

TANO CHERE

(Excerpt: Chapters 1-5)

I.

Children will tell you what they do, men what they think, and older people what they have seen and heard.

I stopped playing mid-chord, my bow poised at a thirty-degree angle above the violin. His voice was right in my ear, a whisper, almost mischievous. Impossible. Wasn't it? I glanced cautiously right to left; I stood alone.

Someone called my name and I was jolted back to the task at hand: the gleaming ballroom, customers in their finest, enjoying an evening of elegant dining, dancing and live music. Their conversations had ceased as abruptly as my melody, and they stared, waiting for me to continue. I shook off the eerie feeling and resumed. Later, after I had soaked up the applause, played encores and made my way home with my earnings, I thought again about the voice

Danilo

and the proverb

Children will tell you what they do, men what they think, and older people what they have seen and heard.

I remember the first time Danilo said this, how it stuck in my head. Because it came from him, it sounded wise. Had I heard it from some other well-meaning adult at the time, my youthful spirit would've sighed impatiently, my mind would've wandered. But it was Danilo talking, and that made all the difference. I didn't completely understand it, but I wanted to.

Now I'm older – not old, but older – and I understand. *What I have seen and heard.*

Little seems changed in my soul with the passing of time. I still respond with exuberance when I awaken to a lesson-free day, despite the fact that I was done with formal education long ago. My heart still thrills at a stirring shimmer of music, still races fit to burst as I watch a glorious dawn, sunset or lightning storm. What has changed? Have my senses dulled, or was the air clearer then, the melodies more inspiring, the raindrops we caught on our tongues sweet and potent enough to quench a needling thirst? The campfire I build each night still warms me, still cooks my dinner. Did the wood burn finer back then? Did the simple fare eaten under the stars taste better? Did the stars shine brighter?

Nostalgic digressions! Alifi says this is my shortcoming as a storyteller, and she's probably right, dear old confounding friend. I learned storytelling early in life, supplementing my musicianship with a few tales. I love the young listeners and their unabashed curiosity, so charming and attentive, as long as I keep that preachy tone about the good old days out of my voice. The young ones seem to envy me; some of them have said as much. But they're young.

Alifi says give credit where credit is due, so I cannot underestimate my mother's part in the scheme of things. My *maman*, Madame Katrina, born near Paris to a French father and a Russian Gypsy mother. She entered adulthood with no interest in marriage, preferring to indulge her appetite for luxuries and men who would accommodate her. Charming, effervescent, will-o'-

the-wisp—a fleeting, glamorous spark on the landscape. I'll grant that a will-o'-the-wisp is too self-absorbed to evoke an idyllic portrait of motherhood. And yet, if not for her restless spirit, I never would've met Danilo.

In Mother's travels around Europe, the inevitable happened twice: Cassandra, born in London; and me, two years later, in the south of France. Thanks to Mother's *laissez faire* approach to parenting, Cassandra and I were the envy of our schoolmates. In return for liberalities bestowed on us, Mother insisted we adhere to the principal maxim of our childhood: we were never to call her 'Mother' in front of the ones she dubbed her gent callers. She promised dire reprimands if we slipped. So when she introduced us as her nieces, we would smile, curtsy, and call her 'Auntie Katrina.'

I confess, I incurred her wrath once on this point. It was one of those days where I longed to trade places with a pale, fair-haired schoolmate whose father was a grocer and whose mother was a contented homemaker of rosy complexion and always smelled of fresh flour. (Are children ever content with their lot? My friends longed for the freedom I enjoyed, and I yearned for a traditional family structure.) That evening, as Cassandra and I stood facing Mother's date in the parlor, I heard her mention his occupation as a train conductor. We were excused, and as I left the room, I bid *À bientôt* over my shoulder to my 'Aunt-a Karenina' – my senses still abuzz from the film I'd seen the week before. (Anna Karenina's death scene was topping. Selflessly throwing herself under a train, brilliant!) Glancing in the mirror over the fireplace as I walked away from Mother and her companion, I saw their expressions and stifled a snicker. Outside the room, Cassandra giggled till she developed hiccoughs, and I knew I was for it. *C'est la vie*; I

was safe for the night. Mother wouldn't punish me till the next day, and her bark was worse than her bite. Sometimes a little punishment is worth a good laugh.

Cassandra had a condition, something that made her "not quite right," as some would delicately whisper. If she was ever diagnosed, Mother never shared the results with us. She struggled in school with everything except reading. She demonstrated little interest in analytical thinking, but she had common sense and a happy disposition, making friends easily. Her dream was to be a dancer, despite her chubby figure. I assured her one day she would dance us all to fame and fortune. But for now, her performances were exclusive to whatever living quarters Mother's latest gent provided for us.

My birthplace was a tiny town called Alegransa ("happiness" in old Occitan). Mother said my father was a Gypsy, descended from a French *trobairitz*, or woman troubadour, named Na Lombarda. I did some investigating and learned there really was such a person, known as the Lady of Toulouse. I never confirmed my tie to the Lady, but I was enchanted with the notion and happily embraced it. I'd already begun a love affair with music, teaching myself guitar on a cheap acoustic left behind by one Mr. Percival Skeffington, a gent caller. Mother had been furious when, after giving 'ol Skeffy the best hours of her life, she discovered that the guitar was pretty much all he had in the way of worldly possessions. A quarrel ensued and he was quickly out the door – leaving only the guitar and a distinctive dent in Mother's frying pan for us to remember him by. I commandeered the instrument and soon was playing simple songs to accompany Cassandra's dancing. Mother encouraged our pursuits, glad that they kept us busy and out of trouble. I reveled in my newfound passion and declared Uncle Skeffy my personal favorite of her callers. "You *would* choose the poor one," she remarked dryly.

Then Danilo came into our lives – quietly, as events of great significance often do.

We were in London at the time. We had been settled in one flat for awhile, and Cassandra and I were enjoying the school we attended. Mother was in her prime and could afford to be choosy about the company she kept. We had grown accustomed to her latest flame, a wealthy octogenarian, so we were quite taken by surprise one afternoon when we heard the familiar tone of our gay, doting ‘aunt.’ “Girls! There’s someone I’d like you to meet.” We rolled our eyes and sallied forth to meet her new playmate, and we stopped at the doorway, staring. The lean, angular face, coarse black hair and scruffy beard, handsome dark eyes ... he was nothing like Mother’s usual suitors. Younger, too. I studied him again, and it hit me – he was a Gypsy. I had seen Gypsies in the city, I’d seen a picture of my grandmother. I realized I was staring and shifted my gaze to the window, flustered but thrilled, for once, with Mother’s choice.

Danilo did one thing that immediately guaranteed my respect. He didn’t avoid looking at Cassandra when introduced to her. The behavior of some people on meeting Cassandra never failed to ignite my temper – the smile, the curiosity, then the infuriating expression of something like superiority mixed with pity; finally the averted eyes. But Danilo simply smiled and said, “*Sastimos*. Pleased to meet you, Cassandra, I’m Danilo Roussel.” He shook her hand firmly, held her eyes with his. He said ‘Aunt Katrina’ had told him of her love of dancing, and she giggled with delight. I turned to see if Mother was watching this phenomenon of Cassandra being charmed by one of her dates, but she was adjusting her hat before the mirror and took no notice.

Then Danilo turned to me. He studied me, his expression almost solemn. “And this is little Manouche, the musician.” He took my hand. “I heard you playing a moment ago. You’ve been blessed. Never take that gift for granted, savvy?”

