPTER 23

### Marisol

*July 15, 1942*

Marisol can't rid herself of constant exhaustion. There is the cleaning work at Durwood's, her reading at night, and the swarms of querents who steadily pass through her tent. Everyone seems desperate for hope among the mounting fears of war. The crowds have been bigger than any previous summer as people seek a modicum of fun. Rumors have been running rampant that other entertainment events have been paused because of the war efforts. Even the Ohio State Fair has been canceled for the first time.

She has always thought of herself as dutiful, doing what is expected and necessary. But it's a relief that Lila helped her finish the charity program application nine days ago and mailed it to the committee. Those academic people hold Marisol's fate in their hands. She doesn't dare let her mind wander to the possibility of being chosen. Since there won't be any news until the end of August, many weeks can be spent needlessly fretting about the outcome. The hard work is complete, so Lila and Marisol decided they would take a break from studying textbooks. It's one less thing to take up her time.

Instead, Lila has been checking out different types of books for her at the library in Newark. "People say it's a children's book, but it's capturing

the imagination of all ages,” she said when she handed *The Hobbit* to Marisol. “Everyone is talking about it.”

For the last two nights, as they lay on the lumpy mattress well past midnight, Marisol has read the pages out loud to Flora. They travel together alongside Bilbo Baggins away from his comfortable hobbit burrow to face the dragon Smaug.

“*Roads go ever ever on, under cloud and under star, yet feet that wandering have gone, turn at last to home afar.*” Marisol pauses.

“Go on, please, more,” Flora whispers.

“*Eyes that fire and sword have seen and horror in the halls of stone look at last on meadows green and trees and hills they long have known.*”

“What does that mean?” Flora asks.

“I think in books like this, not textbooks, we’re meant to consider what the writer is saying but apply it to our own lives. To me, this says that no matter what things we see when we travel, we can always come back home, wherever that is,” Marisol says.

“Like this cabin. It’s our home?”

“Yes, for now, it is our physical home. Our home—you, Gran, Mammie, and me — is wherever we are together.”

She closes the book and lays it on the floor. Flora snuggles close, and Marisol contemplates the fantastical story while she brushes her sister’s hair back until she drifts off to sleep.

Until Lila opened Marisol’s eyes to fiction books, she had no idea imaginary worlds like Middle-earth could exist within the pages and how the impact of stories, once they are read, can’t be easily forgotten. Each one adds more to her expanding views of the world, far beyond what she had only known within her cloistered clan.

Marisol pushes down a wave of panic, the one that surfaces when she thinks about how dismal her life will be if she isn’t accepted into the charity program. She’d surely be relegated to finding a husband and keeping house. If that happens, maybe she will teach others in her clan to read, even if it is met with disapproval. She must pass on the gift of knowledge Lila has given her. Marisol knows now it is something that can’t be taken away. She

commits to teaching Flora to read. Gran is now too old and tired, and Mammie is too busy.

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Marisol gathers her bucket and cleaning supplies from the closet near the boardinghouse kitchen. The house is quiet. The Durwood boarders are gone from their rooms by eight-thirty, and the kitchen won't be needed until dinner. She ascends the narrow back staircase used only by the staff.

Each time she cleans, Marisol begins with the bathroom, since it is the least pleasant. Might as well get it out of the way, she figures. After the toilet is sparkling and she's made the hair pomade and toothpaste disappear from the sink, she turns her attention to the guest rooms.

Marisol works her way down the hallway. It is an intimate affair, observing how people make a temporary home for weeks, and in some cases, months. Some of them are disorganized and messy. Others keep all of their belongings on hangers and folded neatly in the bureau drawers. Such as the meticulous man who is the master of ceremonies in the Pier Ballroom. He even makes his bed, tucking in the corners with military precision. His room takes Marisol half the time to clean as any of the others.

With each one, she tries her best to polish and clean the worn furnishings. She removes all evidence of coffee rings, empty beer bottles, gambling tickets, vomit, and sometimes even blood. She fluffs the saggy pillows with little success and gathers the damp towels. The rooms and the furniture have welcomed many types of travelers over the years, and the stale scent of old dust crusted in the crevices is ever-present. Marisol masks them with lemony furniture polish and mists a final spray of lavender-scented water in the air before she closes and relocks each door.

After she's done with Hal Clements' room, she finishes with Etta Durwood's mother's. The Denison beauty queen still stays there. Her travel cases are modern, covered in buttery tan leather, and monogrammed with her gold-stamped initials beneath the handles.

She met the young woman one time. Marisol knocked before entering, as she always did, but there was no response. She used her key and opened

the door. The occupant was startled, sitting at the dressing table with a thick towel swirled around her head like an ice cream cone, her ears fully covered. They locked eyes in the mirror, and Marisol blushed with embarrassment, but the woman smiled and waved her into the room.

“I’m so sorry. I thought no one was here,” Marisol said as she dipped her chin.

“No problem at all,” the beauty queen said, removing the towel and shaking her blond mane free. It cascaded in damp waves down her back. “I don’t mind the company.”

Marisol stepped forward to take the towel and stuff it into her laundry bag. The boarder’s fluffy terrycloth bathrobe had come loose along her shoulders. It left her creamy white skin exposed, and a purple bruise in the shape of four fingers was lined along her collarbone. She noticed Marisol’s gaze and cinched the robe back in tight.

“So, you’re the one who cleans my room?” the young woman asked Marisol as if they were casual acquaintances.

“Yes, Ma’am. I hope you find it adequate.” A person who attends an expensive private college and carries monogrammed luggage must surely be accustomed to finer accommodations.

“Oh, yes, it’s sublime, tucked away here where no one knows me. I feel like I’m out in the world on my own. Returning each day gives me solace.” She had risen and offered Marisol her hand. “I’m Mary Alice. Thank you for keeping my room so tidy.”

No one had ever held their hand out in greeting. Especially a *gadzo* woman. Or thanked her for cleaning. Her instinct was to say *I’m sorry, I can’t touch you*. But also, *you noticed my work?* “It’s my pleasure,” Marisol said as she clasped the stranger’s hand like she had observed others do.

She hesitated to share her name. This woman’s life and hers were worlds apart. Marisol never judged any of the room’s occupants by the appearance of their possessions. What business is it of hers? “I’m Marisol.”

Mary Alice had moved beside the window and stared out through the treetops. “The lavender scent is lovely. And this window calms my nerves.”

“Should I come back later, after you’ve dressed?” Marisol thought of the bruise on the woman’s shoulder.

“My clothing, well, Marisol, you can probably tell these things are not exactly everyday apparel.” She stood at the carved antique wardrobe and pulled out a one-piece bathing suit. “I’ll be in the beauty pageant in two weeks. At my mother’s insistence, of course. Parading my half-naked body around in front of strangers isn’t my idea of a good way to spend my time.”

Marisol starts to respond, but the words that come to mind catch in her throat. Mammie would certainly never have her expose so much skin.

“Honestly, I can’t wait to leave here and get back to Connecticut,” Mary Alice continues, returning the suit to the armoire’s shelf. “What do you do, Marisol, besides cleaning these rooms?”

“I read tarot cards in a tent near the park entrance.” Marisol waited for the smile and the familiar look in Mary Alice’s eyes. The same always appeared when *gadze* learned about her fortune-telling skills. Everyone thinks they want someone to show them what’s in their future.

Instead, Mary Alice nodded. “You must meet all kinds of people.” She touched her robe where the bruises lay beneath. “My mother is from New Canaan. She was Miss Connecticut. She thinks I will be discovered if I enter beauty pageants. I want to be a singer. I’m talking about serious singing. That’s why I’m studying in the music program at Denison. At least I can watch the professionals perform here in the park before I lose.”

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Saturday is the beauty pageant. Marisol places the deck of cards in the silk pouch once her last querent leaves the tent. For the past three days, they have filed in one after the other. Her back hurts from sitting so long in the uncomfortable wooden chair, but the money is worth the pain.

Flocks of women who will compete have descended early upon the park. Most of them are what people consider to be beautiful despite appearing quite similar to each other, Marisol thinks. It’s as if they have studied from a manual titled *How To Be A Beauty Pageant Queen*, like Gran’s book on reading tarot cards. She isn’t sure how one will stand out enough to be chosen as the winner.

Each of the hopeful queens sits with their spines straight and heads held high as their eyes flit nervously around Marisol's tent. Many of their questions to her are the same. Will they be the winner on Saturday? Will they find a husband soon? Will they be discovered as a movie star and live a glamorous life in Hollywood? Only one of them wanted to know if she would be accepted into the college where she had applied.

All Marisol wants to do is strip out of her costume and fall into her bed. Mammie and Gran come through the beaded curtain as she slips out of her skirt. They both stare at her as if something bad has happened. Mammie is dragging Gran's chair from the other room. Marisol's heart flips. Has something happened to Flora?

"What's wrong?" Marisol asks as she slides her feet into her shoes.

"Let's all sit down and talk," Mammie says, an octave higher than normal. Flora must be okay; otherwise, she would be more distraught, though her expression registers anguish. Marisol does as she's asked, easing back into her chair while she finishes buttoning her blouse.

Gran and Mammie lower themselves into the chairs, the frame of the querent one creaking as Mammie sits across from Marisol. Once they are settled, they meet each other's eyes with apprehension. Something is not right, that is for sure.

"It's a fine thing all you're doing, working hard here in the tent and at Durwood's. What you earn to help our family is important, learning to read from Miss Lila, and teaching Flora. And completing the application." Mammie's face is stoic. She takes an expansive breath, and her shoulders stiffen. Red streaks in the whites of her eyes magnify her exhaustion from holding their family together.

Marisol stills her breath, searching for clues about what is causing their obvious consternation. The summer is more than half over, and it's true that she never stops rushing from one thing to the next. Brigid has been so helpful in helping her sneak off to meet Will as frequently as possible that Gran and Mammie aren't aware of anything.

Mammie clears her throat. "I don't want to upset you, but I can't sugarcoat this, either." Gran touches Marisol's hand. "There's been a lot of whispering." Mammie's words land like hot embers.

“About what?” Marisol darts her eyes between the two women. Mammie looks as tired as Marisol feels. “Who?” she says, her voice indignant and rising. Gran bows her head, letting her eyes fall to her lap.

“It seems you’ve been spotted more than once at Picnic Point. With the *gadzo* boy. I saw the heart necklace. He must be good if you have chosen him.” In the candlelight, Marisol thinks Mammie’s eyes may be damp. “But it’s too risky, now that all the shunning we endured when we first arrived has died away. I can’t take it if it all fires back up.”

She’s been careless in her secret meetings with Will. For a fleeting moment, she feels his gentle kisses and the caress of his hand on hers. Why should anyone care if she sits on a bench with a boy? Marisol clenches her jaw, bites the inside of her lip, and forces back the tears. What Mammie is saying sinks in.

“And Hal Clements. He’s been spreading rumors. About the time you spend with Miss Lila. He claims she’s helping you steal from the drugstore and the game booths.” Mammie straightens and rests her hands flat on the table. She wrings them together as if they itch from poison ivy. “It’s all too much, Marisol. Word is Hal is going to have all Romanies banned from the park after this season. We can’t afford to have that on our shoulders. We will never survive it.”

Marisol thinks about the last time she saw Hal Clements. It was early in the morning this past Thursday as she came out of Mary Alice’s room. He stood in the hallway at his door, fumbling with his key in the lock. A big brown cardboard box sat at his feet. On one side, in black stenciled letters, it read: PRIZES: CERAMIC VASES.

“Good morning, Mr. Clements,” Marisol said flatly, but as politely as she could muster. She scanned down the hall, hoping someone else was around. A shiver ran down her spine. She remembered how trapped she felt that night he followed Brigid and her after they got Miss Betty’s waffles. She wanted to stomp on his foot and kick the box against his shin.

“You certainly get around this park.” Hal pushed his door open and stepped beneath the doorframe. “Why don’t you come inside, give my room another dusting?”

Marisol shifted from one foot to the other. "I'm out of cleaning supplies. I'll stop back later." Her voice was much too high. She hurried past Hal's door and the box and flew down the stairs before he could reply. The brushes clattered in her cleaning bucket, and one fell out. She didn't stop to retrieve it. Hal's door slammed before she reached the bottom step.

Glued to the chair, she can't take this interrogation a moment longer. She is so hot, her ears sear from Mammie's words. Marisol gasps for air and swipes her hand across her eyes. Abruptly standing, her chair wobbles and then tumbles back onto the rug. Without bothering to right it, she gathers her skirt and darts out the back tent flaps into the dark. How naïve she has been.

Marisol's cheeks burn. Brigid is standing just outside the tent. She grabs Marisol's hand, pulling her along the tow path. The park is closed up for the night and empty. Everything is unusually quiet. A few nighttime lights still flicker. "Let's go sit by the fountain," Brigid says.

They walk across the large grassy area without saying a word. The four-tiered fountain stays well-lit all night, a beacon rising from the ground. Abandoned now, but when the park is full, it's the common meeting place. They ease themselves onto the ground.

"Did you hear everything Mammie said?" Marisol asks, her voice shaky as she rubs her pounding temple. She stares up at the top spire of the fountain as water bubbles and cascades down the tiers. Will is a problem. Reading with Miss Lila is a problem. Hal Clements is a problem. She thought things were getting better, but she has been making them worse. It's no wonder everyone is talking behind her back.

"Yes." She doesn't offer more.

The image of Hal Clements and his rotten cigar burns in Marisol's mind. Doesn't he have something better to do than stir up trouble? What has she ever done to him? "He's got this whole damn park, and he has to follow me around!" Marisol yells, flying her arm out in the air. She has never said one of the swear words her father often used. The heat of a fresh wave of tears stings her eyes.

Marisol presses her palm against her forehead. Suddenly, everything is clear. How stupid and ridiculous it is that she let herself fall in love with a

*gadzo*. How could that ever have worked out? And her carelessness with Miss Lila, who has tried to help her. Marisol is tired. Not from all the endless work, but from the weight of never-ending judgment.

Brigid scoots close and wraps her arm tightly around Marisol's shoulder. She tries to wiggle away, but Brigid won't let her. She's too worn down to resist. Her stomach aches like someone has kicked it.

"Will we always have to worry about what other people think?" She pulls in a long breath, searching Brigid's eyes. "We have to choose, don't we? Between our world and this other one?" She is not asking. It must be said aloud to force reality to take hold.

