

TIME TRAVEL
ROMANCE

THE
**TITAN
CROWNS**
NEW ATLANTIS 6

Galaxy SF Romance Award Winner

NHYS GLOVER

**The
Titan Drowns**

Nhys Glover

This novel is entirely a work of fiction. With the exception of historical events and people used as background for the story, the names, characters and incidents portrayed in this work come wholly from the author's imagination. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events or localities is entirely coincidental

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On 14 April 1912 at 11.40 p.m. Titanic struck an iceberg in the Mid North Atlantic and sank 12,415 feet beneath the icy ocean in just two hours and forty minutes. Of the 2,223 souls aboard her that night, only 710 were rescued and another 328 bodies recovered, although 119 of these were buried at sea. This leaves 1,185 people, or more than half the ship's passengers and crew, left unaccounted for.

Man has, in only a few short years, flown like a bird, walked upon the moon, explored the universe, travelled faster than sound, cloned living creatures, transplanted hearts and other organs, designed human cells, split atoms, created infinitesimally small nanobots... and this list of wonders increases with every passing day.

One has to wonder if, given enough time and technological resources, man could not one day find a way to cross time and space. And if, when they did, might they not look back at that night in 1912 and be tempted to rescue at least some of those 1,185 souls who were never seen again?

I like to think they would...

* * * * *

Prologue

Karl

Summer 2336 New Atlantis, GAIAN CONFEDERACY

‘We are undertaking another major mission,’ Jac Ulster announced to the assembled group of Retrievers from the Child and Adult Programs. ‘Like our 1942 mission, we will require a large, well-orchestrated team working in strategic stages. Our main Target will be the forty-eight children our research has indicated were not seen during the chaos of the early hours of April 15, 1912, and whose bodies were never found.’

‘April 15, 1912. That is when...’ Pia Rogaland interrupted in stunned amazement.

‘The Titanic sank,’ Jac finished for her, nodding at the tall blonde. ‘Yes, you have correctly identified our objective. We are going to redress a little of the loss that occurred that day.’

Karl Ontario felt his heart flutter strangely in his chest. It wasn’t the first time he’d experienced this odd sensation since he’d heard the news of the planned Titanic mission, but it still struck him as uncharacteristic. It almost felt like sick excitement; but that was absurd. The only time he’d ever been excited by anything was in his Original body when an experiment had yielded interesting results.

Since then, some 216 years, excitement had never been an emotion he’d experienced. Interest, determination, compassion, contentment and satisfaction were feelings he recognised in varying degrees of mild intensity, but never excitement.

It was commonly believed that the cloned bodies they inhabited were responsible for their race’s lack of passion, but there was no scientific evidence for that. Whatever the cause, it was certainly factual to say that post-apocalyptic man’s emotions were dimmed and marginalized.

Of course for him, even in his Original, the ‘desires of the flesh’ and the concomitant passions it aroused had only ever been mild. One lady-friend had once told him he had ice water in his veins and he’d believed her. He was, after all, the product of his upbringing.

Karl’s father had been an eminent Canadian surgeon in the middle years of the twenty-first century. A fierce and cutting man, he’d ridiculed all emotion out of his son by the time he was ten years old. All that was left in Karl from that time

on was the determination to excel. This he'd done spectacularly, out-shining his father in his chosen field by the time he was twenty-five.

Once this goal was achieved, he'd begun looking for new fields to conquer. It was then that he'd encountered the early work on accelerated cellular development the government was funding. Once he saw the potential for their experiments, his course was set.

It gave him satisfaction to know that he was partly responsible for saving what was left of humanity after the Last Great Plague decimated their numbers. Humanity had been whittled down to little more than a few hundred thousand after that last catastrophe, which ended the Second Dark Age.

He firmly believed that he'd been spared by Divine Intervention so that their work, which had previously been directed into military areas, could be utilized to save mankind. Had he or one of his team not been one of the one in a thousand who survived that horrendous pandemic, no one would ever have known about their spectacular research and results. The sterile and sickly survivors of their race would have died out, and humanity would have gone the way of the dinosaurs.

Before the Last Great Plague, if anyone had asked him about his beliefs about Divinity he would have called himself an "unconvinced agnostic." He'd wanted to believe there was a God, but his analytical mind had never found the proof needed to commit to such a belief.

