

TITANIC 2012

—CURSE of R.M.S. TITANIC—

by Robert W. Walker, author of City for Ransom

This historical novel of intrigue, suspense, and terror is a Centenary retelling of the Titanic story. From a master of terror and suspense, herein lies a compelling reason to force Captain Edward J. Smith to scuttle his own ship. What prompts such an action on the part of a veteran, retiring captain on a ship's maiden voyage?

The answers are unveiled in April 1912 and in April 2012...

However, first an acknowledgement: Thanks to the tireless efforts of Diane Harrison this novel sees e-Publication months in advance; this due to Diane's excellent genius in editing. Diane, my undying thanks for a job well done...beyond my wildest expectations! Along with others, Diane also edited my *Children of Salem*. Thanks also to Robert Farley, Jr. who has offered wonderful help in an editorial sense and especially with the difficult technical questions that make up much of the science fiction introduced here. Thanks as well to all my early readers who pointed out my misses from one end of the story to the other. As a storyteller the story becomes the biggest, greatest concern, to get it told, and along the way mistakes are made. My heartfelt thanks also to Joe Franks for excellent 'gun' support, helping me get the firearms right. Thanks to Charles Pellegrino for his excellent *Her Name Titanic*, and of course to Dr. Robert D. Ballard for finding Titanic and writing his excellent account *The Discovery of the Titanic*. My copy is as well-worn as a book can be. I couldn't have written this book without this invaluable help and would surely have repeated the errors of Clive Cussler's *Raise the Titanic* (written prior to Ballard's discovery) if Bob Ballard had not found Titanic two and a half miles below the North Atlantic. Sadly, however, I won't be making the 2012 sold out re-creation voyage of the Titanic's course in 2012, a hundred years since her sinking.

Finally, allow me time to thank my wife Miranda, whose *Absolution*, a novel of suspense, is now an e-book, chapter one attached at the end of this book for a sneak peek of Miranda Phillips Walker's talent. Miranda's a wonderment. Thanks also to my son, Stephen Walker for untold behind the scenes work from great graphic cover art to negotiating the intricacies of the internet world and digital platform publishing. Finally, thanks to Joe Konrath who led the way for me. Finally, I owe so much to all those thousands of ebook readers who have embraced my Kindle original titles and reprinted works. You've made me a happy man.

ONE

Belfast, Northern Ireland, April 3, 1912

Sifted coal dust rained unseen over them, choked them. A fine shower of it fluttered about the men like a million black fairies that insisted on entering them. The dark dust created of itself a ghostly, unruly smoke. Despite how fine the black particles were, their helmet lights captured it as a sparkling array before their eyes. “Black angel dust,” commented the taller man.”

“Stuff always looks to me as if, you know, alive,” said the stouter of the two.

At the same time, the earth around them groaned and stretched, disturbed from slumber, just awakening. Tim McAffey, mine superintendent, along with his assistant superintendent, Francis O’Toole, dared enter to inspect the recent damage that had been left unattended for two months—this after the mine had sat unused for two years previously. This fresh and somewhat minor cave-in had shut it down anew. Still the order was to get Number 9 operational again at all costs.

At times like this, McAffey wondered why he’d ever become a miner. Then as the floating grave ahead of them settled, he thought of the bonus promised if he did his job. He thought of home and family and food on the table.

The day had ended with little to show for, so McAffey remained frustrated and upset. He knew from experience it’d take days if not a week to get the men comfortable enough—even

now after sixty days—about reentering this section of the mine to even begin to clean up the mess where some timbers had given way. “Hell, amounts to a sneeze,” he said to O’Toole.

“Minor inconvenience at best,” agreed Francis O’Toole. “Thank God, no one’s been kilt this time by her; two injured and off to hospital’s all.”

Still, men were superstitious; once an area underground shook with the slightest tremor, they bolted and often refused to return unless the owners offered a bonus or other incentive. Two years previous, there’d been a god awful mining accident the likes of which Belfast had never seen—twenty seven men killed in an instant. But that, while in Number 9, was in another section quite aways from here. This most recent set-back was a minor one, nothing of consequence beyond a six-foot high pile of rubble in the way of going forward to where it was believed the finest iron ore ever seen lay waiting for harvest—in the shaft where the twenty-seven had perished.

“We’ve little choice, Franics, but to push on. Bosses signed a big contract with the White Star line. Provide iron for three ships that’re between fifty-three and sixty-three tons.”

“Aye...building two more to match that monster *Britanic* we saw launched some time back. The three of ’em...” O’Toole shook his head. ..“they’ll be the grandest ships ever the world has seen.”

This one they’re calling *Titanic* will be even larger than the first, I’m told.”

“She’s almost ready for launch, I ’ear.”

The talk of the British-owned White Star’s plans for a fleet of ships large enough to compete with the Seven Wonders of the World had the two miners discussion turn to politics.

“No matter a man’s politics or feelings toward the British, Francis, White Star has brought a level of prosperity to Belfast sorely needed.”

“They’re calling this new one The Unsinkable Titanic, ’ave you heard, Tim?”

“Aye—and Belfast Iron’s a big part of her; a part of history now, Francis.”

“Getting the ore to the foundry and the shipyard, that’s all that matters—one more ‘Titanic’ to go.”

“Aye—the one called Olympic.”

“Hold on.” Francis stopped cold in his tracks and pointed with an unlit pipe, asking, “What ’ave we ’ear?” asked Francis. He pointed to a darkened corner of the troubled shaft.

“What is it?” McAffey directed his helmet light at the spot and gasped.

“Some sorta dead dog looks like, but he’s froze in the rock wall for God knows how long.”

“Look at the size of them fangs, would ya? Thing’s gotta be old as the bible, I warrant.”

They stared at it. The thing was indeed embedded in the cave wall, recently uncovered by the fallen debris all round it. The snout was huge, the gaping incisors prehistoric in appearance. “May Gawd ’imself blind me,” began McAffey. “Francis, tell no one about this monster, not a word of it, ya hear?”

“Why? What’re you thinking, Tim? We could put it on display, charge folks to ’ave a look-see! Make ’nough to keep us in ale and bitters for months.”

“Word gets out ’bout this, Tim, and-and we have two problems, old man!”

“Two problems?”

“Yes—one with the men, the second with the long-hairs over’t the universities.”

Francis shrugged, frowned, and asked, “How’s that, Tim?”

“The men’ll claim tis Satan ’imself at work here! You know that. And the professors—they’ll want to turn this shaft into a laboratory—an archeological dig.”

“Aye...I see your meanin’.”

“This stays with us. We pickaxe this...this ancient badger outta here, wrap it up, and toss it into the nearest river. Let it be somebody else’s bloody discovery. I want nothin’ to do with it.

Agreed?”

O’Toole poked at the brittle creature in the wall with his pipe only to knock away an entire tooth the size of his finger. He lifted the tooth, pocketed it, and said, “Something to tell my grandchildren about!”

“I just said no one’s to know!”

“After I retire one day.” He laughed and turned to McAffey who shoved a pick into his hands.

“So long as you tell ’em that’s all you found—a tooth. Now let’s start diggin’.”

The two veteran miners intended to make short work of the unusual find. In fact, they soon had the creature extracted from the wall, and were chipping away at the remaining ore attached to the carcass. “I can just see this flesh-eater tearin’ away at his kill, can’t you, Francis?”

“Aye—he’s dried out like a mummy but from the girth at the shoulders, he’d’ve been a real monster, this one.”

“We’ll get a tarp, wrap it, take it down to the mill creek,” suggested McAffey, puffing now from the work. “Either bury it or tie a rock to it and dump it there.”

O’Toole pictured the spot his boss was talking about, a curve in the creek that accumulated debris floating in the current above the millworks north of the shipyards. His thoughts were interrupted when suddenly McAffey sucked in a deep breath of the mine dust and stumbled to a rock, squatting there. He tried to shake off a sudden fatigue, his face turning an odd shade of pale grey and a strange greenish hue in splotches here and there.

“Musta overdone it,” he muttered, out of breath.

“You OK, Tim?”

“Just get the tarp! I’m fine. Catch me breath in a minute. Go!”

O’Toole studied his boss for any additional signs of danger, wondering if the gases down here had turned him sour, and if so, they might both be dead in minutes.

“Just somethin’ I ate, Francis, so stop lookin’ at me like I’m a dead man.”

“Sorry, Tim. It’s right-cha-are!” After nodding, O’Toole set off for the surface to fetch the tarp; he couldn’t help grumbling and cursing under his breath that he was ordered about like a dog himself, while McAffey sat ass-end on a rock to wait for his return.

Fifteen minutes elapsed when O'Toole returned with the tarp only to find McAffey bent over in serious pain, asking the other man for help. "G-Get me to-to the surface; imperative. Need fresh air...now. Help me, p-please."

He didn't even sound like McAffey anymore, so distraught was he.

"Sure...sure...I can come back later for the carcass." But McAffey had forgotten about every other consideration. He simply kept repeating, "Air...I gotta have air. Get me air!"

O'Toole thought of the amount of dust they'd both swallowed on first entering the shaft. O'Toole, a big man in his late fifties, held his wobbly boss who seemed about to faint dead away any moment. The man's knees buckled; he could hardly take a step like some newborn pony on spindly legs. "Hold on to me; I've gotcha, Tim, me boy."

"Feels like I picked up something, Francis. Got no time for this. No time for sickness."

"Your nose is bleedin', Tim—gushin' it is."

"Get me to the surface, now!"

McAffey's ears began to bleed now, but in the darkness, O'Toole didn't notice. "Never been sick a day in your life, Tim, so what's this?" he asked, but McAffey could not form words. Blood strangled any attempt to speak or to breathe. Halfway up the lit elevator shaft, Superintendent McAffey died in O'Toole's arms, his eyes first imploring as if to ask why and then going absolutely blank. As if a shadow was crossing over his brow and eyes—a gray-greenness turning to sienna. Yes, in the eyes. Francis, distracted, paid little heed to this. He was too busy trying to forgive himself for his first thought—I'm sure to be promoted to McAffey's job...make more money.

The lift platform creaked and bumped its way toward the surface.

By this time, under the elevator light, O'Toole watched McAffey's body turn into a stiff, brown-skinned mummy. Francis knew that Tim had died a terrible death. A death which left his body looking like a brittle ancient unwrapped mummy, yet despite the bizarre desert-like dry condition of the body, a strange odor emanated from every orifice, an odor Francis could not place at first until he thought of Hades as it must surely be the odor of fire and brimstone and sulfur.

Francis knew also that he was himself feeling ill and far from normal.

And this terrified him.

He feared whatever had destroyed Tim McAffey before his eyes; feared it was no doubt now inside him, infecting him. He hadn't time to feel guilty over his earlier thought of taking charge—finally—as mine superintendent. His hand went for his pocket, and he grasped the saber-tooth cradled there and cursed it. He knew, like McAffey, that he was on his own way to a horrible death, and it had to do with handling that beast he'd left below in the mine, all save the damnable fang.

He recalled having first tapped the damned thing with his pipe; recalled how they both had dug it from the wall, how they'd both tugged at it with their gloved hands, exerting themselves, breathing heavily as they worked. He thought of Tim's fateful decision to remove it rather than call in the experts from a local university to identify it. Whatever it was.

Francis felt a stirring in his body like a foreign emotion. He tightened his fingers around the overlarge tooth resting in his palm now and squeezed until the tooth bit into his flesh. He did

so just to feel something other than the numbing fear overtaking him. Something suggested that while he had no future, that he would live longer than McAffey had; that whatever this was, it had fed on Tim like a starved dog over a piece of meat, but that it would take its time with Francis O'Toole who had made the mistake of being in the wrong place at the wrong time. "Mistake was goin' back into the mine the second time...being human—of caring, of doing me best to help Tim to the surface air he craved in his last moments."

Whatever had killed Tim, he feared now may well have spread to his body, but what in God's name had killed Tim? It'd all happened so fast. One moment good old Tim's feeling nauseous and begging for air—to get to the surface—and the next moment, he's gone! Just like that!

But Tim McAffey calling for the surface and the air like he did, pleading like a frightened child—that was so unlike Tim; didn't seem like Tim at all. Tim's appearance, so changed, his skin resembling beef jerky, leather to the touch, like some ancient Egyptian. What did it all mean? What did it portend? Something Old Testament? A plague? Could there be any disease that could kill a man so fast and so surely as this? If so, O'Toole had never seen it nor heard of it. Not even the dreaded smallpox could take a man so fast and do such hideous things to the body.

It'd been a swift end for Tim.

"If I've picked it up, I should be dead as well," he ciphered aloud, "or shortly now sure. Yet I've me legs—a bit stiff, to be sure, but I-I feel fine," he tried reassuring himself.

However, deep within, he felt an overwhelming fear that this disease, whatever it was—some new strain of malaria, smallpox, the bubonic plague, whatever—it was beginning to sap

his strength and resolve. Still, Francis fought it, suddenly as anxious for topside air as Tim had begged for—that and the company of men.

Air I m-must find...find air, said his mind. Survive I must, came a second voice in his head, yet so real.

And for no reason he could fathom, O'Toole suddenly began kicking out at the inert, now petrified body of his former boss and sometime drinking buddy, McAffey. Then again with another hard kick, and suddenly he was kicking him repeatedly with a booted foot and leg that acted without reason.

The body lay now at the edge of the lift, an arm hanging over. Once again, he viciously kicked McAffey's dehydrated form, until the body rolled off the platform altogether. He heard the nasty thump of the other man's body hit the stones lining the shaft as McAffey returned to the mine shaft below to spend eternity there for all O'Toole cared now. "With god and the beast now," he said, for a moment sounding like his old self. But only for a moment.

"Off with ya, now," he said to the darkness below where the body had fallen. "No time for ya have I." Then he haltingly chanted in what seemed another voice: "Out I must get...out...g-get out...got to get out..."

Before he could analyze these heedings, the lift finally came to ground level, and he stumbled onto earth as if finding his sea legs, appearing a disheveled drunk in a gait that did not seem his, and yet these were his feet.

He stumbled and fell, gasping for all the air he could place in his lungs, choking as he did so. Whatever this was, a voice inside his head was now telling him to go forth toward the city

piers and the shipyards. This hypnotic suggestion felt so strong; he could not fight it. At the same time, he wondered, “W-Where’s me-me own will got off to?”

It was late, no one around, and no one to ask help of. He knew he’d live; something told him so, but he had an inkling it would prove to be a short-lived future at best. Knew in his heart and mind that whatever had destroyed Tim was soon to overtake him, but he didn’t wish to die in a hole in the ground. He wanted to die among men here at the surface, yet he feared infecting others at the same time that this overwhelming need arose in him—to die among men, in a crowd, the first men he came to. It might be his last wish, his final desire, but he could not fathom why he’d not rather die among family than strangers but there it was—an insistence to go nowhere near anyone he loved yet to seek out human contact.

It was a powerful suggestion, one that must be obeyed, one he could not combat no matter how much he longed to see home, hearth, the wife.

He knew the nearest fellows to the mine were men working at the shipyards. He knew that his feet—the same as had kicked McAffey back into the mine shaft, now moved toward the distant lights of the shipyard at Belfast as if made of wood on the one hand, and as if they had a mind of their own, these extremities, and were guided by a hand other than his own.

“Company of others...don’t want being alone...time like this.” He heard himself saying now as he ambled in mechanical fashion toward where they had labored for so long now building Titanic and her sister ships via the iron ore provided by the mine.

Francis had forgotten McAffey’s name now; could not dredge it up. Then he realized he’d forgotten his own name as well. He wondered if he might live at least long enough to take in the air of the world outside the mine in the company of other fellows, perhaps raise a pint to his lips,

smoke a cigar before his mind should completely go—but what else did it all mean? A man spending a lifetime, learning, filling his mind and for what? So it ends a blank slate? Why? How? What was at root of living and dying?

“Some seed in that damned, cursed prehistoric dog carcass,” he muttered to himself, feeling an overwhelming urge to live, and to do so among other men—other men who would allow life to continue—yet a life he did not recognize. All he knew was that he must survive long enough to get to others of his kind. In fact, it replaced the one mantra in his head—to get out and to get air—with another that pleaded for other warm bodies.

Some time later, O’Toole stumbled into the sprawling Belfast shipyard looking like a drunk at the midnight hour. He passed below the huge gantry, a part of his brain unsure in the dim light how he’d gotten here, how he’d come so far, how he remained alive when that other fellow... a man with whom he’d been... someone he’d known but could not so much as picture in his mind now... how that other fellow had died so quickly and violently. That much he remembered.

He felt not at all in control of his limbs, felt no control of his will, yet he was alive, despite the horrible belief that some kind of dreaded disease had grabbed hold of him and would never release its grip. It seemed madness to contemplate, but it felt as if the thing that’d taken hold had somehow transferred itself from this other fellow’s corpse—to him. And there had been this curious creature he’d carelessly handled. It may well’ve come from that ancient creature.

Whatever it was, it hadn't killed him as it had the other miner. Instead, it was intentionally stretching out its time with O'Toole—using him up in a more controlled fashion as if it could...as if it could manage to control its feeding within.

While it had so quickly and voraciously fed on the other man, it had now ushered in a powerful self-control. Whatever it might be called otherwise, this thing was sentient.

It directed him deeper into the shipyard; it seemed to want to get as far from its former prison as possible. To that end, it wanted O'Toole aboard the ship just built, a ship that was made from ore taken from the mine that it had snuggled alongside for how long—as if it had an affinity for the iron walls.

Or perhaps it realized that Titanic could act as its perfect lair.

While his conscious mind had no true evidence of any of it, his every remaining human instinct said it was so.

In any case, O'Toole had no choice but to carry out its wishes.

By now realizing himself to be just a conduit, a vehicle to move it from the mine to here, O'Toole thought of killing himself, but he had no ready method of doing so save leaping into the water as he could not swim. He made a move in that direction but was turned about. While his mind still fought for itself, his body was no longer his. He guessed that he'd debated over suicide too long, and it knew his thoughts, and as a result, it was ahead of him on this.

Francis moved now below the giant letters a hundred feet overhead and twenty feet apart. Letters that read: T I T A N I C.

TWO

The Pier at Woods Hole Institute, Massachusetts, April 11, 2012

The screeching pelicans and seagulls overhead seemed quite out of their minds with the unusually early morning activity surrounding the bizarre-looking research vessel in its slip at the harbor. Human activity. Human excitement. It must mean food scraps for them. What else might it portend, wondered David Robert Ingles, feeling a bit like Ishmael of Moby Dick fame, readying for the voyage with the mad Ahab—in this case Captain and Doctor of Oceanography, Juris Forbes, a man obsessed with Titanic, but then who wasn't?

The research vessel, Scorpio IV—four times the size of anything else docked here in Woods Hole—was jam packed with superstructure that supported two enormous cranes, affording sea birds all manner of handy perches; in fact, the birds patiently awaited any opportunity for scraps and fish heads to eat. However, the primary purpose of the two super cranes was hardly for the birds, but rather for lifting tons of weight from the depths of the ocean and positioning heavy objects weighing tons onto Scorpio's deck. In a matter of weeks, the computer operated, hydraulic cranes would be hauling up treasures plucked from the mysterious interiors of the one-hundred-year-old shipwreck named Titanic. The treasures would be placed in sealed vaults to protect them from the change in pressure from the deep to the surface.

It was now April 2012—precisely one hundred years—the Centenary of Titanic's launching and her demise when she struck an iceberg at 22 knots.

David Ingles took notice of the birds—thankful the seagulls weren't a flock of albatrosses. He gave a flash thought to his reading of The Rhyme of the Ancient Mariner, imagining he would undoubtedly run into an ancient sailor on board Scorpio this trip—old timers

with short fuses and little patience for the young and foolish who got men killed at sea as quickly as scratching an itch. If the old timers aboard Scorpio knew his history, or his latest failed mission, they'd surely be wary of him the entire way out and back.

Ingles came aboard without fanfare and no one to greet him. Everyone on the pier and on board busily work at their jobs. It was obvious orders were to ship out within the hour.

At the center of Scorpio, Ingles found the 'oil well' over which the largest derrick supported a myriad of equipment strung with cable as thick as hemp on a Cutty Schooner. But this ship was far from a schooner, and while faster, hardly as romantic or beautiful. Essentially a high-tech outfitted drill ship, Scorpio's primary drilling derrick stood amidships. But rather than use a traditional drill pipe, Scorpio's gleaming derricks supported her enormous cables—hundred pound Cryo-Cable to be exact. Her cable could withstand the most frigid conditions on Earth—or rather below the seas—including the bottom of the North Atlantic exactly two and a half miles below the surface.

Ingles, carrying his gear, now ran a strong hand along the huge derrick steel. With her electronically controlled pulleys, Scorpio could hoist anything imaginable, even a Titanic-sized bulkhead if need be. David imagined that if the Titanic were in one piece as described in a Clive Cussler novel years before Ballard's discovery of the ripped apart, pancaked-in-on-itself ship, Ingles had no doubt that Scorpio could "Raise the Titanic."

However, their mission was not to raise her so much as raid and plunder her. Some news accounts used the term 'rape' her, but Ingles didn't see it that way. Not in the least. It was well documented in the literature that Titanic took down many treasures with her—far more than dishware—and the belief held that even the sealed hold that carried a treasure-trove of vintage automobiles would be perfectly preserved at the depths where Titanic resided. Even a sandwich

at such depths would be perfectly preserved and edible unless found in a Stover's lunchbox—which would be permeated then with corrosive salts and more toxic than sea water. So what of the stash of mailbags crossing the Atlantic in 1912? They resided in a sealed section of the ship. A wealth of letters, documents, bank notes alone. So what of all the jewelry stowed in the safes aboard yet to be discovered? Not to mention brass and gold fixtures and shipboard items within the ship? The treasures that had survived all these years—museum pieces for world showcases, and each item itself worth a fortune!

It was just a matter of using modern means to salvage the treasures awaiting them from what remained inside the various safes aboard, the staterooms, the varied first, second, and third-class dishes and silverware, the mailbags, the secret cargo in the holds—like the rumored crates of Vickers automatic machine guns destined for the US Army, and a stash of now quite antique automobiles.

Yes it was all extremely controversial, and Ingles'd had to walk through a sizeable crowd of protestors noisier than the seagulls to get aboard, but history would eventually prove the mission the right thing to do—of this he was certain. Otherwise the enormous sacrifice of all those 1600 souls aboard the night Titanic went to its watery grave would have been in vain. At least that was the sound byte put out for the media and the public.

The other side argued that Titanic was a cemetery, sacred ground; they championed Dr. Robert Ballard, who had consecrated that solemn peace of the death ship at the bottom of the Atlantic. Ingles recalled Robert Ballard in a Red Sox ball cap when the discoverer of the Titanic in its grave had last left Titanic's ruins decades ago. He had certainly put his stamp on the discovery and had every good intention to proclaim it a last resting place, a sanctified ground, a place not to be disturbed, a place nothing should be removed from.

Author Rod Serling's brother Robert's worst novel—Ghosts of the Titanic—prevailed in the minds of many, but for Ingles and other scientists such concerns amounted to superstitious claptrap—Twilight Zone nonsense.

“Make no mistake about it,” said a white-bearded stout fellow confronting Ingles, jabbing at the derrick with his pipe. “This monster can hoist up an entire Sherman tank from below if you give the order, Dr. Ingles. If need be, we can bring up that blasted ship piece by piece, compartment by compartment.”

“Capable of a quarter million pounds of lift,” David replied, smiling. “May sound like science fiction but there you have it. Please, call me David.”

“Indeed, young man...indeed.” They shook hands.

“Your voice sounds somewhat familiar. You're Dr. Dimitri Alandale, aren't you, sir? We've spoken. You called my iPhone.”

“Aye—first mate, science officer, and you look like your photo, yes? Sometimes a good thing!”

“You've got me!” Ingles joked, and they both looked out to sea.”

“Ahhh, yes, I called you from the wireless. Captain'll see you soon 'nough. Busy with that bloody press conference.” He pointed to the pier with his pipe.

“Good to meet you, sir.”

“Sorry there's no one to welcome you aboard other than me.” A tall, gaunt man perhaps in his early to mid-sixties, Dr. Dimitri Alandale was half Greek, half Scotsman. He looked the picture of a graying oceanographer and seaman, and Ingles took an instant liking to the man

whose laugh came so easily.

The two seamen, young and old, stood in silent admiration of the machinery before them. They understood its enormous power, that its express purpose was to lower and lift a massive platform on which thousands of tons of sensing devices, search and salvage equipment, as well as recovered artifacts would rest. This equipment would be made available two miles below the surface to the diving teams, men and women whose experiences uniquely qualified them to participate in this historic dive into the very bowels of Titanic.

Ingles would be among the divers using the new underwater breathing apparatus that allowed divers to explore the vast interiors of the sleeping giant below the North Atlantic.

He and two teams of four divers—eight in all, counting Commander of Divers, Lou Swigart—all had passed extensive tests utilizing the new technology that amounted to breathing oxygenated liquid into their lungs. Essentially, they were going through an act of ‘de-evolution’—returning to a fish-like existence in that their lungs would be filled with liquid, but liquid from which they could sustain life.

It was a technology developed by the US Navy, and Ingles had been among the first test subjects. It essentially involved a moment of death before coming out on the other side, unless a diver panicked, in which case, there was no other side. Having the liquid pumped from the lungs after mission accomplished was no picnic either, but breathing from lungs filled with liquid oxygen equalized XX the pressure and allowed a man to dive as never before.

In any event, there was no room for error.

“I can hardly imagine being able to withstand temperatures of minus 1,700 degrees,” muttered Alandale in Ingles’ ear. The man’s large-faced, wide grin was infectious, and now Ingles placed his looks: Alandale had the bearing and appearance of the actor Max Von Sydow

in his later years.

“Our dive suits are made of the same material as the Cryo-Cable here,” David replied, giving a mock-squeeze to the huge cable. Ingles had imagined this trip and the dives ahead of them many times over; he’d imagined the giant four-sided, metal basket atop a huge platform at the bottom of the sea chockfull with treasures that Neptune would cry for. Treasures that would find their way to public museums across the globe. Treasures dredged up by human hands from Titanic’s secret interiors.

Sure I’m in it for the money, but I’m here for the adrenaline rush, too, he thought, being honest with himself.

The press called them fortune hunters, mercenaries, but there was more to it than money—far more. Ingles turned at the shouting of orders from below. From where he stood alongside Alandale, he could see that every major media outlet had shown up, some with microphones milling about the pier. Others made moves to come aboard the research vessel but were held in check by a pair of brawny crewmembers.

Reporters, Ingles thought. Most would kill their mothers for an inside story.