“S-savvy,” I stammered. Mother announced it was getting late, and the spell was broken. He helped her with her coat, and they started for the door. I snapped out of my trance, ran after them and stood at the door, watching him assist Mother into a taxi. “Mr. Roussel!” I called. “My name ain’t ...” I hesitated, trying to remember the word. “... ma-noosh!”

He looked up at me over the roof of the cab. “How do you know? Do you know what it means?” I shook my head. He grinned broadly, flashing a gold tooth. “Well, then.” He climbed into the cab, and the car pulled away.

I watched till they were out of sight and closed the door, scratching my head. Riddles don’t bring out the best in me, and he had left me with a corker. I heard our record player and Cassandra’s heavy tread as she danced. I pushed the riddle aside and dashed toward the sound, ready to convince my sister she’d be much better off practicing her dance to my accompaniment. Later, lying in bed, I thought again of Danilo and the funny name. I frowned in the dark, determined to solve the mystery, then soon fell into a dreamless sleep.

Cassandra woke me the next morning with a vigorous shake. “Wake up, we have presents!” I opened my eyes. She was wearing a long scarf draped over her head, purple with silver spangles. She held it out excitedly. “Ain’t it elegant? C’mon, let’s see what you got.” She turned and ran from the room.

Yawning, I slid out of bed and followed her. As I passed Mother's room, her door ajar, I peeked in; she was alone, sound asleep. I found Cassandra in the kitchen, and she waved at an envelope on the table, addressed in a bold hand:

MANOUCHE

So that's how it's spelled, I thought. "You sure it's for me?" I asked Cassandra.

She pointed at the word. "Ain't that what he called you? There was two packages, this one, an' one with *my* name on it." She took an end of the scarf between her fingers and swept it over her face so only her eyes showed. "I'm Lady Cassandra, the mysterious dancer."

I picked up the envelope and found two items inside – one was a book about music, a page marked with a paper clip. I opened it to the clipped page and read my answer:

Gypsy Jazz – Origins largely in France. AKA Gypsy Swing, often called by the French name "Jazz Manouche." Jazz Manouche is often learned by the passing down of knowledge from older generations. Many Gypsy (Roma) musicians do not read notated music. It is common for beginners to memorize songs from recordings and learn techniques from experienced players. The word "manouche" is French Roma, from the Romanes word "manúš", meaning "person."

I read it twice, then looked at the other item, and my heart beat faster – sheet music for a song called 'La Gitane'. I opened it and stared, fascinated. My fingers fairly tingled; I couldn't wait to have at it.

"I got a letter, too," Cassandra said, holding up a piece of paper. "The scarf belonged to his mother, she used to wear it when she'd dance 'round the campfire. He says she'll smile down from heaven knowin' her scarf'll still be used for dancin'."

My cynicism kicked in – cynicism born at age five, when I’d seen a Santa Claus emerge from a pub reeling drunk, bellowing ‘Auld Lang Syne’ in a Scottish burr. I found it hard to believe a stranger would so readily part with an item that belonged to his mother, giving it to the daughter of a woman he’d just begun to date. Correction, a *niece*. But I didn’t know Danilo. I smiled at Cassandra; I wasn’t about to spoil her pleasure with my doubts. Regardless of the story behind the gift, it made her happy.

We heard footsteps, and Mrs. Kelly, a Yorkshire woman in her late twenties, tall and slender as a reed, entered the kitchen carrying a bag. Mother had engaged her services for cooking, cleaning and keeping an eye on us. Cassandra had christened her Cook Kelly, and she kindly indulged us. She set the bag on the table. “Right, looks like your mum’s lyin’ in today, so brekkie for just th’ pair o’ ya.” She turned to Cassandra. “What’ll dancer Cassan’ have?”

Cassandra spun, the beautiful scarf floating behind her. “Bangers an’ mash, *s’il vous plaît*.” Cook Kelly laughed at her blend of Brit slang and proper French, then turned to me.

I had been half listening, flipping through my book, feeling disappointed about not also receiving a note with my gift. But at the sound of my name, I looked up, saw her questioning glance and replied, “Oatmeal, please. An’ call me Manouche.”

“Aye, Miss Manouche,” she agreed, and turned to start preparing breakfast. That’s when I understood that Danilo had given me more than a note. He’d given me an identity. My life as Manouche had begun.

II.

The wild clap of thunder woke me with a start and I fell from my bed, notebook pages flying. I looked around the room, disoriented, then I remembered. I'd started work on a new song, the scribbled pages of chords and notations scattered before me on the bed, then I'd dozed off. The sun had been shining; now it was early evening, darker from the thunderstorm. I sprang up and dashed from my room, hungry, ready for tea.

I started down the hall and brightened as I heard Danilo's voice coming from Mother's bedroom. He had been courting her for months now, much to our joy. His encouragement of my music meant the world to me, and he was always a willing audience to little recitals that featured Cassandra dancing to whatever tunes I managed to learn. He frequently asked how 'La Gitane' was coming along. I always replied evasively, not wanting to play it for him till I felt I could do it justice. A tricky song, but I was determined. And at fourteen – an age characterized in many girlish hearts by great secrets and grand life plans – my stubborn streak was robust.

I headed toward Mother's room, stopping abruptly at the heated voices from behind the closed door:

"You mean you haven't seen her in nearly twenty-four hours?"

"Danilo, we're very fond of you, but I don't think this is your business."

"You don't know where she is?"

"Of course I know where she is! She's visiting that little girlfriend of hers, that Gloria."

"That 'little girlfriend' is eighteen, dresses like she's twenty-one, and gets Cassandra into adult clubs."

"Cassandra's sound. She's sensible for her age, like I was at sixteen."

I heard Danilo mumble something I couldn't make out, followed by a loud slap. Then ...

"Apologies, Katrina. You're right, it isn't my affair."

"Thank you." A pause, then a crisp rustle of material; Mother's best taffeta. "Be a lamb, fetch my opera glasses from the bureau."

"May I take you to supper after?"

"I would love nothing better, *cherie*, if Cedric hadn't already asked me. I need to speak with him about ... goodness, look at that face. Danilo, I can't keep my calendar open indefinitely. You have to ask me in advance."

"I ... I don't always know how much money I'll have till the day rolls 'round."

"I understand, the life of a musician. But that's your choice, darling. I've got the girls to consider, I have to plan for their future."

Another pause, and the hushed tone in Danilo's voice made my heart ache. "Is there a place for me in your future?"

"*Cherie*, of course! I don't know what we'd do without you."

They stopped talking, and I hoped they were kissing. I quietly withdrew and went to the kitchen. I saw the cheese plate on the table, a triangle cut from a wheel of Camembert, a bowl of grapes, an uncorked bottle of red wine and two glasses. This was Danilo's ritual of an evening, and it had become mine too, except for the wine, of course. Danilo usually let me sneak a taste, but I longed to have a full serving, to cradle the glass and swirl the liquid as I'd seen grownups do, savoring it as I laughed gaily with fascinating acquaintances. I picked up the bottle and poured some wine into one of the glasses. I glanced at the door, picked up the glass ... and swiftly set it back down, nearly upsetting it, as I heard footsteps. I sat down, grabbed a stem of

grapes and smiled innocently as Mother swept into the kitchen, Danilo close behind. The moment he saw me, he smirked, and I blushed; how did he always know?

Oblivious to my near indulgence, Mother spun around. “How does Mummy look, dear?”