He'd gotten all the proof he needed the day he woke up alone in a town filled with the dead and realised he had the knowledge of cloning that could save the lives of those few who remained.

Man had paid a huge price for his hubris and neglect, but a merciful Creator had given them a way to redeem themselves. The statistical chances of any top scientists surviving that pandemic were infinitesimally small. Yet, among the survivors, there were a surprisingly large number of eminent specialists from a wide cross section of the sciences, including those involved in cellular transpositioning. Their research had eventually led to the time travel they now employed to Retrieve suitable candidates from the past to replenish their depleted numbers.

"Noah's Ark for humanity" he called the Last Great Plague of 2120; somehow, it had selected survivors who could preserve the best of mankind's legacy.

His mind returned to the topic at hand. The Retrieval teams were going to Jump to 1912 and pluck children and other suitable adult candidates from the

decks of the mortally wounded Titanic. And, for the first time in his life, he was intensely excited by the prospect and wanted to be involved.

Karl wasn't a Jumper. Such work was left to the more adventurous of his kind. He held a support role – the Head of New Atlantis' Medical and Research Facility. Not once in the last seventy years of time travel had he felt the urge to involve himself in that other side of life.

Until now. Until the word Titanic reminded him of the undulating rows of grey stone markers, many unnamed, he'd seen in Halifax, Nova Scotia, when he was a child.

His mother had taken him to the Fairview Cemetery to visit the grave of her father that long ago day. While she stood quietly grieving, he'd wandered off into another part of the cemetery. There he found the 121 graves, arranged in three neat rows of markers, all bearing the same date of death: April 15, 1912.

Those graves had affected him. Separated by time – nearly 200 years – he'd still felt a strange bond with those unnamed bodies who were robbed of all that made them human: their names, their history and their loved ones. All they had left were their corpses, which had been collected up by unknown hands and buried in graves of earth, instead of the water that had claimed the bulk of their comrades.

His mother told the story for many years after – well out of his father's hearing, of course – of how she'd found him standing there among those stones. When asked what had possessed him to wander off like that, he'd simply replied, 'I came to keep them company. It must have been terrible to die cold and friendless that way and then to be left here to lie forever among nameless strangers.'

He didn't remember saying that, but it was certainly what he felt for a long time afterwards. All he did remember of his interaction with his mother in that spot was her taking his cold hand in her warm one and gently leading him away.

Now, more than 200 years further on again, those nameless dead were calling to him once more. And this time he could do more than provide short-term companionship. This time he could help to save some of those lost souls from their lonely fate.

Jac and Chen, the leaders of the Retrieval programs, would fight him over his decision to join the undertaking. They'd claim he was too valuable to their society to risk on such a dangerous mission. However, he'd be adamant, and he had enough pull in the higher echelons of government to get his way.

The prep for the mission would take many months. During that time, he planned to integrate with a new clone. Currently, he had been housed in his fourth clone for fifty-five years. Not the limit of the lifespan for a clone by any means, but he wanted to be fit and energetic in a twenty-year-old body if he was to take on tasks that might prove physically demanding and dangerous.

That thought roused the sick excitement once again. Could he be changing in the same way some of the Old Timers were beginning to change after they found their significant other? It felt like it might be the case.

After nearly 250 years within a chrysalis of emotionless rationality, he seemed to be feeling the first tremulous moves toward freedom and life. Within the death throes of that metal Titan, he sensed he would be reborn. The how and why of it he didn't know, but the when and where was certain: April 15, 1912, Mid Atlantic, aboard the doomed Titanic.

He couldn't wait!

Chapter One

Lizzie

10 March 1912, London, ENGLAND

Lizzie Faulkner stepped with trepidation into her employer's old-fashioned study. The heavy furnishings, fussy Victoriana knick-knacks and blazing fire in the grate made the high-ceilinged room unnaturally oppressive. The silent condemnation of the straight back woman standing at the window only served to intensify the atmosphere.

Lizzie tried to draw in a deep breath to calm her jittery nerves, but she had cinched her swan bill corset so tightly that morning that she had barely enough lung capacity for shallow breaths. Dizziness and panic threatened to overwhelm her.

'Ah, Miss Faulkner, I am glad you have seen fit to join me at last. Are you feeling a little better?' The words were polite enough, even compassionate, but they were delivered in a tone of such icy disdain as to make a mockery of any warmer feelings.