The last time Ingles had spoken to a reporter was on his return from Japan where he’d been branded a hero for saving lives. No one said much about Wilcox. Hell, Wilcox had saved his life so that he could himself go on to save others. But Wilcox had died in the tragedy—no story in that, he facetiously realized. And him...made out the big hero. Twisted story indeed so far as David Ingles was concerned. No, he’d failed his best friend when Terry most needed him.

Ingles’ dark glasses lightened when the sun slipped behind a cloud, relieving the scene of the blinding April morning glare. He wore a sailor’s Navy Pea coat and matching watch cap, looking like any crewmember as he’d hoped to get through the reporters without notice, without

anyone recognizing him, and it'd worked. He just wanted to blend in at this point; he could be himself and was seldom at ease any longer when not at sea.

His wide shoulders, height, and good looks usually tagged him as some sort of Billy Budd, but this particular Budd held two diplomas and a doctorate in underwater forensics—investigating shipwrecks with an eye to what brought them down. His long, sandy blond hair curled up from below the hat. As always, he maintained his regimen of exercise to keep in peak athletic shape. A former Navy Seal, he routinely involved himself in various triathlons across the country and overseas.

Ingles' attention was suddenly drawn to a figure pushing through the crowd, a young woman who offered a reporter a sharp reply to what looked like either an annoying question about her mercenary tendencies, or an annoying pass. Ingles guessed who she might be, and he thought her stunning, and from her catlike reaction to the reporter, she didn't take anything sitting down. He noticed how she took in the crowd, eyes darting in every direction as if searching for someone she'd hoped to meet on the pier, someone other than reporters.

Looking over her shoulder like me these days, he wondered, thinking maybe they had something in common—detesting reporters. Regardless, he found himself unable to take his eyes from her. He watched her go about in a circle, making him wonder why she was taking her time on the pier. Looking for a boyfriend who was supposed to see her off, no doubt. Still searching it seemed when she suddenly looked up at the ship and straight at David. He blinked and pretended to look away. He then turned and leaned into the railing, hair lifting in the breeze. But he soon looked back. Had she found who she was looking for? Was she in search of the so-called hero, David Ingles? Was she a pushy, snooping reporter or was she Dr. Kelly Irvin, another of the divers?

If she's a reporter in search of a story, David wondered, here to ask me to repeat my harrowing escape from death, how quickly I'll lose interest in the woman, despite her beauty, but perhaps she's not a reporter at all. In fact, she looked like a photo he'd once seen of Dr. Kelly Irvin, and if so, perhaps there was an upside to the hero business, he joked with himself. After all, she is damned gorgeous and obviously in wonderful health.

When he again focused on her whereabouts, she was storming aboard, her gaze set on him. At least it seemed so, which is what he told himself. As she neared, smiling, a hand extended, David gave her a firm nod to acknowledge their mutual stare, and he instantly regretted it when she rested a duffel on wheels that trailed in her wake, her honey hair blowing like wheat in the ocean breeze. Dressed in jeans and a safari blouse, the returning sun bathed her in light. Tall, he thought, fair-skinned, eyes matching the color of her hair. Carries herself with a distinct elegance and pride, he surmised.

But it was suddenly apparent that indeed this was Dr. Kelly Irvin, one of his co-divers, when she stepped up to him and Dr. Alandale—her duffel bag carrying the universal sign for divers.

She gave David a perfunctory nod but showered Alandale with a beaming smile, grabbing his hand and pumping it in a handshake. She then proceeded to tell him how she had read everything he'd ever written while still pumping his arm as if she might discover some secret if she only shook long enough. She certainly appeared enthusiastic in her admiration for the elderly man beside David—in awe of being in his presence. “Such genius...such genius,” she said in a mantra while David frowned. Meanwhile, entirely ignoring Ingles as if he were a fixture—treating him like one of the crew—she began a tirade of questions for Dr. Alandale, all surrounding Titanic and her last night at sea in what appeared an effort on the part of the student

to make the teacher believe that she was his number one pupil and entirely enthralled—and apparently, she was.

By now Ingles wasn't sure it was a bad thing to be ignored by Kelly Irvin. At the same time, David had to give it to Alandale; the man knew as much about patience as that shown by the biblical character Job. He also knew every detail of Titanic and her first and last 'maiden' voyage in 1912. In the parlance of gang mobsters and salvage crews, people said of Alandale 'He knows where the bodies are'.

Dr. Kelly Irvin finally introduced herself to Alandale, and then continued a rain of questions, until Alandale stopped her with a single word. "Enough."

"Enough? I've just begun," she countered.

"Enough for now; we've weeks at sea together. I must pace myself...I'm an old man."

"Oh, not at all, sir."

"Calling me sir further ages me."

"Oh, no! I-I'm so sorry."

Alandale waved it off, and she changed the subject with ease, asking, "Just exactly where're the private quarters for the dive team? So's to stow my gear?"

"Now you sound like one of us," offered David, garnering a smile from her.

Alandale gave directions, and she rushed off with the older man pretty much on her arm as he guided her to a door that would take her down and into the ship. At the hatch, she insisted that Alandale escort her below decks. She disappeared with Alandale on her arm and without

another word to Ingles. Maybe he was wrong in his assumptions about her, but she came off as rather cold to the ‘hired help’—which she obviously thought David happened to be.

THREE

Before David Ingles could find and stow his own gear aboard *Scorpio*, a call for divers to find the tactical room and report to Commander of Divers Lou Swigart came over the PA system. Ingles rushed to join the other seven divers to report to the tough-minded, former naval captain, now head of the away team on *Scorpio*. It’d been Swigart who had hand-picked David from hundreds of applicants for this mission. Although David felt that Swigart, some fifteen years his senior, respected him, even liked him, Lou had told David early on that there would be no ‘headline-grabbing crap’ as he put it. He didn’t mind repeating it for the group now where they sat in a cramped operations room.

“Nothing in the way of news or reports is going out to the press about this mission to *Titanic*; that means nothing about you either—no interviews, no phone calls—nothing. Consider it top secret. Got it”

Lou, a big man, filled the space where he stood beside a lectern. “Nothing said that isn’t cleared by the Woods Hole Institute PR machine. I put it to you now...simple and direct—and I repeat: there’ll be no freaking headline-grabbing cowboys here. Not on my dive team!” He’d warmed to it, pacing now, adding, “It’s a purely scientific expedition on the face of it—for the media and the public, but we all know it is a salvage operation this...this expedition, ladies, gents...and so to all who’ve signed on go the spoils—whatever’s dredged out of the belly of that

wreck down there, we all have a share in. But make no bones about it, the entire structure is unstable, and what we're proposing...well it could easily—easily turn into a suicide mission.”

He let this sink in but David knew divers, so he knew it wasn't sinking far.

“You need to know that going in, and if anyone decides here and now that it's this back-out time, your replacement is waiting in the wings. Mr. Fiske, stand up so that all the others know your face.”

Fiske leapt to his feet, a muscular, square-jawed young man filled with energy and a keen eye as he took in the others, saying, “I want this as much as any of you; should anyone fall ill or have an accident, I'm here to fill in.”

“That's comforting,” muttered Will Bowman, getting a snicker out of the others.

Lou silenced them with an upraised hand. “So it's a lot cheaper for the expedition if you decide now, else you'll be flown out by chopper once we're at sea and Mr. Kane and company will be up my ass about it, understood?”

“I do...completely, sir,” Ingles replied, feeling certain that Lou was talking about him the entire time thanks to the press that he and National Geographic had gotten on the botched salvage operation in the Sea of Japan. Despite David's plea that National Geo not air the program, the producers had overruled him and other divers who felt as David did that it should not air, given the dire turn it had taken, costing Wilcox—who figured heavily in the program—his life.

“You don't go into this thinking you have something to prove, people,” continued Swigart, ignoring Ingles. “This is now, and it's hardly the Sea of Japan. Trust me, this is great depths we'll be working at, beyond anything anyone has ever withstood before—and the real

reason I suspect you're all here, willingly..." He let this sink in while taking up a position along the side of the podium where he now leaned in a casual manner. "And this series of dives will prove the new technology right or wrong."

"In other words," said Will Bowman, grinning, "live or die."

The room erupted in a quiet chorus of murmurs.

"I need the bread, Lou," said Ingles. "Not here to prove anything to anyone."

"Not even yourself?" came a female voice at the rear, making Ingles look back. It was the second female diver, Lena Gambio, a weight-lifting Italian with an overlarge nose for her petite face.

"I signed on for the hundred thou." Ingles' blunt reply caused a wave of muttering about the small meeting room.

"The going rate for a suicide dive." Swigart didn't miss a beat.

"The money has been put up by a private donor working through the institute, working through Luther K—"

"Hold on!" said Kelly Irvin, suddenly standing. "I thought Kane was footing the bill."

"Luther Warren Kane is a rich man because he doesn't gamble his own money on risky ventures, and nothing gets more risky than undersea salvage."

"Kane is just fronting?" Kelly persisted.

"What's it matter?" asked Jacob Mendenhall, the closest diver to her. "Who cares where zee money is coming from so long as we get paid?"

Swigart waved them all down. “Said donor has managed to ignore decades of objections from those who support the belief that Titanic should not be disturbed any more than it already has been.”

“Been looted from the outside by various nations around the world,” added Lena

“But none of them had the technology we have,” countered David.

“Or the corporate and government backing that Scorpio is now equipped with,” began Kelly, palms raised. “We have the Navy involvement, our training, and some of the largest corporations in the US behind us.”

“Far cry from just having National Geographic support,” said Bowman with a smirk.

Mendenhall laughed and added, “I saw the spread NG did on you, Dave.”

“We all saw it!” countered Bowman. “So what, Jake.”

“Please, it’s Jacob or Mendenhall if you like, Bowman. “I am just saying that I’d worry less about where the money is coming from and more about with whom we are dealing at those great depths!”

“Makes sense,” agreed Lou who continued, pointing to the rear of the room. “Confine your concerns to the dive and your teammates. Your life and the success of this mission depend upon it.”

David glanced over his shoulder to where Kelly Irvin sat at the back of the room. From her expression, she had known who he was all along. He heard Swigart’s continuing rant again in his ear. “That Geographic episode made quite a splash. Just be damned sure we have no

g'damn accidents here, and that the wreck you and your friends worked in the Sea of Japan is in the past and out of your system—got that Ingles? Are you hearing me?"

"Yes sir! Heard and taken to heart, sir." David gave a thought to his best friend whose body had never been recovered, at eternal rest inside the hull of a World War II Japanese submarine; quite the expensive coffin. How many eulogies had he given to Terry Wilcox? "Lou, I swear to you it's behind me," he wanted to believe it as firmly as he'd said it.

"Good...good. Can't have you down there with any damn ghosts, emotional baggage—all that shit. And that goes for all of you in this room."

"Understood, sir...yes, sir..." came a chorus of affirmations.

"Have to be focused like a laser, stay on camera and audio. No place for idle thoughts or daydreaming."

Swigart was right of course, and right to call him on it a final time today. "I won't let you down, Lou. Promise."

Others muttered and nodded to indicate the same sentiment. Ingles took in the faces of the seven other divers—Team Aft Section Titanic: Lena Gambio, former Navy diver, Lt. William Bowman, former Navy Seal, Steve Jens, a career man retired from the Navy. Lt. Kyle Fiske, another navy man acting as underwater captain of the aft section. Meanwhile, Team Bow Section Titanic was comprised of David, Kelly, Dr. Jacob Mendenhall, oceanographer and experienced diver, while Lou Swigart would be at the submersible controls.

"All I ask, all I ask," repeated Swigart, "and thanks for dropping by!" he tried and failed at sounding a bit friendlier. "Now get your gear stowed and ready yourself for the voyage out to the Sea of Sacrifice."

They all recognized the phrase—a title on one of Alandale’s books that went into some detail about all those he could find records on who went down with the Titanic on the night of 1912.”

“Aye, Commander of Divers!” shouted Steve Jens, a stalwart looking, handsome fellow with the requisite seaman’s tan. The others followed suit, saluting Swigart as most were ex-Navy.

Swigart was pleased to see this; he obviously wished to run his operations by US Navy standards despite its experimental nature and despite the fact that none of them were any longer connected to the Navy.

At least Swigart’s setting the tone for ‘open and aboveboard’ about everything that goes on—and on a ship, that was important, Ingles consoled himself. Too many people packed in too small a space to be anything but honest and up front. Besides, it was the unspoken stuff that seeped into Ingles’ mind that might make him paranoid about how others viewed him and his recent failures. A disciplined work ethic aboard following naval protocol felt right and proper.

These thoughts followed David out of the debriefing, and while others were introducing one another, he rushed past them and was soon in search of his cramped semi-private quarters below decks. He soon felt the familiar sense of being home, even if it was in a metal box with poor lighting. The narrow passageways, the shoulder-to-shoulder sized archways led him to his cabin, marked No. 4 where he opened the hatch on a small area cramped as any rolling RV. Two bunk spaces and a single locker with small mirror to each man. Any shaving or other toiletry needs meant additional shared facilities down the hall.

It all looked like that damned sub in the waters near Japan. It made him wonder about where precisely Terry Wilcox's skeletal remains had become trapped, but he quickly rushed from that path of thought, knowing he could not go down that road again if he wished to remain sane.

As a balm, his thoughts moved to the thoroughfares inside the Titanic where he would be diving in the near future. From all he had ever read of the ship, it was spacious—outlandishly so, at least before it sank. Now to be sure, ceilings in particular would be crushing and walls and bulkheads tight indeed, but he imagined it would be more spacious than a WWII vintage sub.

Ingles and the other divers had been working with the Navy for a year after their initial recruitment, but oddly enough, they had been trained at different locations and had not worked as a team. It was part of the overall strategy, according to Swigart; from his understanding the 'bosses' wanted it that way, believing that too much familiarity among team members in such a high-risk, high-stress situation guaranteed slip ups, that a dive team too closely aligned by fidelity, friendship, and loyalty were less likely to follow protocol in a negative event—the latest euphemism for foul up. In essence, that was what had happened to Ingles' buddy in Japan. Perhaps it would not have happened had absolute protocol been followed, but then again who knew for sure? Certainly not the commission put together to study the mishap, whose thousand-page report made for sleep-inducing prose suited only for the toilet. They hadn't overlooked admonishing Ingles for failing to follow protocol when things went south, yet the commission praised him for saving the others, all but Terry Wilcox.

David stared into the small mirror on his compartment locker and told himself, "You can do this." He had worked hard on getting this right, diligently and long, to the exclusion of

everything else in his life. Lou Swigart had made himself clear. “A good dive team is a tool, Ingles—another arm for the scientists to utilize. No one under my command is going to be some hot dog. First sign of such shit, and you’re on a chopper outta here.”

Reacting to a loud kick at his door, David snatched it open to find his roommate, hands filled with his duffel and a couple of huge biscuits piled with jam and butter balanced on a paper plate. “Need a hand—Bowman, isn’t it?”

“Got it...got it...OK maybe if you took the plate...thanks.”

“So you guys drew straws and ‘the black guy’ got to share a room with me, eh?” David joked.

“You know how it goes; black dude always gets the shaft,” Bowman immediately shot back, laughing good-naturedly as he worked himself and his bag into the cramped quarters. “I see you’ve staked out your claim.”

David placed Bowman’s biscuits onto his small desk. “First come, all that.”

“Help yourself to a biscuit,” offered Bowman who then extended a hand to shake, adding, “Name’s Will...Will Bowman.”

“Yeah, I’ve studied your bio. Wanted to know who I’m working with.”

“Need to know who’s got your back—agreed.” He lifted the paper plate with biscuits precariously balanced toward David, again offering him a bite.

“No thanks—not hungry. Too nervous to eat in fact.”

“I know...exciting times.” Bowman looked pleased that David hadn’t taken half his food, and he quickly began to devour what was on the flimsy plate, and was soon licking his fingers of butter and unpacking when he heard a strange noise, followed by a woman’s voice cursing outside their door, sending David investigating. He swung open the inward hinged hatchway to find Dr. Kelly Irvin stooped over and picking up a spilled fanny pack she’d dropped; she’d spilled all manner of feminine items, and among the debris two pill bottles.

David went to his knees to help her pick up her runaway items.

“Hello, Dr. Ingles,” she said from her kneeling position, hardly able to turn and twist in the narrow passageway. “I heard there was breakfast in the galley,” she continued as she replaced everything in her pack.

“Breakfast? Sounds good. You are?”

Her eyebrows went up at this. “On your dive squad, but I suspect you know that.” She extended her hand to shake. “Dr. Kelly Irvin.”

Rather than take her hand to shake, he balled up his right fist, and she reciprocated, and they bumped knuckles instead. “Oh yes, read your file.”

“I should hope so. Join me for ham and eggs?”

“I’ve just begun unpacking,” he lied, noticing that Bowman smirked at this, “but I am hungry...so what the hell, sure.”

Bowman closed the door on the couple with a little shake of the head. With the door closed, they could not make out his final remark but the laughter was clear.

They stood and exchanged an awkward moment until she said, “Thought we oughta get to know one another to some degree. This notion we should have absolutely no concern for one

another—to act like, I dunno, cyborgs on the job—I just don't fully agree with. Do you?"

"Have you told that to Lou?"

"Course not, but you're dodging the question."

A pair of crewmen squeezed past them, which gave David time to consider this question in more depth. Alone again, he replied, "It's probably a good policy—to be honest."

"I suppose so." Still she frowned, started to add a word, hesitated, and put hand to mouth as if to stop herself.

"Up to a point, you mean?" he said and laughed. "They haven't been able to completely brainwash the idea into your head, eh?" He opened his cabin door and gestured for her to lead the way.

She moved along the tight corridor and spoke over her shoulder. "Well, you of all people, Dr. Ingles, you can't completely agree with the notion, can you? That to be efficient in our jobs, we have to give up being human?"

"Well it is 2012, you know, and any ahhh...human foul up could bring on the the earth falling off its axis and a collapse of the entire world according to Vice President Reardon and Wall Street insiders. I mean now that we're no longer as ready to believe ancient Mayan beliefs and that fellow Nostradamus."

This got a laugh out of her that reverberated up and down the corridor, and he reacted with a smile. "There...there it is, a human moment between us. Frankly, I don't think even Lou Swigart can enforce what they're talking about to begin with, but that's just me."

She nodded. "There is that little thing called trust; kinda necessary and absolutely human."

“So how do you like ‘sucking it?’” he asked, using the crude Navy term for the new use of L-C02. XX

“Liquid O? XX It’s miraculous once you get there, but getting there is hell—no matter how many times I do it, I’m sure it’s my last breath. How ’bout you?”

“It sucks—literally! But miraculous, it is. Makes me feel like Aquaman!” It was not entirely a lie. But each time he used the XX square-pak of L-C02 XX which had replaced heavy oxygen, he thought of Wilcox and how this new technology—had they had it in Japan—would have saved Wilcox’s life to be sure. He’d be alive today only if. Instead, Terry suffocated in his suit as his air ran out, and David had been unable to get to him in time on the return down after getting Peterson and DeVries out and up. Although David had risked his own life doing a second dive too soon, leaving him with the bends, it simply had not been enough. Time itself killed Terry.

Nowadays, with L-C02, XX the bends were no longer a worry during a dive. No matter how fast one descended or ascended. The new lightweight tanks and what they carried did indeed return a man to his origins once the ‘death grip’ was reached and suppressed and gotten past. With ‘liquid air’ as it was called, your mask filled with liquid that covered mouth, nose, eyes, and ears. You were literally ‘drowned’ inside your Cryo-suit, your every pore and orifice in the “pour” house, taking in the liquid oxygen.

Many a rat and monkey had been killed in an effort to get the formula right. Once perfected, years of tests went into it, and now, for a man or a woman, you knew you would come out on the other side with your eyes opening, your heart beating, your brain functioning, and your skin crawling but alive, and soon your eyes cleared, brain fog gone, heart rate finding its rhythm. And that horrible feeling that you were being turned inside out like some sort of

garment, finally dissipated, replaced by a sense of power that reflected the simple notion of normalcy in one's bodily functions. The huge surprise too was the freedom—absolute freedom in the salt water.

But it had to be harnessed and controlled. Thus the 4-hour LC02 XX square pak had been developed with the backing of the US Navy, and now it was being tested by private industry and expeditions such as the Titanic 2012 Expedition.

If David expected an intimate moment at breakfast with the lovely Dr. Irvin, he was immediately disappointed when she opened the galley entryway. There they found some dozen or so members of the crew, a few other divers, a number of the scientists, and a cook, a ship's dog that looked a mix of lab and shepherd, and a galley boy who looked from his day's old beard to be perhaps eighteen. Rather than doing introductions at this time, everyone just cheered in a group welcoming of the two newcomers.

That is, all but one fellow had cheered.

At the far end of the tight galley room, a sullen fellow kept his own counsel, eyes on his food, fork pushing scrambled eggs around on his plate. A big man with huge hands, this fellow had looked up at David and Kelly for the briefest moment, averting his eyes, which to David appeared silver grey with the intensity of lightning. He recalled Jacob Mendenhall from the earlier meeting, another member of the dive squad.

While he seemed cold, Mendenhall might simply be taking to heart the planned protocol to have as little contact as possible with fellow members of the dive assigned to. It would explain his seeming rudeness. David noticed that Kelly also seemed disturbed by the silver-eyed fellow

the other end of the table.

“Sit, eat!” said the cook like a captain giving orders.

“Sit where?” asked Kelly, shrugging when two of men in the room rushed to their feet, saying they’d finished, and rushed off topside with their dishes still half full.

David and Kelly sat side by side in the noisy atmosphere unconsciously pulling in their shoulders to make room for themselves. They were soon eating and listening to the talk. Someone had brought up how few funds went into ocean exploration and the safety of aquanauts as opposed to space and astronauts. David quickly agreed, punctuating with his fork to say, “Take the mid-ocean ridge, a 40,000 mile long seam that goes around the globe like a baseball seam—biggest geological feature on earth—the oceans—and it’s ignored while people need to be made aware of it—just how big it is and how little exploration’s been done.”

“Exactly what I’ve been saying for years. People don’t know for instance there’re more volcanoes under the sea than on land—active volcanoes.” This fellow introduced himself as Steve Jens—one of the other aquanauts.

“It’s sad how little we know about the ocean,” agreed Will Bowman, a black diver who was paired with David for the upcoming dive to and through Titanic.

Kelly piped in, adding, “I’ve read where the volume of water our oceans are made up of has, over the last eight million years, seeped down into the Earth’s crust and returned through hydrothermal vents—and that, gentlemen, is a lot of water.”

“Yeah, and what about all those new life forms Robert Ballard discovered at the East Pacific Rise—life forms that exist on sulfides instead of sunshine and chlorophyll?” asked Bowman. “All that life needs to be studied.”

“That kind of life form...damn alien to us,” added Steve Jens, his baritone voice filling the room. “Could, you know...could be out there in space on another planet for all we know.”

“Who knows,” said David, smiling. “Maybe our little mission to Titanic will revive interest in oceanic exploration—get up some funds and fans.”

“Fans? You mean groupies? I hope you’re not in this for glory, Ingles,” said Will Bowman, eyeing his dive partner and leaving more unsaid than said.

“Fans of oceanography, Will; that’s all I meant.”

“Eat, eat!” shouted the head cook, a fellow everyone called Cookie. Then before Kelly knew it, the men were talking about first the Air Coast Guard that plied the North Atlantic to safeguard ships from icebergs since Titanic’s demise. But soon their talk turned to guns that might or might not be found on Titanic, and what sort of weapon would Will Murdoch have used to mercy kill a passenger and then shoot himself in the head?

“In 1912 semi-automatics were rare as hell,” David replied to someone who suggested such a thing. “The Browning Colt 1911 .45 automatic was only manufactured the year before—1911.”

Mendenhall added, “Ingles is right. I mean, a handful of the original prototypes were available in 1910, but not to the public—and surely not available to the Titanic crew.”

“No, the British would’ve been using a Webley MKIV break top revolver in .455 Webley caliber,” added David and displaying with his fingers in pinch-fashion the size of the bullet, he added, “Big chunk of lead throwing 6 shooter—that mother.”

A crewman named Ford got into the fray, saying, “They would have had a lot of weapons being transported from one side of the pond to the other in her cargo holds—no telling what prizes are still down there.”

“Packed alongside ammo and caps, no doubt—I mean for the breach loaders like the Sharps rifles.”

“According to the cargo manifest no, but sometimes in those days they had a code for weaponry onboard,” put in Alandale. “Calling it crates of wine instead, and according to the manifest, there was a boatload of crated up wine going to New York.”

Kelly had too much on her mind to listen to this. She wanted another cup of coffee though and Cookie had promised more eggs, so she suffered through.

FOUR

The Harland & Wolff Shipyards, Belfast, April 3, 1912

Veteran shipyard watchman, Anton Fiore had, seconds before, seen what appeared to be a drunken sod in miner’s apparel mucking about below. Anton had just stepped out of his small office atop a scaffolding some twenty-five feet from the ground, not even close to Titanic’s second level. Anton had stepped outside in hopes of having a quiet smoke on his pipe and a

gander at the stars overhead. As always, he looked forward to a slow night that would go by with painful boredom with little more to do than play chess with himself.

Anton once had a second man on duty but those in charge had unreasonably deemed a second man suddenly to be an unnecessary extravagance. The poor fellow, George Pines was unceremoniously let go—fired. So now Anton played the game alone until his replacement at daybreak should relieve him. Pines had been an awful opponent anyway...still the place was lonely without him.

Now Anton's star gazing was interrupted by the sight of the stumbling miner or derelict far below. The man was extremely near the new ship the builders were talking up as an 'unsinkable' ocean liner, its hull made of the finest ore to be double-plated, its compartments built so as to cut off any flooding from one another. The thing was mammoth—gargantuan in fact to the point it could not be exaggerated. To be sure beyond anything Anton Fiore had ever seen in the shipyards; in fact, it had humbled him on the one hand and made him proud of mankind at the same time.

He hoped the figure he'd seen at the base of the ship stumbling about was just a derelict, but suppose he was one of those madmen with an incendiary device—an anarchist who lived to terrorize god-fearing people, a fellow who lived to disrupt normal society and progress. What a headline it would make to blow up Titanic before she even got out of dry dock.

Anton rushed to catch up to the man and to apprehend him if need be. He had a club, and he knew how to use it. They did not give him a firearm. After all, he was no Pinkerton agent. He had read something in the papers about the shipyard hiring private security in the form of Pinkertons; their reputation had spread far and wide since the days of their having broken up so

many strikes across the globe, and since having been the model for the US Secret Service since Lincoln's presidency. Every Irishman afoot was proud that Alan Pinkerton was one Irishman who'd made something of himself and his now famous two sons as well. They'd made something of a dynasty of their agency with the motto: We Never Sleep. All due to an Irish trait—an innate sense of intuition and tracking.