She looked smashing, but I felt a smirk of my own at her words. It hadn’t taken Danilo long to surmise that we weren’t her nieces, and she had petulantly dropped the pretense. I nodded approvingly. “Aye, ye be yar!”

She sighed, looked at Danilo. “If you could *please* be sure she works on her studies this evening instead of reading pirate stories or murder mysteries, I’ll be eternally grateful.”

Danilo smiled. “A drink before you go?” He filled the glass I’d started.

Before she could respond, we heard a horn outside. “I must dash.” She leaned down and kissed me, then turned to Danilo, embraced him lightly and kissed his cheek. “*Merci*, darling. Don’t let her stay up too late.” She skipped to the doorway, favored us with a radiant smile, and was gone.

The silence that fell over the kitchen was broken only by the sound of the rain beating against the windows. I wrinkled my nose. “She wears too much perfume.”

Danilo gazed at the doorway. “You shouldn’t criticize your mother.” He picked up the wine glass and slowly walked out of the room.

I grabbed the grapes and followed him to the parlor, where a small fire flickered. He set the glass down on a table near the fireplace, took up a poker and jabbed at the fire. I stood next to him, watching his movements become more agitated, the sparks flying. Finally, I said, “Who ya got in there?”

He looked at me sharply, then managed a smile. He set the poker aside, sat down on the floor facing the fire, took a pine cone from a bucket on the hearth and tossed it into the flames. It popped loudly. I jumped at the sound, and he chuckled. "Pirates aren't afraid of a little fire."

"Gypsies tend campfires, not sittin'-room fires," I responded haughtily.

"Pirates drink rum, not wine."

"Pirates drink whatever opportunity brings their way."

"*Touché.*" He picked up his glass and held it out to me. "One sip, then homework."

I held the glass gingerly, swirled the wine, sniffed it and took a taste. I swished the drops in my mouth, sucked in my breath and swallowed. "Bordeaux ... Chateau Turcaud ...

"On the money." He took the glass, and I grinned. Just a little game we played; we both knew I'd simply memorized the bottle's label. "We'll make a Sommelier of you yet," he added. "You'll work at La Promenade or some other posh place, and we'll come see you in action. You'll be so rich an' fancy, there'll be no living with you."

"*Au contraire!* I'll work at La Promenade, an' I'll see to it that you're paid lots more to play there than you're paid now. An' when I ain't busy, I'll bring my guitar an' we'll play together. No, wait, I know!" I jumped up excitedly. "I'll *buy* the bloody restaurant, an' we'll do anything we want with it." My enthusiasm faded at his expression. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing. You shouldn't say bloody, it's not nice." He tossed another cone on the fire.

This was a new one. We all said 'bloody,' as far back as I could remember. Then something occurred to me. "Why didn't you go with Mother tonight?"

"She preferred to go with someone else." He looked at me with a smile that didn't quite reach his eyes. "Wagner ain't my favorite, so it's just as well."

“Is she on a date?”

“She said it’s business. To do with you girls’ future. The chap is well heeled.”

I kept my eyes on the fire, trying to hide my disappointment. Business, indeed. I knew what it meant, and I was crushed. Danilo was by far the best of all Mother’s callers. I had hoped ... I sighed. Then I brightened. “Maybe it is. She’d give you the boot if she didn’t fancy you. She’s had more’n one caller at a time before, but she *never* lets one hang about the house when she’s with another. I bet it really *is* business.”

Danilo coughed uncomfortably, ran a hand through his hair. “Really, Manouche, you say the damndest things sometimes ...”

“You shouldn’t say ‘damndest,’ it ain’t nice,” I said saucily, and he raised an eyebrow at me. I plucked another grape from the bowl. “Tell me again about when you met Mother.”

“Why? You know the story, there ain’t much to it.”

“Cause I’m gonna perform some Gypsy magic,” I replied mysteriously.

“*Romani* magic, not Gypsy.”

“Why, what’s wrong with Gypsy?” I asked. “I see an’ hear it all the time, I’ve seen it on records they call Gypsy music. I even heard it from Gypsies in the city.”

“I know, but many people mean it as an insult.”

“But *I* don’t mean it that way.”

He smiled. “I know you don’t, darlin’. An’ I know it’s often used respectfully, an’ it’s still very much in use by the Roma themselves. But try an’ say *Romani*, just for me. Savvy?”

“Sure, Danilo.” I started again. “I’m gonna perform some *Romani* magic. A *draba*,” I added, pleased to have remembered the *Romani* word.

“Are you now! Pray tell, how’s it work?”

“You tell the story about how you met Mother. Tell it real good, real vivid, don’t leave anything out.” I reached in a pocket and pulled out a calico cloth bag tied shut with twine.

“While you speak of your love, I toss this in the fire. It’s magic dust, I got it last Saturday at Portobello Road, from a Gyps – I mean, Romani lady.”

“Portobello ... last Saturday? What’d she look like?”

I shrugged. “I dunno ... Mother’s age, maybe older. She wore her hair in a long braid.” He frowned, and I nudged him. “You’re not gonna get all sad again, are you? C’mon, we have to do this *soon*.” I shook the bag at him emphatically.

“Soon? Why? Is that part of the spell?” he snapped. “I suppose this lady gave you some rubbish about the alignment of the stars, or the moon — ”

“No, it’s just that I have a lot of homework tonight. If we don’t do it soon, there won’t be time.” He laughed, and my spirits lifted again. “C’mon.”

“All right.” He took up his glass and turned his eyes to the fire. “About eight months ago ... how ‘bout that, it’s comin’ on a whole year ... I was playing at La Promenade. I was halfway through ‘La Vie En Rose’ I looked up, and there she was. She’d just walked in on the arm of some rich bloke.” I moved closer to the fire and opened the bag, and he went on. “She was wearin’ that green gown, the one that looks like it changes colors in different lights. Just stunnin’, she was.” He smiled at the memory and I tossed some glittery powder into the flames. “I decided I had to meet her, speak to her. So once they were seated, I approached ‘em and asked if they had any requests. The gent was studyin’ the menu, but your mother flashed that smile of hers and said, ‘Begin the Beguine.’ I started my next set with it, just for her.”

I nodded, tossed more dust. “Then what?”

“The room got busier, an’ I didn’t see her again till they were leaving. As they passed by, she tossed me a rose she’d been wearin’ in her hair. I still have it.” He paused, embarrassed, and shook his head. “Bloody nonsense.”

“Have a care with that kinda talk! The spell!” I tossed more dust into the fire.

“Apologies, lil’ one.” He took a drink of wine. “About closing time, the hostess stopped me and gave me a card, ‘with the lady’s compliments,’ as she said. Your mother had written a note about hiring me to teach music to her nieces.” He grinned. “When I met with her, I found out music lessons weren’t what she had in mind.”

“Good.” The bag was almost empty. “Now we need to evoke a strong feeling for your love.” I thought a moment and snapped my fingers. “Music brought you two together. Sing that song she asked for, that ‘Begin’ whatchamacallit.”

“How ‘bout I play it?” He stood up and left the room. He returned with his violin and started to play. For a moment I lost myself in the melody, then I got back to the task at hand. I tossed the last of the dust and recited a few words of love in old Occitan for good measure, *a la* the Lady of Toulouse. I listened blissfully to the rest of the song and applauded. “Bravo! *Tres jolie, la musique, le chanson extraordinaire!*”

“*Merci, mademoiselle,*” he replied, bowing gallantly. “And now, homework.”