Brigid speaks so quietly that Marisol can hear them both breathing. "Yes, we can't seem to escape how fast the world we know is changing. Before this summer, I hadn't thought of it all that much, how we are caught in the middle. I've mostly felt secure in how things have always been. But then, there are the possibilities. At a high risk, I suppose."

"All these rules. These *customs*." Marisol says the last word as if it were rat poison on her lips.

She stares up again at the free-flowing water and stills. Marisol knows what she must do for the sake of her family.

## CHAPTER 24

## Will

*July 17, 1942*

Will stands at his grandma's kitchen sink, gazing out the window at the apple orchard beyond. The branches dip, laden with the bright green globes. Although the harvest is still at least a month away, Will can count the days until his induction date. He will miss this familiar view. How long will it be before he sees it again?

The reality came closer yesterday when he called the university to defer his studies. Until when, he isn't sure. The administrator's words were accommodating. He said *God bless you* and thanked him for his service to the country.

"Another day at the airport?" his grandma says, entering the sun-drenched room.

"Yes, seems we're busier than ever." The airport has needed him to work many more hours than he had expected.

He doesn't regret finding the opportunity to be around airplanes and people like him who love them, even if his father is furious. He relishes being privy to the chatter about fighters and bombers in the Pacific from those who seem to have aviation fuel coursing through their veins. Several times, the pilots have taken him up. Each shift solidifies his desire to one day sit in

the cockpit behind the complicated controls. All of it confirms it is his calling, and that he will not follow his father's plans, no matter the cost.

"It's been wonderful having you here all summer. I don't know how everything would get done around here without you."

Will has been happy to help, though it has constrained his time with Marisol more than he'd like. Most weeks, he'd been able to go to the park on Saturday evenings, but this week, his airport schedule means he must go a day early.

He studies her worn face. "Grandma, the girl at the park. Marisol. I have to let her know I'll be leaving." He's already waited too long to tell her about the draft. "I've never had to do such a thing. I don't know where to begin." What will it be like to be apart for months, or years, while he serves in the military?

"You need to tell her. Better you give her time to process it."

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Will finishes his work at the airport and drives the twenty minutes to the park. He's excited as always to see Marisol, but this time he's also nervous. All day while he fueled planes and carried luggage back and forth from the hangar, he's been rehearsing, trying to find the right words to tell her about the uncertainty of his future.

He chastises himself for holding the information back the night at Picnic Point when they told each other everything. But after he revealed the truth about his parents, it didn't seem right to tell her this bombshell, too. He has never cared for someone this much. It has taken him off guard. There's no time left to delay telling her he'll be leaving in seven weeks.

Will is an hour early for their meeting at the Picnic Point bench. *Goodnight Irene* wafts across the lake. The park is closing soon. He wipes his hands across his grease-stained uniform pants and recites his practiced words that he's leaving for two years, three, maybe more. He imagines how she will respond, that she will tell him she will wait until he returns. But what if she doesn't?

He checks his watch. Another half hour has passed. Will considers walking to the row of tents. But Marisol made him promise he'd never go there.

Forty-five more minutes drag by. He stands and paces, then sits back down.

A figure suddenly steps forward from the shadows of the trees. "Hello, Will," a woman says quietly. He lifts his hands from his head and holds them forward. He expects the voice to be Marisol's, but it is her friend's.

"Brigid. Where is Marisol?" Panic grips his chest. Has there been another fire?

"I'm afraid she is not coming." Her face is emotionless in the moonlight.

"Is she hurt? Has something happened?"

"She's fine. Nothing like that. I hate being the messenger. But you must go."

"Go? I will not go. I have to talk to her tonight. What has happened?"

Brigid sits beside Will on the bench. She positions herself so that their bodies don't touch, riveting her stare to a spot far across the lake. "It is complicated. She can't spend time with you anymore. I shouldn't even be here. We can't risk our jobs at this park. There's nothing more important."

"This makes no sense. What do you mean, we? How can Marisol seeing me cost your jobs?"

"I wish I had a better explanation. You must forget that you two ever met. It will be best for everyone."

Before Will can ask more questions, Brigid jumps up from the bench and disappears into the darkness. "Wait! Brigid! Please come back! I don't understand!" She's gone as his words drift into the air.

Will rakes his hand through his hair. His confession about his prejudiced parents was too much for Marisol to accept. Why would she want to be around people like them? She's already had a lifetime of it. Will hadn't exactly thought about asking Marisol to marry him, but he is certain he wants her in his life forever. Why would she want to join such a family? He barely wants to be part of them himself. How stupid he's been not to consider this.

Over an hour has passed since the park closed. Everything is asleep. Will thinks how dead this place is when it is shuttered, exactly how he's feeling. He stares numbly at the abandonment of it all as he stumbles away from Picnic Point in defeat.

Before he reaches the parking lot, he pauses to look down the row of Romani tents. All the flaps are tied securely for the night. The emptiness is unbearable.

Will climbs into Edward's old truck and drives painfully slow to the farm. He's never felt a deeper sadness as he steers up his grandparents' winding driveway.

Up on the porch, Charlie waits patiently in a heap. He lifts his head as Will drags his feet up the steps. He reaches down and touches between his ears and then steps over the old faithful dog. Charlie pads behind Will into the farmhouse.

A light is on in the kitchen. Grandma Emma is at the table. Her Bible is open, and a cup teeters in her hand. She is not looking at the book's pages but is staring at the toaster. The kitchen is deady quiet.

"You're back earlier than I expected," she says, setting the cup into its saucer and looking at Will as he steps through the doorway.

"I was supposed to meet Marisol tonight at the park. Like we always do." He slumps into a chair and presses both hands flat against the table as if he is steadying himself in a boat. "Marisol won't see me anymore," he says, putting his head into his hands. He feels angry and defeated.

The words fly out as he tells her everything about Marisol. What he knows about her people and how hard she works with Lila to prepare herself for the possibility of college and the physician program.

"How can people be so cruel?" Will describes the prejudices Marisol and her family endure. He tells his grandma about the encounter with Hal behind the caramel popcorn stand and about Clara's cruel words during his birthday lunch at Lazarus. Her brows arch as she takes the last part in.

She lays her hand on his. "I raised Clara right. I can't speak for your father. People see what they want. They ignore the reality right in front of them." She clasps both his hands. "It must be a misunderstanding for Marisol not to tell you in person that she's breaking things off."

“No. It is clear.” He details his conversation with Brigid tonight, letting him know everything is over. But it was so little information. In that moment, Will realizes his greatest fear isn’t the draft. It’s losing Marisol. He knows he loves her.

Silence settles between them as Will accepts that he is helpless to do anything. Even if he went back and found her, the damage it would cause to her family is too great a risk. “You must miss Grandpa terribly if it feels anything like this.”

“Yes, I do.” She gazes past Will toward the window. “Some days, it’s hard to go on. We built a life here on this farm. Nothing is the same without him. We were lucky to have each other.”

Will’s sleep is fitful the entire night. He tosses and dreams he’s on an aircraft carrier alone in the Pacific Ocean. Twenty-foot waves make him seasick as he hangs on before being thrown overboard.

## CHAPTER 25

### Lila

*July 18, 1942*

“Have you been out here all night?” Lila asks Birdie as she approaches, knowing her likely response. She’s standing in the same spot she was the last time she saw her, an hour after the park closed.

The sun hasn’t risen yet, but the Crystal Pool area is a beehive of activity. Bright lights beam down on the area, illuminating it like midday. The filter once again has its metal parts and rubber hoses strewn everywhere on the concrete. Four men in gray canvas jumpsuits have their heads buried in the machine. It looks like it may swallow them whole. Birdie frowns as she stands over them, her arms akimbo.

“Yes,” she answers with an exasperated sigh. Her husband, Albert, walks toward them with two paper cups of coffee. “The master of ceremonies is supposed to be here in four hours. The pageant starts at noon. This is a disaster, thanks to Hal and Summerland.”

Lila scans across the area. Birdie and Albert have everything else ready for the pageant. An L-shaped runway platform is built across the pool. They’ve placed a silver microphone stand at the end in front of one of the lifeguard chairs. The banner tacked above the concession stand flaps in the breeze:

MISS CENTRAL OHIO BEAUTY PAGEANT  
SPONSORED BY THE COLUMBUS SUNDAY STAR

She glances down at the water. Bits of scum and leaves float along the top. If the filter isn't fired up soon, the debris will be on display for the hundreds who arrive for today's main attraction.

Finally, Hal saunters up. He has on the same clothing he wore yesterday. Lila considers speaking her mind, but waits so that Birdie can take the first swipe.

"Hal! This pool has given us nothing but headaches all summer. And today, of all days, to have its guts splayed across this decking yet again!"

"Now, Birdie, I'm sure these men will be finished any minute. Let me have a word with them." In a rare display of awareness, Hal has the good sense to stoop down next to the repairmen, feigning concern for the situation.

Lila widens her eyes and tilts her head when she hears Gus and Ruby's voices. He was snoring softly in their bed when she left the cottage earlier. Since the sun isn't quite up, it will be at least another hour before they begin their safety checks of the rides. They certainly can't count on Hal to do that job consistently.

Gus hobbles with his cane and leans against it when he stops beside her. Yesterday must have been excruciating on his hip. He wraps his arm around Lila's waist and plants a peck against her cheek. She smiles as his curls tickle her skin. "Leg bad again this morning?"

"Yep. Makes me feel like an old man," Gus sighs. "This is the last way I wanted to start today, with the crowds we'll be seeing."

"This is hard work." Lila pats the roughness of his face. She knows from experience there is nothing she can say to make him feel better.

Gus releases the grip around her waist and shuffles toward the silent mechanical beast. With the end of his cane, he pokes at Hal's behind, nearly knocking him over.

Lila and Ruby's eyes connect with mutual concern. Though Gus gets frustrated at the park, he is never confrontational. It may be a sign it's time Lila asks Doc Wright for medication to ease his pain.

“Clements!” Gus barks. A repairman drops his wrench, and it clatters against the concrete. “I thought I told you when we got here in March, I expected no trouble with this pageant. Look at this mess!” All eyes are pinned on Gus.

Hal regains his balance and has the decency to stand. He jams his hands deep into his pockets and offers a crooked, half-hearted smile. “Whoa, Cowboy, back off,” he says, although he retreats two steps away from Gus. Hal adds a shrug as if it doesn’t matter that swarms of people will pour through the park entrance gates within two hours.

Gus doesn’t respond or move an inch. His hand trembles slightly on the top of the cane he’s planted against the pool deck. Lila knows her husband well enough to understand that the look in his face says he might punch Hal between the eyes. “What a fool,” he mutters.

Before Lila can intervene, Gus grabs the handle of his cane in his fist. He limps without its assistance toward the midway. He must have concluded that slugging this incompetent man won’t do any good. Ruby throws a sideways glance at Lila and hurries after him, the leather-bound notebook clutched against her chest.

Forty-five minutes later, the pool filter chugs and finally gurgles back to life. Lila watches bits of detritus still floating in the pool, but this is the best it’s going to be.

The announcer has arrived and stands at the tall metal microphone. “Testing...one...two...three...testing,” he says as he taps the bulbous silver top. He runs through his opening greeting, oblivious that anything was amiss only an hour earlier.

As the repairmen whisk away the last remnants of the near disaster, Lila positions herself beside the concession stand wall. Early curious spectators jockey for prime viewing spots around the edges of the pool, their voices buzzing with excitement.

Marisol seems out of place and walks awkwardly as she approaches Lila through the pool entrance gate. She hasn’t visited the hidden room for the past two days. Lila would have checked for her at the tents to be sure everything was okay yesterday, but there was no time with the need to help Gus and Ruby prepare for the pageant.

“There you are. I was worrying,” Lila says. They’d planned that Marisol would bring Will to meet her last night, but she didn’t show up for that either. It’s unlike her not to come to the room when she says she will.

“I was hoping I’d find you here. There are no querents at our tents, with everyone over here. I’m sorry about last night.” Marisol gestures at the growing crowd and then stares at the concrete pool deck. “A lot has happened. I wanted...”

A voice booms through the loudspeakers, interrupting Marisol. All eyes turn toward the microphone. “Welcome to the Playground of Ohio and the Miss Central Ohio Beauty Pageant finals! Thank you to our sponsor, the Columbus Sunday Star newspaper!” His voice blasts above the din as the crowd quiets. The pageant announcer is overdressed for the sticky July weather. He looks uncomfortable in his black slacks and a white blazer over a pressed shirt and candy-cane striped tie.

“We’re glad you’ve joined us on this beautiful day, where one lucky lady will be crowned to represent us in the Miss America pageant!” He tips his plaid newsboy cap and, with his wrist, wipes away a bead of sweat that’s trickling down his temple. He replaces the hat atop his bald head and continues his opening speech. “You’re in for a real treat here today, folks, that I assure you! Yessiree, we’re going to witness a parade of beauty as talented ladies walk on water right in front of you!”

The announcer calls out the names and numbers of the pageant contestants who are lined up in alphabetical order. As each one is called, she steps up beside him, places her hands on her hips, smiles, and gives a wave like the Queen Mother to the appreciative crowd. She steps forward onto the temporary catwalk built out over the water and falls in line behind the woman ahead of her.

“Mary Alice Thompson,” he calls out.

“That’s her,” Marisol says, pointing. “She’s the Denison woman who’s been staying in one of Mrs. Durwood’s rooms.”

“I’ve got to give them credit. I wouldn’t have the nerve to parade around in a bathing suit in front of all these strangers,” Lila says with a wink and sucks in her lips. Every contestant exposes far more skin than Marisol ever does.

“All right, ladies and gentlemen, our judges have made their decision! Let’s have our lovely ladies give us one final spin so we can see them from all sides.” In unison, the scantily clad women twirl on the narrow platform. The temporary structure wobbles. If forty-three women careen into the pool, Lila can’t even imagine the headline in tomorrow’s newspaper.

The women file off the catwalk and assemble on either side of the announcer, clasping each other’s hands. He calls out the third-place winner. Then, with the seriousness of a priest, he reads a statement about the obligations of the winner and the role of the runner-up, should she fail her solemn duties.

