

*October 1937*

The tentacle moved on its own.

Goldie Grayson didn't notice at first—she was too busy cursing the pneumatic lift she'd cobbled together from carburetor scraps and washing machine guts. It had worked fine the night before. Now, on the damp cusp of morning, it was misbehaving like every other piece of this damned ride.

She didn't see it move, not exactly. It was more like ... the aftermath. The faint ripple in the water. The shiver in the air. The sense that something had shifted just out of sight.

She froze, one hand still clutching her wrench, breath caught like a shorted circuit.

No one else was in Firefly Cove. The midway gates were still locked, the park hours away from opening. She'd made sure of that. Woody, the scruffy gray mutt who'd decided she was his human, lay curled nearby atop a coil of electrical cable, one ear twitching in his sleep. The only sounds were the tick of cooling metal, the distant boom of surf on rocks, and the rhythmic creak of the water wheel churning the canal behind her.

And ... the whisper?

Very faint. Very close.

*“Goldie ...”*

She jolted and nearly toppled into the canal. The wrench slipped from her hand and clattered to the floor, loud as a gunshot.

She spun around, eyes wide, but the ride was empty. No shadows behind the paper-mâché trees. No footprints in the artificial mud. No lurking teenager with a grudge and a voice like her mother's.

*You imagined it, she told herself. Too many long nights. Too much static in your brain.*