Sly blighter! A sneak attack, after all I’d done to help his romance with Mother. I was no longer the enigmatic mystic – I was a schoolgirl again. In keeping with the situation, I whined. “Oh, Danilo, please, one more song? Let me play somethin’ with you. I think I’m ready to play ‘La Gitane’.”

He looked at me sternly, but I could see in his eyes he wanted to hear how I was faring. He nodded, and I dashed from the room to fetch my guitar. I came back, dropped down on the sofa and looked up at him expectantly. He counted it off, and we launched into the tune. Perhaps the *draba* had spilled over into my musicianship; whatever the reason, I was playing better than usual. Judging from Danilo's face, I wasn't alone in my assessment.

I heard Cassandra come in, and I called out, "Cassan"! Give us a dance!" She ran to us, beaming, and began spinning around the room. Being our mother's artful offspring, we conned Danilo into two more songs before he finally insisted we get busy with our lessons. We settled down to it, sprawling on the carpet before the fire with books and papers. Danilo stretched out on the sofa with more wine, a book and cigarettes. After awhile, I looked around the room and saw Cassandra staring at her notebook in heavy concentration, pencil in her mouth, frizzy hair cascading around her shoulders. I saw Danilo reading intently, cupping the bowl of his glass in one hand. My eyes shifted to the cheery fire, then I looked up, out the window, where I could see the sky. The storm had ended, the clouds were gone, and I spotted my cluster of wishing stars, the Seven Sisters. ("Tano chere," as Danilo called them – 'little stars' in the Romani language.) I felt a shiver of contentment. Maybe there was magic in that ceremony after all, I thought happily, and resumed my studies.

Two days later, the magic was gone.

I had passed some time with friends after school before heading home to tea. As I entered our flat, I had a strange feeling ... something wasn't right. I heard agitated voices coming from the kitchen. I started for our room, hoping to find Cassandra, then changed my

mind and followed the voices. Danilo and Cook Kelly abruptly stopped talking as I entered, and I swallowed. “Wh-what’s happened?”

Danilo’s expression softened when he caught my eye. He motioned me to the table, held out a chair. “Sit down, dear one.” Fearful despite his gentle tone, I squared my shoulders and did as he said. He and Cook Kelly sat down too, and he began. “Manouche ... I’m not quite sure how to tell you this ... ”

“I don’t know what she were thinkin’!” Cook Kelly exclaimed bitterly. “Well, obviously, she weren’t thinkin’ at all.” She started to sob, bringing a dish towel up to her face.

Danilo frowned at her, then turned to me and reached out, taking my hand. “Your mother has gone away. She’s ... well, she’s run off. She’s gone to live somewhere else.” He waited for me to say something; when I didn’t, he continued. “You remember the other night when she went out with that gent, Cedric? She’s decided she wants a life with him, you see. And the two of ‘em, they decided ... they want to share that life between themselves, and no one else.”

My mouth dropped open, and Cook Kelly stifled another sob. I turned to Danilo, waiting till I could trust my voice. “S-so, what’s to happen with us?”

He squeezed my hand. “She left a fair amount of money to cover for a time. Beyond that, there are agencies, authorities who deal with this sort of thing. You girls are of an age where you can have a lot of say in this. But I was thinkin’ ... that is, if you’re keen ... I’d like very much to take care of you from now on.”

Tears filled my eyes. Our own flesh and blood had abandoned us, and Danilo was asking to take us in, as if we would be doing him a favor. I couldn’t speak, so I just stared at him and nodded, tears rolling down my face. He leaned closer and brought his arms around me.

Cook Kelly found her handkerchief, blew her nose and wiped her eyes. “And it’s for the best! The three o’ ye are meant to be together.” She looked at me. “Luv, I grant Mr. Roussel is a bit young, there canna’ be more’n ten years ’twixt him an’ yer sister. But I’ve seldom seen a papa an’ daughters better suited.” She reached out and gently patted my cheek, then rose and turned to the oven to boil water for tea.

I sniffled. “Where’s Cassandra, does she know?”

Danilo nodded. “She’s upstairs.” He gently brushed the hair back from my face.

I started to ask more questions then I stopped myself. This was enough for now. I wrapped my arms around his neck, kissed his cheek, then stood up and left the kitchen.

Upstairs, I peeked inside our bedroom and saw Cassandra, sound asleep. An empty tissue box had dropped to the floor next to her bed, and balled-up tissues were scattered near the wastebasket where she’d tossed and missed her target. I felt my tears starting again and forced them back. I went to my bedside table, opened the drawer and took out the empty bag that had contained the magic dust. I shoved it in my pocket, left the room quietly, crept through the flat, my nostrils quivering from the tantalizing aromas of tea. I pushed my hunger aside, continued to the door and stepped outside, the cool air bringing a measure of calm to my hot face. I reached the river and walked out on the bridge. I took the bag from my pocket, removed a pin from my jacket and, with the sharp point, started pricking at a seam of the bag, unraveling a thread. I pulled at it till I was able to rip the bag apart into pieces, then I wadded them up and hurled them over the rail, watching them drift lazily on the breeze till they lit on the water below. My dreams of Mother and Danilo, reduced to this. After all, I thought bitterly, two rambunctious daughters

and a devoted Rom guardian with a hungry look in his eye would scarcely fit into the world
Mother hoped to enter with her wealthy *homme du jour*.

As I started back home, one thought pierced the darkness in my mind—the revenge I
would wreak someday, somehow, on the Gypsy who sold me that powder.

III.

After the initial shock, I realized it was the ease with which Mother abandoned us that hurt me more than actually losing her. Mademoiselle Katrina Minot, always preoccupied, whisking us from town to town, her efforts to explain us becoming more difficult each year as she strove to convince her suitors she couldn't possibly be old enough to have teenage children. Still, I genuinely bore her no ill will. Our mother was what she was. I had enjoyed fun times with her, and I had admired many of her qualities – her indomitable cheeriness, her charm, her dexterity with hairstyles, jewelry and other tools of feminine trade; the bewitching spell she cast over men and women alike.

But I respected Danilo. He was kind, fun, gentle, caring, the sun in my sky. He wasn't quite like a father, he was too young for that. It was more like we had discovered a long lost uncle who was a kindred spirit. Yes, things definitely could be worse.

Unfortunately, Danilo and Cassandra were unable to embrace my pragmatism. Danilo's sorrow made sense, but Cassandra's puzzled me. I felt flustered, in that contrary way people sometimes have of wanting to experience another's feelings even if the feelings are painful. Perhaps I was resentful that Cassandra and Danilo shared this bond. Many years passed before I realized how lucky I was to be spared that hurt.

Finally, the time came when we knew we had to leave our London flat. Danilo simply couldn't afford it. So we prepared to embark upon the vagabond lifestyle he'd grown up with. He scraped together money to purchase a used mini-bus and trailer. He outfitted the trailer to accommodate Cassandra and me, the mini-bus for himself, and we set out. We traveled around Great Britain for awhile. We saw some places we'd seen traveling with Mother, and Danilo

introduced us to others we hadn't experienced. Cassandra and I loved the Lake District in particular. Also, on suggestion from Cook Kelly, we found an uncle of hers in Liverpool, a Mr. Dawes, who worked in the shipping industry. Cassandra told him of my status as a fledgling pirate, informing him that someday I would seek his assist in launching my own ship. He smiled and promised he would be ready when we were.