Mrs Peabody was a woman in her mid-forties, but her extreme thinness and tightly pinched features made her look ten years older. Her dark hair, liberally streaked with grey, was scraped painfully back from her face and bound in a netted bun at the back of her head. Her fashionable, pencil-thin morning dress was made from expensive fabric, but the puce colour clashed badly with her complexion and only added to her unattractive appearance. It was almost as if she went out of her way to look as hard and unappealing as possible.

'Yes thank you, Madam,' she whispered, ashamed of her own temerity. Where had the courageous bluestocking gone who had set her sights on scaling the peaks of male-dominated arenas? And who was this craven ninny who seemed unable to put more than two words together without whimpering? Life had torn away her childish confidence and left her only too aware of her weakness and vulnerability.

'I have received troubling information from below stairs,' Mrs Peabody went on, her tone just as stony cold as before. 'Would you care to make a conjecture about the nature of that information, Miss Faulkner?'

'Ah, no, Madam, I have no idea,' she lied unconvincingly.

'Then you are a liar as well as a fallen woman, Miss Faulkner. I have it on very good authority that you are with child, and as there is no ring upon your

finger and I have heard of no husband mentioned in the past, I can only assume that this child you carry is illegitimate. Do you deny it?’

Lizzie felt the room begin to spin and she reached out to grab the edge of the desk to steady her.

When Jessie, the upstairs maid, had brought a jug of hot water to her room that morning, she had inadvertently seen Lizzie in her smalls before she had time to don her corset. The girl’s eyes nearly bulged out of her head from the sight and she’d turned tail and run, slopping water out of the jug as she went.

With stays, she had been able to disguise her five-month pregnancy, but without them, the gentle rounding of her girth was apparent, as was the increased size of her breasts. Jessie was an ignorant girl but she was wise about the ways of nature. The girl had known exactly what she was looking at and been in a hurry to share her titillating secret about the uppity governess with the rest of the household.

‘I was taken against my will, Madam. It was not my fault.’

‘Hah! As if every girl in your condition does not claim the very same thing. Even if that were the case, you are still at fault for placing yourself in a position where such an attack could take place.’

‘Place myself in a position? Do you think I was walking the streets at night? I was in my own bed here in this house, and I had to stay quiet so that I did not frighten your daughters in the next room.’

‘Oh, Miss Faulkner, surely you can be more imaginative than that. Are you suggesting a man broke into our home for the single purpose of having his way with you and that you did not struggle or tell of it the next day? Please, you think me a fool with such a story.’

‘No one broke in. And no one would have believed me if I had told them the next day. I could barely believe it myself, though it happened to me.’

‘Are you claiming one of the servants attacked you?’ demanded the enraged woman, puffing out like a furious rooster.

‘Not a servant, Madam. It was the master.’

The deathly silence that filled the room for a few long minutes was suffocating. Then, after several deep, calming breaths, Mrs Peabody drew herself to her full height and said, ‘How dare you!’

The words were as effective as a slap in the face, and Lizzie jerked back trembling. However, her resolve, now that she had finally voiced her complaint, began to harden.

‘I dare because I have no alternative but to dare, and I know that it is not the first time such has happened to a young woman in this house. Two maids have been sent away because of their condition in the last few years, and I never believed the rumours circulating below stairs concerning the master until it happened to me.’ Lizzie was proud to hear her voice was louder now, even if it was also tinged with hysteria.

‘If this were true why did you remain in our employ? Surely, you would fear that it would happen again. I am assuming it was only once you claim this attack occurred?’

‘He... he sat on my bed after... after it happened and cried. He said I had tempted him and he had been unable to withstand my siren’s call. But he swore it would not happen again if I did not tell you. He said he would take care of me if I were to...’

‘Enough! I will hear no more. You girls come to me with your unfounded claims and expect me to believe my loyal and faithful husband, who has no interest in such unseemly activities except for the procreation of children, would force himself on you and then cry? No, I say.’ Her voice rose in pitch and volume to override her victim’s.

‘Because one girl made that claim you all think you can make it? No, I will not have it! Pack your belongings, Miss Faulkner, and leave this house immediately.’ Mrs Peabody drew in several deep breaths in an attempt to calm herself. It must have succeeded, because when she went on a long minute later her voice was cold and calm once more.