“And the winner of Miss Central Ohio 1942 is...Ruth Ann Davis!” The other contestants part so the new queen can make her way beside him. A faux diamond crown sparkles in the sunlight as last year’s queen secures it. Two other women drape a banner across her front, and an unwieldy bundle of thirty-six long-stemmed roses is thrust into the winner’s arms. They are larger than the woman, and she cradles them like a baby as she executes a princess wave at the adoring crowd.

“There she is, folks! What an honor! She’ll be off to bigger and better things! Let’s have our newly crowned beauty give us a final victory walk!” The woman clutches the massive bouquet and steps gingerly down the catwalk. She works hard to keep a broad smile plastered across her face. The crown quivers despite the fistful of bobby pins that last year’s winner pushed into her hair.

The crowd disperses onto the midway. “I’ve got a little longer before I need to get back to my tent,” Marisol says. She casts her eyes around as if she is nervous. “Could we go to your room?”

They settle at the table. “What has happened? I was worried when you didn’t show up. What is troubling you?” Lila asks.

Lila can’t see Marisol’s hands beneath the table in her lap, but her arms move in a manner that indicates she is wringing them aggressively. “I’m not even supposed to be here with you,” Marisol says.

“Whatever do you mean? You are always welcome here. This is my room.”

Marisol darts her eyes to the closed door. She puts her elbows on the table and leans her forehead against her palms. “People are watching me. Everything I do and who I talk to. It’s the way things are,” Marisol mumbles. She swipes her sleeve across her forehead. Her defeated shoulders slump.

Lila can’t understand what Marisol is saying. People can come and go as they please. Summerland’s CAUCASIANS ONLY signs tacked on the ballroom and swimming pool walls flash in her mind—it’s true, not everyone.

Marisol takes a breath and swallows hard. “Miss Lila, you don’t know how much I appreciate everything you’ve done. I’ve never known anyone who had faith in me becoming a doctor, except for Grandad. You will never know how your kindness has changed me. But in my world, I’m not supposed to be fraternizing with *gadze*. Like you. Or Will.” Her words spill in an unsteady cadence.

Lila tries masking her concern. She doesn’t want to think poorly of Marisol’s people, but this sounds like nineteenth-century brainwashing. Could they be this isolated in such a modern world?

“Marisol. What do you want?”

Marisol shifts in her chair. She is a grown woman, no longer the child sitting in the dust along the tow path.

“I want to work. Not cleaning houses, mending clothes, or reading tarot cards. I want to take care of people when they are sick or injured. You know all of that. But I realize now that I also want to have someone to love and travel through life with. I almost believed I could have that with Will.”

Lila reaches forward and lifts Marisol’s chin. Their eyes are locked on one another. What would she have said to Daisy? She would have loved to help her with matters of the heart. “I am not telling you what to do. It is not my right or my decision. But it would be wrong if you didn’t know it is normal to have desires to love someone deeply. I can tell you it is rare to find someone like it seems you have in Will. I have no way of knowing if that is a sign of disloyalty among your people.” Lila bites her lip, knowing she would never have made it through the loss of Daisy without Gus. “Marisol, you have a right to be happy and have a fulfilling life.”

Marisol lowers her head. Her shoulders heave as she sobs into her arms. Lila smooths her hand across her hair. Once she is spent, Marisol's red eyes are questioning. "Everything is so confusing."

"Yes, it is. We all have choices," Lila consoles. "You must follow your heart. I would tell Daisy the same."

"You are right. I want Will, if he will still have me. But I am risking the anger of our people. Oh, Miss Lila, what should I do?"

"You must at least let him know how you feel. Is there a way I can contact him for you?"

"He told me he is staying with his grandmother, Emma Grayson. She lives in Somerset."

"There is a phone in the park office. I will call her and ask him to return."

## CHAPTER 26

### Will

*July 24, 1942*

It's been a week since Will visited the park. For six sleepless nights, he went over and over Brigid's vague and confusing words. He'd practically gone out of his mind, trying to figure out what to do next. He has to find Marisol and at least express his feelings, so she knows he will be gone for a long time and that he has no choice but to report for induction. What will his life be if he can't win her back and ask her to wait for his return?

He does everything to keep Marisol off his mind. Working extra shifts at the airport has left him exhausted.

And then last night, while he was working, Grandma Emma received a phone call. It was Marisol's friend Lila, the woman he was supposed to meet the night everything fell apart. Her message was that Marisol wanted to meet Will at the park tonight.

Will walks into the kitchen and lowers himself into a chair beside his grandma. He grabs a peach from the wicker basket. "I'll be late tonight," he reminds her. As if she might have forgotten how important today is. "I have to find out if we have a future together. And then I must tell her I'll be leaving." He can't imagine two more difficult conversations, back-to-back.

She pats his cheek. "Everything will work out." A moment passes. "Clara called this morning, too. They'll be here early tomorrow."

Will pierces the peach's skin with his thumbnail and frowns. "I'll be at the airport by the time they arrive." He'll leave at five am if he must. The last thing he wants to do is talk to his parents, especially if things don't go well in his conversation with Marisol. He'll put off facing them until Sunday.

His work at the airport always zips by, but today it drags on incessantly until it's finally time to clock out. He drives the seven miles to the park, though he still has no idea what to expect. Will Marisol explain why she sent Brigid to cut off their relationship? Or does she have final angry words?

Will offers a weak smile to the girl in the ticket booth and pays his entrance fee. He is earlier than the meeting time Miss Lila indicated in the message. And she didn't specify a location, so he stops behind the popcorn stand. The meeting place had become his and Marisol's habit, late in the evenings when no one seemed to care. Normally, the sweet and salty popcorn scent makes his mouth water, but today, he is dry-mouthed. His stomach twists in knots from fretting so much all day about how this conversation will go.

The first thing he will do is apologize for his parents' insular views. But he is certain that the damage is already done. Even if she never wants to see him again, he is resolute in telling her he must leave on Labor Day to fulfill his war obligation.

Materializing from nowhere, Marisol touches him on the arm. "So serious," she says with a smile. The sight of her face warms him like the sun.

"I feel like I haven't seen you in over a month," Will blurts out. His heart jabs a true pang, the deep ache accumulated from their time apart. He wants to wrap her in his arms, but he stays still.

"It's the same for me." Marisol's eyes are sincere, but dart about as if she is nervous. "I need to apologize for sending Brigid to talk to you that night."

"No. I'm the sorry one. About my parents. I was stupid to think it wouldn't change what you think about me." It takes every bit of willpower for Will not to pull her against his chest, but he doesn't know if that is what she wants.

Marisol looks at him quizzically, though her eyes still flit beyond his shoulders. "Let's go over to Picnic Point. I have a lot I need to say."

For this late in the evening, the park is bustling. Will and Marisol walk along in silence. He doesn't take her hand in his, unsure of his footing. He fidgets with his fingers at his sides, still rehearsing what he will say. Marisol keeps at least two feet between them.

Twenty minutes later, they sit together on the bench. The air is warm and humid, even beside the lake. A soothing waltz from the band playing in the Pier Ballroom floats into the air. It was the same as the first time he held her on the night they danced in the shadows by the boat docks. Speckles of light from the cottages on the opposite shore dot the horizon. The sky is clear and black as a million stars twinkle, as if on tenterhooks, anticipating the impending conversation.

A young couple appears from the darkness, but they turn away when they see the bench is occupied, leaving Marisol and Will undisturbed. Once they are gone, she shifts her body toward his and edges closer, offering out her hands.

Will releases his breath and envelops her hands in his. They are soft in his grip, and he relishes the sensation as it spreads up his arms. "When you didn't come, it made me crazy. I know it's because of my parents. I am so sorry. What can I say to make you believe I am nothing like them?" he pleads. If he can't convince her, at least he has this one chance to say out loud what's on his heart.

"Oh, Will. That's not what this is about. Not your parents. That isn't the first time I've heard hurtful words. And I'm certain it won't be the last."

If it wasn't his parents, then what has he done to make her hate him?

Marisol's hand begins to tremble, but Will clasps it tighter. "This is difficult to explain. I come from a different world. It has been passed down through generations. The beliefs and customs are deeply rooted." Marisol lets out a sigh. "Many of them hardly make sense to me. Not the ones that cause women's suffering. Maybe they were appropriate and necessary in a different time and place. But now, I'm not so sure."

Will listens quietly. He reaches up and traces his finger along her cheek.

"The idea that it's impure and forbidden for me to spend time with you is absurd. My people are as intolerant toward *gadze* as yours are to me. And Miss Lila. The woman has done nothing but try to help me. Why should we

starve and struggle to survive when Mammie and I are capable of learning skills to work like any man?"

"So, this is about being with non-Romanies?" Will asks.

"Yes, that's part of it. But also, it's about the never-ending narrative." Marisol narrows her eyes. "That we are inferior."

Will can't take her suffering alone any longer. He pulls her to his chest and holds her face against his shirt. She inhales a deep breath and straightens.

Will's body warms with the relief and assuredness that he has not lost her. He takes her face in his hands and kisses her long and tenderly.

Marisol lays her head against his shoulder, their hands clasped together against his thigh. They sit motionless for several minutes, though it is difficult for Will. His heart is racing with the closeness he feels inside.

"I understand how difficult the choices must be for you and your mother. Or maybe I can't possibly, but I want to. It's not my place to tell either of you what to do. I hope you understand how I feel. The thought of living without you is unbearable." He is relieved to have said a part of what's on his mind. "I have something to confess."

Marisol pulls her hand free and presses it to her heart. "What?" It's her eyes this time that are filled with confusion.

"There's something I failed to tell you. I should have done it before." He reaches into his pocket and pulls out the induction notification.

She tips the crumpled paper in the three-quarter moonlight and takes in the words. Marisol lays the letter in her lap. "I haven't dared to let myself think about what would become of us. Who I would be without you. I never imagined that the war would make that decision."

"Never in my wildest dreams would I think the actions on my birthday would impact a future with someone like you. It was..." Will pauses. He strokes the back of his hand across Marisol's cheek. "That was before I met you." He pulls her head against his chest again, and they cling to each other. What has he done?

Marisol straightens as she pulls back her face. "What happens next?" she says with a tremor in her voice. Will pushes away a strand of hair off her forehead. She closes her eyes as if she is capturing the sensation.

“After I report for induction, I’ll go through basic training. Then hopefully, they’ll make me an Aviation Cadet. Send me to Texas or California, where they hold flight training.” He won’t hold anything back this time, as he shares every detail he’s learned, which is scant. “One week of Classification. They decide if I’ll train to be a navigator, a bombardier, or a transport pilot. Ten weeks of pre-flight and then several months of training. Then...”

He pulls Marisol closer and kisses the top of her head. She wraps her arms around him and gently caresses his back. She is comforting him. He is not scared of what he has finally told her about being drafted, but is sad that his words cause Marisol more pain than she is already enduring.

“Before you leave tonight, let’s go to Lila’s hidden room. I want you to meet her. She said she’ll wait for us,” Marisol says.

Will hadn’t expected to meet the woman tonight, with everything else he’d been worrying about. But he is still curious to meet the person who has helped Marisol all summer.

As they reach the busy boardwalk, Marisol releases Will’s hand. To him, it seems like any other day as children tug their parents forward and singles flirt with the hope of meeting a new sweetheart. The people are packed in tightly, meandering from stall to stall, with no need to hurry. It’s not any other day. Will wants to savor every second.

They have to pass by a man at the Guess Your Weight booth that Marisol has pointed out before. He is from her clan. Will keeps his eyes down as he drops two steps behind for extra insurance, letting a family fill in between them. As soon as they duck through the lower doorway below the Crystal Ballroom, Marisol grabs his hand again. Music pulses from above. Instead of mounting the staircase, they turn left into a hallway.

“I’ve never been down here at night,” she says. Marisol leads the way as she weaves them together through the maze of shadowy passageways.

Lila is sitting at the table when Marisol knocks on the open door. She lifts her head from a book and smiles. Will’s head nearly grazes the ceiling.

“This is Will,” Marisol says.

Lila rises and extends her hand. The woman looks more petite than he had imagined.

Will crosses the short distance. "Will Worthington, ma'am. I am pleased to finally meet you. Marisol has been telling me all you've done for her."

Lila smiles and nods genially. "It's she who has been doing the work. With some luck, we'll have her in medical school soon enough."

They finish the polite conversation and leave Lila in the room. They are alone in the dim hallway as they take the third turn back toward the entrance. Will tugs on Marisol's arm.

"Wait. Can we stop here for a minute?" He hadn't realized they'd be going somewhere this secluded and protected from prying eyes. He can't wait another second to kiss her again. "You never mentioned it was so private here."

"I guess I never thought of it that way," Marisol laughs, lifting her chin as Will nuzzles her neck. "This is Lila's space, not mine."

"If she's as obliging as you say, I'm sure she won't mind me kissing you here." Will turns their bodies so that Marisol's back is pushed against the timber wall. He takes her by the shoulders and presses his lips to hers. Her body softens as she lays her hands against his chest. Surely, she feels his heart pounding beneath her hand.

Stronger than he has ever felt, a desire burns inside. He almost lost her, and now he holds her in his arms again. He pulls back and stares into her eyes in the minimal light from the entrance, searching for any sign that their thoughts are in alignment.

From the way she is looking at him, he finds it, the understanding and agreement. "I want to hold you. Hold all of you," he ventures. Her story weeks ago about Levoy presses into his mind. He would never do anything she didn't want. Neither of them moves. The gravity of the moment hangs between them.

"There is a room at the boardinghouse where I clean. It's been empty since the beauty pageant," Marisol whispers against his ear.

Will nods slightly. "Is that what you want?"

"Yes."

They agree to meet at Durwood Boarding House in three Saturdays. Will kisses Marisol one last time, lets her hand slip from his, and walks alone back through the park.

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On Sunday morning, thirty-six hours after Will bared his soul to Marisol, he dresses and is ready for church before anyone in the house is awake. He'd arrived late at the farmhouse last night after work, long after his parents and grandma were asleep.

There is silence in the car as they drive to the church. The back of his parents' heads makes him see red. He had time to think about Marisol all day at work yesterday. He is incensed by how they behave the same as people who cause trouble for Marisol and her family.

The familiar quiet sits heavily in the car on the drive back to the farmhouse. A mile before they reach the driveway, a patrol car is tucked around a bend in the road. "A *gavver*," Will says, a word Marisol uses when they encounter uniformed park security men.

"What did you say?" William snaps, jerking his eyes to the rearview mirror.