I couldn't help but notice how traveling agreed with Danilo; I saw him eager and glowing, like I'd never seen him in London. Who knows, perhaps his nomadic spirit would've made marriage between him and Mother impossible, even if she had been devoted to him. She had moved us around frequently; but she always vowed she would settle down in a fine house someday. No, the road, the *drom*, was not for her.

Our new way of life gave us a chance to learn more about Danilo, too. We already knew he was born in Brussels to Roma parents, his father Belgian, his mother French, like ours, and he had no siblings. By the time he was fourteen, he was living on his own. His father, tragically in the wrong place at the wrong time, had been murdered by a stray bullet outside a corner shop during a robbery. His mother, never quite the same after her husband's death, died from an illness less than a year later. Fortunately, the Roussels had raised their son well. His cleverness, combined with his musical talent and charm, kept him from starving. He began traveling, occasionally meeting up with members of his extended family. Eventually, his wandering brought him to London, and to this day I thank my Seven Sisters wishing stars for the circumstances that brought us together.

As we traveled, Danilo took odd jobs while we spent time on lessons he created for us. We couldn't attend school, but he insisted we continue our studies – even if all he could do was

share with us the limited education he had received. My favorite subject, of course, was music, and I reveled in the stretches of time I now had to work with him. It turned out to be a blessing in multiple ways. At one of our camps, as Danilo and I were playing a tune together, some tourists overheard us. They loved what they heard, applauded and tossed money. Then Cassandra got into the act with her dancing, and more money was forthcoming. We started adding to our repertoire, combing dustbins and rummage shops for props and costumes, and our shows grew more elaborate.

As fate would have it, Cassandra took opportunity one step further. You had to hand it to her, she was an engaging performer. She was hardly Hugo's Esméralda; she was full-figured, her hair more frizz than wild black curls, and she sometimes got tangled in her shawls mid-pirouette. But she laughed off any mishap with such good humor, spectators were amused. Their patience during these setbacks was rewarded as Cassandra would finally get into it. When that happened, she was mesmerizing.

Then she turned eighteen, her sensuality cranked into high gear, and men began to find her irresistible. She did little to fend them off, the concept of chastity not having been high on her list of priorities even before Mother left us. Gloria, our worldly schoolmate, had been happy to arrange double dates when they first started noticing boys, and Cassandra had eagerly followed along. Danilo desperately tried to dissuade her, but it was out of his hands. She was essentially an adult, men were drawn to her unconventional beauty ... and she was happy knowing she was contributing to our budget. It would've been hard to survive those times without her income, and this fact deeply pained Danilo. When I came of age, I contemplated the same path to help out financially. Like Cassandra, I had no qualms about it and probably

would've pursued it if not for Danilo's reaction to my suggestion; his dark silence spoke volumes. I couldn't bear to hurt him, so I honed my talents in music, sleight of hand, reading tea leaves and storytelling — though all combined were not as lucrative.

So life went on for our unconventional family. Cassandra and I were healthy and happy, and Danilo always made sure we knew we were loved. From the day he took us in, he gave us his surname, Roussel. When I was old enough to choose my name, I wanted no other.

Heady tonic, the confidence that comes from living by your wits. You believe you'll always know what to do, no matter what the situation. Then one breezy March night, I found out how wrong I was.

We had been on the road with Danilo for several years. Cassandra was nineteen, I was seventeen, and we were traveling in France. We'd set up camp outside a small town teeming with American and English tourists ready to spend their money. Danilo had been his usual careful self, drummin' up business. It was tricky, to be sure, advertising the right wares to the appropriate customers — Romani music for all ages, food and drink as long as both held out, whatever dish we had cooked up during the day. Then, later in the evening, storytelling and songs, and Cassandra's dance. Danilo had to hawk all this without antagonizing the local law, already less than keen on Roma setting up housekeeping in the area.

This particular breezy March night, Cassandra had gone to the trailer with her first (and, Danilo hoped, *only*) customer of the evening. It was late, a few remaining visitors sipped drinks, chatting quietly. I was strumming a slow tune and Danilo was counting our earnings. I noticed with surprise my song taking a melancholy turn, as if writing itself. Danilo looked up, our eyes met, and I shivered as something passed between us, a quiet urgency; dark, mysterious and

secretive, like undulating cattails along the edge of the river at dusk, their silhouette eerie in the light of the setting sun.

A scream from the trailer obliterated my melody, and it never found its way to me again. A man's scream, high pitched. No cry of passion—just terror, pure and simple, followed by breaking glass and footsteps as the trailer door was flung open and the man stood in the doorway, trembling violently, his face like chalk. “Bloody witch, that’s the devil’s work!” he cried hoarsely. He pointed at Danilo. “Y-you can’t make me pay for them damages. I-I should report you to the authorities. It’s witchcraft. It can’t be true ... *it can't be true* ... ” He covered his face with his hands, staggered down the steps and into the woods, weeping hysterically.

Danilo bolted for the trailer, and I followed him. He stopped abruptly with a gasp. I peeked around him to see Cassandra reclining on the bed, holding a handkerchief up to her nose. A light quilt covered her up to her waist. She still wore her gauzy cropped top, part of her favorite harem-style dancing costume, which left her midsection exposed. The room’s disarray, the broken glass underfoot, all receded into the background compared to the small picture, like a Henna tattoo, on my sister’s torso.

As I’ve mentioned, Cassandra was of ample size. Not fat, but voluptuous, and wide through the middle. The image on her skin, clear and unmistakable, depicted the death of her recently-departed fare. He was older in the picture, but it was him. His death appeared to be the aftermath of a grisly car accident, his body hurled through the windshield. His face could be seen clearly, eyes staring, a thread of blood oozing from his mouth.

“What the hell ... ” We heard a man whisper behind us.

“Someone fetch a priest,” another voice murmured.

Danilo recovered somehow, and turned to face the crowd, his hands raised. “Calm down, everyone, just a little magic, is all. Quite a trick, ain’t it? Don’t bother askin’ how it’s done. Trade secret.” He mustered a charming smile and waved them outside. “Come, I have a vintage bottle of Macallan Scotch – fifty years old! On the house.” He ushered them out of the trailer, found the bottle and passed it around for approval before opening. Not so much a rare vintage as it was the result of my latest talent: recreating labels of expensive liquors. (A Sommelier I wasn’t, but my calligraphy and illustration skills were top notch.) In reality, Danilo was offering a current bottle of Glenlivet; a fine choice, but no vintage Macallan. But our guests were none the wiser, content with the unexpected treat until eventually they dropped off, one by one, happily weaving homeward.

While all this was going on, I remained in the trailer and set things right. The broken glass turned out to be a cheap crystal ball we’d picked up somewhere, thinking we might work up a fortune-telling act. I dumped the glass into a wastebasket and watched the frightful image fade from my sister’s torso. Crystal ball? So much for clichés.

* * *

“So how did it happen?” Danilo asked Cassandra later that night. After everyone had left, we’d broken camp and found a new base about thirty miles away. Even though our customers had gone home drunk and happy, Danilo didn’t want to take any chances.

Cassandra shrugged. “It just happened. He was leavin’, he said ‘bye, an’ his face got all white, like cream.” She smiled. “I want strawberries an’ cream for breakfast tomorrow.”

“Did you feel anything?” I asked.

“Manouche, go to bed,” Danilo muttered, knowing it was useless. I was in the prime of my teen years, that irksome age at which youngsters are cocksure they’re fully armed for life. His control over me was dwindling, and we both knew it.

Cassandra ignored him and answered my question. “No. When I looked down an’ saw it, I ... well, it’s not very nice, but I felt like laughing. Not at the man, I was sorry he felt bad. But at what I could do. It made me feel happy, kinda special.”