‘Out of the kindness of my heart, I will pay you one month’s wages in lieu of notice, but that is only if you promise to keep your filthy lies to yourself and make no further claim on this family. If you do not so promise, I will pay you nothing, nor provide you with a reference.’

Lizzie felt a fatalistic calm come over her. This was how she had expected this encounter to end. After more than a year in the Peabody’s household, she knew the woman before her very well. For all her seeming strength of will, her employer hid her head in the sand about every matter that concerned her husband or her daughters.

Those two girls were rude, ignorant and unwilling to take guidance. They had been the cause of the resignations of two governesses before Lizzie. However, for all the evidence to the contrary, Mrs Peabody continued to claim it was never her girls’ fault. They were simply high spirited or unjustly blamed for other’s actions. Her daughters were angels.

Nor was her husband's drunkenness, gambling or philandering, it now transpired, his fault. Someone else was always to blame. Such denial was so deeply entrenched; Lizzie doubted the woman would believe it, even if she walked into a room where her husband was holding down a screaming girl and having his violent way with her.

So Lizzie would take her reference and her month's wages in advance because there was no other choice. Even if she had the strength, she could not hope to wage the kind of war required to right this wrong. She must make the best of it, which was all that was left for her to do.

'I make such a promise and will leave immediately,' she said in defeat.

The harsh features softened slightly now that Mrs Peabody had been reassured her world was safe once more. 'See that you do then. I will have your reference sent on to you, and Manning will have your wages at the door when you leave. I am disappointed in you, Miss Faulkner. You came to us highly recommended. It is a pity that your character is so flawed because your mind is very acute.'

Magnanimously, Mrs Peabody drew a letter from her pocket and threw it onto the desktop. 'That came in the post for you this morning. It is from the Americas. I hope for your sake that it is good news. You are dismissed.'

Frowning cautiously, Lizzie took the letter up and turned it over to see the sender's name. Her heart lifted for the first time that terrible day. Bertie! It was a letter from Bertie!

Lizzie hadn't heard from her brother for years, not since he left home when she was fifteen to take passage to America. There had been bad blood between her father and Bertie back then, which explained the silence. However, she had expected to hear from her only sibling when the news of her parent's death reached him.

That death was more than a year gone and she had just about given up on ever hearing from her brother again. Now, when her need was at its greatest, a letter had arrived. She couldn't wait to open it.

Hastily, she made her exit and hurried up to her tiny bedroom on the second floor. No bigger than a cupboard and containing just a small cot and set of drawers, it had been her only refuge during the terrible year that she had spent with the Peabody's. Not that all of her misery was their fault, she acknowledged. She prided herself on being fair. No, the bulk of her misery, especially in the early months, was the grief over the death of her parents. And, as the pain of that loss passed slowly, the disappointment at her lost education had replaced it. Only

then did the master's unwanted attentions begin to terrify her and drive out all other distress.

She had been at Girton College at Cambridge just into her second year when the terrible news of the train crash in Yorkshire had changed her life. The tragic accident had taken place on Christmas Eve 1910 as her parents were making their way back from Carlisle in time to spend Christmas with her. They never arrived, and while she drowned in the grief, more bad news had followed fast on its heels. Her parents were in debt, so their solicitor told her. It would take the sale of all their holdings and chattels to clear that debt. There would be nothing left for her upkeep or her continued education. She would be forced to seek employment to support herself.

Lizzie had not even turned twenty when she found herself alone and destitute. And like her favourite heroine, Jane Eyre, she had been determined to make her way in the harsh world unaided. Like her heroine, she had advertised for a position as a governess and found such a position with the Peabody household quickly. However, fact was not as uplifting as fiction, and Mr Peabody was no Mr Rochester. And instead of finding love and a happy-ever-after, she found fear, pain and humiliation. Furthermore, as an unmarried mother, she could only expect worse to come.

She sat down on her neatly made bed and, with shaking hands, began to open the letter. The big, elongated script she knew well greeted her like an old friend. With the first words, she felt a smile lift her tightly drawn lips.

21/332 175th Street,
Queens, New York, NY
March 2, 1912.

My dearest Sis,

I have just received a message from our parents' solicitors advising me of their death and the dissolution of their estate. They have made me aware of your dire circumstances, and it grieves me to know that you have been forced to go through so much pain alone and unsupported.

