

Chapter One

BELFAST

WEDNESDAY, MARCH 27, 1912, 2:12P.M.

The punch struck Paddy square in the jaw, rattling his teeth. It hurt more than he expected — more than it needed to hurt. He wasn't even acting when he staggered backward into the man in the hounds-tooth cloak.

A slim white hand slipped out of the boy's ragged sleeve and found its way into the cloak's patch pocket. It emerged a split second later, the small fingers deftly clutching a gold money clip fat with banknotes. That, too, disappeared, flicked under his threadbare jacket. The man shoved him away, growling, "Keep your brawling from decent people, boy!"

Paddy suppressed a grin. He always enjoyed it when the mark helped out by sending him off with the stolen purse. By the time the rich fool realized he'd been robbed, Paddy would be far away, counting the windfall.

All that remained was to finish the street theater that had provided cover for the theft. He lunged at Daniel, burying his fist in his partner's stomach—revenge for that haymaker to the jaw.

"I'll do you for that!" Daniel wheezed.

Then, like so many times before, Paddy fled the scene, Daniel in hot pursuit, bellowing threats. The crowd parted to let them go, as if the passers by were their accomplices, and the horse-drawn buggies and electric trolleys had been placed there as obstacles to aid their escape.

The pair kept running, dashing down side streets and through the back lanes they knew so well. At last, they collapsed against each other, laughing and celebrating their success.

"Curse your evil heart, Daniel Sullivan!" Paddy cried. "Were you trying to break my jaw? I'll be black and blue for a week, thanks to you!"

"It can only make you handsomer," Daniel chortled, rubbing his stomach. "You talk like you didn't just knock the breath out of me. If I can't runaway, who are you going to start your next dustup with? Yourself?"

"To listen to your whining, "Paddy bantered," you'd think I couldn't get along without you. With you clapped up in jail, this fat purse would be all mine."

He took out the money clip, and the two examined their prize.

Daniel's eyes bulged. "I didn't know the Prince of Wales was walking down Victoria Street!"

Paddy nodded. "This is a fortune!"

They fell silent, counting the haul over and over again. They were accustomed to worn purses containing a few meager coins. But the clip held twelve crisp banknotes worth one pound sterling each. This was enough money to replace their rags with warm clothing and proper shoes. It would keep their always-empty bellies full for along time.

Paddy caught his breath first. "If I'd known about' this, I'd have had his watch, too! And maybe the gold out of his teeth!"

At fifteen, Daniel was a year older than Paddy and considered himself more worldly. "We'll have no easy time spending these," he predicted. "When the likes of us hands over a brand-new banknote, there's not a shopkeeper in Belfast who won't know we stole it.

"That wasn't what Paddy wanted to hear." Are you, saying we fell on a king's ransom, and it's worthless to us? Maybe you're afraid to spend it, but I'm not."

Daniel tried to be patient. "Think, Patrick. What kind of man likes his money in paper notes printed by a bank? Someone who's got so much of it he'd need a barrow just to carry the silver. When you spy your reflection in a window, do you see that person?"

Paddy was stubborn; "I'm going to be that person someday, so this will be good practice." Daniel threw his hands up. "I'm just saying we should be careful. And if you had half the brains God gave geese, you'd know it."

They argued often, but never with lasting effect. Despite all their insults and bickering, Paddy Burns and Daniel Sullivan had been closer than brothers since the' day they'd met. It was a bond forged by friendship, but also by something darker. Daniel was an orphan who had fled the life of a chimney sweep's climbing boy. Paddy had walked sixty-seven miles to Belfast after the last whiskey-driven beating he intended to endure from his stepfather. There was no question that each was all the other had in the world.

They stashed' the money in their secret hiding place behind a loose brick in an ancient wall— "There are pickpockets and footpads out there," Paddy reminded his friend. "Look what happened to the gentleman who used to own all this lovely money."

Then they headed back toward the most crowded part of the city - Queens Island, home of Harland and Wolff, the largest shipyard in the world. It was a hub of activity, with more than fifteen thousand employees working shifts around the clock. All Belfast seemed to orbit this center, It was a pickpocket's dream.

The boys watched from across the road as a trolley let off dozens of passengers. Paddy's eyes settled on a short, squat man whose overcoat bulged where a purse might be carried. Daniel read his friend's mind. "No, not him. Look how down-at-the-heel his boots are. He needs the money."

The two had an informal agreement never to make a victim of 'a poor man - even though

they themselves' were always much, much poorer. Their unfortunate situation forced them to live by their wits and steal to survive. But there was a line they would not cross, knowing that they weren't the only hungry youngsters in Belfast. Besides, there were plenty of peacocks, plump in the pocket, just waiting to be plucked.