"I said *gavver*," Will says louder. "It's a Romani word that means policeman."

William slams on the brakes of his Pontiac, and it skids to a stop along the side of the dirt road. He whips his shoulders around and stares at Will with furious eyes. "John Pierson told me he saw you at the park a couple of weeks ago, holding hands with a girl he claimed was one of those Gypsies. I didn't believe him and told him it was impossible. But I see now you've been sneaking behind my back. Do you take me for a fool?"

Will wants to shove open the car door and escape. He doesn't want to be anything like his father, nor does he want to share his beliefs, his actions, or his words.

William pounds his hand against the top of the front seat. "Speak when you're spoken to!" he shouts, as his mouth twitches. Clara sniffs, and his

grandma lowers her eyes to her hands, though she presses her knee against Will's.

Will shakes his head from side to side. "I'm not sneaking around," he says evenly. "I'm leaving in six weeks for the Army. I'd think by now you would have accepted you can't control my life any further."

William's entire neck and face are red. Steam is practically coming out of his ears. "You still live under my roof! I forbid you to see that girl again. We're leaving as soon as we're back at Emma's. All of us." William starts the car and jams the gas pedal, spinning the tires as he jerks it back onto the road.

When they arrive at the farmhouse, Will goes straight to his room and packs his duffel. He wants to challenge his father and refuse to leave. But he won't stoop to his level. He'll go with his family today. His father thinks that will stop him from seeing Marisol, but he has no intention of wasting precious time without seeing her before he reports for induction.

## CHAPTER 27

### Marisol

*August 10, 1942*

The tiniest smile plays against Brigid's lips. "You're going to do it? Meet Will at Durwood's Saturday night?" She and Marisol sit on the Picnic Point bench and eat their lunches.

Marisol tosses a piece of bread crust at the flock of white Pekin ducks that paddle expectantly beside the stone seawall. They flap in a flurry toward her single offering. The fattest one is the quickest. She snatches the soggy scrap into her pointed orange beak. The resident waterfowl quack and scrounge the water for more, but this is all Marisol can spare.

"I am." Her mind is made up. Knowing that Will is leaving for the war in four short weeks, no one can convince her otherwise. If she loses him forever, at least it will be without regret. They will give themselves to each other in the most intimate of ways. It will be something they can cling to in the unknown that lies ahead.

This is an altogether foreign sensation for Marisol. It is so different than the fear and dread she felt toward Levoy on their wedding night. Though she hasn't spoken about it, Marisol is certain about her feelings. She is in love with Will.

Since Mrs. Durwood's mother's room has remained empty, Marisol assumes that Mary Alice went back to Connecticut after the pageant. She's

overheard Etta tell her kitchen helper, Sadie, that she will keep it empty until her sister comes to visit at Thanksgiving.

Mrs. Durwood allows Marisol to refresh in the bathroom after her cleaning duties are finished and before she goes to her tent. She changes into clean clothes in Mary Alice's empty room.

Sometimes, Marisol lies down on the bedspread. She runs her fingers among the chenille tufts and imagines what it would be like to be a woman on her own, sleeping in her rented room before departing each morning to do important work.

Marisol also thinks about what it might be like for Will to fly an airplane in the war. Will he sleep in a tent or a barracks? Will he be in constant danger? They have no television or radio in their rented cabin, so she is woefully ignorant about what is happening overseas. She will ask Miss Lila.

A couple of times, in that solitude and stillness, Marisol thinks about God. Some people in her clan believe in Him. They certainly all believe in an afterlife. To Marisol, it's a vague idea that has always been hard for her to picture what that's like. Her father was an atheist. Gran and Mammie sometimes talk about faith and spirituality, but it would be impossible to attend a regular, *gadzo* church. Marisol has seen many of those buildings where people gather and commune. They're for the Catholics, the Protestants, the Baptists, and the Jews. Could all those people be wrong, believing in a source that brings comfort and knowledge of a true, eternal life? Hope? If there is a God, would He want her or Will to suffer? Marisol decides that it would not be possible. She prays for Will's safety in the war. She whispers to God to help Mammie find work in a factory. And she prays that the charity program committee will choose her application from the pile of others, enabling her to have a different life.

Etta Durwood's system for boarders consists of two keys for every room, their cardboard tag numbers matching the metal ones tacked on the bedroom doors. She gives one key to the guest after they pay the first month's rent, and the spare hangs on hooks behind the entryway reception counter. Marisol uses those keys each time she cleans, replacing them before she leaves. She will keep the beauty queen bedroom spare in her pocket on Friday.

The next day, Gran rests in the querent chair. Tuesday afternoons are quiet before the weekend visitors descend upon the park.

“Will you read my cards?” Marisol asks. “Now that I’ve done so many, I’m curious what mine will show.” After all summer reading others, she’s come to believe one thing. They have the power to inspire optimism and hope. Besides, she knows Gran sometimes misses being part of the game.

Gran tips her head and smiles. She opens her grooved palm, and Marisol lays the thick deck in her practiced hand.

It takes considerably more effort for her to shuffle than in early spring when she tutored Marisol. Her paper-thin skin accentuates her knobby joints. Marisol is not sure how she can hold the large deck, let alone move the cards between her fingers. Most days now, Gran stays resting in their cabin until late afternoon, when she comes to assist with the stream of evening customers.

“Let’s see what they have to say, my dear.”

Marisol chooses her card. “La Papesse,” Gran says, continuing to shuffle the remainders. Marisol touches the middle stack, and Gran begins the reading.

Gran lays her hand on *The High Priestess*. A woman sits on a throne, the layers of her blue robes and gown spilling all around her. The demeanor on her face is calm, and her hands clasp the scroll in her lap. “You have stepped into your role,” Gran says knowingly. “This is as it should be. I will not live much longer, of that, I am sure. And your mother. With time, you will be the one to lead, far more than we were ever allowed. This, the scroll, says TORA. The memories you carry in here...” Gran touches her heart. “They are the past and the present. And the future is not yet revealed to you. Though I can see it. A combination of things we’re not meant to know and the surety of science.”

Marisol’s heart is warmed by the message Gran is interpreting with the cards. She imagines many of her querents must feel the same when they hear her words.

Gran taps the *Page of Wands*.

“Le Bateleur,” Gran says. The Magician. “We stand between the spiritual and physical realms. You and I might agree that there is room for

both our traditional, passed-down healing versus that of science you've been learning about."

The sixth card is The Moon. Gran taps it several times. A dog and a wolf howl beneath a yellow moon that appears to be crying. If Marisol were reading for a querent, she would tell them it signals danger and deception. She thinks of Hal Clements.

"Enemies and danger are nearby," Gran finally says. "There are unseen forces. Though...there is always hope for peace." She presses her finger against the dewdrops beneath the sun.

Marisol's final card is the Ten of Cups. This one, she has seen many times in the readings she does for strangers. Most of them are young women who worry about the safety of their children and their husbands being shipped off to the war. Ten golden cups are arranged in a curved rainbow, hanging in the sky. Beneath is a young couple, the man's hand around the woman's waist. Two school-aged children skip beside them. As Gran points to it, she lifts her eyes to Marisol's. "The young *gadzo* man?" she asks.

Marisol nods.

"I suspect you can read this one for yourself," Gran says, tapping the card and then Marisol's hand. "Perfect love and union. What you've always longed for. Do you recall the night before your wedding to Levoy? I foretold it." She smiles and nods to herself.

Marisol scoops up the deck. She thinks of her planned meeting with Will in two days. She has no higher trust than in Gran's wisdom. It will never be a mistake to give herself to him. "There is something I need to ask you," Marisol says.

Gran raises her eyes.

"If I choose love. And work meant for men. What trouble will that bring to you and Mammie?" Marisol could bear the consequences for herself. But Mammie and Gran are from different generations. Making their lives even harder than they are would be an even greater cruelty.

Gran Rose sighs and takes Marisol's hand in hers. "The problems, Marisol, are not yours to bear. You didn't bring them to us."

She is grateful for Gran's attempt to relieve her guilty conscience. She has made no decisions, other than the one she is sure of, that she will bind herself to Will before he goes to war.

An hour remains before the park closes. "I am so tired," Gran says. "I think I'll go back to our cabin. You'll finish tonight alone?"

Marisol kisses her on the cheek and pulls her into a warm embrace. "Of course. I'll be fine."

Gran moves out to the entry part of the tent. Moments later, the flaps rustle as a middle-aged woman, Marisol's next querent, steps in.

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At last, the day's work is finished. Marisol secures the string of the satin pouch of coins around her waist and ties the tent flaps securely for the night. The lights on The Dips are dark, and the park is drifting off to sleep. It has been an unusually busy day of readings, and Marisol is exhausted.

Late in the evenings, when the park is closing, random stray voices and car engines make their way over to the path. But tonight, everything is eerily quiet.

Marisol drags her feet as she walks toward the Romani cabins. The half-moon, cutting between the leaves, casts crisscross shadows at odd angles along the path. A twig snaps and an owl hoots as she nears the fork. The cabins are to the left, and the lakefront cottages are to the right.

She smells something burning. Before she can process why the misplaced cigar odor is in the woods, Hal jumps out in front of her.

"Walking alone tonight?" He jabs the cigar between his teeth and sucks in a draw. The round tip glows red in the moonlight.

"Yes." Marisol inhales, and the sickly sweet smoke stings her throat.

Hal licks his lips and peers over the top of a paper he waves in his other hand. "I've been hunting everywhere for you. I wanted to make sure you got this back. Your name is on it."

It's the application answer sheets she pushed beneath Lila's crates back in April. "Where did you get that?" Marisol asks, indignant, before it occurs

to her to hold back on her words. Those first ones had been a lot of work, and she'd painstakingly recreated them word for word.

"Aww, you seem so surprised! Guess you people aren't the only ones good at stealing?" Without further explanation, Hal brings the end of his cigar to the papers. They catch fire immediately. Flames shoot straight up and curl the bottom where the paper touches the embers. He drops them to the ground, and Marisol can only stare as they disintegrate into ashes.

Her throat is dry. She jerks her eyes down the path, calculating if she can outrun him. But her legs are frozen in their place.

"Thinking about going that way?" Hal throws his cigar onto the ground and jams his hand into his pocket. "Don't be in such a hurry. I have something else that belongs to you." He pulls her gold locket from his pocket. The chain dangles between his fingers.

"You're the thief!" she shouts. Hal's eyes flash with anger. He steps forward, and she moves back against a tree to keep a distance between them. She bites back a scream, the same as she had done when Levoy trapped her in the barn.

Hal brings the locket clasped in his fist up to her cheek as she angles her head back, trying to avert his touch. He wedges his fist beneath her chin so that their eyes are forced to meet. She knows he can see the fear painted on her face. "I'm thinking we can make a trade. I have something you want. Assurance that you people can work here in the park. And you have something I want."

Marisol flinches as he puts his other hand against her waist. The dark December days flood her mind. The terrifying image of Levoy and the barn will never truly leave her. How can this be happening again? Anger boils in her blood.

A branch snaps, and Marisol peers beyond Hal's shoulder but can't see anything. In a flash of bravado, she lifts her hand and slaps it hard against Hal's cheek. His eyes bug wide, but he does not step back as she had hoped. He snatches her wrist and twists it.

"Hal Clements! Take your hands off her this instant!" Lila shouts as she hurries up the path. Ruby is one step behind her. "What the Sam hell are you doing?"

Startled, Hal releases Marisol's arm and drops the locket as he scrambles three steps away from her. He crosses his hands across his chest and recomposes himself as if he is observing a piece of art in a gallery. "No need to insert yourself here, Mrs. Bennett. This is none of your concern," he says with smugness in his voice.

"It most certainly is! Marisol, go!"

Marisol stoops and snatches the locket from the dirt. As she straightens, she stomps her foot hard on top of Hal's, then breaks into a run toward her cabin. She slaps back branches that reach across the path and shudders as she hears Ruby swear at Hal. "Gowl! Pox!"

## CHAPTER 28

### Lila

*August 14, 1942*

Mid-morning Friday, Lila, Ruby, and Gus huddle beside The Dips. They have not been so lucky this time to escape with only damage. Lila watches as Gus runs his hand along the gaping hole cut in the chicken wire fence.

Two men approach from opposite directions. One of them is Hal. Lila guesses the other must be the Summerland Park man. His business suit is out of place. A layer of dust clings to the laces of his black oxfords and has dulled the shine. As they reach the breached fence simultaneously, the stranger loosens his tie at the knot and removes his hat. His forehead glistens in the sweltering August sun.

The ever-rotating higher-ups the company sends once a summer arrive unannounced. Often, they wander around the park a day or two before anyone notices them. None of them ever returns, so there'd be no way of recognizing this one.

"Bart Kingston. Summerland Park Company." The man nods with confidence as he extends his meaty hand. Gus shakes it, though Lila notices her husband does not offer his name or a reciprocating smile.

"Ruby O'Rourke, Lila Bennett," Gus says, releasing the man's grasp as he motions toward both women. Ruby already has her hand outstretched, and Kingston is forced to shake it. Lila keeps her hands planted on her hips.

Hal stares at the ground. With his hands jammed in his pockets, his lips twitch, but he says nothing.

Gus wastes no time getting to the purpose of the meeting. “Glad you finally got here, though, as you can imagine, Friday morning is not ideal for us. I’m sure your profits show that customers have inundated us all summer. Especially on the weekends.”

The park man pulls a handkerchief from inside his jacket and wipes his sweaty brow. For one moment, Lila is willing to give this man a chance, the same as she does the first time she meets anyone. But she sees his face register blankness at Gus’ words, as if he is unaware of the record number of patrons who have visited Buckeye Lake Amusement Park this season.

Not waiting for the man’s response, Gus continues. “I’ve placed a call every week to your main office since we opened in April. Three calls last week. Again yesterday. After what happened here Wednesday.” Gus slaps his hand against the fence. It wobbles and rattles against his thrust. “You been getting those calls?”

The crowds have strained every aspect of the park—the quantities of food, the parking lots, the cleanliness of the public bathrooms, and especially the rides. The high demands make it impossible for Gus, Lila, and Ruby to be everywhere that they are needed. It seems that all Gus and Lila have talked about this summer is worrying about someone getting hurt. Lila has been counting the weeks. There are only three more until the park closes for winter.