“Like when I learned to play ‘Billets Doux’,” I offered.

“Yeah.”

“Bloody hell.” Danilo put his head in his hands, leaning his elbows on his knees. “Has anything like this ever happened before?”

“Like we wouldn’t know,” I said.

“Let Cassandra answer,” Danilo snapped sternly.

Cassandra shook her head. “No, never.”

Danilo ran a hand through his hair. “Maybe it was just a fluke, a one-time thing.” He looked at her again, and this time his eyes were filled with a sorrow I didn’t understand at the time. “He – he didn’t hurt you, did he?”

“He made her nose bleed,” I exclaimed, and Danilo silenced me with a glare so severe, it stung a bit. I didn’t get it. Why all the concern? I thought the picture was the coolest thing I’d ever seen, feeding my passion for horror stories that seemed to be ripening with age.

“No, he was nice, it was an accident,” she assured us. “When he saw the picture, he tripped an’ then he bumped me. He didn’t mean it. It didn’t hurt.”

Danilo nodded, troubled. “All right. Tomorrow, we’ll go to another town, see how it goes. Cassandra, maybe you should, um, take a holiday for a few days.”

“Yes, ‘cause I got hurt on the job,” she said proudly, indicating her nose, which had stopped bleeding long ago. Danilo stood up, leaned down and kissed her, and climbed out of the trailer, carrying the lantern to the campfire.

I followed him, hoping he would allow me to sit up with him awhile. He looked so low, I longed to cheer him up, even more than I wished to understand what was so terrible about Cassandra’s magic. I watched him hang the lantern carefully from a tree branch, then he sat down, picked up a stick and started poking at the fire. His movements were less aggressive than I’d seen them at other times, but I still gave him my usual line: “So who ya got in there?”

Sometimes he laughed when I asked this. Sometimes he said, “No one, darlin’.” Other times he would say something like, “That bastard who left tonight without payin’.” But this time, he stared into the flame and only said, “Me.” This startled me and I guess he sensed it, because he held his arm out and drew me close. “It’s wrong,” he murmured after a minute, as we both gazed at the fire. “It’s wrong, what I’m doin’ to you girls. You should be living in a fine house, going to school, with lots of pretty dresses an’ nice young blokes comin’ to court proper.”

“Rubbish,” I said. “Let’s see some schoolgirl play ‘Valse de Bambula’ on guitar, or fool people with a fake bottle of vintage Scotch.”

“Unique talents, to be sure,” he sighed.

“I’d like to know what we’d have done without you when Mother left,” I said boldly, for mention of her always brought him some pain; but I figured this was a special case. I continued quickly. “We get the pretty countryside, plenty to eat, and my music’s gotten better an’ better.

Without you, we would've starved, or maybe been sold into slavery, or forced to work in a sweatshop ...”

My worst-case scenarios that would've sent Charles Dickens spinning brought a short but genuine laugh from him, and I hugged his neck. He dropped the stick and pulled out his watch. “Bloody schemer, tryin’ to make me forget how late it is.” He returned my hug. “Go on, now.”

“Will you play me a song to start my dreamin’?” I would never grow too old for this little tradition of ours.

“You know I will. But no more mention of what happened tonight.”

“How ‘bout just between us? We can talk about it again, can’t we?”

“Of course. But let’s leave it for a time.” He reached for his violin. “What kinda dream journey you fancy tonight?”

“Adventure,” I replied, and scampered to my eiderdown on the opposite side of the campfire. He waited until I was settled, then started to play. I listened raptly. As far as I was concerned, Cassandra’s magic was no more remarkable than Danilo’s magic with music. Somehow concocted a sprightly melody that fired the imagination yet still eased me into slumber. I dreamed of tall ships, beautiful dresses, and a sapphire necklace that a handsome captain was bringing me all the way from Istanbul after months at sea, facing untold peril ... during which time I protected our villa from marauders with the help of our trusty mastiffs. All the while, Danilo stood in the wings of each scene in my head, playing violin and smiling a smile I seldom saw on him except in dreams — carefree.

IV.

Then it happened again.

We were back in England, camped outside a community that worried me a little. A rough town with rough inhabitants. Still, that night, despite our anxieties, we reached the peak of our fete with no trouble. Our visitors were in fine spirits, and it seemed nothing was going to stop them from enjoying themselves to the hilt. I could do no wrong. They tipped me handsomely for my music, and roared at what I knew were very old jokes.

Then came an exclamation from the trailer, but this time the voice sounded awestruck, not terrified. “Damn! Joe! Ya gotta see this.”

We saw a man respond to the voice, and we followed him to the trailer. Once again, Cassandra displayed another tattoo. We looked at her customer, who showed not a trace of fear, and we examined the image. The man in the picture was old, with long white hair, lying on a bed. A beautiful, much younger woman was standing over him, distraught, the bed surrounded by empty bottles.

“Jesus, Rob ...” Joe mumbled to his friend, staring at the picture.

“Look at me,” Rob cried gleefully. “Bloody celebrity, that’s awesome.”

Joe turned to Danilo. “What is this? She some kinda fortune teller?”

“If she is, that’s the way to go out,” Rob said.

“It – it’s nothing, just a trick ...” Danilo stammered, struggling to conceal his terror.

“Lemme try.” Joe produced a wad of bills. “How much?”

Danilo frowned and turned to Cassandra, who smiled and nodded. Joe shoved money into Danilo's hand and motioned us all out. "If you don't mind," he said, and Rob snickered. We had little choice but to go along with it, so we withdrew.

"Manouche, let's have a song," Danilo suggested in a loud voice as we rejoined the crowd. We took up our instruments and started a boisterous tune. Soon, even Rob seemed to have forgotten what had transpired and was stomping feet and clapping hands.

It was so festive, Joe's wail took us by surprise. We ran to the trailer and saw Joe standing near the door, dressed except for his jacket, weeping over the tattoo, which depicted him not as an old man, but as he looked right then and there. His fate was not a pretty one, and if there were any truth to the image, it was going to happen soon.

"N-now listen, mate," Danilo started carefully, placing a hand on Joe's shoulder. "It's a parlor trick. Good old-fashioned haunted house stuff, that's all." He pulled out the money Joe had given him. "Here, call it square. C'mon outside, have a drink."

Joe looked at him. "No, keep the money. This is good ... it's a warning. Now that I've seen what's gonna happen, I can avoid it. I can know what to look out for. I can cheat death." He sniffed, wiped his eyes with his sleeve, reached for Danilo's hand and pumped it vigorously. "I oughta give you *more* money." Trembling, he turned to pick up his shirt and jacket from the floor, averting his eyes from Cassandra. He crept out of the trailer, and he and Rob headed toward their car without another word.

I don't recall how the evening ended. Cassandra had no more customers, but some people were discussing the phenomenon in hushed tones. After awhile, everyone slipped away. Danilo considered moving our camp but decided against it, too exhausted from the stressful

evening. Cassandra, as always, went to sleep quickly and woke refreshed the next day. I had no tune from Danilo that night, but I dreamed plenty on my own without the musical assist.

* * *

The crowd was tripled in size the following night. Most had come for the usual entertainment, but about half a dozen men were led by Joe, wanting their fortunes told. Cassandra, in one of her rare contrary moods, expressed her displeasure at the queue of thrill-seekers. Despite my fears, I hid a smile as she referred to the situation as “vulgar.” “This ain’t a sideshow,” she sniffed. She selected two, and that was that; the rejects accepted her decision meekly, without protest. Her depictions were tranquil, the men presumably destined to die peacefully, of old age. The night passed quietly, and Danilo heaved a sigh of relief.