As he worked his way down from his perch, athletically scaling down the stairs like a circus performer, the strong, bear-sized Anton did his level best to keep the intruder in his sights. So he saw when the fellow entered Titanic at her still gaping hatch where cargo would one day be taken aboard at someplace like Southampton, England—so far the only port mentioned around Anton.

Thus far, the retractable gangplank-like gigantic door to this hold had not been attached, riveted, and sealed. Anton wondered how they hoped to have it ready for her scheduled launch. However, he hadn't time to do any ciphering. Instead, he rushed for the black passageway. The passageway was so large that Anton imagined the wagons in Southampton loaded with supplies able to pass side by side twice over.

He wondered why this figure had chosen to duck into the ship. If not up to some mischief, then what purpose had he? Who was he? Appeared a local for sure, and some of the lads here, once liquored up, were capable of some madness. A sure thing that.

Titanic's monstrous size created a black, sleeping giant of a backdrop for Anton here in the dimly lit shipyard that had given birth to her. An eerie fog that seemed like so many ghosts at play added to the creepiness of this night. Anton was used to the fog but hardly the gigantic ship or strange men stumbling in from nowhere. He had lived in France, Canada, and now Belfast—

all shipbuilding countries. After he'd given up the physically draining work of a ship's mason to take on the job of watchman here at the yards, he'd become bored but it got him home most nights in safe and sound fashion.

The wife was far happier as he spent less time drinking and in taverns only to wind up in fights and eventually jails. Being chief night man at the yards was a safe life to be sure. As safe and as boring as what he imagined milking cows would be. Before taking on this job, he'd taken great pride in his work. Although forty-two now, he'd been only a boy of thirteen when he took his first job in a shipyard, carrying a rivet bucket as an apprentice. He'd heard Harland and Wolff used the best ship builders in the business, and so he migrated to Belfast years before, but when an accident left him with a perpetual limp, and the limp had taken its inevitable toll, he had to step away from the hard work and heavy lifting; still he had not stepped off too far—accepting the watchman's post. A post he took seriously, and so he entered Titanic in pursuit of the intruder.

Working relations between the men and the company hadn't been exactly harmonious lately, so Anton's first guess was that the derelict was in fact a distraught, possibly drunken worker who had decided to act on some of the threats that had been circulating. Anton had warned that the men were restless and angry at not being paid a higher wage, and that perhaps putting on more guards rather than fewer would be a good idea—but it appeared to have fallen on deaf ears. Rumors ran about that the Orangemen working at the yards didn't care to do their best work for the British Star Line or any British company for that matter, and they didn't care for Harland and Wolff contracting with the Star Line. Some even joked that the rivets would pop on her maiden voyage as a result of shoddy work. Anton had heard on more than one occasion a riveter say something to the effect, "Rivets is rivets till you punch 'em in cold like a washer

woman.” Anton didn’t believe the talk anything other than talk, yet he knew there was a core group capable of the worst kind of thinking—and that they just might convert thought to sabotage.

These musings raced through Anton’s mind as he searched the interior with his John-lantern. He meant to order the man out of the hull and out of the yards, else he’d knock him silly with his club.

From the moment he’d stepped into the belly of Titanic, Anton had noted the sharp, crisp odor of freshly fired and painted iron walls and bulkheads; the odor filled his lungs the deeper he went. The absolute darkness made him think of the biblical story of being in the belly of the beast. In a sense, that was precisely where he stood now...in the belly of a gargantuan metal monster.

“Announce yourself, man!” came a sudden voice behind Anton. “Who is it? What’re you doing here?” The stentorian voice out of the darkness was followed by a second watchman’s lantern now blinding and surprising Anton, who held up an arm to cast off the brightness and study the stranger. No one Anton knew; certainly not the scraggly fellow he’d come looking for.

“Who am I? Who the devil’re you?” Anton immediately fired back.

“White Star Line guard, Pinkerton Agency.”

“What? You? Pinkerton Agency? But...” stammered Anton, taken aback. He’d heard that the Star Line had threatened to put on professional guards with guns to look after the expensive interiors already in place on Titanic, but he had not seen these men come on. Nor had the day

watchman said a word about it. The Pinky's, as some called the hired coppers, were supposed to protect the chandeliers, the teakwood balustrades, all of it, down to the gym equipment on board.

"I'm Fiore, the shipyard watchman," Anton informed the other man. "Saw a man entering here. Was it you?"

"No...not me."

"I thought not from outward appearances."

"Just precisely what did this fellow look like?"

"What'd he look like?" Anton stalled, trying to regain his composure.

"Yes? Details. We must know any facts you have."

"A shabby little fellow, perhaps in miner's clothing; else a street derelict—looked to be intoxicated."

"Good man, Fiore." The agent pronounced it wrong as Fioree rather than Fior, but Anton didn't bother correcting the other man who added, "Can't be too careful. I'll help you search for this man."

Together they went deeper into the ship, a winding labyrinth of metal without any niceties at this level. Their lights hit on storage areas, freezer compartments, boiler rooms but still no intruder. "Where the deuce might he've gotten off to?"

"It's a big ship," replied the Pinkerton agent with a laugh. "Names Harry Tuttle," he offered, "late of Shrewsbury."

They shook and continued on, deeper into the dark ship, and still they were coming up empty handed. “It may have to wait until morning,” began Anton, shrugging, “but I have no idea what the man’s intentions are—and what with all the rumors....”

“Yes, we’re aware of them all; it’s why we were hired. Better safe than sorry and all that.” Tuttle rummaged about in the darkness, occasionally lifting his lantern in different directions, creating crazy shadows of them both against one wall, then another when he suddenly raised an alarm: “Found something amiss here!”

Anton turned to find Tuttle lifting a light over the body of Francis O’Toole, and knowing the old miner from the nearby tavern, he gasped.

“You know him?”

“Y-Yes, I do...and he’s got no reason whatever to be here, and look at ’im—dried to the appearance of a corpse escaped its coffin, he does! When-when minutes ago...he was stumblin’ drunk! Spiralin’ on two feet—he was.”

But Anton Fiore only saw the corpse for a second before he felt Tuttle suddenly too close, and then came the painful thunder of Tuttle’s club knocking him senseless. Anton did not hear the faint laughter of the Pinkerton agent, nor see the glint in his eye like that of a man who’d achieved a great victory over his prey.

“I’ll just save you for later, Mr. Fiore—perhaps a crumpet at sea,” said the agent although the man had no clue as to why he said it or what it might portend; or for that matter, why he’d attacked Fiore, or why he was now stowing the watchman’s unconscious body into a foot-locker where he’d surely suffocate once locked in—but lock him in is what Harry Tuttle felt he must do

and do now, as if his very existence depended upon it. “But why?” he asked aloud of the dark interior. Somewhere deep within his brain, he heard whispered, melodic word—“*Sus-ten-ance.*” And then came the single word in equally sing-song fashion in his head—
“Spawn...*spawn...spawn.*”

All quite strange to Tuttle who’d had an altercation with the dazed and vague miner calling himself O’Toole. Tuttle was not used to either of these two words being plucked from the vaults of his mind—and to make a mantra of them? It made no more sense to him than having hidden O’Toole’s body or contemplating murder, yet he knew he would kill Fiore, and that he had no choice in the matter as his limbs somehow worked independent of his mind, and his limbs were powerful. It was as though his body would not cooperate with the signals being sent. This helplessness made him over, a different man. Staring at a reflected image in the glass of a portal, Tuttle didn’t recognize his own face nor could he recall his own name. The man in the mirror, a stranger to him, made Tuttle rethink all of existence and reality.

FIVE

Aboard Scorpio, April 12, 2012

The clash of silverware against pewter plates, the chatter and noise from those dining, coupled with the excitement and bustle of the galley workers aboard Scorpio as it sailed toward Titanic and the past, all of it proved no match for the hoopla being broadcast on CNN. The TV screen squatted in an overhead corner. Dr. Juris Forbes, head of the scientific expedition and Scorpio’s current captain stood alongside Luther W. Kane himself before a bank of network microphones at a podium set up on the Woods Hole docks now far behind them—a mere dark line in the

distance. The earlier news conference was already a CNN loop, and said hoopla was all to the annoyance of the more seasoned seamen aboard.

Ingles recalled having gauged the level of chagrin on the faces of tough crewmen; he'd seen their astounded grimaces as they walked into the galley only to see the CNN broadcast. David shared the thought with Kelly, saying in her ear, "You'd think with Luther Kane's billions, they wouldn't have need of a show."

Kelly shrugged and replied, "Expeditions like ours cost a fortune, and Kane didn't get rich being a fool. He's paying for it with donations."

"Donations, really?"

"Taking in donations, yes."

"I had no idea. I meant this ship alone..."

"How best to be a part of history without—you know—risking life and limb?" she replied. "Without, you know...even being aboard Scorpio yet being 'on board' with the most important undertaking of our time? The true exploration of Titanic—from the inside out."

"So tell me what do you really think of Dr. Alandale?" asked David, leaning in to hear her response, already knowing the answer but hoping to keep her talking.

Alandale had sauntered in moments before, asking the cook for a cup of coffee. The old professor gave an exaggerated stare at the TV screen, then he gave them a wane half smile and said, "For a moment there, I feared Kane might board and declare himself captain of Scorpio"

"God forbid," muttered Cookie.

“Feed his ego to take over entirely,” finished Alandale.

Just then Dr. Juris Forbes stepped in, looking weary. “Thank Neptune, we’ve set sail.” His first words to Cookie were, “Damn it, turn that TV off.”

After Forbes settled in beside Alandale with coffee in hand, David asked, “Sir, do we call you Captain or Dr. Forbes for the duration?” David met Forbes’ eye.

“Either or will do, son, but I rather fancy Captain.”

“Makes him feel a bit rakish, doesn’t it, Juris?” said Alandale, poking Forbes. “You of all people know how hard I worked to get control of Scorpio,” Forbes countered, his tone serious. “As to our benefactor, Mr. Kane, he’ll get his part done.”

Cookie rushed over to douse his captain’s coffee with rum from a flask.

Alandale held his cup up for a dram as well, and off-handedly said, “Juris, you need no titles; you’ll do just fine, so long as Kane stays out of your way...Captain!”

“Kane does have a sterling reputation for getting in the bloody way, doesn’t he?” Forbes breathed in the aroma of his coffee with deep satisfaction. “Rather glad I got that off my chest.”

The two old friends broke into laughter. As they did so, Kelly whispered in David’s ear. “You know I once worked with our captain some time back.”

“Oh, really?” asked David of her, his eyes widening.

“It was many years ago, and I was an apprentice. Mostly amounted to moving files, boxes, chairs, and coffee cups around.”

“Kelly!” Forbes called to her, lifting his cup in salute. “So good to see you made the team, Doctor Irvin.” Alandale, gave Forbes a good-natured shove as if it’d been his idea for the captain to say something to Kelly.

Kelly returned the salute. “Didn’t think you’d be seeing me again so soon, I’m sure.”

“I always knew if you applied yourself, Kelly, you’d be a true star. Swigart tells me he has every confidence in you and your team mates.”

“Mr. Swigart’s being generous!” she replied as Forbes shut down again, his mind on other things.

Kelly turned to David and privately shared, “He’s the one who recommended me to Lou. Rather suspect he’s the reason I’m aboard.” She stabbed at what passed for scrambled eggs on her plate. Galley cuisine was not known for being anything other than functional—something to fill the hollow spaces. It proved the reason most seamen and scientists of the sea were rail thin.

“Looks like Forbes is turning into a barker for Kane,” quipped Alandale, jostling his long-time friend again and pointing to the now dark screen overhead. “Turn it back on, Cookie. We have a right to know what the rest of the world thinks of our little expedition, don’t we?”

“This isn’t a democracy,” replied Forbes who, having downed his coffee, got up and abruptly left, turning at the door to add, “It was just another of his damn news conferences; Kane’s people put it together. Not of my doing.”

“You’re no Robert Ballard!” Alandale’s last taunt followed Forbes out the door.

“The news, Cookie,” said Mendenhall, still at the far end, also apparently interested in what was being said about the expedition.

“Science needs funding,” said Alandale as the news came back up. “This unfortunately, means you put up with the densest—well, deepest crap known to mankind.”

“Comes with the territory,” agreed Kelly.

“Always somebody else holding the purse strings.”

“Name of the game.”

“Par for the course.” He gave her a broad smile.

“Think we’ve exhausted the clichés,” she finished, and they quieted to hear more about the great adventure they were on from the news cast; on camera, Forbes looked uncomfortable with Kane’s arm around his neck. As head of the expedition, Forbes had more to do than anyone aboard, and it was obvious that he wanted to have it and launch Scorpio IV to end the media circus. That had been two hours ago now, and the news loop had repeated itself on CNN twice since David and Kelly had stepped into the galley.

“Look at our fearless financial backer,” Alandale said, poking fun at Kane. “Pretending he’s fraternity pals with Juris.” He laughed lightly, as if to say it was below contempt. “Such a charade—the whole of it.”

“What do you mean, sir?” asked David. Ingles could not help but hear the note of disgust in Alandale’s last remarks.

“Why it’s a sham, his involvement. He makes phone calls. Threatens people...has a file on everyone. Squeezes them like some reincarnation of J. Edgar Hoover.”

This drew a laugh from everyone in the room. Alandale added, “Here he is acting as if without him, there is no hope or chance of success. He’s like that Trump fellow and Hitler rolled into one.”

“Juris looks so out of his element and uncomfortable, too,” said Kelly, eyes on the tube. “Don’t you think?”

“If I’m any judge of body language, yes,” said David, and to smooth things over, he off-handedly agreed. “Looks like the captain’d rather swallow bilge water than answer another question.”

Mendenhall, who’d been silently listening, muttered, “That’s for sure.”

But another question came from the suave-looking young CNN reporter on TV who said, “This one’s for the scientist, Captain Forbes and not Kane, the financier and PR guru.”

“Fire away!” challenged Kane while Forbes had stood stone-faced.

The reporter asked: “Is it true, sir, that the submersible you intend using to dive to Titanic will be filled with XX liquid oxygen, and that the men inside will essentially be under water within the hull, breathing like fish?”

“When descending and ascending, yes, of course,” replied a stern-faced Forbes who looked like everyone’s idea of a white-bearded college professor, and who had a startling resemblance, likely cultivated, to Captain Edward J. Smith who, according to history, had gone down with Titanic. “It is the only way to prepare the men for the dive from the submersible to the Titanic—my God, man! It’s two and a half miles below the surface. So...so one error means certain death. There’s absolutely no room for problems arising from pressure to the lungs or for panic.”

“Losing his temper,” commented Alandale who then sipped at his coffee.

At the same time, on the TV, another reporter fired off with, “And so pilot and crew are literally submerged within the submersible?”

“I just said that. Didn’t I make myself clear? Yes; it cuts down on any fear of implosion, and there’s no difficulty leaving the submersible for the shipwreck.”

“Sounds like science fiction!” shouted a third reporter. “Man on Mars stuff, you know? I mean men roaming the very depths of Titanic’s interiors?”

“Its time has come!” shouted Kane now. “And I fear time has come for Dr. Forbes to return to his command; I am sure he is anxious to make all the final preparations and necessary checks of our multi-billion dollar equipment aboard Scorpio—including the sub.”

David could tell that Forbes needed no second telling, bolting as he did from the microphones with a quick wave of the hand. Kane raised both hands and basked in the adoration and said, “I’m prepared to take a few more questions.”

Now grumbling and at end of his own patience with the news report, the fed up galley cook switched the TV off. David noticed a subtle, silent signal between Alandale and Cookie—otherwise known as Frank O’Bannion, who shouted to any and all, “Eat! You’ll need all your strength where you’re goin’.”

Kelly held up her fork and let what remained of the eggs cascade back to her pewter plate just as Cookie lobbed another ladle full before her.

David stifled a laugh to see her eyes roll back in her head, and he was quick to cover his plate with his hand to say in no uncertain terms that he’d had enough.

SIX

As Juris Forbes made his getaway from the galley, he ran into Louis Swigart, his man in charge of the dive team. “Are they all aboard, Lou?” he asked.

“To a man, yes. Went ahead with our first debriefing.”

“Good...good. And it certainly feels good to be underway.”

“Decided you’d rather we got started; figured no sense waiting, and no telling how long Kane was going to be flapping. Just glad to be underway, Juris—Captain.”

“What a circus. I had hoped to hell to be outta port before he could show up, but no such luck. Then I was just praying to get out to sea as quickly as possible before that fool decided he wanted to ride along ‘for the jollies’ as he’s so fond of saying.”

“Sick to death of the man, so you needn’t tip-toe round me but there’s sure to be a mole among the crew or somewhere aboard. Are you sure of the women, Gambio and Dr. Irvin?”

“Yes, sure. Hell, they’ve done better in all the trials and training than the men, Captain.”

“Ah, then it’s true...women do better breathing XX than do men.”

“Proven fact, yes. No one’s figured out why but yeah, it’s true.”

“Kelly’s certainly blossomed. Going from my file clerk to Oceanographer and diver in matter of a handful of years.”

Lou changed the subject, going back to Kane. “The thought of Kane aboard makes me shudder. With you on that, Captain. Hope he doesn’t fly out on that chopper anytime soon.”

Forbes liked being called Captain on such expeditions; it was his one vanity. But his forte was Oceanography and finding things under the waves. He’d worked as a young man with the famous Bob Ballard, and he had worked with Lou Swigart on several missions. He trusted Swigart above all; knew what to expect of the man. No surprises and none of the sarcasm Alandale heaped on him. No, Lou was a serious fellow, and Lou was resolutely predictable. Not everyone was. Forbes knew Swigart to be that rare individual who not only could command the respect of his men, but control his team as well. His vast knowledge of this new deep-water dive technology and state-of-the-art submersibles, paired with his deep-water experience made him uniquely qualified to take men and women into places where no one had gone before.

Swigart would be captain on the submersible; he’d be in charge down there at the dive site—at Titanic as she sat on the mid-Atlantic ridge, where she had been now for over a hundred years, since April 14th—1912 to 2012. Kane’s News Releases and headlines were reading **100th Anniversary of Titanic Disaster**. What better time than now to plunder her remaining treasures; to uncover her final secrets?

NBC’s *Dateline* had already done a special on it, and they meant to do another, and so NBC cameramen, crew, and a reporter named Craig Powers were also venturing out with the mission—a necessary evil, as Kane had put it—to keep the incoming cash flowing.

Swigart handed Forbes a stack of reports on each diver. “Each diver’s well known for their ability in the water and experience with XX liquid oxygen, sir. Each has been thoroughly tested on all the equipment in multiple simulations.”

“But not at two and a half miles below.”

“Well...no but the science says, given the circumstances, it’s the same at two miles as it is two hundred feet. The LO2 XX effect’s the same. It’s why—”

“—why whales don’t explode at such depths, spare me.” Forbes had heard the exploding whale joke a hundred times.

“Yes, sir.”

“Thanks, Lou.”

“Captain, you ought get some shut-eye.”

“Me? Hell you were up all night.”

“Same as you.”

“Both of us pacing.”

“Like a couple of expectant fathers, eh?” They laughed in unison at this.

“Worried how things might so easily go bad for us at the launch,” said Forbes.

“Maybe we both oughta turn in for some R&R.”

“Perhaps I can sleep now...now that we’re underway.” Forbes slapped Lou on the back.

Lou smirked. “You left strict orders to get us out of port the moment you stepped back on board. Just followin’ orders.”

“Can’t tell you how good it feels, Lou, to have that kind of loyalty from the bridge and pit crew.”

“Some kinda show Kane gave ’em back at Woods Hole.”

“You saw that, did you?” Forbes laughed.

“Caught a glimpse of it from the bridge, yes, and later on my Mac.”

Forbes grimaced and nodded, studying Swigart’s rugged Arkansas drawl closely enough to follow what he was saying. Unlike Forbes’ professorial appearance, Swigart looked and dressed Navy issue—in fact, he was the sort of navy man who wore a cap to his brow, one with the insignia of his ship that read: USS Nimitz. It was where he’d done most of his time.

The ex-naval officer’s skin shone brown from years in the sun, but it was peppered with freckles, and his thinning red-to-brown hair and Irish grin or grimace as needed, marked him as a seaman. He sported a pair of big Irish ham-hocks for hands, and the muscled arms were wider round than Forbes’ calves. Most important of all, Lou believed in discipline and knew how to enforce it evenly and at all times.

Forbes held the files up and away as if to signal something, and then he asked, “Lou, how is it all going to come off, really?”

“What ya mean?”

“Any doubts? How is this thing shaping up? Do you have any doubts at all—hand to fire.”

Swigart looked uncomfortable with the question, almost squirming. “No doubts, sir.”

“When you have your team down there at those depths, Lou, and inside the walls of the wreck, tell me—tell me that everything will be as controlled as we can humanly make it.”

“I have every confidence in my divers, Captain.”

“Even though you wanted current naval officers, Lou?”

“Even so, yes.”

“Thanks to Warren Kane’s getting us the largest contributors we’ve ever imagined, we have an expedition. Hell, Lou, we’re talking billions here.”

“Yeah, I give ’im that.”

“And he was the one who insisted on no Naval involvement other than use of naval technology and you, Lou! He put me onto you. Had his research team scour for the best man for the job.”

“He also lost us a significant grant from the government funneled through the Navy.”

Forbes pulled at his beard. “I need to trim this damn thing,” he thoughtlessly added. “But you know, Lou, there is one thing we must absolutely have in our dive team.”

“What’s that, sir, loyalty to us and not the US Navy?”

“Loyalty goes without saying, Lou, but what we truly need is every confidence. Confidence in our people. And confidence in their aptitude and skill. Barring any unforeseen accidents inside the hull of Titanic...a bulkhead giving way, for instance, we truly are only as good as our weakest link; only as good as our people. Right?”

“Yes, sir! Barring an opportunity to train for another six months to a year, yeah, we’re as ready as can be! We’ve the people with the ‘right stuff’, Juris.”

Forbes took a deep breath of sea air and stepped to the rail to feel the ocean spray against his skin. “I’m feeling home at last, Lou.”

Swigart had already sensed this when joining him at the railing. Both men stared off into the horizon for the distant prize out there.

“You know, Lou, I came to this place in rather a roundabout manner.”

“From the galley, I know...to stay out of sight of another reporter—to make your way up to the bridge and the control room.”

Juris Forbes laughed. “No, Lou—I meant to this place in my life; it has been a dream for so long, you know...so very desperately, damnably long.”

“Oh...I thought you meant...” Lou laughed now at his misunderstanding. “Still, Juris, best place to be aboard Scorpio is up there in her central nervous system—the control room—or what you dyed-in-the-wool Navy guys call the ‘tank pit’.”

Forbes turned and leaned his back to the brass railing; he took in the entire ship at a glance, from bow to stern and the up to the bridge. “She is an electronic marvel.”

“She’s certainly that.”

“So I’m gonna keep heading that-a-way.” Forbes pointed up a ladder leading to the control room and bridge. “Thanks for everything, Lou.”

“Think I’ll catch some winks, Captain. Suggest you do likewise, sir.”

They parted company, and Forbes thought about the media circus again; it'd taken Warren Luther Kane three years to amass the fortune required to "raise" the Titanic as some news stories put it, while others called it raping the Titanic. Kane was not so foolish as to risk an entire fortune alone; he had significant silent partners. The ship, the equipment, the specialized Action Info Center with its hologramatic navigational tools, the pressurized containers to be lowered for all the plunder and treasure, the millions spent creating SLOSSIE, their supersonic submersible, not to mention the lives of everyone aboard Scorpio and the away teams Lou was in charge of—the divers.

It was all a gigantic undertaking—one team to investigate the aft section, the other the bow section a mile away. Lou's chosen divers meant to go inside the shipwreck to retrieve the remaining intact treasures aboard. With the new technology, they could plunder the ship as quickly and efficiently as any pirate endeavor on the high seas of old—but in this case, no one was alive to put up the least resistance. Even Bob Ballard had been sickened and greatly disappointed by their plans. On learning of Scorpio's mission to Titanic, the old man was unable to put up a fight when even his beloved Woods Hole Institute fell in behind the project.

Ballard's threat to get an injunction against Forbes—his one-time student—and all the backers of Scorpio's mission never materialized. According to Kane, they all had Kane to thank for getting into a full-on PR battle with Ballard.

Still, as he made his way to the control room, Dr. Juris Forbes, Captain of Scorpio for the duration, wondered how history would portray their venture, and in particular how kind or unkind history would treat him personally. Then he wondered why it mattered; why it should matter to him.

Continuing his thoughts, Juris Forbes wondered if it would matter in the least to anyone, including himself, once he was a wealthy man thanks to his contractual share in the profits.

Still so much depended upon what precisely the expedition might or might not uncover; what they might ‘unearth’ from this watery tomb. Aside from all these considerations, there was the one prize in particular awaiting Forbes’ discovery, something beyond wealth and fame. A prize without measure. Of this much he was certain.

He scaled the ladder and entered the control room and bridge to a wave of cheers honoring his horrible TV performance. He ignored it, waving and moving on when the officer on duty stopped him with a salute. Strict naval protocol was the order among his immediate crew.

“Sir, the NBC guy, Craig Powers, is wanting an initial interview and some footage of you at the helm, sir. He’s just the other side of the bridge, waiting patiently, sir.”

“Not now, Walker.” Disregarding his officer with an upraised hand, knowing the last person he wished to deal with at the moment was this TV anchor star, Powers, Juris Forbes preferred the solemnity of the chart room at the moment to doing a spot for MSNBC and 20/20. He knew it was part of the deal that Warren Kane has struck with NBC, but it must wait. For now, Juris pushed on to the chart room where he brought up a holographic map that incorporated data from the ship’s sonar, ship’s radar, weather Doppler radar from the NOAA all merged into a single coherent representation of a civilian application of the US Navy’s CAIC—combat/action information center. This map of the North Atlantic floated before Forbes’ eyes, reflected in his contact lenses, and always gave him a sense of wonder. In three dimensions, revolving at his touch, it displayed the weather overhead, the sea state, the sea floor, the ship within its present convection and projected trajectory and course, the distance, when and where to stop in order to

be hovering directly above Titanic and much more. It was one of many incredible tools aboard Scorpio.