But their luck has run out. Two days ago, a teen boy scaled the underpinning braces here at The Dips and fell into Little Lake. His three drunken buddies were somehow sober enough to pull him out and get him to the pool house.

“I’m not aware of any calls beyond the ones last week. What happened Wednesday?” the park man asks, raising his chin and gazing past Hal’s shoulder to the severed wire.

“How could you not know?” Gus yells. He throws his hat into the weeds. “This is my point!”

The park man glances at Hal. “I’ve got no report. What’s he talking about, Clements?”

“Bored teenagers. They cut this chicken fencing at least once a week. Kid scaled the scaffolding, fell into the water over there.” Hal points to Little Lake and says the words as if the incident were a child tipping over off his tricycle. “He’s fine. Couple of scratches, a broken arm. Boys will be boys. What one doesn’t break an arm at some point?”

Gus’s ears are tomato red.

Ruby steps forward toward the overdressed man. “It’s a wonder this whole damn park didn’t burn to the ground, with your lack of fire extinguishers,” she barks at Bart and Hal. Her emotions are raw and visible from the pain endured by String Bean and Miss Betty. Lila wants to move over and comfort her friend. Instead, she remains locked in place to lend solidarity to the three of them as they advocate for the park visitors.

Bart Kingston’s perplexed face shows he’s never heard of Miss Betty’s fire. Hal stares blankly at Ruby and shrugs his shoulders. “Not my fault there aren’t more extinguishers. There’s a war on, you know. Metal shortages and all.”

Ruby thrusts her leather notebook forward for emphasis. It’s splayed open, revealing rows and rows of notes. “Pages. Pages of issues we’ve had all summer. I’ve transcribed them every week. Left them at Durwood’s for Hal here, Mr. Kingston. Since we can’t ever seem to find him.”

Bart Kingston adjusts his feet further apart and plants his hands against his hips. Ruby does not back away.

Hal steps forward and clears his throat. “This is all a misunderstanding. Everything that is Summerland’s responsibility is in great shape. I’ll swear that on my mother’s grave.” He walks over and touches the curled wire. “Except for this fresh cut. By my way of thinking, if you want to complain about something, it should be those Gypsies. Whatever they’re involved in here at the park puts us all at risk.”

All eyes turn to Hal. What is he up to now? Is this a threat? Lila’s eyes flick to Ruby’s, then to Gus’. He had been as furious as her when she’d told him about their meeting on the path three nights ago.

“What have the Gypsies got to do with all of this?” Kingston asks.

Lila opens her mouth to defend the work of the Romanics, but Hal interrupts.

“They steal from the booth owners. I’ve been fielding complaints all summer. They pocket half our take from the rides. I spend my time following them around to be sure we’re not robbed blind. There’s scarce time to do my real job.” He ends his tirade with an audible huff.

“You’re a liar,” Lila says, her voice deep and unwavering.

Hal straightens and puffs his chest. “I’ve already filed a complaint about them with corporate, Kingston. I’ve told my brother. I’ve recommended we ban them after this season,” he snorts.

Bart Kingston scans between Gus, Lila, and Ruby. “If you say so, Clements. Seems fine to me,” he says, his voice flat. “Plenty of people need work. No use bringing around trouble, the way I see it.”

Lila closes her eyes and lets out a breath. The whole lot of them are corrupt. She points at Hal with an outstretched arm that trembles. Ruby grabs it and steers Lila away from the men. They move at least three yards away as the men’s heated arguing continues.

“That horrible man. String Bean could have died,” Ruby says.

Lila shakes her head and lays her hand on Ruby’s shoulder. Her eyes burn hot as anger builds inside. She can feel the storm clouds of Hal’s deceit brewing. “I know. Banishing the Romanies. They have more right to be here than he does,” she says as she kicks the dirt. “He’s a son of a bitch!”

The two women stand shoulder-to-shoulder. They keep their backs to the men so they can’t see their anger on behalf of the hundreds who visit this park and trust them with its safety. Ruby, Lila knows, for the near loss of her true love. Hers is for losing Daisy in this place. All of them are furious about the injustice against the Romanies and the realization that it has become too much.

The next morning, Lila sits at the table inside her secret room, waiting for Marisol to arrive. After a short break, once the application was mailed, they’d picked the more complicated studies back up while they wait for the charity committee’s answer.

“Hello, Miss Lila.” Marisol skips into the room and settles into the empty chair.

“Goodness, I’m glad to see someone is happy today.”

Pink floods Marisol's cheeks as she lowers her head and opens a heavy textbook. "I'm seeing Will again tonight."

"Ah." Lila hates to spoil the cheerful mood, but she must tell Marisol about yesterday's meeting with Bart Kingston. The Romanies need to be informed before word gets out and takes them off guard. "There's something I must tell you."

"Have you heard from the university people? I've been rejected?"

"No. Nothing like that. I expect it will be a couple more weeks before we have any news. The application said they'd mail acceptances by September first." Lila rubs her forehead. "This is about work here in the park." It had been bountiful all summer, plenty for everyone.

Marisol furrows her brow.

"It's about Hal Clements again. After the incident earlier this week on the path, I've learned he's filed a complaint with the park company. He lied. Nothing we can do about it. Summerland has agreed that this will be the last summer the Romanies will be allowed to work here at the park, unless Gus can get something changed. He plans to go to higher-ups once he has time after we close down in a few weeks."

Marisol clasps her hand to her mouth. "Mammie said this would happen. This is all my fault!"

"Of course, it isn't. This has nothing to do with you. And everything to do with bigoted people." Lila grasps Marisol's hand. "Gus will try his best to undo this."

## CHAPTER 29

### Marisol

*August 15, 1942*

Marisol told Mammie this morning about the devastating news. It is true that Hal Clements is forcing the Romanies from the park. But she refuses to think of it a moment longer. Tonight, Will comes to meet her at the boarding house.

She had hoped to finish her readings early today, but with the approach of summer's end, the weekends are busier than ever. At least she'd had the foresight to tell Will to arrive later. With his father's insistence that he leave his grandma's house in Somerset and spend his remaining time back in Columbus, no telling how long it will take him to get here. There'd be no need to enter through the park entrance, anyway.

Marisol stays hidden within the path's bushes to observe what's going on at Durwood's. She'd never come here this late after the park closed.

When several minutes go by and no one approaches, Marisol tiptoes up the creaky wooden steps, working to muster confidence. She pretends she's a rent-paying boarder. She doesn't know if Mrs. Durwood has gone to bed or if she may be standing right inside the door. Holding her breath, she turns the knob and pushes it with caution. The bell above emits the faintest tinkle, conspiring along with Marisol to let her pass unnoticed.

She glances down the hallway. The aroma of freshly brewed coffee and the hum of conversation drifts out from the kitchen. Without hesitation, Marisol climbs the stairs and moves quickly toward the last room on the right.

Tucked beneath her arm, she has brought a candle set into a wicker-covered wine bottle and some matches. Marisol fishes for the room key in her pocket. Her shaky hand fumbles with the lock. She flexes her fingers and balls her fists to steady her rattling nerves. With a few more jiggles, the spare room key settles in the grooves.

Marisol glimpses once more down the empty hall and slips into the room. She closes the door behind her, clicks the lock, and sinks her body back against it. Her breath labors with relief. She brings her hand flat against her pulsing chest, sighs, and smiles.

She sets the candle on the nightstand and lights it. Marisol switches off the light and crosses the room to the window. Unlatching the metal locks, she heaves the heavy wood frame up. The white lace curtains flutter and float as the night breeze ripples through the tree boughs. Marisol pops the screen out and props it against the wall. She drags her hand along the sill and gazes out at the night sky. Excited nighttime noises fill the air—a chorus of crickets and a pair of debating frogs.

Marisol eases onto the end of the bed and slips out of her shoes. She pushes her toes into Mrs. Durwood's mother's plush mauve rug. It's nicer than the ones in other rooms. Bouquets of roses are woven among its threads. In the space of one hour, she's gone from the worry of being caught, the anticipation of being in Will's arms, to pride in following her feelings, and now, to butterflies for the coming intimacy with a man.

A noise outside pulls her back toward the window as Will finishes scaling the metal fire escape. He ducks and folds himself through the opening.

"You made it," Marisol says, tamping down her sudden shyness.

Will takes her hand, and her heart steadies. "Yes, of course," he says. His voice causes heat to swell and roll throughout her body. He places his hand on the small of her back and leads her to settle with him at the end of the bed. Beside each other, their legs are touching. They stay that way for several

moments as their breathing slows, their hands clasped together. Will caresses his thumb back and forth on Marisol's as they sit in silence.

The flickering candle, the moonlight, and the leaves rippling in the breeze outside conspire to create dancing shadows on the walls. Marisol is both apprehensive and excited. Being in Will's presence feels altogether foreign and achingly familiar.

He shifts slightly to face her and touches two fingers to the gold heart necklace. "You've found it," Will Whispers. He moves them across to graze her collarbone and the roundness of her shoulder beneath her dress's fabric. The effect of his touch ripples throughout her body. He leans in and lifts his hand beneath her chin.

Marisol inhales. She locks her eyes with Will's as they shine and dance with his anticipation and desire.

He touches his lips lightly against hers, tenderly, a gentle caress. She closes her eyes and is aware she is shaking. It's not with fear, but with expectation. Her heart beats so loudly that she is sure he must hear it.

Will presses his lips harder, moving his hand to the back of her head. The kiss is strong. She is dizzy and overcome with unfamiliar desire. No words are necessary as both their hearts speak a language to each other.

He pulls his face back and smiles. The candlelight reflects against his cheek, and his blonde curls fall loose across his forehead. He reaches for the silk scarf she's fashioned into a headband and pulls it out, letting strands of hair fall around her face. Brushing one side back, he lets his hand return to the front of her dress and skim across. It comes to rest on her waist. He presses his hand against the fabric. With both hands firm along her waist, he pulls her to him and kisses her ear, her neck, her collarbone, and directly below the locket. Marisol's mind is lost in all the new sensations. This goes beyond any of their previous hand-holding and kissing, but she wants him to go on.

As he lifts his head, Marisol wraps her arms around Will's back and sinks her chest against his. She moves her hands across his shoulders and feels the muscles beneath his shirt tense and then relax with the caressing of her touch. She marvels at the unlikely miracle they have found each other. Until

this moment, she has not recognized how hungry she is for touch, for love, to be needed and singularly wanted in this way.

Her heart thunders against his chest. She wants so badly for there to be a chance for them to be together always. But their worlds can't be more different. How can this desire, this love that has blossomed, be enough to see them through?

"I need you," he whispers in her ear. "Are you sure?"

"I am yours," Marisol says softly.

Will traces one hand up her arm, over her shoulder, and on up to her lips. She kisses his fingertips as he holds them there.

He removes his hands and unbuttons his shirt. Marisol reaches forward and pushes it down his arms. He unbuckles his belt as she undoes the buttons of her dress and slides the top off her shoulders, letting it pool around her waist.

Will stands and scoops Marisol in his arms and lays her gently on the bed. As she pulls away the remainder of her garments, he slides his naked body beside hers. Their skin is hot and longing as they face each other in the candlelight.

Will lays his hand on Marisol's waist, then moves it to the small of her back, then down lower to the roundness of her bare buttocks. His fingers move with intention along her thighs. Marisol arches with this foreign pleasure.

His mouth finds her breasts and lingers on one and then the other. She closes her eyes and drinks in the sensation. After a few moments, Marisol grasps Will's chin and pulls his mouth to hers, aching for his kiss again.

Will moves on top of Marisol and sinks into her body. Her legs curl around his torso as they both grasp at the desire that is new to them. She is electrified and alert to his every movement. Marisol reaches for a cohesive thought but only finds an out-of-body sensation. She cries out with a foreign pleasure as they move in rhythm.

Afterward, they lay still in each other's arms. Marisol doesn't know how long. It doesn't matter. The world has stopped completely.

Marisol rolls onto her side. Will presses his chest against her back, curls into her, and gently strokes her hair.

“I want to be with you forever. How can I leave you, now that we’ve found each other?” he asks.

Marisol wishes she had a reply. But her mind is blank. How can she accept that what she’s been searching for and has found will be gone within three weeks?

She tucks her feet between his ankles and pulls his arm across her waist. “I don’t know. Let’s not talk about it. Stay here now.” Marisol intertwines her fingers in his and holds tight until she falls asleep.

The first faint light of sunrise seeps in through the open window. Sometime in the night, Will had covered them with the bedcovers. Cocooned beneath the blankets, they stir to each other’s touch. They make love again, slower than the night before. Cradled in each other’s arms, they talk of love and desire. And they talk about the sadder things—the looming war, prejudice, intolerance, and ignorance. They are of one mind, but regrettably, on different paths.

Voices in the hallway seep through the bedroom door as the boarding house occupants begin to stir. Marisol and Will rise and dress. She straightens the room as if they were never there. Instead of leaving through the door, she exits on the fire escape with Will. They remain unseen as they step onto the shady path just beyond the front drive.

Will holds both Marisol’s hands in his. She realizes she’s forgotten the wine bottle candle holder in the room, but it is too risky to go back.

“When can I see you again?” Will says, his eyes filled with sadness.

“I must be extra careful,” Marisol says.

“Once more, please.”

“Sunday before Labor Day? Beneath the caramel popcorn stand,” Marisol says.

“There’s something. Something I must tell you.” Will swallows and tightens his grip. “I love you, Marisol. I think I’ve loved you since that first moment I found the sequin and saw you between the tents.” His eyes shine.

Marisol’s heart aches. “I love you, too.” She has never said these words to anyone. “How can we...how can we...” she repeats as he envelops her in his arms.

Will cups his hand against her head and pulls it to his chest. “I don’t know.”

They kiss one last time and separate, walking away in opposite directions. Marisol has never experienced such highs and lows of emotion with her declared love and her impending loss of Will to the war.

## CHAPTER 30

### Marisol

*September 6, 1942*

Marisol stands in the opening between her tent's tied-back flaps. She looks at the vibrant swags of orange, red, and purple fabric that stand guard on both sides of the tow path. They are draped on the tentpoles anchored where they have stood watch throughout the summer. Regal, like stained-glass bottles on a shelf. Their shiny payette sequin edges jangle listlessly in the breeze. When they'd returned in April, she'd worried about the months ahead and the uncertain future beyond. She'd had no faith that anything good was here in this place or anywhere else. After tomorrow, when the park closes for winter, what lies ahead is even more uncertain.