It has taken them over a year to track me down and for that alone I beg your forgiveness. My wife Catherine often informs me that I am a selfish sort and it is in moments like this I realise she is correct. I must admit to having not given you or our parents much more than a passing thought in the six years since I left home. My life has been full and not always congenial, so I have been occupied

with those matters close to home over these years. I never thought to contact you or mother and let you know where I was, or that I was even alive.

You will be pleased to know, I hope, that I have a family of my own now. Catherine gave birth to a daughter, Mary Louise, on January 20 of this year. Both mother and child are doing well. I manage Catherine's father's large general store here in Queens, and I am kept busy with the demands of work and family.

We would like to invite you to join us here in New York, Sis. I cannot hope to make up for the last year you have spent alone, but I will try to right my wrongs. Come and live with us. Catherine is in need of feminine companionship, as her own dear mother died when she was very young and she has no sisters or close female relatives. You can continue your education if that is your wish. You were always much brighter than I, as I was constantly reminded by our father. However, what I lack in wit, I have made up for with hard work, and I am well pleased with the life I have carved out for myself here.

I have taken the liberty of wiring to the Western Union Office in London the sum of one hundred dollars, which should provide you with sufficient funds for a second class berth on a steamer to New York, as well as extras for the journey. Please let me know of your arrangements and I will be at the docks to meet you.

I cannot say often enough how sorry I am for my part in your travail in the last year. To be so young, destitute and alone during your time of grief is more than I can bear to think about. However, if you join us here, Catherine, Mary and I will be your family and you will never be alone again.

*Your loving brother
Bertie*

Lizzie wasn't aware that she was crying until she felt the cold drops fall onto her hands. It was a dream-come-true. Bertie wanted her to come to New York and live with him and his new family. She would be able to continue her education after all.

Then the awful reality of her situation hit her anew. She was with child. She was unmarried and with child. There would be no further education for her. In the coming months, all her time would be occupied by the demands of motherhood. And even if she were to finish her degree, working was frowned on for those who held the important role of mother.

What would her brother think when he found out she was a fallen woman? Would he renege on his offer because her moral character would infect his females? If Bertie had been like their father, he would react in exactly that way. However, Bertie had always been rebellious and a free thinker. That was why America had seemed such a perfect place for him to go. Maybe that freethinking would extend to acceptance of a dishonoured sister.

Or, maybe not.

What if she were to write and tell him she was a widow? She could claim to have married a young man who subsequently died. But her brother named her as Elizabeth Faulkner with her employer's address on the envelope of his letter. How could she then tell him such a tale if her parent's solicitors had told him different?

Even so, the more she thought about it, the more determined she was that possessing a dead husband was the only way that she would be able to navigate her new circumstances. The idea of lying to her brother was repellent, but the idea of him rejecting her was even more repellent. And in America, there would be no one to say she had lied. She could start afresh as a young widow doubly weighed down by the grief at the loss of parents and husband.

A hundred dollars awaited her at the Western Union. That was about twenty pounds, if she calculated rightly. That would be more than enough for a second class ticket and the cost of accommodation in a nice place for the time it took to get a suitable steamer berth. For the first time in more than a year, Lizzie felt as if her life was finally looking up.

Chapter Two

Eilish

11 March 1912, London ENGLAND

When Eilish Cork stepped out of a darkened alley onto rain-soaked Bury Street, St James, with Luke Bedford on her arm, anyone awake at that late hour might have assumed some salacious business transaction had just taken place in that alley. By the time they reached the intersection where Bury Street met the more populated Jermyn Street, any person viewing the pair might have assumed they were a happy couple making their way home from a night out in the West End. When they turned into The Cavendish, a moderately priced hotel on Jermyn Street, where a night bell brought a groggy concierge and the hasty exchange of some Guineas to find them a room with no questions asked, an observer might have suspected that a romantic liaison of a clandestine and discrete nature was taking place.

None of these observations would have come anywhere near the truth.

‘What a night!’ Eilish exclaimed, as she tossed off her broad-brimmed hat and flopped backward onto the double bed in their small room. It didn’t offer much in the way of a bounce. But it was enough to knock some of her wild, black hair loose from its confines so it fanned out around her head like Medusa’s snaky locks.