He then indulged himself in switching on the data he had gathered that called on the hologram to display a fourth dimension—the dimension of time. The CIC-styled hologram indeed indicated all the conditions of April 14, 1912 at exactly the time and place where Titanic had slipped below the surface. Here was a model of a reversal of time using recorded data projected forward thanks to all the outside sources, one being the NOAA which housed and stored the answers at the Central Repository of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Agency.

Forbes began to study. After a moment, he clicked on an overhanging intercom and said, “Captain to bridge, Mr. Walker...we appear right on course and right on history.” He paused to chuckle. “Appears all systems running smoothly. If you will so log it in, noting time.”

But his second-in-command, Stuart Walker was busy mugging for the NBC camera at the moment. He replied in exaggerated fashion, “Aye-aye, Captain Forbes, sir! I’ll make it so. Consider it done.” Walker stood at the wheel, posing for the cameraman and answering questions put to him in rapid-fire succession by none other than Craig Powers.

Forbes gritted his teeth on hearing some of this back-scatter noise; he wanted nothing to do with it for now, so he clicked off.

At the same instant, Juris Forbes did a double-take, thinking Walker or Pierce had entered the cramped chart room to await further orders, but when he turned, he didn’t find either of his trusted men. Instead, he found one of the divers, David Ingles, standing in shadow, his mouth agape at the incredible ‘historical’ hologram.

Ingles forthrightly saluted and introduced himself.

“Yes, yes. Thought we met in the galley, David.”

But David was staring at the fascinating, floating map before them in the blue-lit room, unable to take his gaze from it.

“Yes, well, I understand from your Captain Swigart that you’re one of our best divers, Ingles. I’ve your file right here.” Forbes held up the stack of files Swigart had earlier placed in his care. “Swigart assures me you’ll do a first-rate job for us.”

“That’s kind of him, sir.” Ingles continued studying the floating map.

“Like myself, Swigart has the highest expectations for the mission,” continued Forbes, a wave of fatigue washing over him. He shook the weariness off.

“I just wanted to say I’m proud to be a part of the expedition, sir.” Ingles had stepped in close, examining every detail of the hologram. “Like looking back in time, isn’t it, sir?”

“No...not looking, Ingles; it is like being back there that very night, down to the wind currents. I can hear them. Can’t you?”

Ingles felt a shiver run through his body. “Indeed sir.” David felt a strange emotion fill him and he realized it was one shared by Forbes, an emotion that could only be described as wonderment.

“I’m sorry about your difficulty in the Sea of Japan, the loss of your friend there, Ingles.”

“He was a good man.”

“It’s terribly sad to lose a good man; imagine all the good men who went down with Titanic.”

“Yes, sir. We—the dive team that is, we’re all terribly excited to see Titanic from the inside, sir—but wow, look at her here. X marks the spot, eh, Captain?” David pointed to the icon within the hologram that marked their destination above the surface, a half ship in the throes of splitting apart, readying to slide below the surface and a second lying obliterated at the bottom. “Amazing technology. I’ve always been fascinated by such gadgets, sir. Sorry if I’m babbling.”

Forbes stopped in his study of the charts long enough to look Ingles over. He saw a powerful young man with piercing steel-grey eyes. “Excellent you have such an interest.” On the one hand, Forbes would have liked to sit down with the diver and discuss their mutual fascination with Titanic, but on the other, he must be guarded.

Secretly, Forbes wondered why Ingles was here, snooping; he wondered if Ingles might be the spy, Warren Kane’s plant aboard Scorpio—his eyes and ears to report back to Kane as the expedition goes. He had no doubt someone aboard was being paid by Warren on the side to keep a close eye on their progress. Kane was all about power and control. Had he gotten to Ingles; everyone had his price, and Ingles here had had his last dive come apart at the seams.

“Forgive me, Mr. Ingles, but I have a great deal to do so that we can, as you sailors say, stay on course.”

Ingles half-smiled at this, realizing what the professor-turned-captain really meant was for him to ‘shove off’. He watched Captain Forbes turn back to the hologram.

“Sorry to’ve gotten in the way, sir; just wanted to say that if ever I’m needed, I spent six years as a navigator in the Navy myself, so in the event my services are needed.”

“Kind of you, David. I saw that in your record, and we’ll call on you should it become necessary, of course.”

“Yes, sir.” David lingered.

Forbes looked again at Ingles. “What is it, Mr. Ingles?”

“I read your remarks on why this expedition is so important, sir, and I totally agree with what you’ve said—the whole purpose being to bring up this buried, underwater museum to the surface and to place it on display for any and all to see. You know, what has been buried within her, untouched by human for a hundred years, and perhaps some additional clues to the long-standing mystery surrounding her demise, sir.”

“You naval chaps may be interested in her scars, what precisely brought Titanic to her knees, Mr. Ingles, what the death blow was; not me. My only concern is the operation dealing with her interior and the recovery of priceless treasures we can only imagine.”

Ingles nodded and smiled. “Treasures just waiting for us, and since we’re uniquely equipped to convey them to the surface without the slightest damage...treasures the size of statues and ‘motor cars’ of the day, who better to relieve that sad old ship of her burdens?”

“Indeed. She’s just waited so patiently for so long for you aquanauts—the new spacemen of the deep, David.”

“I’m just proud to be one of the team, sir.”

“Good, then you don’t hold with Dr. Robert Ballard’s sentimental ahh...diarrhea about the site being a fitting memorial to those who died aboard the ship the night of April 12th 1912?”

“Ballard’s sat idly by while foreign expeditions have gone to Titanic to prove one pet theory or another; suppose they’d had our technology and a war chest like Lucifer’s or Kane’s? Americans must do this first, not just to be the first for first sake but to ensure the treasures we do find will end up in the hands of the American people.”

“There’s far more inside Titanic than Ballard had the vision to realize, but again he didn’t have XX LO2 technology, now did he? Curious what he might’ve done had he the wherewithal we have today at his disposal in September 1985?”

“Would he have gone inside Titanic’s corridors and holds?” David shook his head and snorted at the thought. “I’m no expert on human nature, sir, but I trust you are. I know there’s good reason to salvage Titanic as you would any shipwreck before another country gets its hands on our technology and goes for it.”

“Even as we rape and pillage her, as the press says, we’ll do it with a great deal more reverence and respect than say the French?” He laughed and stormed off, saying he was needed on the bridge—his destination, leaving Ingles to study their course via the hologram that Forbes had returned to three dimensions and present headings.

Captain Juris Forbes had been careful to time his reentry into his state-of-the-art control room aboard Scorpio so as to not run into any cameras or Craig Powers. A green hue coming off the electronic screens colored the command room and bridge. Every gauge on every panel, every

gadget and gizmo must be checked and rechecked, which is what the bridge crew had been doing while he had been before the television cameras back at Woods Hole, three and a half hours ago now. Each officer in turn was asked to report, and one by one a positive ‘all systems go’ response came rolling off their tongues. “Music to my ears, gentlemen.”

“Any problems near shore, will be tenfold out on the high seas,” he felt compelled to caution his men, although he respected them and knew if the slightest blip showed up anywhere on their screens, they’d notify him at once. Wake him if necessary as Captain Edward Smith’s men had done the night Titanic struck that infamous iceberg, a thing impossible to do nowadays thanks to the Air National Coast Guard up to the minute reports on ice in the region even now as late as April—the same month as saw the Titanic go down due to ice.

Everyone aboard knew that it had been mechanical failures, human error, and weather that had turned back Forbes’ last expedition in the Grand Caymans in search of a priceless shipwreck stuffed with gold and silver. That had been four years ago; it had taken that many years to regain his reputation and gain his command aboard the Woods Hole owned Scorpio IV—a ship built on donations, largely from silent partners.

He needn’t literally take the helm, but Forbes liked the feel of her under his guiding hand, and so he would on occasion, like now, replace the man at the wheel—in this case Walker who’d stood in for him to fend off Powers. He thanked his officer and took the wheel. It relaxed him to hold the powerful wheel in hand. The ship’s gleaming, brass wheel may look like something out of the past, but it acted as an electronic sensor; the least touch or lack of touch and Scorpio could go off course and time would be lost. Juris imagined himself the sort of captain that Bly was in terms of his navigational abilities, that if necessary he could sail a lifeboat back to safe harbor

from anywhere on the ocean's surface. But he was hardly the whip-cracking, bullying sort. Still, he demanded discipline, for without strict discipline and protocols at sea, an entire crew could pay such a debt in blood.

“Mr. Walker!” he called out.

“Yes, sir!”

“It appears one of Captain Swigart's divers is in the map room; would you please be so kind as to escort him off the bridge,” Forbes calmly said, staring out at the sea, the power of Scorpio beneath his fingertips.

SEVEN

After having been escorted from the map room and off the bridge by First Officer Marks, David Ingles kicked about the deck for awhile before he returned to his room, chatted with Bowman about the upcoming dive, napped restlessly, read portions of an intriguing international thriller entitled *Silver* by the author who'd replaced Dan Brown, returned to the galley for what passed as meatloaf with potatoes and greens, and finally found himself standing under the star-filled sky. He studied Orion and other configurations in the firmament until bored with the exercise. He then leaned on the railing to stare down at the churning wake of Scorpio going at top speed toward her destination when a sudden light hit him, and he realized he could see his shadow bobbing and weaving in the whipping seawater down there. The moon had come from behind high stratus clouds, sheeding its pale light over him. “Blue moon,” he said, quoting an old song, “you saw me standin' all alone...without a dream in my heart...without a love of my own...”

“Don’t let the moon see you crying!” came a feminine voice from behind him.

It seemed the training of the divers—to remain unattached to one another and objective, had kept them all at the polite stage. Even with Bowman, there remained a distance, and it appeared Kelly had gone off to hide from David as well, until now. At least, he was thinking so, until she startled him here and now.

“Oh, sorry!” she was saying, leaning now on the railing beside him. “Didn’t mean to frighten you, Dave.”

“Snuck up on me!” David didn’t care to look the least fragile. “Where’d you come from?”

“Been exploring the ship; came out of that hatch right there.” She indicated a hatchway a mere five feet away. “Getting to know the ship as well’s I can.”

“You need to get Forbes or someone with pull to show you the map room; should see the set up—amazing technology, just eye-popping.”

“Will have to do that, yes.”

“I think Forbes is a bit touchy about who’s on his bridge though.”

“You boys with your toys...” she shook her head, smiling. “So what’re you doing out here? Contemplating the stars?”

“Sure, the stars, why not? Look at ’em!” he thrust his eyes skyward. “They’re dancing with the April moon.” As he said this, David was thinking how his shadow had danced with the churning wake—looking like a drowning victim.

“So you’re a romantic, eh?” She followed his eyes and stared up at the firmament. “A bit brisk but a beautiful night.”

“That it is on both accounts. Need my jacket?”

“No, but thanks. A night like this...not unlike—”

“It’s April 13th soon, a night before she sank; do you feel how that tugs at the heart?”

“Yes, in fact, I do. A night like this, the sea calm as glass,” she replied and their eyes met.

Neither had to speak it aloud: the thought of its being a night in the North Atlantic exactly like the one that silently watched the demise of thousands aboard Titanic.

“Yeah—but only if you believe the accounts.” Her remark must be designed to break the spell, he decided, staring at her still.

“Survivors...witnesses to the disaster said the ocean was like glass that night, and yeah—stars looking on like a million eyes.”

Moon bright, too. Funny they couldn’t’ve seen a freaking mountain of ice ahead. Least that’s what I’ve read.” She wrapped her arms about her to stave off the chill air.

David wanted to wrap an arm about her but thought better of it. Instead he remained still, listening to her sparkling voice.

“The lookout—Frederick Fleet, right? Said it dawned on him last minute that a portion of the sky ahead was—how’d he put it—‘strangely empty of stars’ on account of he was staring at an iceberg straight ahead.”

“Yeah,” replied David, “like a black screen against the sky.”

“Funny,” she muttered, eyes now on the ship’s wake and the deep.

“What’s funny?”

“I mean if it was a night like this when Titanic struck the berg, why? Why couldn’t Murdoch or Lightoller, or any other officer or crewman aboard, see the damn ice before she ran over that spur?”

“No binoculars, remember? Facts bear it out—at the trials...well inquiries.” “I know all that! Lightoller said they’d left Southampton in a rush, and they simply left a box of freshly manufactured binoculars on the wharf. Said he’d go to his grave wondering if it weren’t all his and the Quartermaster’s fault—Hitchens.”

“Oversights happen. It’s popularly called—”

“Human error, so I’ve heard.” She dropped her gaze and shook out her hair in the ocean spray. Then she began to laugh a lilting, pleasant laugh.

He took this as an invitation to lighten the mood, so he laughed; she then echoed his laughter, and a crewman stared at the couple before going on by without a word as if wishing to respect their privacy. It looked to be the man named Ford from the galley.

“No such thing as privacy on board a ship,” David muttered on watching the crewman disappear the other side of the deck.

“Dave...there were a lot of inconsistencies at both the American inquest and the British inquest, and you know everybody fabricates and fills in or outright lies at such gatherings for any number of reasons.”

“You think Lightoller lied about the binoculars along with Fleet?”

“I suspect the veracity of all the remarks by the crew, especially the officers who survived.”

“Why in the world?”

“Would they lie?—those who manned the lifeboats, and not one of them could easily answer what was in Captain Edward Smith’s mind that night he went 22 knots into an ice field he knew to be miles long and wide straight ahead?”

“I know the sixty-year-old Captain Smith’d had wireless warnings all evening, but still—”

“And-And some of the survivors who encountered Smith thought him in a daze...in a panic, some said...unable to make a move or give an order—completely out of character.”

“Come on—the man did the-the manly thing! What-what and all that!”

“Of course—he was British after all, through and through. The captain must go down with his ship. It’s the comforting facts we cling to. Makes us all feel a bit better about the disaster.”

“Wow...whew...you’ve given this some serious thought, but Kelly, he was last seen on the bridge, firmly standing there and overseeing the—his men...and the launching of the lifeboats.”

“The whole of it was botched—the lifeboats! Perhaps intentionally so, and Smith was nowhere to be seen; he was shot by Murdoch just before Murdoch shot himself.”

“How could you possibly know that?”

“Witnesses said Murdoch fired and killed one other man before taking his own life when things became too desperate; why not his beloved Captain?”

David mulled this thought over. He'd never considered Smith had done anything other than what the last photograph of the man depicted—leaning over the bridge from the height of a god and sending a salute down to everyone aboard. “Then it’s pure conjecture on your part?”

“Conjecture based on a healthy sense of men; look, David, I have reasons for my beliefs about that night. I have it on good authority.”

“You mean, what if Von Daniken or Stephen King had written a book about that night, right? You been reading some hair-brained conspiracy theory? A special military attaché and envoy carrying a world-changing message between the Pope and President Taft aboard, gun-smuggling, sabotage? Aliens from outer space?”

She gritted her teeth and glared at him; she tried to speak but only an angry ‘ugh’ erupted from her gut.

“Come on, Kelly. They made some stupid but all too human mistakes like sailing off with too few lifeboats, no binoculars aboard for the lookouts—pure arrogance, I know.”

“And no binoculars—not a single pair, not even for the lookout,” she sarcastically added.

“Thinking...thinking Titanic could not be brought down—hubris of the age; the Unsinkable Titanic. The most marvelous man-made object on the planet. There was bound to be confusion and fear and desperation when it became obvious—all their human errors cascading back at them—biting them in the ass.”

She remained silent, allowing him sway.

“No one can imagine the circumstances Smith and his men found themselves in; it’s a wonder so many got off alive—707.”

“Agreed there. How many lifeboats did they carry? Sixteen, for God’s sake, along with a couple of flimsy collapsibles?” she said, shaking her head. “And even then the fools in charge, they only managed to fill the boats they had to a mere third of capacity.”

“Another sad fact, but hardly—”

“They could have saved hundreds more but instead, these highly trained, cool-headed professionals failed miserably in filling those boats, and in fact, took it upon themselves to order the boats lowered and moorings released too soon. Lost one entirely—sent it over the side! Maybe right along with the binoculars.”

David only now realized what she was saying—that it was all intentional. “Whatever are you getting at, Kelly?”

“Yeah, whatever...and who cares about truth anyway?”

“What truth?”

“How and why Titanic went down; you’re right—it’s no longer relevant. Only the legend.”

“Damn it, Kelly, there’re plenty enough wild-hair theories on what eventually sent her to the deep, so why don’t you subscribe to one and leave it at that? Ballard’s theory, the French expedition’s theory, the rivet theory, sabotage theory.... I mean how is any of it relevant to our mission today?”

“History is always relevant, Dave. I was being facetious. Like death, when is history not with us?” She gazed into his eyes, and for a moment, he wondered what she might be thinking, while hoping she was thinking some romantic thoughts about him, and all this talk was maybe just nerves. But why all the dancing around?

David wanted to kiss her but wondered if he should get involved with her now—after the crazy talk she was spouting. She had to simply be tossing these wild notions out there just as an intellectual exercise, to impress him with all she knew of Titanic’s history, perhaps. But there was another concern that should keep David on a hands-off approach with her. Suppose someone saw them in an embrace?

“Swigart sees us together like this out here under the stars, he could get the wrong idea,” he said. “Best we both turn in; big day tomorrow.”

“Say you don’t think me mad, David—my ideas about Titanic’s demise?”

“I don’t know what you want me to say, Kelly. That people lie under oath all the time? That maybe it wasn’t a clear night? That the binoculars were stolen?”

“I’m asking you to keep an open mind.”

“Sometimes all we have is eyewitnesses and that’s what makes it history.”

“Even though science has proven again and again that we can’t trust the human eye? Police lineups prove it wrong every day.”

“It’s all we have to go by from that night in 1912?” he shrugged. “What ya gonna do?” He again focused on her beautiful features.

“We also know that history changes depending on whoever’s writing it.”

“But there’s truth in there somewhere, and like I said, it’s all we have to go by.”

“And sometimes we live or die based on how little we know! Or how much rewritten history we’re fed!”

“Ahhh...yeah, I get it: ‘Those who ignore the past are doomed to repeat it’, right?”

“That’s right. Think about it. People have faith in religion, that Mark and Matthew and Luke and Peter got it right, word for word, but then theology, the study of religion replete with scholars comes along and the true scholars of the Bible see the same set of facts from another perspective; they see facts that don’t bear out the Gospels.”

“Kelly, you’re bringing down the stars and my mood,” he said with a laugh.

She persisted in the same somber tones. “Dave, think about it, please—if we take everything in history—like how Titanic went down—as gospel, then we may be ignoring the facts, the real truth rather than the legend, and that makes us all hypocrites.”

“When the legend overtakes the truth, print the legend?”

“Precisely—not unlike our PR campaign back at Woods Hole for our mission.”

“Hmmpf! Precisely what I mean by our being hypocrites! We buy into the same legends we create—fairytale, like the one about that night. We don’t dare even contemplate the real story as it might ruin our dream image of brave Captain Edward J. Smith and the brave crew and passengers of the Titanic Legend.”

“Ahhh...I get it now. You’re an agnostic wishing to prove God was not there that night because he’s not at home. Kelly, I’m going to end this conversation now.”

She ignored this and continued unabated. “We say we want the truth while conservatively seeking the comforting legend—that’s all I’m saying. I’m not an agnostic. I want people to take responsibility for their actions—even dead people.”

“Dead as in historical figures, you mean?”

“History is ever with us, David—as is death itself.”

“I get it. I get it.”

“Then what was in old Captain Eddy’s head when he piloted this giant ship into an even more massive iceberg?”

“I will agree that Titanic’s maiden voyage should’ve gone smoothly—perhaps a bit late getting into New York harbor but essentially intact—even after striking the iceberg.”

“You make my point! Why didn’t they shut off the compartments that were built to be sealed in the event of her taking on water at the bow?”

“The story goes the riveters in the shipyards left the bulkheads between the compartments unfinished, so—”

“Again with ‘the story goes’, David. What if that was a lie told by 2nd Officer Lightoller at the inquest to protect Captain Smith’s memory? Suppose instead the order was given to not seal off the compartments. Suppose—”

“Whoa! That’s crazy. Why would Smith not seal off the bow section if he could? I read you were a genius IQ—and that you were cleared on the classes we all had to take for this job.”

“Trust me, I took every class you did, and I know every inch of Titanic; I am just saying what if...what if—”

“That they all lied to protect a captain who lost his mind?”

“No, he didn’t lose his mind; he lost far more than that.”

“Kelly, damn it, you’re confusing the hell outta me.”

“Face it, David, since childhood, you’ve been brainwashed on the Titanic legend, not true history—stuff that doesn’t even approximate the truth. But your faith in the lies told became the facts; so-called facts that came from those hearings and men like Lightoller.”

“Lightoller was a hero.”

“Lightoller simply wanted to save himself after seeing what Murdoch had done.”

“You talk as if...as if you were there in some former life.”

“In a sense...I was.”

“What does that mean?”

“Lightoller, Murdoch, Smith—the entire crew, they were all supposed to go down with Titanic together, David.”

“What’re you saying?”

“That they had a pact.”

“Like some evil cabal? A pact? A pact to sink Titanic?”

“No, not evil...not a cabal or covenant of evil. But they had their reasons.”

David stepped away from the railing and her, pirouetting and looking as if he would stalk off; instead, he raised both hands skyward and stepped to within inches of her. “But it struck an iceberg—and what other way to strike an iceberg than by accident?”

“How about intentionally?”

He could only stare at her now and not with a good thought in mind, and certainly not with a romantic one. “Think it’s getting late, and we’ve a big day tomorrow.” “Yeah, no one’s promised a ride down,” she agreed.

“Have to pass muster on the submersible and gear, so...”

He started off. She grabbed him, spun him around and pinned him against a bulkhead, kissing him. When she pulled away, she said in a whisper, “I’m going to need your help, David. I have to trust someone—and you’re it.”

Surprised at her sudden kiss, he swallowed hard. “Help? What kind of help, Kelly? What’s really going on inside that pretty head of yours?”

“Smith rammed his ship into that berg, David, and it was borne of a horrible fear.”

“You do realize you sound insane, right?”

“It gets worse.”

“Worse how? How worse?”

“I need you to come to my quarters, but tell no one.”

“We could be kicked off the dive team for what we’ve already done here, Kelly.”

“You’ve got to come. Give it fifteen, twenty minutes; I’m alone. They gave us girls our own space. Promise me you’ll come—number seven.”

She rushed off like a person fearful of being thrown into a cell should anyone see her. He recalled the crewman who’d whisked by, showing little interest but one word to another crew member and speculation would go viral. David felt dazed and not just over Kelly’s kiss, but over

her strange words as well. He felt in a terribly awkward position and she'd placed him here—intentionally.

Now Dr. Irvin wanted him in her private quarters, but it meant going against Swigart, against the rules; it could land them both a seat on a chopper for Woods Hole come morning. What was all that crazy talk about Captain Edward Smith—a man who, from his photos, looked the unassailable, quintessential captain—spiffy in his dress whites, a bearing and a beard on the order of the knighted James Bond actor Sean Connery.

EIGHT

Declan Irvin slapped his best friend and colleague, Thomas Coogan on the shoulder where they stood amid the bustle and excitement of the Red Lion Pub in a black alleyway deep inside Belfast's most notorious district. Declan pointed to a table in the back of the crowded ale house.

It'd been twenty hours since Coogan's uncle, Anton Fiore, had been seen or heard from. At home, Anton's wife, Thomas' favorite aunt who'd kept the two young interns from starving these many months, sat weeping and terrified something awful had happened to Anton. She'd expected him home as usual when young Thomas and Declan had slipped past curfew at the teaching hospital where they were in residence doing their work for Queens University to make their way to the XX Holland and Wolff shipyards to meet Anton.

For two years now while enrolled at Queens, the boys had watched in fascination as the largest seagoing vessel on the planet was being built; they'd seen the hull fashioned from Belfast iron ore laid and tested. Between classes and studying anatomy and physiology and an array of

mathematical and scientific curricula, the young men had seen the ship go from a skeletal marvel to the most wondrous and largest man-made object in the world. It marked their time as residents here in the city and helped make that time fantastically exciting.

The sprawling shipyards were situated relatively close to the Mater Infirmorum hospital grounds where they were in residence, and only the night before, Uncle Anton as Thomas called the shipyard watchman who had early on learned of his nephew's fascination with all things Titanic, had boasted, "You do know I can get you lads aboard to see the interiors—that is if you should like."

"Should like?" Declan had echoed. "Absolutely we should like, right, Tom?"

"If you're sure you won't get into no trouble, Uncle."

"Bah! I'll see to it you good fellas have as grand a tour as that Mr. Ismay and Mr. Andrews." Anton winked and flashed his signature Cheshire cat grin.

"And who might they be?" Thomas then asked.

"Only the owner and the architect!" declared Declan, taking Anton's surprise away. "Sorry, sir...I have studied the Titanic and Britannic from their inception, sir."

"Well—those muckety-mucks've had their tour!" Anton laughed and it sounded like bells ringing.

Declan Irvin felt he had been adopted by Thomas' aunt and uncle. They were wonderful people and wonderful with one another, as well and good to be around. But now the old gentleman had disappeared without a trace, and Aunt Fiore was destitute without him. Much to

Declan's chagrin, they had lost any chance of seeing the inside of Titanic, making the loss that much more painful still, but Declan dared not say so aloud.

There would be no other chance; the all but finished ship was to be launched the following day or so. Thereafter, the only way to see her was by ticket or signing on as a maid, purser, crewman, or stoker. Last chance to see her interior ballroom and state rooms, the rumored pools, spas, and the gymnasiums for first, second, and third class as well as reading and smoking rooms, cafes, lounges, saloons and bandstands, and multiple promenades. Last chance to walk her topmost deck, to look down from such a height from her bridge. How he wished to see all her shining brass and teakwood floors.

Declan knew he couldn't afford even a third-class ticket. Nor could he afford the time away from medical school to get a job waiting tables or stacking deck chairs aboard Titanic.

At first Declan had been angry at the turn of events—frustrated and annoyed. After all, Thomas had assured Declan that it was all set. Then just before midnight when they'd slipped curfew at the dormitory and arrived at Anton's office, they found the small shack empty and Anton very much absent. For Declan it, resulted in a dashing of excitement, and for Thomas a gnawing fear beyond any disappointment that'd seeped into Declan's heart. Where Declan was a devoted fan of all things Titanic, Thomas was devoted to his uncle.

Meanwhile, Thomas, who could take or leave the ship, was going on about his missing uncle. At the time, Declan assumed the old fellow had just been talking, or that he'd gotten his nights mixed up and had ambled home, but Thomas found his uncle's watch still on his desk, and it was a time piece he'd never leave behind.

It was the first they'd begun to truly worry, and the worry only grew with the ticking of Anton's pocket watch when Thomas confided that his Uncle Anton had promised the watch to him upon his death.