There'd been no word about the charity program position, so it seems it has been awarded to someone else. Even with the loss of that opportunity, the summer has been better than she'd imagined it could be. The park has changed her. It has given her Will and the ability to read and taught her about love.

She turns and gazes anxiously toward the entrance, and Brigid, her faithful lookout. When Will arrives at their meeting place one last time, she will signal.

This morning was typical, with excited visitors arriving in a steady flow. The sky was bright and sunny. Despite the earthy expectant scent of coming

rain, the park is now at capacity. Many in the crowds have driven hundreds of miles for a final day. The locals will savor the last taste of summer before the grueling work of harvest begins. Today is the opportunity for everyone to ignore what rages across the ocean, where many of these men will soon be sailing.

Moments earlier, brass instruments rang out as the marching band paraded one last time down the midway and out through the entry gates. They concluded an extra hearty version of “The Stars and Stripes Forever,” the importance of its patriotism not lost on anyone. Marching in precision rows, Marisol watched as they followed The Flying Wallendas’ aerial act—today’s free noontime entertainment. The band, the famous aerialists, and the crowds are gathered around the white cement fountain in the grassy area that surrounds it. The remaining park guests are jammed inside the park like sardines packed into a tin.

The only people remaining in the row of tents are the owners. Mammie Amelia is inside hers, preparing for their journey. Gran left five minutes earlier, over to the boardwalk in search of lemonades.

Marisol looks toward the sky. Puffy white cumulus clouds are gathering across the lake. She lowers her head back to find Brigid. Beneath the shiny red caramel popcorn stand sign, just inside the entrance, her friend shakes her head. *Not yet.*

Thinking again of the single phrase Marisol has turned over and over, she wipes her hand against her dress. *What do you say before someone leaves for war?* Just as she’s found him, he must now go away. Her heart races in panic.

Marisol lifts her gaze as a nickel-sized raindrop splats against her cheek. The pale puffs have been replaced by gray-black that is painting its way across the sky. The wind, too, picks up, whirling and whistling from the far side of the lake.

Responding to a sudden gust of wind, the sidewalls of the tents billow inward. The cool air blows against Marisol’s face. She shudders with the approaching storm’s pregnant air. The tents dance in unison like a row of ballerinas.

A stray branch thwacks against Mammie's tent, and she pokes her head out through the flap. "What's going on out there?"

Marisol nods toward the west. "A storm is coming." A flash of lightning slashes and illuminates the eerily darkened sky and the churning lake water below. In one...two seconds, thunder claps. She lets her gaze fall to the towering roller coaster across the lake. Curves of lights on The Dips glow as if it is nighttime. The connected line of cars descends along the rails as their rickety rumble cuts through the air. The wheels clack around a curve and then down the steepest decline. Predictable screams and peals of joyful laughter follow close behind.

Her mind is still on Will and all that has transpired in the past five months. How they'd confided their love for each other three weeks ago.

She blinks as the coaster seems to sway, responding to the ferocity of the sudden winds. The abnormal sideways movement is difficult for her mind to process. Beyond The Dips, what appears to be a thin twirl of white smoke contrasts against the hazy sky. Marisol thinks of Gran gathering their lemonades on the boardwalk. Surely one of the booth owners will shelter her from the wind and rain until the sudden storm passes.

A line of loaded cars approaches the top of the coaster as a second surge of wind reaches the structure. There is another push, this one much harder. Then, a twist of wood and rails.

Marisol is riveted in place as the ride's cars sail through the air like toys thrown by an angry child. Next comes a thundering crash as the structure collapses against itself, part of it smashing into the lake. The screams this time are unfamiliar, reverberating with only terror. The Crystal Ballroom band music halts abruptly.

Marisol's eyes frantically scan for Brigid. The rain is now coming down in sheets. She has abandoned her lookout post and runs toward the swaying tents. "What's happening?" she asks breathlessly. Gathering and hiking her muddy skirt around her knees, her feet slipping on the wet grass, until finally she ducks into the tent for shelter.

Riveted in place, Marisol continues to stand between the open flaps as several more sparks of lightning brighten the sky like a camera flashing. She's trying to comprehend that The Dips has just collapsed. Water rushes along

the tow path in gullies. Rain pounds in an uneven rhythm against the flimsy fabrics. The wind whistles and whips Marisol's hair as the ropes of a tent in front of her vibrate and snap. Its tentpoles are wrenched out of the dirt, and the colorful fabric flaps and sails away like an untethered kite.

From inside the park, yells and screams amalgamate and swell above the whining wind. The voices draw closer to the tow path. "God, have mercy!"

A crush of people pours out through the entrance gates. Random chunks of debris swirl in the air and fall haphazardly. Parents scoop up children while old folks try in vain to stay upright, navigating too slowly among the tidal wave of people who shove past one another.

"It's a twister!" a man yells as he runs down the tow path, slapping his shoes into the muddy puddles. He has a toddler grasped beneath one arm. Her legs and arms bounce with each pounding step as if she were a rag doll. "Irene! Hurry!" he shouts at the woman he's tugging with his other hand.

Marisol is frozen, still staring at the vacant spot where The Dips used to be. Her ears pop with the sudden drop in air pressure. She moves her eyes back toward the entrance just as the ticket booth flies fifty feet into the air. Another gust of wind peels away the Crystal Ballroom's roof as if it were made of cardboard.

Mammie rushes into Marisol's tent. "Flora! Gran! We must get to them!" she says firmly, though she is shaking. Her rain-soaked blouse clings against her skin.

"You go to Flora at the cabin. I'll go find Gran on the boardwalk," Marisol says. Without a moment's hesitation, she turns and bolts headlong into the crush of people barreling forward. Her shoulders press and collide with strangers, and someone's hand slaps against her head. It takes all her strength to stay upright as she cuts them apart with her arms as if she is frantically swimming across a lake.

Pieces of wood and snapped tree branches pepper the ground, and she works to keep her feet from catching. Her slippers are soaked and slide with each slick step on littered paper. She reaches down and peels them off, flinging them away so she can move faster to find Gran Rose.

She reaches the worker's entrance and rushes through the gate toward the midway, but is immediately stymied along the edge. All the park's

electricity is gone as lightning flashes in the sky's sickly gray-green light. It illuminates the mass of shouting, sobbing park visitors. They clog the expanse, arms crossed above their heads as the fury of the storm continues to pelt rain and flying debris. The ones further back in the pack pound on the shoulders of the people in front of them. The collective swarm inches forward. Gusts of wind howl and whip through ladies' once-coifed bouffant hairdos. Everyone's eyes are filled with mutual terror.

The midway is barely recognizable. Many of the booth roofs are missing, and stalls are no longer there. Marisol's eyes land on a miraculously pristine advertising flyer that remains nailed onto a pole, its edges flapping defiantly against the storm:

**The Curtain Falls!**  
**BUCKEYE LAKE AMUSEMENT PARK**  
**closes another glorious season with a Grand Finale of**  
**2 BIG DAYS**  
**of park dancing, games, rides, and food!**

Not only is the red caramel popcorn sign gone, but so, too, is the booth. Striped red and white cardboard popcorn boxes are strewn and trampled in their place. A pink stuffed teddy bear game prize wallows face down in the mud.

Marisol knows it will be impossible to navigate upstream through the crowd surging toward the clogged entrance gates. She wheels around and goes behind the remaining booths, where it is less crowded, so that she can make her way to the boardwalk.

The rain has slowed to a steadier trickle. She finally reaches the juncture where the tall curved MIDWAY sign used to be. The crowd in this area has thinned, though some dazed visitors and workers still zig and zag among debris as they search for a way out of the park. Marisol turns left and scans down the boardwalk under the still-angry sky. The fancy Chris-Crafts and rowboats are broken and haphazardly crushed into piles beneath the pier. The water in the lake is dark and sprays into the air as it slaps violently against the seawall.

“Help!” someone calls out. “Help!”

Marisol wants to stop for the strangers. But her feet barrel her forward to find Gran Rose. She scans and searches for the lemonade stand sign among the few remaining food stalls.

Barefoot, Marisol must brace her steps among the debris. She grits her teeth against the gashes in her feet and tries to hurry toward where the stand should be. If she seriously injures herself, she will be of no help to others.

As suddenly as it arrived, the wind abates and the air quiets. Few people remain in the park. What were panicked screams have been replaced by soft moans and muffled cries. She reaches the remainder of the lemonade stand and sees the ugly pool sign stabbed into the muck. Only the letters IONS are visible.

Marisol first catches sight of Gran’s brightly embroidered skirt wedged between a pile of timber boards. “Gran!” she cries as she kneels beside the rubble. She flings away boards and other trash to free Gran Rose from the trap.

“Help me, please,” another stranger calls out.

She hears muffled moans. “Oh, God, where am I?”

“Mamma! Mamma!” a child cries.

Gran lies motionless. Marisol lays her ear on the old woman’s chest, but there is no heartbeat. She takes up her wrist and presses it between her thumb and fingers, searching for a pulse. Nothing. “No! No!” she cries out.

Marisol pushes away Gran’s tangled and matted hair and gently touches a knot the size of a plum formed above her brow. No blood or apparent broken bones are visible. She looks as if she is sleeping, and her closed eyelids do not twitch or flutter. The head injury and non-beating heart have ended Rose’s life.

Marisol shivers in her rain-soaked dress as she gathers Gran’s shoulders and pulls her close. She places a kiss on her lifeless cheek. It’s impossible to imagine their lives without Gran Rose. Marisol cradles the old woman’s head in her lap as she passes to the afterlife with the fury of the tornado.

## CHAPTER 31

### Lila

*September 6, 1942*

Lila and Ruby sit on the bottom steps leading up to the Crystal Ballroom. The roof is peeled away like a tin can lid. The afternoon sun beams down, glinting off shards of crystals from the broken chandeliers and a dented trumpet wedged against a stair. Paper dance tickets and dollar bills cling like confetti to the muddy floor.

Lila swipes her torn sleeve across her dirty forehead. The ferocious storm passed as quickly as it appeared, leaving the air humid and sticky in its wake.

Hours earlier, the park was filled to record capacity. Lila and Gus had been fifty yards away from The Dips as they watched in horror as the metal, wood rails, and underpinnings twisted and detached, no match for the driving wind. They had been walking in its direction to finish cataloging the long list of repairs needed before the park could open the following spring. The collapsing, groaning ride expelled its final breath right before their eyes. Gus grabbed Lila and pulled them both down into the mud, shielding her curved body from flying debris.

Once the thundering clatter subsided, they stood and then broke into a run toward the tangled mass. Beneath the wreckage, the moans and cries of the injured began immediately. The chattel of Summerland's prize coaster was strewn thirty yards in all directions. A few passenger cars were still

connected, but most had independently wrenched apart. Lila and Gus stepped carefully through dangerous spikes of metal and splintered chunks of wood.

Two former occupants of the first car they came upon sat in the mud beside it.

“You folks okay?” Gus shouted through pants of breath as he crouched down to their level.

“Yes, I think so,” the man said as he rubbed his head. “What happened?”

“A tornado, best I can tell,” Gus answered, rubbing his own forehead.

“Me, too. I think I’m okay.” The woman banged her palm against her ear and tested the use of her legs. Their clothes were ripped. They were dazed and held each other up, but otherwise seemed unscathed.

Gus and Lila continued to the next disconnected car. It lay on its side, half in the water, half on the muddy shoreline of Little Lake. If this car had previous occupants, they were nowhere in the vicinity.

“What’s that?” Lila gasped, stopping in her tracks and pointing at the mud.

Gus’ eyes widened. “It’s... I think it’s someone’s feet.”

The blood drained from Lila’s face. A man’s oxford shoes were pointed stiffly toward the mottled sky, the laces tied in perfect bows. She and Gus exchanged nervous glances as a scene from the recent colorized *Wizard of Oz* movie flashed into her mind.

“Bloody hell!” Gus shouted into the lingering wind that thundered in the distance like a departing freight train. He rushed beside the car and heaved with all his might, rocking and pushing the heavy metal until it fell backwards. Lila clutched her stomach with a wave of nausea as she and Gus took in the dead man. His chest was crushed, and the back of his head was pressed into the mud. An inch of lake water covered his face.

It was Hal. His forehead skimmed just below the surface, and his skull was indented in the shape of the car’s safety bar. Water pooled within his gaping mouth like a cup filled to its brim. Lila stared as lapping waves of water rolled and molded around his lifeless body as if he were a boulder in a shallow riverbed. Gus didn’t say another word, scratching the back of his neck and shaking his head.

More calls for help and sobbing diverted their attention from the gruesome discovery. They rushed from place to place, yanking away debris and tending to the people the best they could until more help arrived. Some injuries were minor cuts, others were broken limbs, and a few seemed unconscious. Passengers frantically searched for their loved ones, and park workers wandered around as if they were in a trance.

Local help began arriving, and once Lila and Gus finished surveying The Dips area, they were joined by Ruby and combed the park for additional injured people. Every inch has been searched. The last place they checked was Daring Dan's box, still tethered on the pier twelve feet beneath the lake. He was oblivious to the tornado above, though he'd wondered why no one came for several hours to talk into the tube.

"It's a miracle only Hal and Rose were killed," Lila says, trying to calm her rattled nerves. "Though Rose will be a great loss to Marisol and her family." At least fifty more are injured, between park visitors and displaced workers. Everyone has been driven to the closest hospitals.

"What happens next, do you think?" Ruby clasps her empty hands together in her lap. No part of the park is without damage. Less than a third of it is recognizable.

"Amazingly, the park phone line is still working up in the main office. Gus called the Summerland people. No one will arrive from Pennsylvania until tomorrow. It's for them to decide, I suppose," Lila says heavily. "I feel sorry for the locals. This is their livelihood."

"All of ours. Though we can restart," Ruby says wistfully. "Stewart and I have already decided. We're heading back to Boston in the morning. I'm still worried about the lingering effects of Miss Betty's fire. And now this. It's all too much in one summer. My mother is declining. I think it's a lot of signs that we should make a new life together somewhere else. We'll decide what to do next when we get there."

Lila isn't prepared to let Ruby go. She reaches for her hand and pulls her into a deep embrace. They hold each other tight, knowing once they let go, this may be the last time they are together.

