

## Chapter Nine

I fled to the Marconi-room, hoping to hear some good news. Jack was now in communication with several other ships. Harold arrived in just behind me, and asked him for an update.



‘Well, *Titanic*’s sister, the *Olympic*, is rushing to meet us, but she’s even farther away than the *Carpathia*. There are a few ships heading in our direction, but not one is close enough.’

Jack’s voice cracked slightly but he covered it up with a cough.

‘What’s happening upstairs?’

Not wanting to add to his friend’s stress, Harold kept his answer vague, ‘Oh, it’s mad busy. The band is playing, though, which is a nice touch. All the toffs are moaning about the cold, as if the staff could do anything about that.’

‘Do you think the passengers know the truth about ... well, everything?’

Harold shrugged and replied, 'No, or at least I don't think so. I heard that Mr Andrews was the only one telling them that there wasn't any time to lose. I suppose it wouldn't help to start an all out panic. Besides, Jack, I heard one of the officers tell his mate that the ship couldn't sink. He said she was her own lifeboat.'

'Oh, right,' said Jack. He gave Harold a strange look.

Harold in turn looked genuinely puzzled and asked, 'What? That's great, isn't it?'

Moving a pile of papers around his desk, Jack said, 'It would be even better had it come from Mr Andrews.'

I stayed with them a while. To be honest, the scenes on deck involving families being split in two were exhausting me. I felt myself utterly swamped by all the sadness and the fear until I couldn't think straight. Meanwhile here, in this snug tiny office, business went on as usual. Jack tapped out messages over and over again while Harold sat by quietly, waiting for that one piece of good news that he could bring back to Captain Smith. These two boys knew exactly how things stood and yet they didn't lose hope for an instant. Both of them kept a quiet eye on the clock overhead. It was now 1.25 in the morning.

Jack sighed, 'I'm trying not to block the one line we have, so I'm keeping the messages as short as possible, but I think

this is preventing the other operators from grasping the seriousness of the situation.’

As if to demonstrate his point, the *Olympic* sent a blissfully naive question.

**ARE YOU STEERING SOUTH TO MEET US?**

Jack took a second to work out how best to answer the query, to communicate in just one sentence that *Titanic* was in such a bad way that she was no longer sailing, that she was actually sinking on the spot.

**WE ARE PUTTING THE WOMEN OFF IN THE  
BOATS**

The next onslaught of bleeping was a question from a ship called the *Frankfurt* that was also miles away.

**ARE THERE ANY SHIPS AROUND YOU  
ALREADY?**

Harold jumped as Jack let out an exasperated shout, ‘Oh, for heaven’s sake! What a stupid question. Would I still be tapping away here if I didn’t need their blooming help?’

‘Just ignore them,’ suggested Harold. ‘They’re much too far away anyway.’

Bewilderment was etched all over Jack’s features as he said, ‘I can’t believe that there is no one else.’

'Hey, I know,' said Harold. 'Instead of the CQD, why don't you use the new code, the SOS. See if it brings us any luck.' He winked at his worried friend. 'You never know, this could be your last time to try it out.' To his relief, Jack laughed a little, in spite of himself.

The operator on the *Frankfurt* was obviously feeling hard done by and sent through a second message.

#### WHAT'S UP OLD MAN?

Almost beside himself with rage, Jack raced off a reply, his index finger tapping out one line that meant a whole lot more.

#### YOU FOOL. STAND BY AND KEEP OUT.

It worked. Not another beep was heard from that particular ship.



Hearing Thomas Andrews' voice in the distance, I took my leave of the wireless operators. It wasn't right of me to hide away like that, only I did so want to be present for any news of an approaching ship. He was hurrying downwards and I felt his need to suppress all the confusion he was feeling. Somehow I glimpsed, in his mind's eye, a picture of his wife and baby daughter. Running a hand across his shiny forehead

he said aloud, to himself, me and this long corridor of *Titanic*, 'If I start feeling sorry for myself now, then I'm no good for anyone.'

