

1

I CAN'T BELIEVE we just arrived in England and we're leaving already," twelve-year-old Samantha Burnett grumbled as she and her sister, Jessica, only eighteen months older, wandered the darkened halls of the Haunted Museum.

Their parents had booked the family on a cruise liner during the girls' spring break from school. The *Titanic 2* was a replica of the original *Titanic*, from the four huge funnels to the famous

grand staircase. The Burnetts had come to England just so they could board at Southampton, the port from which the first *Titanic* had sailed in April 1912. This cruise would follow the exact route the *Titanic* had charted from England to America, with stops in France and Ireland.

With time to kill before their departure, Jessica had insisted on seeing the nearby Haunted Museum, located a block from the ship. “This brochure says they have a special *Titanic* exhibit. It will be educational. Maybe we’ll learn something cool about the *Titanic*.”

The word *educational* had worked its magic with their parents and they’d given their permission. “Be ready to leave as soon as I text you, though,” Mrs. Burnett insisted. “I don’t want to miss the boat!”

“We will,” Jessica had agreed.

Samantha had never been in a Haunted Museum before. But so far her impression was that it was a sort of cross between Madame Tussauds wax museum, Ripley's Believe It or Not!, and The Haunted Mansion at Disney. In the front entrance hall alone, they'd seen a motion-activated talking skeleton dressed to be the pirate Long John Silver, a moldering mummy who bolted into a sitting position from his sarcophagus, the ax supposedly used by the infamous Lizzie Borden in 1892, and the alien who purportedly crashed in Roswell, New Mexico, back in 1947.

Deeper inside they came to a table featuring an amulet of a beetle encased in amber. "Wouldn't that be cool to wear?" Jessica commented as the sisters stared down at it. She reached forward to touch it.

A female guard dressed all in black stepped abruptly out of the corner. "Please don't touch!"

Startled, the girls clasped each other's arms.

The woman pointed to the sign over the doorway. It was lit from behind by a small bulb.

DO NOT TOUCH ANY DISPLAY.

She then pointed to two more of the exact same signs arranged around the room.

"We get the point," Jessica whispered to Samantha as they nodded.

"See that you do," the guard insisted firmly.

The girls moved away quietly. "How did she even hear that?" Jessica whispered.

Samantha shrugged. "She gave me the creeps. Let's leave."

Jessica grabbed the sleeve of Samantha's cotton sweater. "But there's still forty minutes till we need to head back. Look, here's the *Titanic* exhibit. Come on."

Life-size mannequins, dressed in the fashions of 1912 — the year the cruise ship *Titanic* sank —

stood in glass cases lit from within. Samantha read the names of the different figures: Molly Brown, American, philanthropist (saved); Benjamin Guggenheim, American, millionaire (drowned); W. T. Stead, British, journalist and publisher (drowned); Mr. and Mrs. Isidor Strauss, American, owners of Macy's department store (drowned). Samantha stood back, taking in the apparel each mannequin wore: Molly Brown's wide, feather-brimmed bonnet and parasol; Benjamin Guggenheim's long-tailed jacket and ankle-high, buttoned boots; the pinned ascot worn by W. T. Stead; Mrs. Strauss's beautiful print shawl and her husband's rounded, black bowler hat.

"Look at this, Sam!" Jessica called, waving Samantha over to one of the life-size figures: a well-dressed man walking a dog with tightly curled fur. He wore a flat straw hat with a round brim and smoked a pipe.

Samantha brushed aside her dark bangs as she stooped to study the model of the Airedale terrier straining at the leash. “It looks so real.” She smiled up at her sister. “Cute dog, isn’t it?”

Jessica nodded. “This is John Jacob Astor,” she read from the information card glued to the case. “He was an American billionaire who went down with the *Titanic*.”

“And the dog is named Kitty!” Samantha read over her sister’s shoulder. “Oh, that’s funny.”

“It says here that John Jacob Astor opened up all the kennels before the ship sank so that the dogs would have a chance to survive,” Jessica continued. “No one is really sure if that’s true or not, though.”

Samantha thought about it a moment. “I hope it’s true. That was a nice thing to do.”

“I know you love animals,” Jessica commented, smiling.

Samantha gazed at their reflections in the case's glass. Here in the low light she could see why people sometimes mistook her and her sister for twins. But Jessica was the outgoing one with the dazzling smile and quick laugh. Samantha was also friendly but didn't quite make the same big impression as Jessica.