They release each other. "I'll call you on Thanksgiving," Ruby says, brushing away a tear.

Lila nods. "Take care of Stewart and travel safely back to Boston. Gus and I will miss you so very much."

Ruby hurries away. Lila rises and moves toward her secret room. She is surprised at how unscathed this lower level is as she winds around the corners.

She pushes away the crates less carefully than usual. This time, when she leaves, she will not restack them to camouflage the door. This room has served its purpose. She and Gus will leave the park, too. They will not return. Of this, she is sure. It's too much loss and too much destruction.

Inside the room, little has been disrupted. The window has sustained a crack, and water trickles down the wall beneath. It pools on the wooden counter and falls over the edge as it trails along the cabinet doors and onto the floor into a growing puddle. It will be impossible to get anyone to come and repair it, among all the other pressing park destruction.

Lila sits at the table and lays her hand on the envelope that she'd picked up from the post office earlier this morning. The flap is unsealed, and the charity program application results are inside. She'd read it before the fury of the tornado unleashed upon the park. Marisol has secured the coveted place, but she doesn't know it yet.

As Lila traces her finger on the envelope's return address, approaching footsteps echo from the hallway. Will Worthington appears in the open doorway.

"Miss Lila!" he says, frantic and out of breath. He rakes his hand through his disheveled, wet curls. He scans around the room. "Marisol. I have searched everywhere. All the tents—they are gone. I was hoping she would be here."

Lila rises and meets him at the door. Even though she's only met him once, she instinctively lays her hand on his shoulder. With so much loss today, finding each person alive and uninjured kicks in the instinct to provide any comfort possible.

"I'm afraid she's not here. Ruby saw her, but I haven't. I know she is uninjured. We have accounted for everyone," Lila says. "Though her grandmother did not survive."

Will visibly exhales. "That's horrible. They must be devastated." A few seconds pass. "Miss Lila, I'm out of time. I have to leave now. I'm required to report for service early tomorrow morning, and I can't stay here at the park any longer. There's only one more bus going back to Columbus. You'll tell Marisol I tried to find her?"

"Yes, of course."

"Will you tell her..." Will swipes a muddied sleeve across his eyes. "Tell her I love her."

"I will." Lila nods. "I promise." She embraces him before he turns and hurries down the hallway, disappearing into the darkness.

Lila walks to the window and swipes her fingers through the pooled water on the counter. She brings her hand to her stomach as new life flutters among all this chaos. She walks to the shelves and pulls out Daisy's childhood books and a medical one. Lila tucks the acceptance letter beneath its cover. She closes the door and leaves behind the secret room that has saved her.

Though she knows they are grieving the loss of her grandmother, Lila hurries along the path to Marisol and Amelia's cabin, stepping around broken tree limbs. The cabins have not sustained the same kind of damage as the park, but people are gathering their things and packing hurriedly.

Lila spots Marisol on the porch, kneeling beside Amelia in the rocker as she tries to soothe her sobs. "I'm so sorry about Rose," Lila says, wrapping her arms around Marisol's shoulders.

"It's devastating. At least she didn't suffer."

"Gus and I are leaving soon, too, once we've met our obligations and done everything we can." She pulls the envelope from the book. "This arrived this morning."

Marisol slides the acceptance letter out. She reads it, and the enormity and meaning overcome her. "I got in! I can't believe it." She embraces Lila. "I'll never be able to thank you enough."

"You earned it. You deserve it. Your grandmother would be so proud."

Amelia sits up and pulls Marisol to her. "I knew you would. You will be a wonderful doctor. Nothing can hold you back."

“Here’s my phone number and address back in Texas,” Lila says, handing Marisol a slip of paper. “Call me in two weeks and I’ll guide you through the process of starting school. It will be very soon. Please, you all take care of yourselves.”

All three of them are crying now. Lila goes down the porch steps to visit Daisy’s grave one last time before she and Gus leave this place forever.

## CHAPTER 32

### Marisol

*Columbus, Ohio – November 13, 1946*

Marisol checks her patient's electronic monitor. It whooshes and clicks into the otherwise quiet hospital room. The soldier's heartbeat is steady. His chest rises and falls beneath the blanket in a steady cadence. He seems at peace lying there. It is impossible, she knows, with what his eyes have witnessed on the battlefield.

The men in this Columbus hospital are here for two reasons. They've each sustained injuries on the battlefield, and they lived somewhere here in Ohio before the war. By now, with over three weeks together, they have seen each other's bare butts gape through flimsy hospital gowns, just as Marisol has. In the darkest hours, they have listened to the terror-filled cries of their comrades.

She steps into the doorway's stream of light and retrieves a pen from her starched white coat pocket. "Vitals within normal limits," she scribbles on the paper and notes the time. The clipboard clicks against the footboard as she replaces it on the hook. Another hospital bed creaks, its occupant moving restlessly behind the thin dividing curtain. All four men in this communal room are presumably asleep this early in the morning.

Marisol finishes the chart rotation and steps into the fluorescent-lit hallway. The tang of rubbing alcohol and disinfectants assaults her nose, as

it always does. Nonetheless, her eyelids droop heavily. She leans against the wall and squeezes her eyes, which burn from exhaustion.

Two hours of sleep in the last forty-eight snatched in the basement is unreasonably not enough. Even though officially the war is over, she wonders how long it will be before the steady flow of wounded soldiers subsides and she will be able to treat other types of patients.

Marisol looks up as the squeak of rubber soles against the white waxed floor announces someone's approach. "You look exhausted," Nurse Garrison says as she reaches Marisol from the elevator.

"Long shift. These soldiers just keep coming."

"I dare say you won't be too pleased to learn about the new wave arriving. They've cleared out half the children's floor to accommodate." Marisol knows that the wing is rarely full, with all but the infectious patients sent to the nearby Children's Hospital over on South Seventeenth Street.

Marisol is grateful for the opportunity of the charity program and her subsequent training. Though almost weekly, she contemplates giving up and going back to Mammie and Flora and to her old way of life, if her clan would even accept her. This has all been much harder than she'd expected. She hadn't thought through how long it would take to become a licensed physician and follow the strict *gadzo* path to become a doctor. Things had been much simpler in Grandad's time when he'd only treated the Romanies.

Lila's determination made all this possible. Marisol continues for her. Two years ago, a package arrived with Lila's Texas address stamped in the corner. Inside the plain brown paper wrapping was a book. It was *A Tree Grows In Brooklyn* with a note tucked beneath its cover. *Dearest Marisol, I hope this letter finds you well. Gus and I welcomed a healthy baby girl at last. She has beautiful, dark hair, just like you. I saw this in the bookstore—everyone is talking about it. The girl inside the pages, Francie, you'll see, rises above her circumstances. Just like you. Stay strong, Marisol. I'll be waiting for word. Love, Lila.*

Marisol took comfort from the book. Especially in the darker days when she felt so alone, as if she were the only woman trying to make a better life. In those times, she thought of Gran Rose, too. She was the woman responsible for her reading journey back in the caravan in the woods.

Now, here in this hallway, Marisol rubs her weary eyes. She sees Gran's head lying in her lap on that last day at the park. She tries not to think of her as lifeless, finding it best to preserve her happy memories.

It's been four years in her undergraduate degree combined with the accelerated medical program. During the past five months working in her residency at Mount Carmel Hospital, Marisol has seen more broken, wounded servicemen and women rotate through these beds than she ever could have imagined. Their afflictions are so varied that it is difficult to keep up.

Marisol's journey to get here has not been easy. One month after the horrors of the freak tornado took Gran's life, she began this charity program. She takes pride in officially being a member of the class of 1948 at the Ohio State College of Medicine.

But then there is the constant guilt for leaving Mammie and Flora to fend for themselves. She is still haunted that she and Will never had the chance to say goodbye. She had no choice but to move forward. Lila had worked hard to ensure Marisol secured a place in this special program. Many nights, she sobs into her pillow for herself and all of them.

Assimilation among the *gadzo* men in the program was difficult. Everyone already seemed to know the proper behavior rules. She stayed quiet and demure, trying to blend in and make it through each day without drawing attention to her differences. She certainly was the only Romani in the program.

The aspiring physician's fast-paced residency training has necessarily been broad in scope. A scant few weeks of learning in the two-year accelerated program are dedicated to various maladies, and then they hastily move to the next. No one anticipated how long the war would last, and even in the months after, the need for doctors is a priority.

Once she successfully achieved her undergraduate degree, Marisol was immediately assigned to this nearby affiliated hospital ward. She was grateful for the opportunity, though she would have liked to have been considered for some of the other programs that went exclusively to men. She wasn't offered the chance to work at prestigious hospitals such as Johns Hopkins

in Baltimore to learn how to heal damaged hearts or at the Mayo Clinic in Minnesota to treat infectious diseases.

No matter, there is plenty of work she desires to heal people here. The brutality of the war renders severely broken limbs, grizzly-looking burns, and infection-laced amputations normal in this ward. Most of these afflictions are treatable with good medicine, plenty of time, and attention, though until recently, supplies have often been limited, and they've had to make do with what they have.

What Marisol finds far more difficult to assess and render aid to are the invisible, deep-buried wounds within these soldiers' minds. Only their eyes are windows to the horrors locked inside.

Marisol nods at Nurse Garrison and heads toward the stairwell door. She'll catch a few hours of sleep and then go where she is needed next.

Four hours later, Marisol steps onto the makeshift ward. A cork bulletin board behind the nurses' station displays several crayon drawings secured with thumbtacks of artwork left behind by previous patients.

"Dr. Mazaria. Good to see you," Dr. Smithson says as he raises his bushy salt-and-pepper brows above his black horn-rimmed glasses. He runs his fingers through his snow-white hair and exhales. "We're still intake processing. All hands needed." He releases a sheet of paper from his clipboard and hands it to Marisol. "Here, start with rooms 307 through 310, if you don't mind."

The red-cheeked physician had been the first person Marisol met when she arrived at Mount Carmel. He took her for a cup of coffee in the cafeteria that morning and told her about his early years spent as a country family doctor. He'd been called to do his duty here at the hospital when the war broke out. With so many physicians joining the military, his advanced age left him behind to manage the constant influx of broken soldiers returning home.

She has appreciated Smithson's consistent respect during her time working beside him. Marisol couldn't say as much for the experience she'd endured in many of her classes at the university. The undeserved stigma of being the only charity program position holder and a woman kept her at the

fringes of the men's acceptance. Though Dr. Smithson has been professionally cordial, he has demonstrated neutrality.

"Of course," Marisol replies. She snaps Dr. Smithson's intake paper to her clipboard.

As she scans the form, the older man clears his throat. "I wondered, Dr. Mazaria, if I might ask a favor?"

His face softens as she meets his eyes. There's a wisp of something she has missed for many years. It is the same caring, gentle ocean that was in Grandad's.

"How can I help you?" she replies acceptably, though in her experience, the word favor can hold many connotations.

"I have a granddaughter. Patricia. She is fourteen. She's shown an interest in my work. Would you be willing to allow her to attend sometime when you make your rounds? I'm afraid there are no female physicians in the small town where we live. It would mean a great deal to me if she could observe a woman perform a doctor's work." Marisol takes in his request, savoring that he respects her as his equal. This is the first time she's experienced the feeling from another medical professional.

She thinks about Grandad delivering that last baby and how deeply he must have wanted the same opportunities for her to learn as had been afforded to him. The reality, suddenly, that he more than anyone understood how difficult it would be for a woman to follow in his steps.

"Yes, I'd be happy to," Marisol says, as she ties the strings of her gauze facemask behind her head. She lets the edges brush her eyes to soak up the sudden prick of tears so that Dr. Smithson won't notice. Once she is sure he can't see her face behind the mask, she adds, "You can count on me to make sure she knows she can become a physician. Like any man."

As Marisol heads toward the first room, she turns back toward Dr. Smithson. "Sir, might I also ask a favor of you?"

"Yes, indeed."

"Would you write a recommendation letter for a job at Children's Hospital once I graduate?"

Marisol walks down the corridor and steps into Room 307. The smaller children's beds have been removed. Two adult-sized ones have been wheeled in and locked into place. Their extra widths make the room even tighter.

She begins with the patient nearest the open door. The man is sleeping. He has no physically visible injuries. Marisol consults the paper and taps his forearm. "Jenson? Mr. Jenson?" Marisol asks quietly.

The man, really a boy, flutters his eyelids. He blinks. "Ma'am?" His cheeks and chin have sprouted several days of prickly scruff, though the patchiness confirms his adolescence.

"You're Jimmy Jenson, correct?" Marisol verifies.

"Yes." The soldier brings his hand to his stomach and winces.

"I'm Dr. Mazaria. I'm here to check you into our hospital. Do you know where you are?"

"Yes, Ma'am. I'm in Okinawa. I've been shot, right here." He presses his fingers gingerly against his belly.

Marisol nods and scribbles on the paper. "You're back home in Ohio, Mr. Jenson. My information says they missed some bits of shrapnel during the first surgery. We'll get you scheduled for another, and that will help your pain. In the meantime, I'll order something that will decrease it." The boy closes his eyes and lets his cheek fall to the side against the pillow.

The metal clips scrape along the rod as she moves aside the curtain that separates Private Jenson's bed from the one with the other soldier near the window. Marisol steps through, pulls it back, and lets the fabric fall in place behind her.

This man is visibly more battered. White gauze is wrapped in several layers around his buzz-cut head. His ears are fully covered with thick pads beneath the gauze. Scabs in varying stages of healing mark random cuts across his cheeks and nose. His eyes are closed, but his blond eyelashes twitch as he otherwise lies motionless on the bed.

Marisol checks the second line on the paper. This patient should have an amputated leg and an eyepatch or wound cover over a missing eye.

She positions herself beside the bed. "Daniel Painter? Mr. Painter?" she asks. The man does not move. His breathing is steady, but his heartbeat quickens when she listens through her stethoscope. Marisol touches three

fingers to the soldier's shoulder. She suspects there's been a paperwork mix-up. It's been a common occurrence with the steady wave of intakes.

Marisol scans her paper for hearing and headshot wounds that would be consistent with the initial appearance of this patient. She flips the paper over, and the last line matches. She drags her finger left across the row.

William Worthington.

Her insides leap. It can't be. Is this Will, wounded in the bed right in front of her? Marisol presses her eyes closed and then focuses back on the form. She trails her finger to the *Occupation* column. Bomber pilot.