We passed two young bellboys who saluted Mr Andrews.

'Boys, if anyone is looking for me, I'm just going down to the engine room. And please put on your lifejackets. That is an order!'

I don't know what he was expecting to find, but he certainly seemed surprised to open the door of the engine room and discover his fellow engineers, team of joiners, electricians and plumbers, including the entire Guarantee Group. The young Belfast boys seemed positively delighted to be a part of the busy crowd.

'Goodness! What are you all doing here?'

Roderick stepped forward. 'Keeping her going, sir.'

Mr Andrews looked around at the faces of the engineers and electricians, who calmly met his gaze in turn. They all knew the truth of the situation; he had made sure of that. The noise in the room was fierce as the massive engines continued to churn on, oblivious to the emotion that filled many eyes with the barest hint of tears. I could hear Mr Andrews' thoughts once more, *What a true privilege it is to know these men and boys.*

He had always been the kind of man who preferred to see

the good in everyone he met. Sometimes he was rewarded for his optimism and sometimes he wasn't, but he never gave up expecting all people to be good at heart. Swallowing a lump in his throat, he asked Roderick how long they were going to stay. Most of the men were standing in water, maybe an inch or more. The youngest of the boys had tucked the ends of their trousers into their socks.

The supervisor glanced around his companions who nodded to him in agreement. He smiled and shrugged at his boss, suddenly shy. 'Well, as long as it takes, sir. I mean, we can't have the heat or the lights going out; it would only scare the passengers, especially the kiddies.'

Mr Andrews replied in a strained voice, 'Yes, I see. Very good, then.'

With that, Roderick called out, 'All right, lads, let's get back to work.'

As Thomas turned to leave, a few of the men wished him a good night.

For a few seconds I was tempted to stay behind, in the hope that I could be of help in some way. The energy in the room seemed to be pulsating. Maybe it was the camaraderie among these brave work colleagues or maybe it was because here was the source of *Titanic's* power. As I dithered over what to do, whether to stay or go, I suddenly sensed that the

men weren't alone. Little flashes of white light danced in and around the workers unchecked.

Next I noticed Ennis, one of the youngest apprentices, peering in wonder at a particular bunch of wires and switches. His supervisor, William Parr, joined him to see what he was looking at. The apprentice glanced around, almost apologetically.

'This shouldn't be working. I mean, it had stopped working a few hours ago. The fuse had blown and I was just going to replace it now. But it's working again.'

William shrugged, 'Maybe there was nothing wrong with it in the first place.'

Ennis rubbed the area around the switch, making sure it was free of sea water, 'Maybe ...'

Seeing that the boy wasn't convinced, William tried again, 'Or maybe your guardian angel is an electrician?'

They both laughed and, as they did, I swear I could see a glow around them. In that moment I felt released from my need, or sense of obligation, to stay. I hurried after Mr Andrews, not stopping to ask myself any questions.

Just as I caught up with the engineer, he rounded a corner and almost collided with Captain Smith. Both men eyed each other warily. I had been wondering what had happened to the captain and I felt Mr Andrews wanting to ask him where

he had been for the last while. I was pretty sure that neither realised the horrific guilt the other was feeling. The corridor was full of unspoken words and stifled emotions while the captain tried to look merely irritated at this unexpected meeting.

An awkward silence was broken by Mr Andrews. 'Is there any more news from other ships?'

The captain stared past him as he made a reluctant negative reply, '*Carpathia* is still over two hours away, maybe three.'

Neither captain nor designer was wearing a lifejacket, a fact that escaped them both.

'I've just been to the engine room.' Thomas smiled sadly as he spoke. 'All of them – the whole thirty-four of them – refuse to leave.' He looked down at the captain's feet. 'They said they didn't want the lights going out and frightening the passengers.'

As if to himself, he continued on talking but in a quieter tone, 'Half of them have wives and children while the other half are mere boys still living at home with their parents. Husbands, fathers, sons, all prepared to work together until the end. Quite wonderful, really.' He looked up again at the captain. 'Don't you think?'