And there's one right now, thought Paddy.

The gentleman stepping down from the hansom cab wasn't dressed so differently from the other men on the street -, in a tweed coat, a suit: and a bowler hat. Yet every article seemed pressed and perfect, down to the elegant knot of his silk cravat. There was a quiet confidence to his bearing; a sureness to his step. And, Paddy guessed, a fullness to the purse concealed by his overcoat.

With an almost imperceptible signal to his friend, he fell in line behind the new mark, heading toward the shipyard gate.

"No!" rasped Daniel, rushing to keep pace. "Don't you know who that is?"

Paddy nodded vigorously. "A proper swell who can well afford to part with a few coins for our favorite charity."

"That's Mr. Thomas Andrews, the designer of the *Titanic!*"

Paddy was impressed. Even though the name Thomas Andrews meant nothing to him, a fellow would have to be deaf and blind not to know about the *Titanic*, the world's greatest ocean liner, under construction right here at Harland and Wolff. Those four towering smokestacks dominated the Belfast landscape. There was hardly a spot in the city where they couldn't be seen.

Paddy and Daniel had first met in the enormous crowd that had gathered to watch the launch from dry dock a year earlier. Paddy had been there to help himself to a purse or two. But as he watched the massive hull sliding down the ramp and into the Belfast Harbor, he'd forgotten—the emptiness in his pockets and his stomach. It — *she* — Daniel constantly corrected him that ships were always *she* — was a dazzling sight.

The *Titanic* had only grown more magnificent as she lay in her slip to be fully outfitted. It was said that neither a millionaire's mansion nor a king's palace was more lavishly appointed than this mistress of the sea. And, Paddy reminded himself, had it not been for the *Titanic*, he would not have tried to pick Daniel's pocket on that launch day. Then he would have been alone, or perhaps even dead. So he owed Mr. Thomas Andrews that much. Just before the main gate, Andrews suddenly wheeled on them. "If you two young gentlemen have your eyes on my purse, you'd best know that I'll not part with it easily."

It was the first time that anyone had referred to Paddy Burns as a gentleman, and possibly the last time anyone ever would.

"Mr. Andrews, sir" — Daniel was nervously worshipful — "is it true that the fourth smokestack is a fake?"

The shipbuilder looked surprised, and then he smiled. "Does the heart of an engineer beat inside that thin chest? Wherever did you hear about that?"

Paddy spoke up. "Daniel reads, Mr. Andrews. He even taught me a little." Daniel's interest in books and newspapers had bewildered Paddy at first. Why risk arrest to steal

something that couldn't put food in your belly? Now he saw that Daniel's passion for reading was a hunger just as urgent as an empty stomach. Paddy didn't understand it — not yet, anyway. But he knew it to be true.

"Impressive," Andrews approved. "Well, boys, the fourth smokestack is not connected to the boilers, but you could hardly call it a fake. It provides ventilation. And, of course, it is a recognizable feature of both the *Titanic* and her sister ship, the *Olympic*."

Daniel's thin, pale face was almost a light with interest. "And she's truly unsinkable?"

The shipbuilder chuckled. "Anything made of metal has the potential to sink. But see if you can understand this: *Titanic*'s hull is divided into sixteen compartments. At the touch of a single button on the bridge, the captain can close watertight doors, sealing those compartments from one another." He paused. "She can remain afloat with any four of those sixteen compartments flooded. It's safe to say that no one can envision an accident that would do more damage to her than that."

"I can!" Daniel exclaimed eagerly.

Andrews's eyes widened. "Do tell."

"Well, I - I don't know it right now, sir," Daniel stammered in embarrassment; "But if you'll give me a little time, I'm sure something will occur to me."

The shipbuilder seemed amused, but also intrigued. "It might at that," he agreed with a smile. "And if it does, I should be very interested to hear it."

"He can do it, too!" Paddy put in. "Daniel's really smart!"

Andrews's smile grew wider; "Then I shall direct my staff that if a Master Daniel and companion should come calling, they are to be brought to me at once."

The guard at the gate blocked the boys' way. "Be off, you two!" he shouted. "And stop bothering Mr. Andrews!"

The shipbuilder made a point of shaking both boys' grubby hands. "It's all right, Joseph," he said. "We were discussing business." He tipped his bowler hat to them. "Gentlemen. I trust we'll meet again." And he disappeared into the bustling yard.

Paddy and Daniel stood there long after he was gone, astonished that such a great man had treated two street lads with kindness and respect.

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