And Cassandra? She was delighted with this state of affairs. Because money was tight, she refused to listen when we tried to convince her not to exploit her bizarre gift. And the extra money did make life easier. What a revelation! We no longer had to steal.

Long before Danilo came into our lives, I had learned shoplifting, as many youngsters do, Roma or otherwise. Indeed, the street-wise kid who taught me the fine points of shoplifting had hailed from a most fashionable part of London and had no Roma whatsoever in his heritage. Still, Danilo wanted us girls to be above all that, regardless of his own level of expertise in this dubious talent. And now it was easy to simply buy what we needed. Now, even though we still were subjected to frowns and mutterings when we entered a store, at least we had enough cash to maintain some dignity. Now we could even afford to be a little amused. The suspicious clerks, watching our every move, their faces growing increasingly indignant with each item we placed in a cart or basket ... what fun to watch their surprise as we rolled up to the cashier and Danilo

brought out a sizeable handful of bills. Cassandra would laugh and clap her hands every time, pointing at the cashier: “Ha, you thought we were gonna steal this stuff, didn’t you?” Danilo said nothing but his eyes flashed as he took the change, gathered parcels and led us out the door. Some clerks were kind, and apologized for the misunderstanding. Others remained chilly throughout the transaction. But they all got the same look from Danilo.

Another joy of the money was the fact that we were able to set some aside. Danilo insisted on starting a fund for us, to do whatever we wanted when the time came. “You’ll be able to go to school,” he suggested for the umpteenth time, still clinging to his cherished fantasy of seeing us live somewhat normal lives. Cassandra shrugged, as she always did when he spoke of such notions, and tried on the pretty shawl she’d bought earlier that day.

Other than these things, and a slight increase in Danilo’s drinking, life went on, nothing much changed.

And isn’t it always the way, when you get into a groove, that the derailment is all the more breathtaking, whether good, bad, or both.

V.

Julian Ciron was a young man of few words, but his brother Billy made enough noise for both of them. Billy, having heard about Cassandra, decided his kid brother had been a virgin long enough.

Danilo and I were in the middle of a song when they appeared at our camp. “Finally,” Billy remarked irritably as they pushed through some brush. He strode over to greet his friend, a fellow named Cale, who had arrived earlier.

“Ready to see your future?” Cale asked.

Billy lit a cigarette. “I don’t believe in all that. I just brought Julian. I figured . . .” He turned, surprised to see his brother still lingering at the edge of the clearing. “Jule! F’chrissakes, get over here.”

Julian reluctantly stepped into the light. He was nothing like the other men we’d seen from the community, nothing like his brother. Part of it was his clothes, a look I always liked on Danilo—white long-sleeve shirt, black vest, black trousers—slightly oversized, possibly hand-me-downs, though Billy, in jeans and a tight T-shirt, didn’t seem the type to choose such an ensemble. I guessed Julian to be about my age. Slight build, shorter than Danilo; light brown hair, straight, a little long. Pleasing face, with a gentleness contradicted by a pale scar that zagged halfway along the left jawline. It was impossible to imagine harshness or cruelty registering in that face, and I found myself hoping there would always be someone around who could ensure that never happened. How had this town spawned such an angel, such a sweet, otherworldly soul? Well, you see where this is going—I fell in love with Julian the moment I laid eyes on him.

“What’s your pleasure?” Danilo asked them as we approached. “Whiskey, brandy ...”

“Whiskey,” Billy replied, then indicated Julian. “My brother wants to see the fortune teller.”

“Can your brother not speak for himself?” Danilo asked.

“I-I’d like to see the fortune teller,” Julian stammered, eyes downcast.

“Atta boy!” Billy laughed, whacking him on the back, nearly knocking him off his feet. He recovered his balance and looked at Danilo. My heart skipped a beat at the almond-shaped, hazel eyes, silently conveying apologies.

“Manouche,” Danilo said to me as he studied Julian, “fetch whiskeys for these two.” He motioned for Julian to follow him. “C’mon.” And he led him to the trailer.

I got back to work, serving drinks, playing a few tunes, including a pretty ballad for two young newlyweds. “Is it true about the fortune teller?” the woman asked as her husband slipped me a tip for the song.

I poured it on in my best Romni pirate voice. “Oh, aye, ma’am,” I said mysteriously, tucking the bill in my pocket. “They say every bloke who’s with her sees how he’s gonna die.”

“I think we’ll stay in the dark on that one,” the man chuckled, and his wife put her arms around him and kissed him.

A little later, Billy walked by, making his way to the trailer. I watched him knock on the door and yell his brother’s name, and I heard Cassandra reply, “Come in.” He opened the door and climbed inside. I dropped all pretense of working and followed him.

Cassandra was lying against the pillows smoking a cigarette, wearing a pretty embroidered blouse and one of her favorite long skirts. Julian sat near her feet, wearing shirt and

trousers, the shirt unbuttoned. His vest, socks and boots were scattered on the floor and his bare feet dangled over the edge of Cassandra's high, caravan-style alcove bed.

"What th' – what ya been doin' all this time? This is costin' me, y'know." Billy swatted his brother in the back of the head.

Julian winced. "We did it," he mumbled, rubbing his head. "We're just talkin'."

"Oh. Done already?" Billy grinned. "Jeez, my first time, we went for hours." He leaned closer. "What'd you see?"

"Huh?"

"The fortune," Billy said impatiently. "What came up?"

"Oh, that." Julian shrugged. "Nothin'."

"Nothin'?"

"It didn't work," Cassandra piped up, stamping out her cigarette in an ashtray. She looked past Billy and saw me. "Hi, Manouche."

I blinked as Billy spun around to look at me. "I'm her sister," I explained awkwardly.

Danilo appeared in the doorway. "What's goin' on?"

"Seems your fortune teller's a fraud," Billy said. "I'd like some of that money back."

"Billy, lay off," Julian pleaded, blushing. "I don't care if the fortune-telling's a fake."

"It's not a fake," Cassandra insisted amiably. "It's worked with everyone except you."

Billy looked at her. "Well, there's one way to find out." He removed his jacket.

Danilo stepped closer, but Cassandra said, "Sure, let's try it." Again, although I felt fearful, I almost felt an impulse to laugh at her calm, easygoing manner.

"You sure?" Julian asked Cassandra.

“It’s her job, don’t be stupid,” Billy said, yanking Julian off the bed. “Scram.” Danilo and I backed out of the trailer and down the steps. Billy pushed Julian out, tossed his boots after him and slammed the door shut.

We stood staring at the door for a moment, and Julian broke the silence. “I’m sorry.” He dropped to the ground to put on his boots.

“No worries,” Danilo replied, and I loved him for his tact. He motioned to me. “Let’s get back to work, sweet.” And he walked toward the crowd.

I hesitated. We heard Billy and Cassandra talking quietly inside the trailer, then Billy laughed. Julian sighed, stood up and started away. I called after him. “Want a drink?”

He looked at me as if seeing me for the first time, and some of the discomfort left his face. “Okay, yeah, I’ll have a brandy.”

I led him to the stand we set up to serve as a small bar. I poured a brandy and watched him drink it slowly, appreciatively. He relaxed, and I felt encouraged enough to ask him about what had happened. “Is it true you didn’t see anything?”