And so with each tick-tick-tick of the second hand, it played on their nerves like a constant drip. They'd waited for him, imagining him on his rounds even without his watch! But he did not return.

About then, Declan's disappointment had gotten the better of him. "Your uncle set the time and his job is one of schedules, so where is he?"

"I don't know!" Thomas replied.

Eventually, they had gone toward the ship and its gaping cargo hold, calling out Fiore's name as they went. Thomas made a mantra of it, calling, "Uncle...Uncle Anton! Uncle, where'n Hades are you?"

"Where the deuce could he be?" Declan added again. "He'll be sacked for this if they find us here."

"You there!" shouted a man from the topmost deck of Titanic, so high up he might be God. The boys had to crane their necks to look up at a lone figure in dark shadow waving a lantern in what seemed an angry arc. "Disembark, the two of ye; out from here now! Go along...that's good lads."

Unable to see the man's face, Thomas shouted back, "Is that you, Uncle?"

"It's not Anton's voice," Declan assured Thomas.

Thomas realized this too and added, “Who’re you? Where’s my uncle, the watchman at the yards?”

“Tuttle!” shouted the man far overhead. “Pinkerton Agent, and I’m armed along with five other able men! Now shove off.”

“Bluffing,” Declan muttered to Thomas; Declan then shouted up to Tuttle. “Where’s the shipyard watchman—Mr. Fiore?”

“Brought you Pinky’s on and fired him, haven’t they?” asked Thomas.

“I’ve no clue! Likely left his post for a dram at the nearest pub.”

Two other Pinkerton agents sporting long guns materialized at the railing beside Tuttle. “Can’t trust Black Irish or any Paddy for that matter!” said a second agent from on high.

A third added, “It’s why we’ve been called on in the first place!”

“You take that back!” shouted Thomas, shaking a fist at Tuttle and the others. “Me Uncle Fiore is not a Black Irish; fact is he’s French mostly, and he’s never left his post unattended! Takes it serious, he does!”

“We’ve reason to believe he’s aboard, Agent Tuttle,” added Declan.

“Not ’board Titanic, he isn’t,” shot back Tuttle from on high. “We can see everything and everyone coming and going from up here.”

“Then you must’ve seen the old watchman leave for his rounds—which direction did he go in?” pleaded Declan. “He could be hurt. Tell us which way’d he go so we might locate him.”

“Save your breath. He’s not the least bit interested, the bastard.” Thomas pulled his best friend away and the moment their backs were to Tuttle, the agent shouted for them to hold on, making them turn and again crane their necks to the light of the lantern far above.

“Hold on,” repeated Tuttle. “The watchman staggered off hours ago complaining of having gotten hold of some bad oysters, he said. Sick as a dog, he was, all bent over.”

“We’ll take his watch to the house for him then,” Thomas told Declan, the watch reflecting the lantern light even from this distance.

But on arriving at this witching hour to the Fiore home, they learned he’d never come home, and soon the hours brought on daylight and still no sign of Anton. It was then that they’d gone to the Belfast Police who so far as Declan could tell offered little hope and less help. Thomas pleaded until they turned him over to the Chief of Constables but to no avail so far as Declan could tell.

However, Thomas came out of the police department stationhouse with having been told of an eccentric American who’d come to Belfast to set up shop as a private detective. Someone had taken pity on Thomas, apparently, and had told him he might be in need of this man’s services.

After discussing the matter and finally getting Thomas’ aunt to take some laudanum and get some sleep, they’d gone searching for this man rumored to get results, this American-Irish named Alastair Wyland.

And now they’d found him this April afternoon at a card game with several rough-looking characters here inside the Red Lion Public House.

“Three,” said one man with a scar across his left eye, asking for more cards.

“Two,” announced another—a fellow with missing fingers on one hand.

The one who most resembled the description the boys had of a Mr. Alastair Wyland, a well-dressed dapper fellow with watch fob and wolf’s head cane, called for one card which precipitated a bit of banter and laughter.

The dealer, a man who looked as old as wood and as hairy as an Irish wolfhound laughed heartily and said, “So...going for an inside straight, eh? Hehehehe...it never works, son.”

“It is worth it just to hear you call me son,” replied Wyland, whipping the single discard at the old man. Wyland, frayed, grey scruffy beard and all, appeared in his early sixties if not older. Most assuredly, rough cut wrinkles spoke of years of experience with worry.

“Mind those long shots,” added the dealer. “You Americans. Risk-takers you are!”

“You are Mr. Wyland?” asked Declan, now standing over the poker table, making the four men nervous. In fact, it appeared everyone sitting here had fragile nerves and itchy fingers.

Wyland more nervous than any of them, Declan decided, but he covered it well as a good poker player must. Wyland didn’t look up as the others had, instead sizing Declan up from the shadow thrown across the cards. “You’re in my light,” was all that Wyland said to Declan’s shadow.

Declan could see that Wyland was not looking for an inside straight but rather held two pairs. Sixes and eights.

Thomas, beside Declan repeated the question. “Are you Wyland or not?”

“Who might be asking?” the heavysset, well-dressed detective asked.

“We’re wanting to hire you. To find my friend’s uncle who’s gone missing.” Declan nudged Thomas to speak up on the matter, but before Thomas could go into it, one of the men at the poker table said, “It’s them two miners that disappeared, eh? Who’re you lads to O’Toole and McAffey?”

“What two miners?” asked Declan.

Thomas said to Wyland, “My Uncle Anton’s the watchman at Harland and Wolf—the shipyards.”

“Declan put in. “We were supposed to meet him at midnight last eve.”

“But he didn’t show up,” Wyland said, bored, “and he never came home neither. Wife’s worried sick—they’d had a row.”

“All true but how did you know?” asked Declan, eyes wide.

“Hear it every day sittin’ here, son.”

This made all the card players break into laughter.

“Look, this is no joke!” Thomas shouted, drawing Wyland’s eye. “We’re all sick with worry.”

Wyland looked around the table. “Three men missing just like that, all yesterday? Sounds like they found a keg, eh lads?”

Again everyone at the table laughed, one slapping hard against the wood, all except for one man, the old dealer. “Tim McAffey and Francis O’Toole are not the sort to up and disappear, keg

or no keg. They are good men, both—stalwart miners! And no one's more reliable than that big watchman, Fiore.”

“Like yourself McClain, I'm sure,” replied Wyland who looked at his pocket watch and saw that it was just past five, and that he'd been here too long. “Let's finish the hand, shall we, lads? Then its time I find a meal.”

“Will you take our case?” asked Thomas, displaying fifty-dollars in bills. “It's all I could collect, but I can get more.”

“One thing at a time.” Wyland continued with his game and his drink, and when the cards were laid out, everyone but Wyland groaned. The detective, known to have left America for Belfast, raked in his winnings. Rumors circulated about the man; why would anyone migrate to Ireland from America? It was not done except for the other way round. He was a secretive man, and in Ireland for fifteen years—the last three in Belfast—or so it was said. Most seriously, no one knew exactly where in America he'd migrated from, but it had been a number of years now that he enjoyed a reputation of getting things done here at street level.

Others said he did so with an iron fist and a swift gun. That and the fact he'd become a fixture in the neighborhood with connections to both police and lowlife. This made him the right man to locate Anton Fiore as the local authorities had shown little interest in the missing man.

As Wyland now basked in his winnings, Thomas Coogan informed Wyland, “We wanted a real detective—a Pinkerton agent—but we couldn't afford one.”

“Well now I'm no Pinky and never've been one,” replied Wyland, scooping up the last of his coins. “So you're stuck with me is it?” Wyland stood and stuffed his pockets with his

winnings, smoke encircling his head from a pipe he'd taken the time to relight. "I warrant it's no coincidence your uncle, young man, has disappeared alongside these two miners. Who can tell me where the miners were last seen, and where they take their secret meetings these days."

"I-I dunno nothing 'bout' no secret meetings, but I'll take you to the last place anyone saw McAffey and O'Toole," said Missing Fingers.

"Where might that be?"

"Number 9 mineshaft; they'd closed it down, you see, but later sent those two in to inspect it. Odd thing is..." he trailed off as if picturing the odd thing.

"Walter, what odd thing?" asked Wyland, leaning into the table.

"They'd been inspecting, but strange thing is the lift, she come up alone by some accounts...but at least one man claims to've seen O'Toole come up. But the super, McAffey, he wasn't with him."

"What kind of a town is this?" asked Wyland. "You mean to tell me two men were sent into a questionable mineshaft, but no one was in charge of seeing they'd come out?"

"It was quittin' time, and management don't pay overtime."

"Ahhh...makes perfect sense."

"See the lift was up next day, so it's a cinch they left outta there."

"A cinch, eh? Take me to the shaft in question." Wyland looked hard now at the two young men who had hired him. He opened his palm for payment. "You fellows don't look like miners."

"How would you know either way?" asked Declan, withholding the bills.

“Your hands...no coal under the nails, no discoloration of the skin.”

Thomas unconsciously studied his hands. “We are—”

Wyland stopped Thomas with a finger to his lips. “You are students at the university no doubt.”

“No doubt?” challenged Declan. “I suspect you are making an educated guess.”

“Your method of dress, and your politeness give you away—along with a slight scent of the dissection room—formaldehydes, I should say. Aside from this, you are disciplined but show no sign between you of ever having been in the military. Guessing that the professors keep you in stringent line rather than sergeants.”

“How can you...how can he...Declan, he’s reading our minds!” Thomas appeared astounded.

“No, no—just quite good at reading our fingernails and ascots,” countered Declan. “The art of detection, correct Mr. Wyland?”

“True but it oft requires intuition and instinct as well as a trained eye. Come along, and we’ll see if the shaft or the lift will tell us anything.”

NINE

The two medical students followed the private detective, who in turn followed the miner named Walter. A handful of other curious miners slowly got up and followed the group. Walter said over his shoulder, “No one’s wanted to go near that shaft.”

“Curse on it, eh?” asked Wyland, smirking.

“Had a cave in; McAffey and O’Toole were ’spose to assess the damage, and when the lift was discovered, boss decided they’d gone home for bed. But no sooner’n next mornin’ wives were down at the jail then the mine looking for ’em.”

“Life’s a mystery,” muttered Wyland.

“Not been seen since.”

Wyland calmly replied in his best Sherlock Holmes imitation, “Most likely there exist a logical explanation.”

Walter shrugged. “May’ve gone over to the next town to confer with the owners, and may’ve gotten drunk there.”

“That’s good thinking, Walter; you might have a future in detective work,” Wyland half-joked.

“Don’t go pullin’ me leg again, Alastair.”

“But you’re on the money! The man’s most likely in lock-up for destruction of property, perhaps for disturbing the peace. Maybe got into a fight over one of those imponderable questions men pose when drunk.”

Walter laughed lightly. “Guess you’d know about that.”

“Careful, you’ll make the lads here distrustful of me.”

“What ever do you mean?” asked Declan.

“Mr. Wyland, here in Belfast, rumor has it that you know how to find missing people,” said Thomas in a shaky voice, “and ...and that you’re also the most dangerous man in Belfast.”

“No, no, no! Who says such dribble?” Wyland laughed as they approached the mine. “I am not; it’s all stuff and nonsense, and it would please me mightily if you spread the truth rather than the bloody rumor—ahhh, pardon me language but it gets old.”

Declan firmly said, “We do want a man who’s had experience and is expert in his field.”

“Some say you were a police detective in New York,” added Thomas, blinking.
“Others...others say Chicago.”

“Speculation, rumors. I’ve never been to either city except to take the train to Chicago to see the World’s Fair way back in 1893. But it was just a weekend. I lived in Boston.” He clenched his strong right hand around his wolf’s head cane, his free hand tightening into a fist, and Declan noticed this gesture; he’d seen it many times in patients at the university hospital, and it always meant one thing—lies. This man Wyland also looked more and more uncomfortable as Walter had held forth with what Wyland insisted was nonsense and rumor when Wyland philosophically spoke the bloated remark, “The most dangerous man indeed; the most dangerous man is the man everyone else believes to be the most dangerous man.”

Declan wondered exactly what that meant, and he exchanged a questioning look with Thomas who shrugged. “You were a policeman in Boston?”

“I was a records keeper, kept the files on villains is all, but it taught me a good deal about detection.”

Declan whispered into Thomas’ ear, “I suspect this fellow is a charlatan, Tommie.”

Thomas pulled away, obviously not wishing to hear the truth, and they were soon at the mine shaft in question, undisturbed since the two missing miners had reportedly entered after hours on the night of their disappearance. The same night Fiore had vanished.

According to Walter, officials of the mine could not get anyone to go down into this particular shaft; that they'd had to pay McAffey and O'Toole a hefty bonus to do so. First there had been a cave in, and now two men who'd gone to inspect the extent of damage had disappeared. The mystery was complicated by a witness who said he'd seen O'Toole exit the mine in good 'spirits', but not McAffey.

In Wyland's mind wheels turned in all directions; it was his basic makeup to listen with care, consider all sides, weigh up everything and carry on from there. His thinking had come of a lifetime as a former police detective in his native Chicago, Illinois where he had become so embroiled in a death he had no hand in that he'd become suspect number one for the murder, arrested, about to be placed on trial, his cagey lawyer suddenly dying of an 'accident' and he set up by long-suffering enemies in high places; politics very much involved.

He had for years rocked the boat in Chicago by privately investigating every detail of what had led up to the notorious Haymarket Riot. He'd been wounded in the riot when the bomb was thrown into the crowd, and six police officers were killed. It'd left him with scars and a limp, and it'd earned him the rank of Inspector.

This little missing-persons mystery would find a quick and likely a mundane resolution: Most likely the two miners had a falling out, a fight, and O'Toole had won, and he'd left McAffey hurt, possibly unconscious down in the mine shaft. O'Toole, in a state of anxiety, thinking he'd killed a man, had left the vicinity altogether.

Alastair Wyland, which was his alias thought of a familiar phrase among police and detectives—‘Whenever two or more of you are gathered in Bacchanal’s name...anything can happen’.

“Take me down then, Walter,” Wyland told his guide. “Could be a hurt man down there.”

“I’ll drop you down, but I’d rather not go in. I’ve a new babe on the way and six mouths to feed as is.”

“Fine, get me down to the bottom.”

“We’re going down there with you.” It was Thomas, Declan backing him up with a vigorous nod.

“Don’t know what we’ll find down there,” countered the private eye, Wyland, taking his coat off, hanging it on a rail, standing now in his vest, his hefty stomach and chest like a barrel.

“We’re at your side,” said Declan.

“Lads, it could be dangerous. We dunno what we’ll find down there. Could be that your uncle, Thomas, fell in with these two in some scheme or other, maybe to sabotage that bloody ship everyone is talking about.”

“That’s wrong! Uncle Anton would never be a part of any such—”

“You hired me son, and you don’t know what you don’t know as they say.”

“I know he’d never be a part of the plans of malcontents!”

“All right, all right.” Wyland held his hands up.

Declan calmed his friend and added, “We’re doctors or soon will be—third year surgical students. If you do find hurt men down there, we can be of service.”

“There’s no evidence my uncle is down there,” chimed in Thomas again, angry yet again at the suggestion. “He’d have no business in the mine.”

“Thomas’ uncle is an upstanding citizen and no anarchist,” Declan added, frustrated as he stared at the big man he feared their only hope of finding Fiore.

“A fine recommendation but suppose the three had other dealings, dealings to do with money? Every man has his dance with Mammon, you know.”

“Mammon?” asked Declan. “This man had no liking for greed or wallowing in wealth, sir.”

“My uncle bowed before no false gods, and certainly not money. I can’t see it,” replied Thomas, “not in a million years.”

“I’ll not waste another breath on you two; come ’long if you must. Walter—drop us below.”

The odd threesome were soon being lowered below the earth by Walter when a mine official named Hal Bartholomew rushed to the site, asking, “What’s going on here, man?”

Walter’s stuttering explanation of the two young doctors and ex-patriot American detective now gone into the mineshaft caused the other man’s eyes to bulge. “They’ve gone in search of O’Toole and McAffey?—possibly another fellow as well, you say?”

“Y-Yes, sir.”

“But we’ve got a search party together now.”

“Perhaps your search party’d should’ve acted faster,” suggested Walter as he watched the platform disappear into the blackness below; he also saw that Wyland had lit the John Lantern Walter had handed him. In a moment, a second lantern held by one of the boys came on.

“A third fellow? I’ve no word of a third miner lost below.” Bartholomew the Englishman said. Most administration at the mine were British. It was the way of things, and Walter hadn’t questioned it since he was a child. Harland and Wolff, the White Star Line, all of it was British and more recently American interests had bought the lot of it, both the shipyard and the ship company. It was one reason the anarchists were again making noises in and around Belfast; so much so that Pinkerton agents had been called in to oversee the care of Titanic until her official launch as opposed to the hull launching of a short time ago.

Walter had been among the huge throng of more than a hundred thousand curious who had turned out to see the successful hull launch, this according to the Belfast papers. From what he’d heard through the workmen at the shipyard, it had taken twenty-two tons of tallow, soap, and train oil to grease the slipway bed. The coated slipway measures taken that last day in May 1911 had worked against the enormous three-tons-per-square-inch pressure of the freshly painted hull. The Titanic was then towed by tugs to the Harland & Wolff fitting-out basin where final outfitting had been going on these many months since—without incident or need of Pinkerton agents.

Now this.

TEN

Walter had insisted they each wear a miner's hat with a battery-operated light just above their foreheads but Declan's went out, and Thomas kept shining his into the others' eyes, blinding them. Alastair Wyland insisted they forego the damned hats.

But they left the paltry lights on the helmets as they went down and down into the black hole, it grew darker and danker. To while away the time, Wyland gave the boys a history and economics lesson.

“You know boys, given the recent backroom deals surrounding these giant ships the White Star Line is building Belfast and Ireland by bringing jobs, and management believes themselves saints for supplying jobs to working men—miners, shipyard workers, tugboat captains and crew, but they'll be hiring on British crews for their Olympic class monsters like Titanic just as they did with the Olympic launched in October 1910.”

“The British are paying the freight...it's a British held company.”

“Not anymore, lads.”

“What do you mean?”

“As early as 1869 J. Bruce Ismay's father, Henry formed the Oceanic Steam Navigation Company in order to establish the White Star Line as a high-class steamship service in the Atlantic passenger trade, and he contracted his first ships be built by Belfast shipbuilders Harland & Wolff. All rather hush-hush until the son took over in 1891 when under pressure, Ismay admitted to partnership of the White Star Line. He then took over completely after his father's death in '99.”

“What’s this to do with us going down into the mines?”

“Getting to that. In ’94, William J. Pirrie became chairman of Harland & Wolff. And four years later, American author Morgan Robertson published his novel entitled *Futility* in which a British passenger liner called the Titan—get it?—hits an iceberg and sinks on her maiden voyage without enough lifeboats in the month of April in the North Atlantic. The fictional ship is eerily similar to the yet-to-be conceived Titanic in size, speed, equipment, numbers of passengers—both rich and poor. And in the end of the novel, the number of passengers who perished, God forbid, would be the same as on Titanic should she go down in the North Atlantic.”

“A novel...so what? Fiction is frivolous,” said Thomas. “What’s it to do with—”

“Robertson had information on the company—an insider feeding him information; the company planned to build three Olympic class ships they called unsinkable from the outset. Morgan Robertson’s book, which I’ve read, is a running history of how Titanic, Olympic, and the yet to be built Britannic were conceived by men interested in money and power.”

“This is fascinating,” commented Declan. “Go on.”

“Well in 1902, the White Star Line was purchased by the International Mercantile Marine Company, a shipping trust headed by U.S. financier J. Pierpont Morgan.”

“Hold on,” said Declan, “do you mean the same J.P. Morgan who operates the largest transportation lines and all the trains in America?”

“One and the same, yes. While the White Star’s ships still fly the British flag and carry British crews, the company is essentially controlled by American interests, and by ’04, Ismay,

now age forty or so—with Morgan’s full support—becomes President and Managing Director of International Mercantile Marine with complete control.”

“And why is that a bad thing?” asked Thomas. “I smell something awful; you smell that?”

“Yeah,” added Declan. “Smells like decay.”

Alastair ignored this, continuing his tale. “Another thing, Morgan Robertson is related to Morgan—hence the name, but he’s a black sheep member. And another thing—”

A sudden jolt and the platform beneath their feet shuddered, but as the shaft was tight on all sides, they didn’t fear falling from either side, at least not yet. They heard something beneath them tumble as if caught on a rock and the platform had sent whatever it was hurtling downward with a rattling bumpity-bump pounding their ears. Still the platform continued on, lowering them still deeper.

In unison, the detective and the young interns breathed a sigh of relief, and Wyland continued his history lesson as if nothing had happened. “As well, Harland & Wolff chairman William J. Pirrie became that same year a director of Mercantile Marine.”

“All rather chummy,” said Thomas.

“Inbred is what it is,” Declan replied. “And the public knows naught of it?”

“At a dinner party in 1907, held at William J. Pirrie's London mansion, Ismay discussed the construction of two huge ships—with a third to be added later—and the young author was in

attendance to hear their plans; it gave him the insidious idea to make himself happy by fictionally sinking their plans before they'd begun if he could convince a publisher to take on his hair-brained novel entitled Titan. But back to the London party—it was all to do with competing, you see, with the luxury, size, and speed of rival cruise lines. These Olympic-class ships were to be known as the greatest and fastest liners afloat, intended specifically to beat out the Cunard Line for the Atlantic luxury passenger trade.”

“You make it sound so criminal,” countered Thomas Coogan. “It is called free enterprise...capitalism.”

“Not my point.”

“What then?”

“July 29, 08.”

“What about it?”

“The White Star owners, including Ismay, approved in principle the design plan for the Olympic class ships prepared by builders Harland & Wolff under direct supervision of Lord Pirrie, with the assistance of his nephew Thomas Andrews—architect of the ships.”

“Yes, all in the family.” Declan worked the lever to slow the platform here where the shaft narrowed about them.

“I met the author, Robertson, once—had a bright son named Stephen who was fascinated with law enforcement and the science of detection back in...in Boston. At any rate, Robertson showed me a duplicate copy of a contract letter dated July 31st of that year; a letter signing off on construction in the Belfast shipyards for Olympic, Titanic, and a third sister ship at the time

unnamed but to follow. In part it read ‘Ultimate decisions of design, equipment, and decoration are to be made by J. Bruce Ismay. The size of Titanic will be 882 feet 9 inches long, 94 feet wide, and 100 feet high to the bridge level. Final cost: £1,500,000 or approx. \$7,500,000. New docks had to be built in Belfast, Southampton, and New York to accommodate the size of these ships. Harland & Wolff built specially strengthened slips to take their weight, and a new gantry under which these gargantuan ships would be built.’

“You tell a rambling tale, sir,” interrupted Thomas. “To the point, perhaps?”

“Thomas! Where are your manners?”

“Left them in the world above.”

“Ah, it’s no matter, Declan,” replied Wyland. “Frankly at my age, I know that the more sense I make, the less anyone cares to hear it. Or perhaps it was always that way!” He laughed at his own remarks.

“Oh but sir, please go on. I am something of a big fan of Titanic; I wish to hear all of it.”

“Well...as planned, December 16th the keel for the first ship is laid down at Harland & Wolff’s slip number 400 and Olympic construction begins, as you likely know; at any rate, this was quickly followed March 31st of ’09 when Titanic’s keel was laid down in yard number 401 and Titanic—”

“Yes, where Titanic construction began.”

“And now here we are today with Pinky’s guarding her and anarchists wanting to blow their precious plans to kingdom come. Now mysteriously three men who in one manner of another are associated with the yards’ve vanished. Gentlemen, it smacks of anarchy or monies to be had, and quite possibly blackmail.”

“Blackmail?”

“How so?”

“Suppose the three had devised a scheme to reveal all the fictional elements of Robertson’s book as fact? The hidden details of all that has gone on behind closed doors regarding Titanic and her sister ships?”

“It just sounds so far-fetched,” said Thomas.

“But think of it, Thomas—information like that, The Cunard Line would kill for that kind of paperwork, the designs, White Star’s plans.” Declan nodded successively.

“It’s not as if we’re talking government secrets, envoys, and battle plans,” countered Thomas.

“Oh but it is,” said Wyland.

“Have ye no imagination, Thomas?” asked Declan. “It makes sense in a world where, more and more, information is knowledge, knowledge is power, and power converts to money.”

“Makes no damn sense to me! Again, sir, you’re implying some dirty underhanded dealings!”

“Easy lad!”

“Uncle Anton was in no schemes or dirtiness! I won’t have it.”

“But given the size of the powers they may have been going after, perhaps your uncle saw it as fair play perhaps, and not at all evil to involve himself since no Irishman good enough to burn rivets into the hull of this monster’s good ’nough to serve tables on her!”

Thomas fell silent, giving this some thought. “I know my uncle has a keen sense of justice.” Then Thomas’ nose began twitching uncontrollably. “Gawd, that’s a putrid stench?”

“You’re right about that!” agreed Alastair even as his own nose began to twitch.

“That smell,” began Declan. “Worse than the dissecting room, eh, Tommie?” “Smell of death for sure.”

“Coming up the shaft.”

“How far down does this damn thing go?” Wyland was having second thoughts about the wisdom of coming into this inky black hole when the platform hit bottom and tilted sharply, hanging there. The jolt knocked Thomas into Declan and the boys fell; Wyland had grabbed on and kept his feet.

“What’ve we hit?” asked Declan.

“Most likely whatever it was fell earlier from the rock ledge.” Wyland trained his lantern over the side of the lift, dust raining round them even as the two lanterns illuminated a black torso—a dead man. “I believe we’ve found one of the missing men,” he calmly said.

Thomas rushed to Wyland’s side and held the second lantern over the body. “It’s not my uncle—too tall, too thin... besides it must have been here for weeks... if not months.”

“But how then...I mean anyone coming down the shaft had to’ve...” began Declan, shaking his head.

“Not here,” countered Wyland. “First off, no one wanted to come down; there’d been a cave-in here. Secondly, judging from the position of the body, it had to’ve been placed here—or perhaps dropped here.”

Declan worked to bring the lift up a foot, then two, trying to get it straightened out and hovering above the blackened body. “Never seen such absolute decay; not even our oldest corpses at the medical school look this bad—and trust me, they are vile.”

“I’ve seen a lot of dead men,” said Wyland, his gaze grimacing, “but nothing like this.”

“Who could it be if not O’Toole or McAffey?”

Wyland shone his light on a helmet nearby with the name McAffey across it, and he indicated stitching on the dead man’s blackened shirt, Tim M. it read, no doubt stitched on by a loving wife.