Captain Smith was unwilling to pursue this line of

conversation and cleared his throat nervously before speaking, 'Actually, I was just on my way down there to check out the situation.'

Thomas shrugged, almost dismissively, 'Well, there's water in the engine room now.'

The two men had nothing more to say. Things were as bad as they could be, for another while at least. They parted in silence. This time I remained with the captain as he watched Mr Andrews disappear from sight. Once we were alone, he took off in the direction of the Marconi-room, where he entered without knocking.

'Is there any more news to be had?'

'No, sir,' replied Harold, as Jack watched uneasily from his chair.

The grey-haired man nodded as if he had heard exactly what he expected to.

'Righto. Well, I'm just letting you both know that water has reached the engine room.' Here, the captain took a moment after hearing a slight wobble in his voice. 'I'm sure you both know what this means. The power can't last much longer. When the water reaches the wires, the electrical boards will short circuit.' Breathing heavily he paused for a second. 'Which means the end to the lights, heat and, of course, your machine'

On delivering this gloomy summary, he left, and Jack started frantically tapping out a new message to the operator on the *SS Carpathia*:

COME AS QUICKLY AS POSSIBLE  
ENGINE ROOM IS FILLING UP TO THE  
BOILERS



The baker woke up suddenly, in surprise. I had decided to check in on him, having forgotten about him for a while.

‘Who’s there? What was that noise?’

Of course I was unable to answer him.

He rubbed his eyes for a few seconds, looking like he might just go back to sleep. This I couldn’t allow him to do. The scene had changed much since my previous visit. Fortunately, though, he heaved himself up on his elbows, glancing at his watch as he did so.

‘Cripes! How long have I been asleep anyway? Don’t tell me I’m late for work!’

He sat up and swung his feet out confidently to rest them on the floor, where he was utterly bewildered to hear what sounded like a splash. The sound was instantly followed by the sensation of water pooling around his ankles and seeping

into his flimsy work shoes. Charles stared in puzzlement at his feet, as if they belonged to someone else. It took at least half a minute before he remembered.

‘Aha, iceberg; all passengers leaving on lifeboats. Well, I never. So, they weren’t exaggerating.’

The almost empty whiskey bottle lolled quietly nearby, on its side. It must have fallen off the bed and caused the noise which woke him. The liquid inside the bottle looked like it was doing its best to meet with the liquid outside. It chased its way around as the bottle turned this way and that. Delighted to see his old friend, Charles reached for it and took a small sip, just to help him wake up properly and decide what to do next. He took another sip, to be sure, tapping his feet against the ground to see if he could create a little wave.

Something caught his eye in the water. Charles bent over to get a closer look. It was a small, black spider that was losing the struggle to find dry land. The baker, who was instinctively, I felt, a rather compassionate man, scooped the weary creature up in his large hand. The rescued spider stood still, as if trying to catch its breath, allowing both it and its rescuer to size one another up. Lifting his outstretched hand closer to his face, the baker addressed the soaked creature in a kindly manner.

‘You poor little mite. Just take a minute there to dry yourself.’

The spider didn't move a muscle, despite Charles looking off into the distance, respecting, as it were, the spider's privacy should it indeed wish to grab a towel and dry itself off. I watched, fascinated, welcoming a break from worrying about *Titanic's* possible treacherous future.

I had always taken a great interest in the world of small creatures, especially during those lonely days before I joined Harland & Wolff. In fact, it proved a great way to forget, however briefly, both about my lack of human friends and Da. It was my first important discovery, that there were hundreds of daily adventures taking place in the same dull, sad house I shared with my mother.

One time I watched fascinated as a wasp tried to free itself from a spider's web. Guiltily I thought about helping it but didn't see how I could do this without getting stung. My guilt vanished, however, when the web's owner shot out of its dark corner and picked its way leisurely across the threads, to see what he had caught. The wasp had nothing to worry about. The spider was half its size and no one realised this faster than the spider which was being rocked violently from the vibrations caused by the enraged wasp. Nervously, or so it seemed to me, the spider stuck out a leg, to get an approximate measure of the intruder. He did it twice, as if to be completely sure. The wasp feeling itself to be gently 'felt' doubled his

exertions to free himself, beating his wings so fast that I couldn't see them.