‘Typical London weather. I remember what it was like here in the war. Raining one night, bombing the next. You eventually got ta preferrin’ the safety of the miserable, wet nights.’ Luke removed his overcoat and hung it neatly in the huge Victorian wardrobe.

‘It is rather exciting to be here at this time. So much earlier than any Jumps I have made previously. My god, did you see that old Tin Lizzie parked along the road? Absolutely ancient!’

She shifted to her side and stared at the broad back of her mission partner. They were largely strangers to each other, even though they had been part of the same team for more than four years. It felt odd to be sharing such close quarters with this larger-than-life hero for the first time.

It had taken her quite a while to get used to Jumping with a partner at all. In the past, they’d always worked alone in-situ. However, in the last six years the rules had changed, and the new Protocol required two Jumpers for every Target. In those six years, she’d mostly been paired up with women. Although she had

Jumped with Julio Santa Catarina in the early days of the Child Retrieval Program before Jane became his regular partner.

Jumping alone had always suited her. However, once the restrictions such a partnership required were overcome, the advantages became apparent. Not the least of which was having a companion who could relate to her amazement and wonder at the sights they saw in-situ.

That her partner on this Jump was the infamous Luke Bedford had, at first, seemed like icing on the cake. However, now she was alone with him for the first time, she wasn't sure how she felt.

It was known that Luke was only brought in on dangerous and complex missions. He was an ex-World War II Commando who was very good at his job. Everyone knew the story of how he'd killed three Nazis in less than a minute in 1942 Poland when he was rescuing Faith Lincolnshire. And, for all his wisecracking, amiable persona, Eilish had no doubt that beneath it was a cold, killing machine. Dangerous men were so foreign to New Atlantis that Luke had immediately become as much a novelty as a tiger on a lead would be walking down the streets of London.

Am I attracted to him? She knew he represented that Alpha Male type that was supposed to attract women. However, though he was undoubtedly handsome in a muscular, boyish way, she didn't feel drawn to him other than as a friend and co-worker. Of course, that was only to be expected since she'd never been sexually attracted to anyone in her very long life.

And it was good she wasn't since she knew that Luke had eyes for no one but his Faith. He was almost slavishly devoted to the gentle, unassuming woman who now worked exclusively with the children Retrieved by the program and her adopted son, Bart. She was the perfect mother, even though she could never bear children from her own womb, as no woman in their world ever would.

'How long until morning?' Eilish asked absently, shifting back so she could stare at the overly ornate moulding on the lofty ceiling above. Such a high ceiling in such a small room made the space seem even more restricted. She rubbed at what was left of her pompadour hairstyle, loosening more strands from the mound on top of her head. She would need to hire a maid to do her hair during the next month if she was to pass as a lady of the upper echelons of society.

'We arrived at two and this is March, so I wouldn't expect much activity before seven. Sleep if you want to. I brought a book to read.' With a grin, he pulled a stained, yellowing Penny-Dreadful from his pocket. The title: Varney,

the Vampire or the Feast of Blood, was arranged around a crudely drawn skeletal figure in a bat cape leaning over a sleeping woman. It was laughably awful and she wondered what archive Luke had raided to secure the thing. Most material in New Atlantis was kept on computer. There were few, if any, hard copies of books left preserved.

‘It was in Wardrobe. It’s probably a bit antiquated, even for this period, but it’ll attract little attention if it’s found. Unlike a Neville Shute paperback might.’

‘Neville Shute?’

‘A guy who wrote adventure stories during the early part of the twentieth century. I used to read his books on missions. There’s always a lot of boredom when you’re waiting around for something to happen.’

Eilish nodded thoughtfully at this gem of information. ‘A bit like our Jumps. I used to buy a book or two to read while I was grooming my Targets. You cannot be with them twenty-four seven, and after a few days of sight-seeing, most places are a bit “same ol’, same ol’,” as I think they used to say.’

She was starting to become aware the differences in their speech patterns. Luke still spoke like an American of the 1940s, while she used the formal speech of twenty-fourth century New Atlantis. Hers was far closer to the speech of this time than his was, she knew, even though he was born in this era. That was a relief for her, because it meant she didn’t have to try to adjust her language. Her linguistic downloads could do it for her, but it was still easier if she could just stick to what she knew.

‘You’ve been a Jumper for a long time, then?’ Luke sat down on the side of the bed, also seeming to be a little uncomfortable with their close quarters. She wondered if it was his background that made him consider it unsuitable for a couple to share a room when they weren’t married.