Using his wolf’s head cane to offset a serious limp, Wyland carefully made his way to a kneeling position over the body. Leaning in for a closer inspection, he snatched out a handkerchief and placed it over his nose against an odor reminiscent of sulfur. “We’re bound to involve the police, have an inquest, have the body autopsied. Either of you boys want to find the nearest phone?”

“Back at the mining office—’less there’s a police call box closer, but without a key...”

“Smash it with pick axe or something suggested Declan.”

“Yes, you do that, Thomas. I suspect Walter will know where the man’s house is?”

“Most likely; the miners are a close knit bunch,” said Declan.

Thomas lingered to determine what Wyland was up to.

“Can I trust you to get this into Walter’s hands, and can we trust Walter to get it to the man’s wife?” Wyland extended a money purse he’d found on the corpse. “Things like this tend to get lost real fast when police arrive.”

Thomas had held himself in check to witness this exchange, and he nodded appreciatively before asking, “Nothing in the purse to identify the poor devil?”

Wyland shook his head. Just shy of forty pounds, I’d say. No paper. Now be off with you both—Declan to see to the paltry sum, you, Thomas to make that call.”

Thomas rushed off in search of the phone.

“We should get Dr. B to look this over,” said Declan, who had not budged. “See if he knows what killed this fellow, McAffey.”

“ Dr. B?” asked Wyland.

“Bellingham, an excellent physician and inquest expert—and teaches surgery at the Mater Infirmorum—our teaching hospital.”

“Whatever is going to work—and Thomas—do hurry. Getting ranker by the moment here.”

“Frankly, Mr. Wyland, I’m pretty sure we shouldn’t remain here any longer.”

Declan's remark halted Thomas who held the lift. "Are you two coming?"

"Need to do a bit of a walkabout," said Alastair, but you go with Thomas, lad," he added for Declan's sake as an out for him.

Still Declan didn't budge. "This man looks the victim of some awful disease—perhaps some form of a Bubonic Plague."

Wyland added, "Oh dear, the Black Plague, you think?"

"Here in Belfast in 1912?" said Thomas from the lift platform.

"Not likely but who can tell, really."

"Looks nasty enough to be a new strain of Black Plague; the disease took people's lives overnight. Terrible scourge from all the etchings I've seen," remarked Thomas.

"Can't rule it out from down here, but it could as well be something else."

"What else can you be talking about?" Wyland poked at the body with his cane.

"Something new, diseases crop up in the strangest of places."

"Damn nasty business this underground work," Wyland mused, looking at the sheared off ceiling and flashing his light about the wet, black reflecting walls.

"Wonder where the other miner is?" Declan muttered as if to himself.

"We'll search the terminus of the shaft. But first, let's get this man onto the platform so when Thomas goes up for help, we have the body at the surface for this Dr. Bellingham to examine."

The three of them took careful hold of the absolutely stiff man who seemed more like a log than anything human, and they placed the corpse onto the lift. “Get him topside while we investigate further,” said Wyland to Thomas who needed no second telling. While riding up to the surface with the awful corpse, Thomas cupped his hands and shouted to Declan and the detective, “Damn thing looks like a blackened mummy!”

But Alastair Wyland had already set out searching about the mine, thinking the second missing miner—at very least—must be down here and whoever claimed to have seen him leaving the shaft had it wrong; as to the shipyard watchman, Thomas’ uncle, he hadn’t a clue.

Declan followed in Wyland’s wake as now there was only one lamp, and every corner here was blacker than an Irish midnight.

The lantern picked up the area where the shaft roof had collapsed, and at the base of the scattered loosened rock fall, lying in a silence as deep as an empty forest grave, there lay the body—covered in a tarp. “See that? It’s gotta be the other miner.” Alastair was excited, and he momentarily wondered if the families of the men might spread the word about his powers of detection, although he had done nothing save travel down into the mine shaft that others feared. The thought made him silently chuckle.

“Is he...is he like the other one?” asked Declan, shaken on seeing the prone misshapen figure below the thick green tarp.

“We’ll have to get him topside with the other one, sort ’em out. Figure which is which.” Wyland then noticed something distinctly different about this corpse and wondered if the tarp cut the odor. “You notice that?” he asked.

“What? What is it?”

“This one doesn’t smell so awful as the other fellow.”

“What killed them?” Declan asked, ignoring Wyland’s confusion.

“That’s the real mystery, now isn’t it?” Wyland snatched the tarp away in his best magician form, fully expecting to have found Anton Fiore lying here dead if not O’Toole, but instead he and Declan were shocked to find a furry-faced, pained hoary wolf creature with a huge, ugly decayed snout, its eyes like dried prunes. The sight sent Alastair staggering back—and given his limp, he fell into Declan, almost losing his feet and taking the young man to him.

“What in God’s name!” gasped Declan, staggering back, now welcoming the dark corners.

“It’s some sort of beastie, I’d say.”

“Look at that snout; it’s no dog—yet it seems like a large dog, maybe a wolf?”

“I’ve not ever seen the like of it, but look at how dry the skin, and the eyes—like the fellow we sent up, two dry, hard orbs.”

“Mummified—both this animal and the miner.”

“Mummified? I saw no bandages!”

“I’ve seen mummies in the museum in Edinburgh and London, sir, unwrapped mummies. They appear like petrified wood.”

“We had Egyptian mummies represented at the great fair in Chicago, but they were well wrapped.”

“It’s as if…”

“As if what, Declan?”

Declan took the lantern from the detective and stepped closer, examining the dead creature.

“It looks like some sort of *prehistoric* wolf or saber-toothed dog.”

“That’d be my guess—and look here.” He positioned Declan’s lantern and hand up to illuminate the wall to his right. I’d say it was buried here for a long time, entombed in this wall. Notice the shape of the remaining, scooped out section?”

“The miners dug it from the wall and here it lies, yes.”

“And if it’s carrying some ancient disease or organism?” asked Alastair, his nerves shot.

“We’ve been exposed.”

“Almighty’s will be done if it’s to be done.”

“You’re fine with it at your age, but I intend to live a long life.” Alastair’s dark joke got no laughs. “Declan, I appreciate the difference in our ages—and should’ve insisted you get topside with your friend.” Alastair fell silent, contemplating the results of a plague rampaging through the already filthy streets of Belfast’s ghetto areas long before reaching out to other parts of the city. The poverty stricken would die in droves at the outset, and when finished there, it might well devastate the entire countryside, biting at the gentry and heads of state, at which point they might attempt to do something about it. He imagined that Declan, being a medical man, was giving into the same fears.

“If the corpse we sent up with Thomas is diseased and virulent,” began the young intern, “then it could spread about the city.”

“Yes, afraid we’ve made some bad choices for being such intelligent men.”

“The jutting shoulders of this thing,” said Declan of the beast. “And you see the size of the fang there? Wonder where the other fang might be.”

Using his cane, Alastair tried to turn the monstrous snout here in the dark shaft, but he found it stiff as cord wood, unmoving. “Dry and stiff as bone,” he muttered.

“Like the miner we sent up—” gasped Declan—“yet this carcass is ancient, and he...his corpse only hours old.”

“I suspect that O’Toole and McAffey had some reason to dig this thing out of the wall, and things went bad from there.” Alastair poked at the monster with his cane. “Likely placed the tarp over the thing, then boarded the lift, readying to find the surface, but you saw where the one had fallen or been forced over the side of the lift, then caught on a ledge until we landed on the man’s body. If it’s McAffey we sent up, O’Toole got out and into the world.”

“You think they fought over a damn fang?”

“I don’t know that it was the fang they fought over, but do you see the second miner here?”

“Well...no.”

“I saw a chain with a hook hanging on a peg behind us,” continued Wyland, taking the lantern back to the spot where he’d seen the chain dangling on one wall. He returned with it, saying, “We hook this monster and send it up ahead of us, Declan, and then we get the devil outta here.”

“I’m with you. Place gives me the creeps.”

They soon had the meat-hook on the end of the chain attached to the strange discovery, and yanking on the chain which snaked up alongside the lift, they got a response, presumably from Walter, who began winding the crude winch which begged to be replaced. The animal carcass had been light in weight, dehydrated and ancient as it was, and it rained down a dust over the men below as the chain echoed a metallic screech down the shaft. The dry animal dust created a curtain reflected veil in the lantern light.

In the interim as they were discovering the beast in the mine shaft, topside Walter had had the presence of mind to return the lift back to them.

“Let’s get out of here, now!” Alastair shouted to Declan, and they leapt onto the lift platform. Declan and Ransom had both begun to cough in the confined shaft as they rode up below the animal carcass overhead. As they did so, Alastair’s cane tapped at an edge of the boards near Declan’s feet; so close came the tip of the wolf’s head cane that Declan jumped to avoid it.

“Look there!” said Alastair, tapping still. “More evidence the second man got out and away.”

“How can you be sure?”

He lifted the cane and pointed to where it had rested. “Do you see the swath of cloth caught on that nail, the concentration of hair? Someone—presumably O’Toole, who I learned from Walter was a heftier man than myself—kicked his superintendent off this platform as it lifted. Here, stop the lift.”

Declan immediately brought them to a halt. “What is it?”

“The rock face here...smeared with blackened flesh. It’s where the body had been resting before we hit it and sent it to the shaft floor.” Alastair placed his lantern close to the ledge he pointed at. “I’d noticed on the corpse, on the arm—a bad scrape but no redness, no blood. In fact, did you look at his eyes?”

“No, I did not, sir.”

“No, of course not; who looks a dead man in the eye? Only a fool, my mother would say.”

“I am proposing to be a doctor; I should do exactly that when confronted with a corpse.”

Alastair shrugged. “You’re not a doctor yet; you’re young. It’s natural to look away.”

“I’ll be a doctor in a few years; I’ve got to learn to be more observant. I should’ve looked into his eyes.”

“In this case, perhaps not.” With his cane, Alastair indicated up—signaling Declan to control the lift upward again.

Declan swallowed hard and turned the switch for up. “What did you find in the eyes?”

“Dried pair of prunes, shriveled to nothing yet intact—and yet with the level of decay to the body...makes no sense. There shouldn’t be anything whatsoever left of the soft tissue of the eyes.”

“But then in so short a period, the body shouldn’t be so far along in decay either, Mr. Wyland.”

“The eyes looked like shrunken little heads like those made by cannibals. Come to think of it, the entire body looked like those crazy shrunken heads I saw once at a huge fair that represented every race on the planet to us fairgoers.”

“The Chicago World’s Fair?” guessed Declan. “You saw the 1893 Columbian Exposition? Damn, I’d give anything to’ve seen that!”

“Yes...quite a show it was, too. Like all the world in one place.” This much was no lie, he thought, pleased with himself and the memory of being atop the Ferris Wheel with the love of his life, the woman he’d left behind, Dr. Jane Tewes, one of Chicago’s first female surgeons.

“You are old, aren’t you? I mean 1893—wow!”

“Come now, not that old. I am here, aren’t I? Climbing around in the rubble, breathing in this rotten corpse. God help us, son. If indeed this is the Black Plague come back to haunt mankind—figures it would start in Ireland.”

They fell silent with the thought. All around them the mechanical sound of the winch and the groaning boards of the lift below their feet filled their senses: the smell of earth, the dry, subtle stench of the corpse and its change of color as they rose toward the surface where Walter shined a light down to reveal others who’d taken an interest, peering down the shaft as well.

Wyland secretly worried who this might be alongside Walter topside. He gritted his teeth and tightened his grip on his cane. He feared now that his little missing-persons case involved a corpse, he’d exposed himself far too much. The authorities could well focus on him, a thing he had so far avoided here in Belfast. He felt like kicking himself for having gotten involved. He feared the men with Walter were the local police.

ELEVEN

They were soon topside, feet planted on terra firma, breathing easier, and Walter was gasping over the body and saying that it looked like Superintendent McAffey yet not at all like the man. “It just doesn’t look like the man.”

Private Detective Alastair Wyland slapped Walter on the shoulder, a reassuring gesture without effect. “Quite...quite understandable, my friend.”

Still, Bartholomew corroborated that it was indeed McAffey just as Alastair pulled his pockets inside out, finding a tobacco tin with the initials TM engraved on it. At about this time, Bartholomew turned to vomit his last meal, and between retching he muttered, “It’s McAffey but like Walter says, it’s not McAffey.”

“And what in God’s name is this monster you had me haul up?” asked Walter whose eyes had gone wide with anger. “Scared me to prayer, it did, this animal carcass!”

Alastair apologized. “We need to have the thing examined, Walter.”

Even though night had fallen, with the body in the better light, both Declan and Alastair felt as if they were seeing the destruction to McAffey for the first time. The horrible impact to their senses was compounded.

“Can we get a tarp to place over the remains?” asked Wyland.

“It’s gruesome what happened to this man,” said Declan, “and not even explained by the Black Plague, Mr. Wyland. Think about it; he was seen alive twenty-four hours ago, and now look at him. There’s something unnatural about this whole affair.”

“We needn’t invoke supernatural means here,” replied Wyland. “Has to be some sort of disease, a parasite perhaps, an invisible to us organism.” Wyland stepped away, lit his pipe, and hoped the tobacco would staunch the awful odor that had set up residence in his nostrils. He weighed up his choices—remain or go now. If he disappeared, the authorities might more readily be curious about him and his past. If he remained, played out his part in this sordid matter and acquitted himself well, the same authorities might leave his past his alone to focus instead on the obvious crime before them.

“You know,” muttered Walter, “these mines here, they’ve always had a curse on ’em. But I’ve never seen the like of this.”

Ransom noticed that even in death, McAffey had coal dust raining down on his mummified remains, as it shook loose from Walter’s clothing and shaggy head of hair as Walter worked the tarp over the corpse.

“Where’s Thomas?” asked Declan, looking around.

“After he come up ahead of you,” replied Walter, “said he’s going for the authorities,” replied Walter.

“I’d thought the coppers already here, Walter. Saw a couple of other men as we were returning.”

“Not cops. They were miners. Rushed off to spread the word about McAffey. He wasn’t always popular.”

“Could sure use a stiff drink,” Alastair said to no one in particular while studying the finger-nail moon and the stars; he worried about facing the authorities should they begin to place too much attention on him—should they learn his true identity, that he was in fact the one and only former Chicago Inspector Alastair Ransom.

Just as stealthily as the onset of night had come on while they were in the mine, a single suspicion about Private Investigator Alastair Wyland could send Inspector Alastair Ransom back to the US and Chicago as a fugitive from a murder indictment in the death of that damned priest. But I’m innocent of the charge, he told himself for the thousandth time, innocent—at least for the most part.

April 13, 2012, aboard Scorpio, one day out from port:

Against all reason and his better judgment, once Will Bowman had begun to snore, David Ingles slipped from their shared cabin to make his way to compartment number seven. The enticement had proven too powerful for several reasons, not the least being Kelly’s kiss.

Once he got to Kelly’s room, he noticed Jacob Mendenhall far back of him down the narrow corridor; he could not make out what Mendenhall was up to, but he feared the other diver was shadowing him.

Had Swigart already heard rumors about his and Kelly’s rendezvous on deck? Had Swigart put Mendenhall on him to keep him honest?

He instantly began a mock jogging, pretending to be getting his exercise by running the corridor, doing stretches, and he jogged back to his own room only to find Mendenhall gone, nowhere to be seen. He then jogged back to Kelly's room, glanced about, saw no one in any shadows, and rapped at the hatchway to her quarters.

Kelly snatched open the door as if she'd been ready to do so the moment he knocked, and she snatched David by the arm and urged him inside. "We have to be discreet," she said as she closed the door. They filled the small compartment made for one. "I've got something I must share with you."

He thought of a snappy reply but thought better of it. "What is so important that we're risking losing everything we've worked for, Doctor?"

"I need someone I can trust, Dave, when we're down there tomorrow or day two—whenever we go into the interior."

"What do you mean? We've trained for months to watch one another's backs—to trust one another."

"But they made that unusual request of us—to train separately and to remain aloof from one another—why? Don't you want to know why? Don't you think that's an odd way to train?"

"Sounds like someone's a bit paranoid."

"This is not paranoia; this is fear, David—and for all I know, you could be the one who will want to kill me once I reveal why I'm really on board Scorpio."

"My God, Kelly, your every sentence is a riddle."

She put her hands up in a gesture that asked for patience. Then she reached into the otherwise empty duffel bag and came up with what looked to David at first to be his father's scrimshaw pipe, but it was in fact no pipe.

"Is that a piece of ivory tusk?"

She held it up to his eyes, the smooth, tapered fang. "It's the tooth of some kind of saber-toothed animal found in a mine shaft where the ore to make the steel plates and bulkheads for Titanic was mined."

"I really don't follow you, Kelly." Still he wrapped his hand around the large tooth as if drawn to do so.

"It will become clear," she said, reaching into the duffel again, this time coming up with an aged, leather-bound book with tattered edges and a metal clasp in the form of a lion's head holding it together. "The journal I told you about—belonging to my great-great grandfather. A great man who died on Titanic not knowing he had a son, my grandfather."

He put the huge tooth aside, stared at the book, and then up at her and shrugged. "You said nothing about any journal."

"I didn't?"

"No, you did not."

"I could've sworn...well, at any rate, I meant to; it's crucial to your understanding of what really happened that night on board Titanic."

He took it from her hands as she pushed it toward him. The journal itself was a beautifully bound antique with a clasp and a lace bookmark peeking from the top. “I’ve marked some pages in particular that you must read.”

“You want me to have this on loan, I presume? To read?”

“We don’t have time to wait for the movie release,” she joked then glared at him as she undid the clasp even as the book remained in his hands. It opened onto pages brittle and yellowed with time. “You’ve got to read his account of things, David, please.”

“Tonight? Now?”

“Here and now, yes. There isn’t much time before we reach Titanic—what, two, two and a half days?”

“Present rate of speed, should make it Thursday AM.”

“Read,” she commanded. “It’s imperative.”

“It’ll explain the saber tooth and why the Titanic’s captain scuttled his unsinkable monument to man’s greatest nautical achievement up till that point in time.”

“Sit, read...all of it will become clear.”

Frowning and giving in, David fell into the single chair at the desk protruding from one wall—everything here was shiny metal. “This book is why you think—or rather say that it was Captain Edward Smith who gave orders to—I can’t believe I am even saying this—ram the largest oceangoing vessel on the planet into an iceberg, and that his most trusted officers carried out Titanic’s intentional sinking.” He laughed and shook his head.

“Read the book, David—it’s proof, evidence of the truth of my story!”

“I really suggest that you don’t repeat this ahhh...theory to anyone.”

“Dave, I know you haven’t had time to digest all this—and it’s a helluva lot to digest.” She put a hand on his shoulder. “All I ask is that you keep an open mind and take a look at the journal.”

“What could possibly prove such a notion?” He remained steadfastly skeptical. It seemed the only logical response to this unusual game she was running on him. He expected at any moment for her to burst out laughing and to admit that he was being set up—punk’d! He prayed she’d suddenly shout ‘Gotcha!’.

“Start here then if it helps.” She turned the pages to a marker. “Start with the fact Captain Smith had seven Marconi messages in his pocket that warned of a huge ice field that was uncharacteristically floating out ahead of Titanic—directly in the shipping lanes. See right here.”

David read the words at the end of her fingertip: ‘Capt. Smith knowingly chose to remain in on the final solution—to remain firm with the cabal that we had unwittingly become—a cabal whose aim was the sudden end of Titanic and the god awful curse aboard her. Like a worm within the folds of a flower.’

Despite his skepticism, qualms, and reservations, David read on to learn from the author of the journal what he could possibly mean by this marginal notation, this medical internist named Declan Irvin who then wrote: ‘Capt. Smith’s features telegraph his internal battle with the horrible decision fate has placed in his hands. Looks as if he might fall from a stroke, he is that hurt.’

David swallowed hard, digesting this bit about Smith in the tight, controlled hand of the author. He then read on: 'I left Detective Ransom and my closest friend, Thomas Coogan with Titanic's chief operations officers who continued to stare at the evidence of this alien creature aboard. Worried about the aged Captain Smith, I escorted the man to his quarters and gave him an elixir for nerves and a brandy—but this only after the stalwart old gentleman had given orders to all officers in his command to destroy Titanic. Before we parted, he looked into my eyes and handed some seven Marconi messages he snatched from his pocket, pushing these on me. I later read the wireless messages and while from separate sources they all had one warning—"Ice Ahead –your position." These I've folded into the back of this journal.'

David flipped to the rear of the journal and sure enough the authentic wireless messages sent to Titanic, messages warning of miles-long rivers of icebergs ahead of them—the actual Marconi messages—stared back at David.

He had to take a deep breath before looking up at Kelly who held out a shot of whiskey. "I know you like it on the rocks."

He accepted the drink and took a long dram, sighing heavily, and saying, "Hold on. You know how I take my whiskey down to my brand—" he indicated the bottle of Jack Daniels on the nightstand where she'd left it—"but you acted as if you didn't know me when you first came on board? What's up with that?"

"All right, I wanted you to chase me so I could get you alone, so as to confide in you, David."

"So I'd give chase, really?"

“Read!” she ordered and he dropped his gaze back onto the pages of the yellowed book and read: ‘Smith had worked out a plan; he put First Officer Murdoch and Second Officer Lightoller in charge of scuttling the mammoth vessel—specifically ramming its bow into the first sizeable iceberg they might encounter. You must understand, we had marched the officers deep into the bowels of the ship to where the freezer compartments were, and there displayed the reason why Titanic must go to the bottom of the sea without a single survivor. At least, that was the plan, but of course, as Robbie Burns reminds us, ‘The best laid plans of mice and men oft go astray’.

Kelly drilled the page with her finger now from where she stood looking over his shoulder. “So you see now, David? Captain Smith goes to bed with some sort of apoplexy or to pray—or whatever he did alone there with God—seven ominous warnings in his possession all about giant icebergs in Titanic’s path, but he orders no slow down, no change of course—full steam ahead into the ice floes. That was Lightoller’s orders, and like Smith, Lightoller and Murdoch were also well aware of the bergs awaiting Titanic’s arrival—and arrive atop them she did!”

“I’ve read in history books that Smith was warned repeatedly, but he must’ve had his reasons...must’ve thought he could make it through. This allusion to some plague on board is not in any documents or books, Dr. Irvin.”

“David, he ordered all but one pair of binoculars confiscated and thrown overboard.”

“There’s nothing in the record to indicate that!”

“The record—the inquests records—state they left port without binoculars, that they forgot them! How lame is that? You don’t build a crow’s nest without a peg for the binoculars.” Her voice rose a few octaves. Realizing this, she stopped herself, obviously frustrated. She then

added, “You just keep reading, David Ingles, and you will have it on good authority—my ancestor—that Smith ordered every pair of binoculars and spyglasses aboard discarded over the side save his own, which he turned over to Murdoch and Lightoller, arming the two poor devils—officers he’d ordered to carry out the terrible job of spotting an iceberg with the intention of—”

“Hold on...are you really suggesting a conspiracy to-to—”

“I’m not suggesting anything; I am stating a fact—a lost fact, lost to history.”

“History indeed!” his tone made it clear how preposterous he thought this discussion had become.

“Captain Edward Smith went to his cabin where he remained in sleep or contemplation of the coming collision—on his orders.”

“No way.”

“He could not know if Lightoller or Murdoch could carry such an order out, or if junior officers below them might balk at their orders. But make no mistake, Captain Smith put the order in motion. His orders.”

“According to the account of this single ancestor of yours?”

“A singular man, he was...yes,” she countered when they heard a noise outside the hatchway. She placed a finger to her lips, and they fell silent. “No one else can know.”

TWELVE

After giving David time to digest what she'd already put forth as the truth of Titanic's end, Kelly slipped her head out into the causeway outside her berth but found no one there. When she closed the hatchway again and turned to David, she saw the disbelief still floating in his eyes.

“And why for God's sake would Smith, a seaman with a spotless record and on his final voyage...on the maiden voyage of the greatest ship ever built to date, intentionally take her to the abyss with so many lives at stake? To engineer a mass murder?”

“Mass sacrifice, if you will. David, there was a disease aboard, a terrible, terrible disease. By this time, she was a plague ship.”

“One man's journal, this Declan Irvin, your great-great grandfather who was aboard the ship—he alone tells the truth?”

“At the time he was a young intern out of Belfast, Northern Ireland where he'd watched Titanic as she was being built in the shipyards there. He and two other men boarded the ship in Southampton in an effort to convince Titanic's captain to quarantine his vessel and to stop her before she could set off toward her eventual grave.”

“Quarantine her in Southampton?”

“To keep her from leaving Great Britain, yes. To understand, you need to read the entire journal, David.”

“Quarantine against this disease you mentioned, eh?”

“A dreaded, terrible disease.”

“A life-threatening disease.”

“No, no—a life-draining disease.”

“Smallpox you mean?”

“Worse than smallpox.”

“Kelly, no disease known to mankind has killed more people than smallpox through the millennia. So what are we talking about? Some precursor to TB?”

“It had no name, David, but it was like...like the Black Plague, let’s say.”

“Black Plague aboard Titanic?”

“Something akin to it, let’s say; at the time, no one had ever seen anything quite like it. It decimated a healthy person within days...hours.”

“Decimated how?” David wondered why he continued to humor her in this mad distortion of Titanic history that was so far from reality that it could not be embraced.

“The disease completely dehydrated its victims—every ounce of fluid in the body consumed...gone, disappeared...as I said, in a matter of hours, and there was no cure, and with this outbreak aboard rampaging, Captain Smith was left with only one horrible solution.”

“The murder of more than a thousand six-hundred souls that we know about? That’s an answer?—whoa, what am I saying— a cure all? This is just plain old nuts. Hey, maybe your ancestor was insane. Ever think of that?”

“Excellent penmanship for a madman.” She tapped the ink-splotted words before him with a rapid-fire index finger banging out a thumping rhythm, a requiem for his discomfort at hearing this story of hers.

“Yeah, well Edgar Allan Poe’s handwriting looked like that of a normal person, too.”

She frowned and threw up her hands, walked about in a tight circle, obviously upset, but she wound up after him again, replying, “This thing, it was and still is incurable, and eventually Titanic was—or would have been—a ghost ship filled with plague on its arrival in New York. My ancestor was an intelligent physician, and he was not an asylum escapee, David. Please, just read the journal. Read page one.”

“Kelly, how can you be sure the good doctor who wrote these words—” he indicated the book in his lap—“wasn’t crazy?”

“Eccentric, yes, insane, no! Declan Irvin survived long enough to write it all down; he was among those who did not get off Titanic; a friend, his closest friend, managed somehow to get aboard one of the few lifeboats.”