“Yeah. But I didn’t care. This was Billy’s idea. I was ... Your sister was real nice. I hadn’t ever ... she was very kind.” He scratched his head, embarrassed. “Sorry about my brother.”

“You aren’t your brother’s keeper,” I responded lightly, then saw Danilo waving at me. “We’re gonna play now. We’ll play somethin’ just for you, you’ll like it.” He nodded, and still I wanted to do more. “Here, hold this for me,” I added, slipping a beaded bracelet off my wrist. “It’s never fit me right, keeps fallin’ off.” I pressed it into his hand and hurried to join Danilo.

Danilo didn't look up from his tuning as I approached. "I guess I know what you want to play," he remarked, his voice casual.

"Shut it," I muttered, feeling my face flush.

He laughed. "Anyone who can turn you red must have somethin' special about him. He's a good'un, I can tell."

I blushed deeper, but my spirits rose. Praise from Danilo was no small thing. "It's hard to believe he an' Billy are brothers." I shook my head as I picked up my guitar.

Danilo nodded. "Have a care, dear one," he said quietly, his eyes focused on his instrument.

I motioned for him to lean closer, and kissed him on the cheek. "We're in tune, in every possible way," I winked. And we started playing 'La Gitane'. I looked over at Julian, thinking at first perhaps he wasn't enjoying it, he looked so solemn. Then he caught my eye, smiled and held up his glass in a toast. I saw my bracelet dangling from his wrist, and continued the song with renewed inspiration.

When we finished, I returned to Julian; but before we could speak, Billy ran up to us, his face pale. He took Julian's glass and set it down. "C'mon, we're leaving."

Danilo walked up behind me. "Somethin' amiss?"

Billy motioned toward the trailer. "That's some freaky stuff goin' on there." He brought out his wallet.

"What'd you see?" Julian asked.

"Never mind." Billy handed some money to Danilo. "That enough?"

Danilo nodded. Though he didn't care much for Billy, he could see he'd had a terrible fright. "Remember, it's just a trick. How about a drink before you go, on the house? Looks like you could use one."

"No thanks." Billy grabbed Julian's sleeve and pulled him away.

I saw Julian fumbling with the bracelet, trying to remove it. "Keep it," I called softly. He heard, wrapped his other hand around it, and they disappeared into the brush.

Danilo and I hurried to the trailer. Cassandra reclined against the pillows, looking comfortable and content, her eyes half closed, starting to drift off to sleep. There was just enough of the Henna-like image remaining for us to make it out. I felt the room spin; Danilo caught me up in his arms before I sank to the floor, and he carried me out into the fresh night air. He gently placed me on the ground, removed his sweater, rolled it and put it under my head with shaking hands, a sheen of sweat on his face.

"M-maybe a convent would take her," I gulped, and we tried to laugh, our voices trembling, wishing hard on my Seven Sisters or any other stars in the vicinity at the moment ... wishing for the horrific image of Billy's death to be wiped from our mutual mind's eye.

* * *

As is often the case, things seemed better the following morning. The clear, sunny day made our memory of the dreadful picture easier to take, like recounting a nightmare. Besides, Danilo had to be right; it *must* be a fluke of some sort. Soon after breakfast, as we went about our routine, we heard someone approaching. To my delight, it was Julian. My smile faded at his grave expression.

"You better be on your way," he said.

“Why?” Danilo asked.

“There’s news going around about someone who was with Cassandra, fella named Joe. He’s dead.”

Danilo brought an arm around me. “Are – are you sure?”

Julian nodded, then added the explanation we dreaded. “They say it was just like the picture. He – well, he was — ” He glanced at the trailer, where Cassandra slept, blissfully unaware. “I came to warn you, they’re coming.”

“Manouche, pack,” Danilo said in a clipped voice. I bolted without a word and started throwing things together. I didn’t have to be told twice. We had fled towns before due to lesser infractions.

“We’re obliged, mate,” Danilo said to Julian, holding out a hand.

Julian shook his hand. “What can I do to help?”

“You’ve done plenty. You should go, you could get hurt. Manouche ... none of us would want that.”

“I know a way out of here they’ll never think of checking till you’re long gone,” Julian said. “The sooner you’re packed, the sooner I can take you there. So what can I do?” Danilo nodded gratefully, and led him to another part of the site.

To our relief, Cassandra slept through the entire evacuation. With the three of us crammed in the front seat of the mini-bus, Julian guided us to a narrow road we somehow had missed in all our trips to town. “People don’t use it much, it’s off the main route,” Julian said. He found cigarettes, lit one and sighed. “That village ... I guess it’s my town, but it’s never felt like home. With all the strangers who pass through, you’d think the people who live there would

be more open-minded. But they're not. They're quick to judge, they don't take the time to see that things aren't always what they seem."

"That's not a new problem to us," Danilo remarked.

Julian shook his head sympathetically. "The people back there, they don't have any idea what you're about, and they won't bother to try to find out." He nudged me and added, "They'll never know lil' star here has gold flecks in her eyes."

"I do?" I blushed, taking great pleasure in his nickname for me.

"*Oui, mademoiselle*. Very unusual for violet eyes."

"They're not violet."

"No?" He shifted to stare into my eyes, and smiled. "They're deep blue, like the Mediterranean. I bet they're blue-green when it rains." He turned back to the windshield. "And gray when the rain's inside."

I glanced at him sharply. How could he know my eyes turn blue-gray when I cry? He kept watching the road as he nudged me again. I peeked at Danilo, saw his bemused smile, and folded my arms, frowning, not sure what to make of this male conspiracy, this desecration of my cool, aloof image.

When we stopped for gas, Danilo said to Julian, "We'll be sound from here. You should go back, something could still go wrong."

"Can I say goodbye to Cassandra?"

"She's still asleep," I replied.

"Okay, just tell her for me. Tell her I ..."

“We’ll tell her,” Danilo promised. “Thanks again, brother.” He shook his hand and said to me, “Hurry.” And he left us to talk.

Julian looked at me, his shyness returned. “I – I know so little about you.”

“You know the color of my eyes.”

He smiled. “Oh, wait.” He fumbled with the bracelet.

“No, keep it.” I placed my hand over his. “I mean, if you want to.”

“Only if you’ll have somethin’ from me.” He reached into his coat, unfastened a gold watch fob and placed it in my palm. It was about three inches long, Art Nouveau, with a heart-shaped piece that hung like a charm over the strap of the fob. A monogram was engraved on the heart, the lettering so ornate, we couldn’t make it out. A long chain was attached for the watch. “It doesn’t have any special meaning,” he said, as I admired it. “I don’t even have a watch for it. I just liked it when I saw it.”

“Then it does have special meaning.”

He took my face in his hands, and there, standing on asphalt, the air tinged with gas fumes, I received my first kiss. Never mind that I was no virgin, that I had been with more than one young man. This would always be my first kiss, the kiss most of us experience once if we’re lucky, more if we’re blessed. Everything shifted into focus ... all the music I loved and had ever attempted to play was right here, surrounding us.

We heard Danilo tap the horn. Julian murmured, “Bye, lil’ star,” slowly running his hands up and down my arms. He turned me around, pushed me gently, and I headed toward the bus. As we pulled away, Julian watched us go, waving, until we rounded a bend and could see him no more.

I turned and faced the dashboard with a deep sigh. Danilo said nothing but reached over and squeezed my hand. I knew 'La Gitane' would never sound the same to me again, and I didn't know if I was sorry or glad.

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