Marisol lays her hand flat against the soldier's chest. His heartbeat is slow and steady, while hers increases rapidly with the possibility that this could be Will.

She leans closer to his face. His mouth is barely open, and his warm breath escapes against her cheek. The man's eyelids open as her face is inches from his. His eyes widen, and he blinks rapidly. The edges crinkle from a feeble smile.

It is Will. His blond curls are gone, and his beautiful blue eyes have lost their spark. But she would know them anywhere. Warmth waves through her body.

Marisol straightens and studies the details of her paper. Caught in gunfire. Suspected temporary deafness. Previous concussion. Though she knows she shouldn't, her clipboard clatters as she lays it on the table and turns the handle to lower the bed's side rail.

She eases onto the edge of the mattress so that she is sitting to face Will. She leans down, rests the side of her head against his chest, and feels his pounding heart. He moves his arm across her back.

"Will," she whispers into his hospital gown, though she suspects he can't hear her. "My Will."

"I thought I'd never see you again," he says feebly. His words lisp, a common outcome when someone can't hear themselves speak. "I've pictured you a thousand times in my dreams."

Marisol turns her face toward his. She reaches up and caresses circles in the gap between his eyebrows, where there is no gauze bandage. Tears pool and trickle from Will's eyes, and she brushes them away with her thumb.

She takes his hand and places his palm against her chest so he can feel the metal of the heart locket. And her thrashing heart.

Over the next few days, Marisol visits Will at any moment she can break away from her duties. His hearing is gone from close gunfire, as she suspected. Hopefully, it is only temporary.

His sister Charlotte visits every day. The log states that his father, William, visited once, though Marisol was not around. Will's chart has been updated, indicating his mother, Clara, died last year.

Marisol wants to tell Will about what happened that last day during the tornado, her medical training, and losing Gran Rose. But it is most important that he rest. Her words will have to wait until he heals.

When she sits beside his bed, they hold each other's hands. She brings paper, and they trade a few notes before he tires. *We never got to say goodbye,* she writes.

*I thought about you every day,* he responds.

On the sixth day, the Army-issued soldiers' rucksacks are delivered to each owner. Will points at his, asking Marisol with his eyes to bring it to his bed. He fumbles inside a pocket and then reaches for her hand. Folding back her fingers, he presses the shiny purple sequin into her palm. *It kept me alive. I held it every night before I went to sleep,* Will writes.

Marisol's eyes flood. *That day we met. It feels like a lifetime ago.*

*The war. It changed everything,* Will writes.

*Not my love for you,* Marisol responds. Tears fill Will's eyes, too.

On the seventh day, Will scribbles shakily across the paper and hands it to Marisol. *Marry me.*

## CHAPTER 33

### Marisol

*The Village of Buckeye Lake, Ohio – June 30, 2014*

The crickets sing again tonight. Marisol asked Sarah to leave her bedroom window open to the night air. She's never liked artificial air conditioning.

As she settles beneath the covers, Marisol brings her hand against her chest. Tonight, her heart beats strangely and erratically. She pats her nightgown and remembers that night long ago beside the boats where she danced with Will. He'd held her hand against his chest. It was the first time she felt her husband's beating heart.

Marisol has accepted the peace of letting go. She thinks of all the objects she's carried through life and the sadness of places and people lost.

Over the past two weeks, she's entrusted her story to Andrew. She has ached so long for him to know it and is relieved to be unburdened.

He might find time to write it down, beyond the common Romani oral ways, so that it can be passed on to the next generation. All the history she laid into his hands may be forgotten, which is the easier path. But what else can she do? If it is erased, it will be as if her Romani family never existed. Most have assimilated into modern life, at least here in America.

She'd told him about his ancestors and how he could visit them at Woodland Cemetery. When he and his brother were young, she'd taken them there once, but she doubted he remembered. She told him about Lila

and Gus and their daughter Rose. Marisol told him about all the others at the park and about the Romanies from many other clans. They, more than any others, held the park's most intimate secrets. In the shadows and the margins, they saw things others didn't.

Marisol filled in all the gaps her sons had never known about the years during the war and after. Long before they were born. Summerland attempted to rebuild what remained of the amusement park after the tornado, but it was never the same. In the end, arsonists set roaring fires to the timber and wiped away every trace but the old cement fountain.

She told him that across the expanse of her years, she'd been included and excluded, comfortable and uncomfortable, embraced and alone. In each of those situations, where she lay her head at night had left an indelible mark. If the life lessons taught her anything, it was that the physical space where she hung her dresses and took her meals did not define a home, just as she'd told Flora all those years ago on that lumpy mattress in the cabin.

Marisol described the many in their clan who turned against her when she became a doctor among the *gadze*. For that, she never faulted them. It was all they ever knew. Eventually, with time, some accepted what drove her to seek a different path. For those, she traveled miles to offer them modern care and limit their suffering.

And she talked about the importance of books, the thing most discouraged in her childhood. More recently, the history is cataloged on TV and web pages. It had been hard to squint into the future in the dark days when she was forced to marry Levoy. It's the hardest for people to learn from their past mistakes if they aren't acknowledged and recorded. Only from that can they do better the next time.

Marisol burrows beneath the covers. She closes her eyes and can still feel Will's touch on her skin as if he were lying beside her that morning in Mrs. Durwood's boarding house. Marisol releases one last breath. Yes, she is at peace.

## EPILOGUE

*Buckeye Lake Park Fountain – September 19, 2014*

Three months after Marisol was buried beside Will, her two sons, their wives, their sons, and her four great-grandchildren gather near the fountain. The sun sits low against the horizon as a gentle breeze reaches them from across the lake.

What remains of Marisol's family bows their heads, and Andrew says a prayer. As he finishes the words he has prepared and says "Amen," a few cars pull onto the pavement beside them. Andrew opens his eyes and lifts his head in the direction of the noise and beyond. A string of cars snakes single file along the road. They pull up one by one and park in the empty blacktop spaces.

In huddled clusters, strangers walk toward Marisol's family. There are several young children and teenagers. Three old women wear bright embroidered skirts. The group draws close, whispering among themselves. They assemble in a semi-circle in the grass behind the family, their backs facing toward the lake.

Andrew scans the group of nearly fifty people. "Thank you all for coming to honor Marisol," he says, choking back the crack in his voice as he understands who they are. One of the old women in the first row reaches for the hand of the man beside her. Then he grabs the one beside him. It continues down the rows until everyone is connected. Andrew clears his throat and continues.

“We gather today to dedicate this bench to Marisol and Will Worthington, who met here at the park. My mother told me once that there should be a bench beside this fountain. A place where anyone could come and sit. Alone or with others. Some may discover this bench when arriving in despair and contemplating which path to take. Or they might purposefully come here to lose themselves in the pages of a book. Some might rest here with a child, gathering strength to complete the day. And some, like Marisol and Will, might meet here as young lovers. This bench has been made of stone and steel. To withstand tornadoes, fire, and war. Just as this fountain has.”

The warm wash of golden hour filters light above the lake. Ripples dance across the water, beckoning the silenced enchantment of the park to come forward from the shadows. “Today, in this wonderment of a place that brought my parents together, we leave a permanent gift in their memory. For all who come here after, let this be a reminder they were here and of the power of their love born out of destiny and hope.”

Andrew takes a step forward and reads the brass plate’s inscription:

REST HERE  
 YOU ARE NOT ALONE  
 YOUR HEART WILL FIND ITS WAY HOME  
  
 FOR MARISOL MAZARIA WORTHINGTON,  
 WHO FOUND TRUE LOVE WITH WILL  
 AT BUCKEYE LAKE PARK IN 1942

## Author's Notes

I carefully researched this novel for many years, combing through books, archives, online materials, and reaching out to professors, subject matter experts, and interviewing Romanians. It was challenging to get close to historical accuracy for many reasons, not the least of which is that, over the years, the Romanians have largely recorded their experiences through oral histories. I can't claim to have been flawless, but my intention and highest priority was to treat the portrayal of the very real Romanians with sensitivity and respect, which has not often been the case in numerous books, movies, and even songs. This story could not have been told without including the ethnic prejudice, racism, language of the time, and offensive attitudes that people endured. In no way do any of these reflect my own moral values or beliefs.

Buckeye Lake Amusement Park came to life in 1904, dubbed the "Playground of Ohio", when the interurban railroad companies constructed it on the shores of the central Ohio lake. It drew thousands of people during the weekends and summer months until its final demise in 1970. There were many fires and several tornadoes over the years. Today, what remains is the original four-tiered fountain, a nostalgic reminder of what existed. The park was designated with a historical marker in 1994.

Thousands of people have memories that have been retold and passed down, including summer out-of-towners, local villagers, and those who arrived annually to work in the park. As I began research, I found that timelines became blurred. This included details of when and which famous big bands performed in the ballrooms, so for historical accuracy, I included ones that did play or could have in 1942. Also, there were timeline discrepancies regarding when particular rides existed. Similarly, there are numerous spellings and words for the same things in Romani dialects, so I settled on the ones included. Elements of the park ebbed and flowed over the years, and for purposes of this story, I imagined them, including the fictional park layout depicted in the opening pages map. Any mistakes that

may have slipped through are unintentional, mine entirely, and human foibles.

While this is a work of fiction, many elements are drawn from real life. This includes the beautiful Woodland Cemetery in Dayton, Ohio, and the Stanley family's presence within the uppermost prime location. Members of this branch of the Stanley family immigrated to the United States on a ship from England in 1854, and you will find Stanley Avenue in Dayton. The train and bus systems that brought thousands of people to the park were real. Lazarus Department Store's Santaland is long gone, but it remains a favorite childhood memory of many. Because I have a lifelong interest in fashion, I was careful to portray apparel of the day accurately. The famous daredevil family, The Flying Wallendas, performed as a free act. The Olympic-sized Crystal Pool rented bathing suits and staged many beauty contests on a catwalk built over the water. Johnny Weissmuller and Buster Crabbe of Tarzan movie fame performed water shows. The dancers in the Crystal Ballroom stood on the overhead balcony smoking cigarettes and gazing down at the swimmers. Crane Lake and Little Lake were interchanged names, so I chose Little Lake. The Heath airport existed, as does Saint Joseph's, the oldest Catholic church in Ohio. Two of the most romantic facts I included were that the song *Goodnight Irene* was played throughout the park at closing time, and *Moonlight Serenade* was the customary last dance in the real Pier Ballroom.

The most heart-wrenching truth of the period was the Romani's persecution under Hitler's reign. According to the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, there were between 1 and 1.5 million Romanies living in Europe just prior to the start of WWII. It's estimated that as many as 500,000 were killed. Not one of the survivors was called to testify in the Nuremberg Trials. So little has been written about this dark aspect of World War II and the Nazi's that historians call it 'the forgotten Holocaust'.

While all of my characters are fictional and drawn entirely from my imagination, including Marisol, Will, and Lila, I paid fond homage to a few real-life park inhabitants. Those include Gus, inspired by the much-loved A.M. Brown "Brownie", Doc Wright, inspired by E. Howard "Doc" Wright and his store in the park (with loving permission from his daughter and one

of my mother's best friends, Maureen Skidmore), and Birdie, inspired by Ida Fletcher. As unbelievable as it may sound, Daring Dan was inspired by a park attraction of a man "buried" in a watertight container along the pier. He even had a phone number listed in the village phone book for people to talk to him anytime.

It would be remiss not to thank and acknowledge the late Donna Fisher Braig and her daughter J-Me Braig Bogden for their tireless preservation of life at the park. This includes Donna's book *My Buckeye Lake Story*, and the development, curating, and maintenance of the Buckeye Lake Historical Society Museum. I spent many hours poring through the cataloged articles, stories, and artifacts. Thank you to the late Chance Brockway for capturing park life through his photographs.

If you are interested in learning more, here are some resources I recommend exploring:

*Images of America: Buckeye Lake* by Chance Brockway

*Jewish and Romani Families in the Holocaust and Its Aftermath* by Eliyana R. Adler and Katerina Capkova

*My Buckeye Lake Story* by Donna Fisher Braig

*The Nazi Persecution of the Gypsies* by Guenter Lewy

*We Borrow the Earth* by Patrick Jasper Lee

*Zoli* by Colum McCann

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The seeds of *The Last Gypsy Queen* began when I was young and my mother, Patricia “Patsy” (Uhrig) Paul would tell me stories of the Romanies and her youth spent growing up and working at Buckeye Lake Amusement Park. We never stopped talking about them until we no longer could, and they inspired me to create my fictional world. This is less of a story of historical events and more of what, if successful, captures a few moments in time of a place that holds wonderful memories for many. It is also about putting oneself in someone else’s shoes. I am thankful that you, dear reader, picked up this book and spent your time with these pages.

Nothing in the book world would exist without the dedicated library folks and booksellers, who every day champion getting books in readers’ hands. In particular, thank you to the Flower Mound Public Library, the Southlake Public Library, and Monkey & Dog Books.

I wrote this book over a period of thirteen years, often while stuck in an airport or late nights in a hotel room. One of the joys of fiction writing is the countless people I’ve met along the way.

My ability to write a story featuring a young Romani woman navigating between the old world and the modern one of 1942 wouldn’t have been possible without my sensitivity reader, Gary Steele. His family descends from the Stanley clan, which ran their circus during the 1930s. Thank you for helping me ensure that characters different from me are portrayed accurately. Additionally, sincere thanks to his cousin, Gwen Rachel Stanley, for introducing me to him. It was of utmost importance to me to portray their ethnicity as closely as possible. I am also grateful to professors Heidi Gauder and Kayla Harris at the University of Dayton for answering countless questions during my early research days.

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## About the Author



Linda Paul is an award-winning author with MS and BS degrees in merchandising and textile science. She spent many years as an executive in corporate retail and eCommerce where she ran a research center and was a senior lecturer at a major university. Linda's passion for travel has led her to twenty-three countries, where she is always exploring the next creative spark. She is a passionate lifetime volunteer, regularly sits on non-profit boards, and lives with her family in the Dallas suburbs.

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## Note from Linda Paul

Word-of-mouth is crucial for any author to succeed. If you enjoyed *The Last Gypsy Queen*, please leave a review online—anywhere you are able. Even if it's just a sentence or two. It would make all the difference and would be very much appreciated.

Thanks!

Linda Paul



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