“Just under what, twenty lifeboats, less than half filled...” he muttered, recalling his reading of the incident at sea. “707 saved by the lifeboats. Hold on...if the Captain himself ordered the ship scuttled...rammed into a berg the size of a continent, then why would he turn around and order the lifeboats away? It makes no sense.”

“Come on, Dave, you know how chaotic it became...how it turned into a riot. Even those closest to Smith, even those loyal to him, faced with certain death might well have panicked, and in the end, they chose to disregard his orders. Open your mind to the impossible, David, and you might discover the truth.”

“No, sorry, it’s just too implausible and the lifeboats did get away.”

“Yes, yes but not one of them filled, and one literally lost over the side! This done by trained seamen, trained on filling lifeboats and lowering them properly, orderly, in the best of British fashion. There were struggles, fights breaking out.”

“I read the same history, but you’ve got it all twisted round.”

“The first twists came at the two inquests—the lies told at the hearings held on two continents.”

“They did manage to use a third of the seats.”

“Some—some less than a third!”

“All right, I give you that, but they couldn’t get people to take the situation seriously; no one aboard a warm, solid-seeming ship firmly underfoot wants to be put off into a small boat—in scale beside Titanic, the size of a cork.”

“Yes, OK, agreed...scary being awakened and put off and into a lifeboat in a black sea on a cold night. But at the same time, these kinds of stories—they’re what Lightoller claimed at the hearings. It all has become part of the legend, women and children first, all that nonsense, David.”

He could say nothing. Their eyes met, and she pleaded, “David, neither Smith nor his officers trusted all the officers and crew to go along with what they considered their only course of action—and guns had to be broken out to enforce it for fear—”

“Yes, the officers were armed in the end,” he agreed.

“For fear,” she continued, “that the carrier...the plague carrier would get off the ship.”

He took in a deep breath of air and ran his hands through his hair. “But if the lifeboats were launched and hundreds saved, then sinking the ship—this so-called solution—would have failed.”

“It did fail, don’t you see? Failed miserably. Human nature being what it is—hell even Lightoller in the end saved himself rather than end his life, but then so did the ship’s owner, Ismay and others.”

“Lightoller went under; he told the entire horrid story in detail at the hearings. Never changed a word. He very nearly died.”

They fell silent for a long time; he stood and paced but found there was no room for pacing. He continued in the same tone. “People with the disease, they could well have been on the lifeboats. The plan was flawed from the start—if there’s any validity to this journal at all, which I still doubt.”

“Those in the cabal to bring the vessel down, David, they fully expected any boats getting away would be sucked under by the displacement from Titanic’s dive—they expected those in the boats to follow the order to stay close to the ship, close enough that they’d be sucked down with it. They knew the power of the draft it would cause; they had seen how it could sink an ocean liner tied to a dock!”

“They were given orders to remain close in on the ship?”

“To guarantee that everyone aboard go down to the bottom whether aboard or in a lifeboat, yes.”

“And they would have had the crew and officers followed Smith’s orders explicitly, and I suppose that’s in the journal as well?”

“Yes, yes,” she pleaded.

“The crew was given the order to destroy the ship beneath their feet?”

“Declan writes about it in detail in his journal.”

“The cabal, you mean? Please, just tell me what was the plan?”

“Any boats getting off and into the water, the officer aboard, was to venture in close to Titanic’s hull to ostensibly pull other survivors from the frigid sea, but the seamen would know that to remain close to the ship would surely have scuttled all boats hugging Titanic. And historic record bears this out.”

“And historic record bears you out?”

“The inquest in both New York and in London, showed testimony from the survivors; they pleaded with those operating the lifeboats to pull people from the water, that people were pleading for the boats to come back, to return for them but they did not. They couldn’t go through with the plan.”

“The plan again?”

“To hold those boats in beside Titanic, to be sucked under with her, yes. You know very well it’d be a giant vortex of water—a drain. Smith surely expected it with his ship’s going down.”

He nodded. “Not one of the lifeboats came back for survivors in the water until after she went down. True, regardless of the fact men in just under fifty degree water had only ten or fifteen minutes before succumbing to hypothermia.”

He knew it was true—disturbingly so; that it read the same in every account, how the crew members flatly refused to return in the lifeboats to help those in the water—despite the horrible pleas. Those in the water would have been close in on the ship. Returning for them would jeopardize the lifeboats and crewmen would have known this.

Eventually all the survivors, numbering 707, were picked up by a merchant marine ship, the Carpathia, which, hours away, had steamed full-ahead toward the disaster site in hopes of getting to the coordinates early enough to be of service. “So...was this mysterious disease...was it brought on board the Carpathia?” he asked. “Were the survivors deposited in Newfoundland, Canada infected? Any deaths reported aboard Carpathia?”

“No...not in Newfoundland nor New York at that time, that is except for a dog that’d somehow gotten off Titanic.”

“Then perhaps the men of Titanic were successful after all?”

“Not so according to the journal. Thomas Coogan made a few entries from Newfoundland before he disappeared. I fear they did fail, that the plague-carrier slipped through to survive. If he or she did get off the Titanic, it was well-hidden in Newfoundland for some time...either going dormant or hiding in plain sight.”

“Going dormant?”

“Please, keep your voice down,” she said, indicating the door.

Just outside her door, they again heard someone noisily stumbling down the corridor. After a moment, Kelly added, “Now this thing—yes, it is aboard Scorpio now, pretending to be human—aboard, among us! So I can’t trust anyone; if it knew all that I know, I’d be a target for assassination.”

“So you want a fellow target?”

“I need someone I can tell all this to, Dave. It’s tearing me apart.”

He stared long and hard at her and finally whispered, “Just how serious are you about your...this belief in this journal of yours, Kelly?”

“Deadly serious.”

He raised his hands in defeat. “A disease-carrying creature spawning death from stem to stern on Titanic in 1912, and now here with us in 2012 aboard Scorpio? Kelly, it’s impossible to imagine, and now this thing—whatever it is—is hitching a ride back to Titanic for what possible purpose?”

“Harvesting its young. That’s the supposition.”

“Sheeeze. The supposition these many decades according to whom? How can you trust words in a 100-year-old book? It’s fiction.”

“Look, I’ve done research surrounding a number of mysterious deaths that came about in various communities from Newfoundland to Boston and New York in the intervening years. Bodies found with the same result...an identical appearance as those found on Titanic. Look at these documents I’ve uncovered; look at the photos.” She spread additional materials over her desk for his consideration.

Ingles studied the photos in silence for a moment, thinking anything can be photo shopped nowadays, especially with Quasarnet-Adobe2012. “A picture is worth a thousand words,” he finally muttered, staring at the condition of several completely brown, leather-skinned, desiccated bodies. While curiously enthralled by the unusual death photos, he asked, “Aren’t these simply shots of petrified mummies?”

She said in his ear, “Each of them drained of bone marrow, spinal fluid, every ounce of moisture, all gone. Know of any disease that does this to a person gone missing a mere twenty-four hours?”

He shook his head. “I refuse to believe this—” he stabbed a finger at the photo— “drove Smith and crew to-to—” David could not say the words.

“There was only one recourse left them—to sink Titanic because the disease carrier had in essence begun to spawn more of its kind all over the ship.”

“Spawn more of its kind—the carrier—do you realize how incredibly insane all this sounds, Kelly? No matter this...this evidence, these photos. If you so much as whisper a word of it, you’ll never see the inside of Titanic.”

“David, you don’t get it—someone on board this ship—is the descendent of the carrier, and its—his or her—reason for being here is to bring up from Titanic its only progeny.”

“Progeny?” he repeated, his brow scrunched, telegraphing his disbelief.

“Its spawn...its god damned eggs.”

“Eggs? Spawn?”

“For God’s sake, man, I am talking about the resurgence of this parasitic organism we know nothing about. Kane, Forbes, and the others may be in search of treasures in the holds, but this thing...this virulent parasite, it wants its children, and eventually it wants to take over the Earth.”

“I can’t believe—”

“Believe it! It has the potential to wipe out the human race, Dave.”

She put a finger to his lips, as a passing crewman lingered just outside the compartment as if to take note of their banter. They let him pass before going on. “For all we know whoever that was passing by, he could be the...”

“You’re saying it has survived for over a hundred years. Is he some sort of vampire?”
David was on the verge of laughter—again.

“It replenishes itself; it infiltrates the host body, uses it up in slow increments, until it chooses another host, when the earlier host is used up, the corpse left in a state of absolute exsanguination and dehydration.”

“Sang-what?”

“All the blood gone—along with—”

“All bodily fluid, you say.”

“Declan says so, yes, and-and the ME’s who worked on these bodies say so, too, David. This is not some fairytale.” She held up the current day victims. “All liquids drained—down to

the spinal fluid. Look, David, I've seen such a victim at the Boston ME's office. Not even the ME could believe what he was looking at."

"How did you get access to the ME's?"

"Made it my business to get chummy with a guy in the ME's office."

He stood and paced the few feet he had to work with. "Man, I can't believe this."

"I'm sure you'd prefer to have remained ignorant of it, but I have to trust someone."

"Thanks...thanks a lot," he replied in a sarcastic tone.

"You can't not help me, Dave; bodies have cropped up—like I've said—from Canada to New York in enough numbers and in such a mysterious condition that yeah, the authorities and the CDC have taken notice. They just don't know what they're dealing with."

"What notice did they take? I mean when you showed them the journal?"

She hesitated answering. He pushed for a reply. She finally dropped her gaze and said, "I dared not share the journal with them."

He paced. "This is so bizarre....unbelievably ahh...ahh—"

"X-Files, I know! I also know it's a terrible shock, and a great deal to take in at once; you need to read the journal."

He leaned against a wall as if seeking something solid.

"Will you please assure me that I can count on you to watch my back?"

"You intend to combat this thing alone?"

“Oh God, finally...you finally acknowledge there is a threat.”

“Just...just answer the question.”

“Once I determine who on board is the carrier, I’m prepared to kill it.”

“With what? How?”

“An experimental weapon.”

“Experimental? You don’t have a clue then, do you?”

“Not entirely, no. But I know from Declan’s journal that it can’t stand cold. Still, I admit, liquid Freon is not always at hand.” She indicated a canister of Freon in her duffle bag, and he examined it.

“This is the same stuff used by dermatologists to kill ring worms under the skin.”

“That’s right. Manufactured by Johnson & Johnson.”

“It’d take you some time to get this operational and pointed.” It came in a canister with a puncturing tube to insert in the spray head, much like WD-40 oil but there was no using this stuff without inserting the tube. A person could be overpowered before she got the thing working.

“You might do better with mace,” he offered.

“Whatever we use, I can’t do this alone.”

“We now is it?”

“Yes, we! David, I need you desperately.”

“In another context, I’d take that as a wonderful thing but this....Kelly, why me, why burden me with this?”

“From infancy, I’ve learned to read people, and I get nothing but positive vibes coming from you, and you look me in the eyes when you speak.”

“That’s it?”

“I’m a student of body language, the unspoken gesture; I find you sincere and easy to read.”

“Are you saying I’m easy?”

“Confess, before this, you just wanted to get into my pants, but now you don’t want to take advantage of the mentally challenged, right?”

“Hold on...I just wanted to get to know you.”

“Now you’re lying.” She smiled and slapped his shoulder. “Come clean.”

“Well, of course, I had thoughts.”

“I’m flattered, but your attention held no evil, ulterior motive—just sex on your mind, eh sailor?”

“OK, I can’t deny it, but why not? I’m single, you’re single—you are single, aren’t you?”
His eyes met her emerald irises.

“Yes, I am single.”

“And you kissed me, remember, and you invited me here to your room, as I recall.”

“I did, and I stand guilty of manipulating you.”

“I confess I’d been wanting to hear that invitation to your cabin since we boarded, but now...”

“It’s important you get the full story, David; of all the divers, I chose you to watch my back—I trust you alone.”

“So now what?”

“You need to read the journal! Read Declan’s words, I implore you.” She poured him a second drink.

He started reading the 1912 journal from page one.

THIRTEEN

Tim McAffey’s dead features were intact beneath the bark-hardened exterior, at least enough to identify him, and still no sign of the other man, Francis. Also lying here was the mysterious, ancient wolf-like creature with its enormous haunches and hair as thick and matted as a woolly mammoth. The creature was stiff as old tree bark. It looked like a once muscular, energy-charged, huge, long dead and dehydrated beastie of fable.

All this lay before them. Thomas Coogan had returned with his professor and mentor, Dr. Enoch Bellingham and a tall, imposing Chief Inspector Ian Reahall.

Reahall quickly sized up the situation as Ransom studied him and the professor. Bellingham looked uncomfortable, shaky—his thin frame hardly capable of holding his coat on

his shoulders. In fact, the good doctor, perhaps in his late fifties, looked sickly and appeared somewhat corpse-like himself, but he at least had his color. Dr. Bellingham or Dr. B as everyone was calling him tentatively knelt over McAffey's desiccated body.

Ransom quickly concluded that Reahall, a man slightly larger than Ransom himself and looking like he enjoyed three meals a day, was most assuredly given to a bad habit he'd found in most police investigators—a preference for wild conjecture over fact. Ransom recalled fashioning the facts to fit the crime; it was a dangerous practice and could lead a man down a primrose lane faster than falling down a rabbit hole.

“Enoch,” Reahall said to Dr. Bellingham and Ransom noted the two were on a first name basis. “The dead man must have been attacked by the missing O’Toole who appears to’ve used a blow torch as his weapon to so disfigure a man! You know, the sort used at the shipyards by the riveters and steel workers.”

While it sounded just dandy, Ransom knew the local constable was drawing at straws and hoping for quick corroboration from the doctor.

“We find O’Toole,” continued Reahall, “and by God, we find the weapon, case closed.” Reahall’s self-assured tone had the effect of getting a nod from everyone except Ransom and Declan, and why not? It answered the unsettling thoughts, the unfamiliar odors, and unheard of sights before them; in a word it made sense—converted the unknown to the known and so fended off unreasonable fear.

Usually a good approach, but in this case, Ransom knew better, and so he guessed, did Declan. The details simply did not fit with Reahall’s ‘facts’. Still, the others quickly grasped at the proffered straw.

“And what of the beast?” asked Ransom with a kick at the animal corpse which he immediately regretted as he shouted in pain shooting through his toe. Once he regained his composure, he said to his Belfast counterpart, “Constable, really how can a torch do this kind of damage to a man? It’s not burns; you’d smell the flesh if it’d been caused by fire. This is something I’ve never encountered, sir. Have you? Have you really?”

“I know of you, sir. Mr. Private Detective, and I know you were once yourself on the Pinkerton payroll—as strike breaker, correct?”

Like most men, Reahall’s tone made it clear that a strike breaker was a creature of the lowest depths, worthy only of contempt, but Ransom had only hired on in Edinburgh XX for a month so as not to starve. The Constable’s done some digging about, like a pig at truffles, Ransom thought but said, “Wyland, sir, Wyland’s the name, but that’s hardly the question before us, inspector.”

“Constable...here in Belfast it is constable. I understand until recently a select few detectives in Chicago were called inspectors—masters at their work, I understand?”

Ransom fought an urge to scratch his ear or head, thinking if not careful down to each word that this man smelling of cheap cologne had him dead-to-rights. “I wouldn’t know about that, Constable!” He gave out with a laugh. “A-And no, sir, never with the Pinkertons.”

“I have a report of a Wyland in County Cork at a mine there working for the Pinkertons.”

“I applied once, but flatly turned down. Something about my drinking turned up in a background check, and those Pinkerton executives are sorely conservative fellows. Wouldn’t have the likes of me, no sir, so—” he continued to fabricate. “No, me...I’m just a private

investigator—rather poor one at that these many years. Work for hire, work for citizens who need a wee bit of help is all—like the lads here.” He indicated Declan and Thomas.

“Ahh, provide a bit’o muscle from time to time, eh?”

“Leverage...clout when needed.”

“Yes, clout it is, I see,” replied Reahall, a man Ransom’s height and girth. Ransom imagined it would be a close fight between them in a ring or back alley. “There’s now a fourth missing man too close on for comfort.” Reahall indicated to Ransom to step off with him to speak in relative privacy.

“Another man gone missing?”

“Yes, well, not a man so much as a Pinkerton agent!” Reahall laughed at his own joke before calming enough to continue. “Man’s name is Tuttle. One of a handful guarding Titanic at holding slip 401. Harry Tuttle—ever any dealings with him?”

“Tuttle, Tuttle? Hmmm...no, can’t say as I have.”

“Tuttle?” gasped Thomas, overhearing. “Declan, you remember—”

“Tuttle, yes, the night Uncle went missing, this fellow Tuttle was at the forecastle. Shooed us off from where we stood at the base of the ship near the open cargo hold.”

“You spoke to him?” asked Reahall.

“Yes, I mean no but—”

“Which is it Coogan?”

“I mean, we told him we were looking for my uncle.”

Declan added, “We were about to step onto the ship in search of Mr. Fiore when Tuttle threatened us.”

“Threatened you?” Reahall grew excited at the term.

“He had two others with guns all pointing, so we got out of there fast.”

“Did Tuttle look upset, make any strange remarks, what?” pressed Ransom.

“We couldn’t really see him or read him,” replied Thomas.

“He was on the topmost deck and we on the dock,” explained Declan. “And it was dark.”

“I argued with him.” Thomas waved his hands in the air. “He called my uncle a drunk.”

Declan leaped in with, “Tuttle said he thought the watchman might be at the nearest watering hole as he put it, implied since Thomas’ uncle was Irish, he’d be after a drink—along with all the other Paddy’s.”

“He said that?” asked Ransom.

“Something to that effect, yes. Implied a lot.”

“And you boys got angry and argued with him?” asked Reahall.

“I pulled Thomas off, and we went searching elsewhere for his Uncle Anton.”

“Searching where?”

“His house, hoping he’d gone home to bed, thinking him perhaps unwell.”

“I see.” Reahall rubbed his chin, striking a pose, looking thoughtful. “And next thing we know, Tuttle is gone as well...and no one has seen or heard from O’Toole. I arrested O’Toole a couple of times for drunk ’n’ disorderly. I warrant the man is somehow behind this mystery.”

“Unless he, like the others, is a victim,” suggested Ransom.

“Four men gone missing...” muttered Declan. “All in a matter of one night.”

“I presume you interviewed the other Pinkerton agents?” asked Ransom of Reahall.

“Agents are rough men, often hired for their transgressions and brought into the fold. Some have been known to go bad once they’re given a spot of power and a gun.”

“A falling out among the scum, eh?” said Reahall. “I suppose you know all about that, being from Chicago.”

“Boston, actually. As for Chicago, I have found it no worse than any other major city, including Irish cities; each having its underbelly.”

“So now that you have your start here at the mine in searching for Fiore,” replied Reahall, taking another tack with Ransom, “where might you go next to locate the missing watchman or O’Toole for that matter?”

Ransom continued huddled with Reahall. “If there is a connection between Fiore and O’Toole, perhaps the shipyard is the place to continue,” suggested Ransom. “401 –Titanic as of now a fourth man’s gone missing from this general locale. Tuttle was guarding the ship, Fiore guarding the yard, McAffey in a sense, being a super, was by definition a guard at the mine.”

Reahall beamed at the direction Ransom was taking now. “Shades of anarchy at work, you surmise?”

“It would be my first guess—if not for the elephant in the room.”

“You mean the beast here?” Reahall pointed a boot at the animal carcass.

“If it weren’t for that and the condition of McAffey’s body, I’d definitely be rounding up suspected and known anarchists about now, yes.”

“You are a policeman at heart—a detective in Boston, you say?”

“I was a private detective there,” he lied atop the lie. He’d only passed through Boston on his way to taking a berth on a merchant marine bound for Ireland after his escape from Chicago.

“Suppose our anarchists have some new chemical they’ve doused McAffey and some pony-sized stray dog with? Something that blackens the skin and turns it hard?”

“Yes, these anarchists—least the ones I encountered in Boston—they were always seeking to find new types of explosives and chemical weapons, true. True indeed. Knew one fellow who had cultured a batch of smallpox, but I know of no such chemical that could kill a man so surely as this. Why look at these two! What could’ve done this? To leave a man like this?” Ransom indicated McAffey’s horrid remains. “Do you, Constable Reahall know of any chemical form of combustion to do this?”

“Acid perhaps?” Reahall looked to Dr. Bellingham for an answer, but Dr. B was once again mesmerized by what his eyes were taking in. It took Reahall shaking the man to bring him to reply. “Yes, yes...well...we need to view the man’s entire body sans clothing to make any intelligent guesswork. As to an estimate of time of death, given the petrified nature of the exterior.... I mean it has gone from seeming like tanned hide to a rocklike texture just since I’ve arrived—and a likely corresponding dehydration of the interior makes any estimate sheer folly.”

Bellingham was clearly out of his element and dazed.

“I mean the discoloration is so damnably uniform about the face and hands and forearms. I suspect if we cut away his shirt...”

Declan finished for Dr. B, saying, “The blackened skin will likely cover the man’s entire frame. Isn’t that right, Dr. B?”

“I’ll ask the questions here,” Reahall said, anxious to control the uncontrollable. He then looked into Bellingham’s eyes and said, “Well then, Enoch, cut away the man’s clothes and let’s have a look, shall we?”

But Bellingham seemed no more anxious to touch the dead man than did Reahall, and no one could blame him.

Declan snatched out a scalpel from a double-thick leather sleeve clipped to an inside pocket of his tweed jacket. Both jacket and scalpel had been given him by his father—a surgeon back in his home town in Wales. XX As a result, Declan carried the scalpel on him at all times, and so now holding its gleaming surface up to everyone’s eyes, he asked Dr. Bellingham, “Would you like me to do the honors, sir?”

Bellingham stammered, “Ahhh...well, son...Declan...”

“I’ve already handled both corpses, sir; if it’s contagious, I’m already dead—along with Mr. Wyland and likely Thomas as well.”

Bellingham took a deep breath. “Yes...by all means, Mr. Irvin, do cut away the clothing. Let us have a look at the chest. You there, man, hold the lantern closer.”

Walter McComas did as asked, no questions, his beaked nose like a snapping turtle, his frame that of a scarecrow.

Declan kneeled and began cutting away the miner's shirt to reveal his chest. "Uniform discoloration...no splotches, no isolated patches, and the cloth itself fully intact. "Whatever this is...it didn't come about by a torch or acid thrown on the man or even a bomb blast; this discoloration, sir comes from within—"

"Enough, Declan," ordered Bellingham. "We can't do any further medical examination here in the dark."

"Understood, sir, but—"

"Declan, Mr. Irvin, we need the body transported to our lab at the hospital morgue—the one devoted to Queens, gentlemen. I'll send the napper-man 'round."

"A horse butcher?" asked Ransom, astounded. "Would you tell the man's wife that her husband's body was carted about on a butcher's wagon?"

"The napper doubles as our body man," said Thomas, shrugging and frowning.

"For corpses, you see, to work on...at the morgue, you see, for surgical study," added Declan as if informing a child.

Reahall slapped Ransom on the shoulder and said, "What you fellows in Chicago call a John or Jane Doe, we designate as A. N. Other; any unidentified body found dead in the gutter or dead of mysterious causes—and this certainly qualifies—goes for dissection and studies like your John Doe types."

“Boston, man. I am from Boston.”

“But wait, sirs, this man is known,” piped up Walter who’d remained respectfully quiet, holding the lantern, keeping a certain distance from the educated men. “He’s no ‘Nother’ for your dissections! The miners hear of you cutting on McAffey, you’ll have a riot on your hands, for sure.”

“Hold on there, big fella,” said Reahall, a hand going up; this followed by a near imperceptible signal for two uniformed Belfast coppers to step forward out of the waiting shadows to lend a hand and to keep Walter in his place. “You can send one of my men to fetch the napper,” he told Bellingham.

“He’s not far,” said Declan, back on his feet. “Name is Mitchem...lives in the back alleyway near where Grovesnor meets Hilltop End just past Falls Road.”

“Aye, that’s the place,” added Thomas, “and you need only ask anyone in the neighborhood and they’ll point it out.”

Constable Reahall ordered one of his men off on the errand. “You’ll do your best then to determine cause of death, Dr. Bellingham?” Reahall’s rhetorical question hung in the air for a long moment until Bellingham met his eye and slowly nodded. Ransom recognized the unspoken signal—that the constable as with the napper-man would get a kickback on the corpse.

“The lads and I will find an answer,” replied Bellingham. It’s a medical mystery to be sure, and we love a good mystery—don’t we lads?”

“Ol’ Mitchem’ll find some use for that damnable dog, too,” added Reahall, laughing as if picturing the napper at a meal. “Might make a nice meal for Ol’ Mitch, eh?” he asked Bellingham.

Bellingham only frowned and replied, “I think it best he haul the thing along with the bodies to our refrigerated units at the dissection theater back of the hospital, and from there, we’ll get it to one of the furnaces at the steel works. Burn the damnable thing along with the bodies if need be.”

“I should think he’d best burn it where it lies,” said Declan. “For all we know it’s riddled with disease.”

“Your decision, sir,” replied Declan, “but whatever’s to be done with this creature hauled from the mine, every precaution should be taken as it may well be riddled with a disease.”

“What sort of disease?” asked Reahall.

“We have no idea, not yet,” replied Declan.

“Black plague?”

“Too soon to tell,” Bellingham intervened quickly. “We’ve not seen the like of it in our life time—whatever it is brought these men so suddenly to death.”

While the others debated such matters, Ransom imagined this fellow Mitchem, likely a body snatcher as well as a horse butcher, and the silent tacit agreement among these medical men and the authorities; he imagined how Bellingham paid dearly for Reahall to look the other way whenever he got a new body at the university for dissection—a homeless without family or ties normally snatched not from the grave but from the gutter. His greatest contribution to his race

coming in death by repeated, passive teaching—teaching surgery to such good young men as Thomas Coogan and Declan Irvin.

“You damn ghouls!” Walter suddenly shouted. “Goons! You can’t have McAffey to cut ’im open in that morgue! He’s to be buried proper and in one piece!”

“We’ll not dissect the man nor misuse his body!” countered Bellingham. “I promise you, we’ll only run some tests on his blood and fluids, Mister...mister...”

“McComas, your honorable sir...and I will come looking for you if there’s a mark on him!”

“That’s enough, McComas,” said Reahall raising a club and adding, “One more word of disrespect, and you can spend the night in my jail! I won’t have ya threatening the good doctor or these lads.”

“Make sure the napper hauls both bodies to the Mater when he gets here,” Bellingham said to Reahall. “We’ll want to compare the blood and fluids.”

