

## CHAPTER SIX

### **COLLISION**

*April 14, 1912, 11:40 p.m.*

I had fallen asleep with the book in my hand. Groggily, I sat up and tossed it onto the wooden nightstand beside the bed. Then I turned to switch off the small lamp on the wall. As I did so, its glass shade began to rattle. All of a sudden the whole room swayed — it felt as if we had hit a large wave. And then I heard a long, low, grinding noise. Suddenly I was wide awake. I hopped out of bed and opened the porthole. The ocean below looked perfectly calm and the stars were winking brightly against the ink-black sky. When I climbed back into bed I noticed that the sound of the engines had stopped. It left a strange silence — I had become quite used to their thrumming rhythm. Then I heard voices and footsteps in the corridor outside.

“Something’s up,” I thought. I put on my slippers and walked across the room to get my overcoat. That’s when I noticed light coming from below the door to my parents’ room.

“Jamie, is everything all right?” my father called out in a sleepy voice.

“I’m just going up to see why we’ve stopped,” I replied.

“Wait,” he said. “I’ll come with you.”

“No need,” I replied. “I’ll be fine.”

“Wait! I’ll be there presently,” he insisted, which annoyed me. Surely I was able to go up on deck on my own! My father soon appeared wearing his coat and black bowler hat. He had put on his shoes, but I could see the legs of his flannel pyjamas below his overcoat. All was now quiet in the corridor as we walked aft toward the grand staircase. On the stairs up to A deck we met Mr. Hays and a young man, whom I later learned was his son-in-law. Both were still in their evening clothes and Hays had his ever-present cigar in his hand.

“Good evening, Laidlaw!” he called out. “We’ve struck an iceberg. But it’s gone on by. Nothing to worry about, nothing to worry about at all,” he stated firmly. “There’s some ice in the water if you want to see it,” he added, pointing to the promenade with his cigar.

As we walked onto the A-deck promenade my father said to me quietly, “Hays and his family are guests of Mr. Ismay. So I suppose he knows what he’s talking about.”

“Have you seen the ice?” asked a grey-bearded man standing by the promenade windows.

When we looked over we realized it was Major Peuchen. He led us forward to the end of the promenade and pointed over the side. We looked down but couldn’t see any ice in the water.

“Well, there was some there only moments ago,” he said. “I could see it quite clearly.”

I went farther aft on the promenade, leaned out and, sure enough, in the black water below lay some greyish chunks of ice.

“Yes, it’s there, I can see it!” I said, gesturing to my father and Major Peuchen to come and look.

We heard shouts coming from the lower decks behind us so we walked back and looked over the railing down to the aft well deck. Some young fellows from third class were playing soccer with a chunk of ice. Each time they kicked it, splinters broke off.

“Ow-w, me foot!” I heard an Irish voice yell as one boy hopped about after kicking the ice a little too enthusiastically.

“Pieces from the iceberg fell off as it scraped by us,” said Major Peuchen.

“How big was it?” asked my father.

“Must have been a fairly large one,” Major Peuchen replied. “Some chaps in the smoking room

saw it pass by and thought we'd collided with a sailing ship."

Then he suddenly said, "Hello-o. We seem to be listing! She shouldn't be doing that!" He was holding his arm straight out with his palm downwards. "I think we're listing to starboard!"

My father and I imitated the Major's hand gesture, but neither of us could tell if the ship was leaning to one side or not.

Father turned to me "Well, Jamie," he said, "perhaps we should go down and look in on your mother." We said goodnight to Major Peuchen and returned to the grand staircase.

"Peuchen is a yachtsman," he said as we descended to our deck. "But I doubt he knows much about steamships."

Mother greeted us in her dressing gown when we re-entered our cabin. "The steward was just here, saying something about an iceberg," she reported in a peevish voice. "He says we're to put on our lifebelts and go up on deck. Do you think that's *really* necessary, Henry?"

"Just a precaution, I'm sure," my father replied. "Though we just ran into Peuchen on the deck. He seems to think we're listing to starboard."

"Yes," replied my mother with a slight sniff, "Well, he *would*, wouldn't he."

Suddenly there was a sharp rap at the door. It was a steward, but not our regular one. He had a lifebelt over his arm.

“Everyone is to report to the boat deck,” he said brusquely. “Dress warmly and put on your lifebelts. If you need ’elp with ’em, someone will assist you.”

My father looked at him coldly, clearly annoyed at being spoken to in this way by a steward. “Is this *really* an emergency?” he demanded. “Or is it simply a drill?”

“Nothin’ to worry about, sir,” the steward said. “I’m just tellin’ you my orders.” Then he paused and said, “But from what I’ve ’eard, this is no drill.” With that he left and within seconds we heard him knocking on the door next to ours.

As my father closed the door I noticed for the first time a slight look of worry on his face. A chilly nervous tremor ran down my spine. This was all becoming exciting! I suddenly pictured myself having an even better story to tell the boys at Bishop’s College. I pulled out my suitcase from under the bed and began rummaging through it for some warm clothes.

Just then there was another knock on our door and Rosalie entered, wearing her lifebelt over her coat. “There ’as been a collision,” she said.