Then the strangest thing happened. Or maybe it wasn't so strange at all, since I had wondered how on earth the little spider was going to subdue an aggressive creature that clearly outweighed him. The spider returned to his corner to, I thought, consider his options. Meanwhile, the wasp freed one leg, only to get it immediately entangled again. Would the spider wait until the wasp had exhausted itself and then move in to take him? Could wasps sting spiders? Would the sting kill the spider? In the end none of my questions were answered, because the spider did something much more sensible. Cautiously he retraced his steps to just above where the wasp was stuck and began to pick apart the threads, one by one. The clever creature was helping the wasp to escape, thereby saving his web and himself a whole lot of trouble. Unable to fly off immediately, the wasp dropped to the window sill, slightly dazed. I couldn't imagine that it would taste very nice anyway and I admired the spider for keeping a cool head throughout.

With my thoughts miles – and years – away in Belfast, I had almost forgotten where I was until the baker suddenly reminded me by loudly exclaiming, 'Wait! Don't I know you? Aren't you the one that made that dainty web above my bed?'

Charles swivelled his head around to check whether anyone was in residence at the web. They weren't.

'So, it is you. Unusual for you to leave your home and go walkabouts?'

The spider listened contritely, so it seemed, unwilling to commit itself to any kind of answer.

'Well, no matter. You're safe now.'

Almost as soon as the words were out of his mouth, Charles stopped short. I felt him to be checking the truth in his cheery statement. Was the spider really safe? Or had he merely rescued him momentarily before they both succumbed to a watery grave?

'I must admit I hadn't believed it was so serious. The whole thing with lifejackets and lifeboats – I thought it was just protocol. Now here we both are sitting in a puddle belonging to the Atlantic Ocean.'

Neither I nor the spider could make a reply to this, so Charles was free to continue with his train of thought.

'So maybe we should head outside and see how the land lies.'

He laughed alone at his rotten joke.

Still holding aloft the creature, which was beginning to stretch out its legs, one at a time, Charles dug out his cigarette case with his other hand.

‘First of all, you need a name. I’m going to christen you “George”, after His Royal Highness of England.’

The spider stood perfectly still, as if considering this, and then signalled his acceptance with a speedy return to stretching out the legs on the left hand side of his body.

‘Second of all, you need a safe carriage. Now, George, this here tin is my most prized possession. Grandfather Joughin gave it to me on my twenty-first birthday. He got it from a man who had fought in the Crimean War, who told him that these little nicks and cuts were caused by Russian bullets during the Charge of the Light Brigade. I don’t expect you to know anything about this but if we get out of here alive I’ll tell you all about it.’

There were only a couple of cigarettes left and he removed one of these to slide behind his ear. Next he tipped his still dazed eight-legged friend into the tin, promising, ‘This is for the best, George.’

The spider was quite possibly relieved to find itself falling into the snug, dry tin after its recent swim.

Charles placed the tin inside his shirt and stood up slowly. Another surprise awaited him. The floor was no longer even; it seemed to slope ever so gently. The baker took a final slug of whiskey, before screwing the cap on and placing it under his pillow.

‘With God’s grace, you’ll be waiting here for me on my return.’

With the immediate business taken care of, he took a firm grip of the upper bunk and pushed himself towards the door.

‘Well, George, we’re off!’



Once more I found myself drifting back into my past. I couldn’t help it; the baker’s kindness to his half-drowned spider reminded me of the day I found a tiny bird on the ground in front of our house. I called Da to ask him could I keep it and was most surprised when he said no.

‘But why not? I’ve always wanted a pet. Please.’