"See how our reflections are hovering right next to Astor?" Jessica noted. "We look like ghosts!"

"He's the ghost, not us," Samantha objected. Something about Jessica's words had caused gooseflesh to rise on her skin. Maybe it was just the too-cold air-conditioning.

They continued on into another room and examined objects that had been salvaged from the sunken ship: eight hundred cases of shelled walnuts; five grand pianos; a fifty-phone switchboard; an ice machine from C Deck; a Model T Ford; sixteen trunks marked with their owner's name,

Ryerson; a cask of china dishes; a case of gloves from the Marshall Field's department store.

"How big was this ship?" Samantha asked as she perused the seemingly endless collection.

"Huge," Jessica answered. She was intently studying a case filled with jewelry that had gone down with the ship: diamond necklaces; sparkling ruby brooches; an emerald bracelet; gold earrings of various designs, including a drop pearl that shone moon-white.

"That's a lot of bling," Samantha commented as she came to Jessica's side.

"Look at this silver locket. Isn't it beautiful?" Jessica remarked. Samantha looked to where Jessica pointed at a table displaying the less valuable jewelry. The locket was closed and etched with a lily design. "I'm dying to know whose pictures are inside," Jessica went on, still focused on the locket.

Looking quickly from side to side, she snatched the locket from the display.

“Jess!” Samantha hissed under her breath. “Don’t!”

“I just want to see what’s inside.”

“We’ll get into trouble,” Samantha insisted.

In a flash, Jessica pried the locket open. Samantha peered over her sister’s shoulder to see. The pictures on either side were faded and chipped beyond recognition. “I bet the water did this,” Jessica whispered.

Samantha spied a figure moving across the room toward them. It was the woman guard who had scolded them before.

“Put it back,” Samantha urged her. “Quick.”

“I can’t.”

“What do you mean?” Samantha asked in a nervous whisper.

A look of alarm shot across Jessica's face. "I can't open my hand."

The woman was getting closer. She was definitely heading for them. Seized with panic, Samantha slapped Jessica's hand hard.

The locket fell, open, back onto the display table.

With a lightning movement, Samantha shut the halves closed. "Let's get out of here," she insisted, pulling Jessica with her through the first door she found.

. . .

Samantha kept one anxious eye on the door of the gift shop they'd hurried into. Was the woman coming in to scold them for touching the locket? The Haunted Museum seemed pretty serious about their *no touching* rule. Even the gift shop had

signs that said: YOU BREAK IT, YOU'VE BOUGHT IT and DON'T TOUCH UNLESS YOU INTEND TO BUY.

The woman guard appeared in the doorway. Her eyes darted around the shop.

She was searching for them! Samantha was sure of it. Grabbing Jessica by the hem of her T-shirt, she pulled her behind a high display of plastic swords, replicas of those used by the murderous Attila the Hun and his marauding army. "We're going to get caught. Why did you have to touch that locket?"

"I wanted to see what was inside," Jessica defended herself. "You touched it, too."

"Just to close it!"

"Well, she's not looking for us," Jessica insisted, peering above the sword display. The sisters kept low as they tracked the guard's movements from

their hiding place. It seemed like she was looking for *something*. They both heaved a sigh of relief when the guard left by a side entrance.

“I told you there was nothing to worry about,” Jessica said, stepping out from behind the sword display.

“Let’s get out of here before she comes back,” Samantha said urgently.

“She won’t,” Jessica scoffed confidently. “She’s already decided we’re not in here.”

“I hope so. Let’s go.”

“Not yet. I want to see what they have in the gift shop.”

Samantha sighed, not even bothering to argue. Jessica was crazy about gift shops, and Samantha knew they’d be there for at least another twenty minutes. She decided to make the best of it and look around. She was admiring a counter displaying stuffed Airedale puppies when her phone vibrated.

A quick check revealed that she had a text from her mother.

We're waiting outside. Ship is leaving soon. Please hurry.

Turning in a circle, Samantha located Jessica at a counter across the gift shop. "Come on. We have to go. Mom just texted me. The ship is leaving."

Samantha's phone buzzed again. This time she didn't even bother to check it. "Come on. If we miss the ship, Mom and Dad will ground us for life. You know how they hate it when . . ."

Samantha's voice dwindled as she realized that Jessica wasn't paying any attention to her at all. What she was looking at interested her much . . . much . . . more.