Since his arrival in Belfast, Ransom had learned of every back alleyway, studying the lay of the city for the day when he must run, a day sure to come...and perhaps it already had given this trouble. For now he slipped away from the others and this mess he’d become entangled with, a mess that had to drag in the authorities. As he silently disappeared, he thought of the two medical residents who’d hired him. He also thought as he made his way back to his small rented apartment of how often he heard the common phrase about these streets: ‘You go to dah maeter to find out what is dah matter’ referring to the Mater Infirmorum Hospital.

He heard this phrase almost as often as the word ‘hello’ here; he heard it whenever someone in a shop, a café, or a pub complained of an ailment. In this area of the city where the hospital resided, everyone knew it as Mother-of-the-Sick, but the Latin word Mater was interchangeably pronounced as ‘mae-ter and matt-er’.

Again his thoughts returned to his clients, the two students at the hospital, which he recalled as founded in 1883; he knew too that it’d been modernized in 1900 and had some major improvements three years ago such as dormitories for the students, and while it stood in the midst of a socially and economically deprived part of the city, it welcomed fresh, young gentlemen working to become doctors and surgeons. The hospital was not far from the center of commerce here and the wharves. Mater was often caught up in community tensions during the time of ‘The Troubles’ as the locals called open religious warfare between Protestant and Catholics—both of whom lived side-by-side in the surrounding streets. Mater had begun to take on the power of a symbol of stability in this unsure place, leading by example, turning away no one from their door—despite political leanings, and as a result the place had become famous for dealing with gunshot wounds as well! True too of Victoria Hospital across town. Mater had only three years ago become a teaching center, receiving students from Queens University.

“Those boys,” he said aloud to the dark streets as he walked through a shroud of fog for his current home, “have to admire them their youth and their goals.” They reminded him of young Gabby back in Chicago, Dr. Jane Tewes’ daughter for her determination to become a surgeon like her mother before her. He fantasized for a moment of enticing Jane and Gabriel to Belfast to work and teach at this place named Mother of the Sick.

“You may count on it as surely as rain falls in Spain, doctor,” Constable Ian Reahall was saying while looked about for the mysterious private investigator, Wyland, only to realize he’d slipped away into the shadows. “Damn that man,” Reahall muttered in anger, but he recalled what Wyland—if that was his actual name—had said about going to Slip 401, to Titanic for a look around the yards there. “You can all wait for the napper; I am off to catch this fellow Wyland late of Boston, indeed.”

Reahall’s sarcasm made Declan wonder what he could mean; he shrugged in Thomas’ direction, but Thomas only looked away, a sick look painting his features.

“Nothing more to be done tonight, lads...ah gentlemen,” began Bellingham. “You two are way beyond curfew and bedtime. Get some rest, and we’ll sort this affair out the in light of day.”

FOURTEEN

David Ingles awoke, finding himself in a sitting position, upper torso lying over Declan Irvin’s detailed and stunning journal. Dry-mouthed and exhausted, he looked over his shoulder to where Kelly Irvin softly moaned in her sleep, and for a moment, he studied her features where she lay in her clothes. She looked so lovely and so normal, he thought and offered a prayer for a millisecond that it had all been a bad dream—her crazy story. It felt good to hope for this up till the moment of fully recalling Declan Irvin’s journal; it all came rushing in at him again, vividly gripping, the intern’s voice so compelling, so sure, so authentic until the tale had enraptured David so completely until sleep had forced him to stop reading. Thus the final truth of the sinking of the unsinkable Titanic—whatever that truth might be—sank now into his befuddled mind.

Most assuredly many tenacious reservations and doubts held sway. A part of his mind kept fencing with it, doing battle, disbelieving, but then the disbelief was suspended when he recalled Irvin's details to this point, not to mention Kelly's strange saber tooth and her certainty that the Titanic's captain and crew had acted with intent...had actually planned to take her to the bottom of the Atlantic. With good reason...due to some disease organism on board. Men who ought to be heroes of their day had come to the conclusion that Titanic could not find any other home than on the ocean floor—to freeze this Black Plague-like organism running rampant on the ship. Could it truly be that a secret cabal aboard Titanic was set on this course? That they actually scuttled her? Logic told him it was impossible.

The lookout in the crow's nest, Frederick Fleet, and the officers on deck, turned her bow into that now famous iceberg and rammed the mountain of ice. Meantime, below decks, the chief engineer—acting under direct orders of Captain Smith—opened up the bulkheads built to be sealed off at the ceiling ensuring each compartment below the water line would fill in succession with the cold Atlantic. The controls, after all, to seal off these compartments, were on the bridge! At the captain's disposal.

These same officers and crewmen, according to pages that he had skipped ahead to, opened large bilge tubes to speed up the process of taking on water after she struck the iceberg. In fact, men were knocked down while officers above managed to veer the ship off the spur of the iceberg, the lowest deck shaking earthquake fashion.

On the one hand, it was all too fantastic to swallow, yet on the other the detailed account rang such a convincing bell; it sounded so honest.

For now, Ingles had to slip out of here unnoticed and hope that Bowman hadn't missed him—likely an impossibility. Kelly moaned in her sleep, and he imagined her having vivid dreams for certain if she believed everything in her ancestor's journal. Wildly insane dreams really if she believed that someone aboard Scorpio today was the descendant of some alien creature supposedly escaped from a prehistoric beast buried in a mine shaft. Then the supposed thing hitched a 'ride' as any parasite in nature does via a carrier, in this case a human host, on board the Titanic? Yeah sure, he thought. Only to survive the sinking of Titanic and leave some weird egg-sacs it'd laid—and now it was back? And finally, that it had the potential to destroy all of humanity?

If Kelly truly believed the 'facts' laid out in the 1912 journal, she might well endanger Scorpio's mission and everyone aboard. 'Beware the man—or woman—of one book' warned some forgotten philosopher in David's head.

David hesitated at the door, wondering if he should not take the journal with him, wrap it in a girly magazine and read more during the day. He glanced outside; some people moving about down the corridor. He ducked back inside, decided to take the journal, and then considered the larger question now galloping through his fevered mind: Shall I continue to read this journal or turn it over to Swigart and Forbes? Let them deal with Dr. Irvin and her crazy agenda? Is she psychotic or suffering from delusions of grandeur? Either way, they'll put her off Scorpio...and she'd no longer be my problem.

Then he recalled that she had worked with Forbes years before; how long had she lived with this plan to disrupt Dr. Juris Forbes' expedition, a mission taking years to fund, organize, and get started? Her cover for being on board now appeared a sure infiltration, but how radical

might she become—if she didn't get her own way? Had her plans been ongoing for three years? Four years? For the better part of her life? Was she OCD on this subject or just insane? Maybe an insanity gene ran in her family. This seemed more logical than this next question: suppose the disease carrying parasitic monster did exist? Suppose she was the one infected? What if she were possessed of this so-called sentient, blood-sucking, parasite leech without a name? What if it had simply chosen her family to take root in through the generations? Why not?

One thing was for certain. She needed help, but not from David Ingles. She needed the best shrink money could buy. Her ancestor creates this HP Lovecraft-styled nightmare fantasy about what happened aboard Titanic, offering this crazy story, and she buys it hook, line, and sinker? Fine but David Ingles' mama raised no fools.

She rolled over onto her side, still deep in slumber. "Crazy beautiful creature," he muttered, grabbed up the journal, and with a deep breath, he stepped out into the passageway. There he came face to face with Lena Gambio and Will Bowman who seemed in high spirits. Their conversation ceased suddenly and each stared from David to Kelly's room and back again.

"Looks like you're not the only one got lucky last night, Bowman," Lena said, punched Will in the arm with a solid blow, and rushed ahead for the galley, saying, "I need that coffee, man."

Bowman, a sure look of guilt on his black face, said, "Hey, man. Woke up, found you gone, took a stroll on deck, and Lena and me...we got to talking. Know how it is? It's been a while."

"Yeah, I understand." Ingles kept the book at his side.

Bowman glanced at Kelly's closed door, lifted his chin and smiled. "Guess you couldn't sleep either, eh bro?"

"No...too excited about the dive to Titanic."

"Listen, man, you got my back, I got yours. Deal?"

"Deal. Say that coffee smells good."

"On my way, too."

"Let me just stow this." David snatched open their shared compartment door. "Catch up to you in a minute."

"Reading the sailor's bible, eh? Moby Dick?"

"Rhyme of the Ancient Mariner," he lied, "freakin' first edition Dr. Irvin has. We ahhh talked all night about it. Seems we share a taste for classic lit."

"Yeah, right...talked books, got it...sure! Later then." He gave Ingles a jumping thumbs up, obviously certain that David had done more than discuss poetry with Dr. Irvin. He finished with a fist-bump and a toothy grin before rushing off to catch up with Lena.

David had no problem translating the salacious grin on his dive partner's face; it'd spoken volumes as Bowman had turned to make his way toward mid-ship and the galley. David heard his mutterings and laughter, his body language clearly accepting the fact that the bosses, not even Swigart, could keep human nature in line.

David saw Mendenhall who'd just then come out of his compartment. He'd been masked by Bowman until Will had passed the other diver. Jacob gave David that evil eye of his, a cold

stare, studying him acutely and likely curious about both the book in David's hand and why the look on David's face. Had Jacob also seen him exiting Irvin's cabin. No knowing smirk from Jacob and none expected, no laughter or thumbs up or any gesture whatsoever—just that examining eye.

David decided that if Jacob knew anything Lou Swigart would have him on the carpet by noon, and then people would really be talking. Was his secret rendezvous already out? If so, it would spread throughout the ship. “Damn,” he muttered to himself while watching Mendenhall's back as the taller man followed in Bowman's wake, heading to the galley, David assumed.

Moments later, David slipped into his room and tucked the journal deep below his bunk. He undressed and wrapped himself in a robe. Shortly, he exited and went to the showers, waving at other crewmen, a TV news cameraman and reporter Craig Powers. They had met the day before, but David now waved him off any thought of an interview and instead by ducking into the tight space of the shower room. He imagined himself at the center of a cellblock murder, feeling claustrophobic as there was only one way in and one way out. He replayed the shower scene in *Psycho*, Hitchcock's black and white thriller—which he'd read in its original as Robert Bloch's novel *XX*—only now in his paranoid imaginings, the victim in the shower was him!

As a result, he rushed through the shower.

Toweling off, about to exit the showers, he turned to find Kelly, her jaw set, standing in his way. She tossed his robe at him, and he quickly covered himself. “You have no right to have taken the journal without my knowledge, Dave. What're you thinking? To turn me in? Have me booted off the boat?”

“It crossed my mind, yeah, but I’m reserving judgment until I can finish the...uh, narrative,” he only half lied as during his shower, he felt more and more compelled to read on.

“Where is it, David? Where the hell’d you put it? Damn you!”

“Hold on! Easy, Kel, it’s in a safe place.”

“Where? There is no safe place for an object like that.”

“My room; I didn’t want people to get the wrong idea—snuck out early and I wanted to keep reading.”

Her angry features softened. “You should’ve wakened me.”

“You were sleeping soundly and—”

“I can’t be exposed on this, David; it’s our only chance, and we have no chance if that...that killer aboard knows we are onto it.”

“I think I’m already exposed,” he tried to make light of it, looking down at his bare chest, the robe now tied snugly about him.

“Sorry but I feared the worst—that you’d already turned me in.”

He raised both arms in a gesture of defeat.

“I’m out of here. Read the rest of the journal, please, before you make the worst mistake of your life.” She rushed out.

“Will do,” he promised, his voice trailing after her.

But David wasn't sure he believed it himself. He had a great deal to weigh up, and if news got out that he and Irvin had had secret rendezvous aboard, he had no doubt that Swigart would send them both packing.

After dressing, David made his way topside; he needed air and a look at the sea—a balm that always refreshed his mind. That saber tooth kept returning to his thoughts like an evil talisman, but he knew that Kelly might've picked it up in the backroom of any museum of natural history in America. But for now he felt a clawing familiar claustrophobia at the back of his mind that began creeping along his skin and every pore; a feeling that everything was closing in on him including time, a feeling he'd experienced only once before—with Terry's death deep inside that sub in the Sea of Japan.

Topside the sea breeze, sunshine, and ocean spray filled his senses and conspired to make what he had learned from the Irvin journal more absurd than he had earlier thought. The cool light of day could have that effect along with a cool breeze on a freshly showered sailor. In fact, it often felt nature was the best teacher, and her lessons were not lost on this sun-drenched deck in the middle of the ocean where the loveliness of this day argued for calm, steady, and perfectly sane seas. It argued for him to sit down with Swigart, Irvin's 'evidence' in hand, and lay it all out for him.

But he'd promised Kelly, and aside from barging into the men's room—and this wild story of some alien disease aboard Titanic—she seemed sane, calm, and as sure as the sea, the sun, moon and stars. Perhaps I should just lie low, he cautioned himself. Remain in my compartment—away from her...and pray any rumors might die before they take hold. Take the coward's way out. He now muttered, "Never said I was a hero."

He knew a lot depended on the other male divers, Will Bowman and Jacob Mendenhall in particular; they'd both seen him exiting Kelly's room as had Lena, and all three had assumed that which most anyone might. He trusted Lena to keep it to herself. There seemed something positive in her passing look. Most certainly, she probably liked gossip as much as the next person, but David guessed otherwise when it came to matters of the heart. On the other hand, Bowman, and possibly Mendenhall, would be unable to keep their mouths shut.

He decided to grab a couple of biscuits from the galley and return to his room to hibernate there and perhaps read on; to be honest with himself, and despite his doubts about the authenticity of the journal, the story did have a certain allure in and of itself—absurd as it was! Still, it somehow compelled him to find out—according to Declan Irvin—what happened next?

After all, once Titanic left Belfast for the open sea, it was run through a series of tests before arriving at Southampton, England, and a few days interval would have elapsed. If those men of 1912 had suspected something aboard, something unnatural and horrible, then why did they wait until it was too late to quarantine the ship before thousands of men, women, and children boarded her and began the journey to America?

Perhaps the answers rested in the pages he had yet to read and digest.

Before he could get below to the galley, however, Kelly again found him, asking “Have you seen Dr. Alandale? Where's Alandale?” The sound of the ship coursing over the surface of the sea softened her shouting. She shaded her eyes against the brilliant sun.

“Alandale? I dunno. Haven't seen him since...well since you fawned all over him when you boarded.”

“Fawned all over him?” She gave him another angry look. “What’re you talking about, Dave?”

“You are one damn good actress, Dr. Irvin. I thought you were a groupie about to ask him for his autograph.”

“I do have one of his books in my bags for his signature; I wasn’t acting, Dave.”

“Then you are a groupie?”

“I hold a degree in Oceanography, but you know that. I’ve read every word Alandale ever put to paper. Haven’t you?”

Something in the way she delivered her last words made him wonder. “You’ve had quite an unusual career trajectory, Kelly. Straight from being a filing clerk for Forbes to Dr. Irvin.”

“Oceanography was required to keep on top of what was going on with Titanic exploration; I knew the French expedition, for instance, could not get to those things inside Titanic, but I learned early on about the breakthrough with LO2—and then I knew.”

“Knew? Knew what?”

“Knew that the thing my great-great grandfather tried to destroy...if it got off Titanic as I’ve surmised—and as he feared it might—that it would be watching for any chance to get at its prize! Those eggs it—that thing—left on board when Titanic went down.”

Suddenly, Swigart’s voice broke into their conversation. “You two look like you’re on a g’damn honeymoon; I hope you’re keeping it professional, people. Already have to keep my eye on Bowman and Gambio.”

She turned abruptly. “Talking protocol, sir. Want to make sure we work as a team,” she lied. “Keeping it professional,” she tossed his words back and added, “Making sure we have our hand signals down in case anyone loses audio.” She allowed her hands to do a bit of dance before Swigart, sending him a mock distress signal—indicating strangulation by noose, tongue lolling, all of which made Lou laugh like a kid. David again thought how adept she was at manipulating men...and at lying.

“But you’re doing it in isolation; you have a third team member,” quarreled Swigart, “and there’s a separate team of three others you’ll rotate with...so this doesn’t look good—”

“My fault, sir,” David jumped in. “I...I followed Dr. Irvin here,” he now lied. “Wanted to ask her a couple of questions about her inside knowledge of our captain, sir, as Dr. Irvin has worked with him previously, sir.”

“Is that right, Mr. Ingles?”

“Yes, sir.”

“I see...well.” Swigart looked sternly at the two of them. “Be sure to keep it professional then, and carry on.” Swigart moved on, and Kelly and David exchanged a look that said ‘close call’.

Still, David wondered at Swigart’s choice of words—‘carry on’. Did he mean it as the normal phrase among sailors? Or was it a jibe or a warning? “Yes sir, thank you,” he called out to Swigart as the man decreased in size going away from them.

Swigart started with a yelp that David at first thought to be a reply, but it was anything but. The older seaman had slipped on a slick of oil, and he went down on one knee, saying, “What the hell?”

The others rushed to help Swigart to his feet; the big man was asking, “What’d I step in? There shouldn’t be any oil on deck. Where’s this leak coming from?”

“Appears to be coming from the seals to the winch, else it’s coming from SLOS, XX the submersible,” said David, among those helping him to his feet.

“Damn, that’s bad either way if it’s the case.” The supersonic L02 -equipped submersible was state-of-the-art, equipped with the most highly sensitive tracking devices and global positioning system on the planet, and the thing cost more than Scorpio IV and her three previous sister ships combined. It could uncomfortably accommodate up to twelve people on a dare; eight far more reasonably. Meanwhile, thanks to new technology, SLOS could remain submerged indefinitely—as with any nuclear powered sub, but while its electronics were operated from a nuclear reactor, its propulsion was, in a sense, low tech—a thing of beauty as it mimicked the method of propulsion found naturally in much of undersea life.

“It could sabotage the whole operation.” David’s accusing eyes met Kelly’s, and she slowly shook her head as if to say she had nothing to do with it. Dave asked, “Who would have enough know how to remove a seal from such a mechanism?”

“Alandale and his crew of engineers; they know every inch.” Swigart looked around as if to take note of every crewman near the winch and SLOSSIE, as the team had dubbed her.

“We were just talking about Alandale,” said Kelly, pushing back a strand of hair, “and wondering where he might have gone; no one has seen him, and I’ve been asking around.”

“Come to think of it, I’ve not seen him either this morning,” replied Swigart, “and we’ve had a crewman go missing as well—a fellow named Houston Ford. Fear is he went overboard in the night.”

“This other man, Ford?” asked David. “Was he on Alandale’s engineering crew?”

Lou nodded. “Tech savvy fellow, yeah. Likeable heavysset, bearded, hair as long as a pirate—you know that Jack Sparrow look that I despise.”

“Oh, yeah...dreadlocks and ponytail,” said Kelly. “I noticed him last night. Thought he was skulking about.”

“Who’s had time to meet the entire crew?” David shrugged.

“I’ll put out a call on the PA for Alandale. He’s got to be here somewhere.”

Swigart went in the opposite direction he’d been heading, going for the bridge where he could put out an APB of sorts to direct Alandale to the bridge. He wanted to get to the bottom of the ominous oil slick on deck, and to get repairs underway before they lost time.

Just then David noticed what Kelly was staring at, and he shouted, “Hold on, Lou,” shouted David, waving him back. Look here.” He pointed to a space behind an overhanging lifeboat on davits. Someone else stepped in the oil other than you, and obviously failed to report it.”

Swigart and Kelly stared at the boot print outlined in oil. “A size smaller than mine,” Lou muttered. “Good catch, Ingles.”

“Not me, the detective here spotted it. “He pointed to Kelly.”

“Oh, well then, good eye, Dr. Irvin.”

“There’s a pattern to every boot and shoe; you find a match to these indents and swirls,” she replied, “and you might have your saboteur.”

“If it proves to be sabotage and not simply a breakdown, and if we have to, we’ll search every man aboard to find the oil-stained matching shoe. But who’d intentionally sabotage the mission? And why?”

Again David shared a quick look between himself and Kelly that Swigart, usually an extremely observant man, missed. But David chalked it up to Lou’s being distracted by the oil leak as well. The leak appeared to be coming from the swivel arm of the davit that was to take the submersible to a position to lower it into the water, but not without hydraulic fluid.

“Who aboard this vessel would do such a thing?” muttered David, frowning, shaking his head.

“Whoever wears a size eight and a half N-sneaker,” she sharply replied. “See the misshapen N in the pattern.”

“He looked closer. Could as well be a Z.”

“Well... whatever you want to call the pattern—it’s not going anywhere.”

“Unless it’s over the side.”

For Swigart, she took out her cell phone and photographed the footprint. “Not a large person,” she said to David. She pointed out a vague design in the oily footprint. It took some straining, but David made out how she had determined his Z to be a wavy N in a circle. “Nike maybe...maybe New Balance?”

“Most likely a boot; does Nike make boots as well as sneakers?”

Swigart was already in the pilot house and on the horn, repeatedly calling out Alandale’s name, following up with Ford, asking both to report to the bridge. David and Kelly looked in every direction, expecting Alandale to pop up from a hatchway somewhere, and Ford to come from one of the holds to make their way to the bridge. But no one showed, and it seemed everyone on board noticed, and they all waited...and they waited but neither Alandale nor Houston Ford made an appearance.

“We’d best check his compartment,” she said, going for the nearest hatch and below—David on her heels. “He could be in some distress, a man his age!”

On arriving at Alandale’s door, David knocked and when no answer came, he pounded the door, and finally he tore it open, calling out, “Doctor! Dr. Alandale!”

But the room was empty, and eerily so; books, papers on the desk open, a candle-shaped lamp lit, a half eaten sandwich left atop the desk, the old fellow’s pipe resting on its stand, a final curl of smoke rising from it. “He can’t be far,” said David, pointing out the rising smoke. “Come on!” David started away, but she grabbed his arm.

“Hold on. There against the wall on the floor. See it?”

“See what?”

She lifted the candle-shaped lamp close, adding, “See this brown-to-black debris on the floor. What is that?”

David saw what she was alluding to, and he bent nearer to inspect it. “Looks like dust.”

“Soil?”

“Yeah...dirt—like soil only...I dunno, spilled tobacco?”

“Dave—the wall...” she pointed to a vent panel. “W-What’s behind the vent?”

There were circular venting holes along the wall above the debris.

“Dunno.”

“I can smell it. Something’s behind that vent.”

David found a grip on the large square panel and yanked. It came down in a crash, sending up the debris that had first attracted them. “Not dirt. Dust flakes, like wood mold—or darkened, hardened skin cells.” He coughed even as he realized they had discovered Dr. Alandale. His body had been stuffed into the vent, legs and arms broken and fitted to his torso with a cord so his body looked more like a laundry package than a body!

In fact, if he’d had no head, it would appear a near perfect square. But the worst of it was that the entire body appeared the color of mahogany and was about as stiff as wood—precisely as described in Declan Irvin’s Titanic journal. Here was a body far too fresh to look this ancient. Nothing in David’s experience could explain it.

“Oh my god, look! It’s your Z and my N on the shoes, David! It was Alandale who sabotaged the ship. It’s begun and far sooner than I’d expected; you heard Swigart. Besides Dr. Alandale, there’s still a missing crewman.”

“Yes, Ford; perhaps he’s the one who killed Alandale.”

“You don’t get it still, Dave; no one knows who or what the killer is until it gets hold of them.”

“All right...OK, so, what do we do now?”

“Put the wall panel back—cover him in his coffin here.”

“What? Swigart’s likely on his way here now.”

“And this thing could be inside Swigart, controlling him. Put the panel back; we have to play dumb. It’s imperative the thing continues to believe no one is onto it.”

David did as told, quickly replacing the panel, Kelly helping out. They heard Swigart and the others coming down the corridor. They completed the task, stood, made for the door and met Swigart face to face, and behind Swigart stood Will Bowen and Lena Gambio, flashing her lashes. Mendenhall and Jens joined them. Kyle Fiske was conspicuously absent.

“What’s going on here?” demanded Swigart.

“We thought Alandale might be ill,” Kelly blurted out.

“That he might need help, sir,” added David, shrugging, “you know when he didn’t respond or show when you called him on the PA.”

“So where in Sam Hell is he?” Swigart bellowed, his eyes steaming.

“Not here,” muttered Kelly, sighing heavily.

“We called for him but no answer.” David looked about at the other six faces standing about here and in the corridor. “When he failed to answer, we stepped in to make sure he hadn’t collapsed.”

Kelly added, “We feared a heart attack or something.”

“My God, did we lose two men overboard?” Lou asked. “What the hell is going on around here?”

Swigart expected no answers, and no one provided any.

“I’ve got to report this to Forbes; we need to turn around, find those men in the water, and pray they’re threading water by the time we locate ’em.”

Swigart turned to go back the way he came. Bowman passed by the other divers, all of whom stared at David and Kelly. Finally, David said, “What?”

“This expedition’s already feeling cursed,” replied Bowman.

“What’re you suggesting?”

“Nothing,” muttered Bowman.

“Look, I don’t like the idea of losing men overboard or turning the ship around anymore than you do, Will,” replied David. “But what choice do we have?”

“Two men just don’t go over the side,” said Lena. “One maybe, but two?” Lena looked around and added, “Something definitely smells about all of it—the screwed up machinery and now this.”

“And you two getting so chummy,” added Steve Jens.

“What about Bowman and Lena!” countered Mendenhall.

“That’s our business and none of yours,” Lena defended, staring down anyone who might challenge her.

“And it’s got nothing to do with missing men,” added David.

“You sure of that?” asked Mendenhall, eyeing David as she spoke. “Tell me, Dr. Irvin, was Ingles here perhaps defending your honor the other night when he got into it with the missing crewman? Then Alandale maybe tries to break it up, and he gets tossed over the side as well? All an accident of course?”

“God, Jacob, you’ve got an imagination after all!” said Kelly, smiling.

David agreed, facing Jacob and saying, “The first time you open your mouth beyond a grunt, and you write a soap opera.” David stepped back. “Hell of an imagination. Too bad it’s confused. I’m going to sack out for awhile.”

Lena Gambio snickered and said, “You need company in that sack?”

“Later,” he said, “as in another life!”

“You could do a lot worse, Davey boy,” she countered, flashing her big eyes before she broke into derisive laughter.

This made Bowman laugh and the tension was broken. The other divers dispersed, grumbling, upset at the prospect of turning the ship around and losing valuable time.

Kelly watched as the passageway was cleared. Once everyone else had disappeared and she was alone, she ducked her head into David's compartment and saw that he'd gone back to reading the journal again. "Good," she said, making him start. "Read on! You must know the whole story...the whole truth."