He wasn’t listening to me, however. Instead, he was peering up at the roof, searching for something. I picked up the little creature and held it close to me. Suddenly Da pointed and explained, ‘There now, see? That’s where he’s fallen from.’

Following the direction of his index finger, I saw a small, flimsy-looking nest that looked as if it had been squashed into the edge of the roof. Just at that moment a squawking bird flew quite closely over our heads.

‘And that’s the little fella’s mother. There’s one thing you have to remember when it comes to God’s creatures, Sammy.

Never, ever get between a mother and her baby.'

The bird perched herself on the nearest lamp-post and continued to squawk at the top of her voice. Da winked at me.

'Aren't we lucky that we can't understand what she's screaming at us? I'm sure she's calling us the most dreadful names.'

It was a little scary when the mother bird dived from her post to swoop past my shoulders. Her baby chirruped twice and, I had to admit, he did look absolutely terrified of me, despite my stroking his skinny, bony head in my friendliest manner.

'Ach, don't be mauling him, son. She mightn't take him back if he stinks of human hands, especially ones as mucky as yours.'

As his mother sped by me again, I held her baby up in the air, 'Go on. Go to your mother. Just flap your wings.'

Da shook his head and said, 'No, he's not ready to fly yet. But isn't he great for surviving such a fall, the poor thing. You'd have thought the shock would kill him outright.'

'Well, if he can't fly back to the nest, I should probably hold on to him then. His mother knows where he is and she can visit him.'

Da laughed. 'Nice try, Sam. Fortunately for mother and child I've got a better idea. I'm going to ask Mr McCracken if

I can borrow his ladder and put the wee mite back where he belongs.'

Mr McCracken ran the corner shop which was just a few minutes away from us, and he used his ladder to reach the more expensive items that he kept up on shelves near the ceiling.

'I'll be back in a tick and I don't want to see him in your hands on my return. Put him down and just make sure he doesn't stray, although he's probably too confused to go for a walk anyway.'

At this stage I had been joined by some of the other children. The bird's mother kept a cold eye on all of us as we stood around her baby, willing it to do something more than simply stand there, the odd, nervous tweet escaping his beak.

'Well now, Nick, looks like we've got ourselves an audience.'

Mr McCracken had not only lent Da his precious ladder but also Nick, his oldest son, who was very tall and very, very spotty.

'Aye, I see that. Now, where is this lost birdie?'

My friends and I parted ways, allowing my father and Nick to walk through us, step carefully over the bird and lean the ladder against the wall of the house. Nick bent down slowly and picked up Beaky. I couldn't resist naming him,

just in case I got to keep him in the end.

‘His wee heart is racing.’

The mother suddenly screeched by, obviously upset that Beaky had been picked up again. Nick crouched low to make us laugh, ‘Oh, missus, I hope you’re not aiming to peck my eyes out.’

My father continued on joking with Beaky’s mother as he took the baby in his hand and stepped up the ladder, Nick holding it steady for him.

‘Now, here he is, safe and sound. Don’t be hard on him. He wasn’t running away from you and I don’t think he was sneaking off for a fag or to see a girlfriend. He just made a mistake and you can plainly see that he’s very sorry for causing so much trouble.’

As soon as Da reached the nest, the mother bird landed on the roof, careful to keep her distance as she watched the proceedings.

‘Da, Da, what can you see?’

‘I see an empty nest, son. No wonder his ma is upset. He’s her only chick. There you go, little man, no more high jumps for you. Wait until your wings are stronger. Good luck now and tell your ma I was asking for her.’

We all laughed at this. I really enjoyed the other children laughing at my father’s jokes. It made me feel like I was on

top of the world. Maybe that's what I missed the most – someone making me feel like I was on top of the world.



My plan was to stay with Charles and George for a while, but the baker was walking so slowly, edging himself along the corridors, either because of the sloping or the whiskey and I had so much to do yet. I hurried off, determined to come back and check on him. I wanted to visit the upper deck, once more, and see what was going on. Time was ticking on and I had a hunch that the real work had yet to begin.