‘Since the beginning, I have always been a bit restless. I was only thirteen when the Last Great Plague wiped everyone out. Too young for a clone and too sick for manual labour. So they moved me to New Atlantis and put me to work in the Knowledge Centre. By the time I got my first clone, I was ready to DO something with my life. I did not want to be stuck in a mouldy old Knowledge Centre forever. I wanted to see the world – or what was left of it.’

‘I was uncharacteristically restless, so I was told. Everyone else was shell-shocked after the LGP and for years afterward. All anyone wanted to do was knuckle down and work to survive. But I was never like that. I had been an Irish orphan living in one foster care home after another most of my life. I did not feel

like I lost much with the LGP – not as everyone else did. And I had always moved around, so it was ingrained into me...

‘Sorry I am giving you my life history and you just asked about my Jumping.’ Eilish shrugged and grimaced as she became aware of how she was running on.

‘No, go on, I’m interested... better than Varley, the Vampire, anyhow. If we’d been in the back-end of this century, I could’ve got Buffy the Vampire Slayer, but hey, Eilish the Restless Irish will do as well.’ He laughed, visibly more relaxed now that they’d started talking. Making quick work of it, he slipped off his shoes, sat back against the headboard and leaned his elbows on his knees. He watched her with bright, blue eyes that didn’t seem to miss a thing.

‘Ha, do you know how many times people have played on the “Eilish, the Irish” thing? Not very original. But anyway, if you feel like being entertained by my life story, here goes.’ She flopped over onto her stomach and rested her head on her hands, elbows bent to support them.

‘So, for a hundred years or more, I just moved around the communities turning my hand to anything that needed doing. I got to see the world, sometimes getting to take excursions into the major cities. Once the bodies had decomposed, it was no longer a health hazard to go into previously populated areas. I would be part of collection details, foraging for anything valuable or interesting. It was the grass roots end of the Knowledge Centres. I had done the compilation end of the process as a kid.

‘Then, about seventy years or so ago, the news came out that they had been able to perfect time travel. Of course, they had been teleporting for years before that. But when they worked out how to transpose molecules across time as well as space, it was big.

‘People immediately saw how we could maybe change the past so the Second Dark Age never happened. Not all of it. We all knew the geological disasters were not man’s fault. But the rest... what could we do if we went back and changed things for the better?’

‘But you never did that. Changing the past is against the rules, even if it were possible,’ Luke interrupted fiercely.

‘Yes, but in the early days people had wild ideas. They thought we could fix everything. Luckily, there were enough sensible heads at government level to make sure none of those wild ideas took hold. In the end, we were all satisfied by the idea of Retrieving people from the past so that humanity could go on.

‘I applied to become a Retriever as soon as it was clear what that would involve. Even though I was not anything special, I had a good brain and most of

the other attributes they felt necessary for a Jumper. I did my training with Jac and Chen, and right from the outset, I loved it. I got to travel and see the world – not the hollowed-out shell of what was left of the world, but the way it used to be. Like this! My god, it was exciting – really exciting – and every Target I brought safely home made me feel like God Almighty. And my success rate was even higher than Jac’s and he was one of the best.’

Luke frowned and shook his head. ‘You’re not like the rest of ‘em, are you? Old Timers never get excited about anything. That’s what Faith told me anyway.’

‘Yes, I know. I am abnormal. I never really fitted in. I am able to keep my passionate nature well hidden mostly. But sometimes it is impossible. But now that things have changed and more of the Old Timers are starting to feel more intensely, I do not feel so out of place.’

‘Does that mean...’ Luke stopped mid-sentence and blushed. He coughed and made much of looking for a handkerchief in his pocket.

Eilish laughed light-heartedly. ‘No, my passionate nature has never extended into the sexual arena. I think it is because I was pre-pubescent when the LGP happened. I never had sexual thoughts, not that I remember anyway. And by the time I reached puberty, I was so sick that sex was the last thing on my mind. Then, of course, once I had a clone, there was never much of a drive to be sexually active. I haven’t missed much, from all I have heard.’

She laughed as she watched Luke’s expressive face mirror his contradictory thoughts.

‘You aren’t attracted to men at all?’ he asked tentatively, after chewing for a while on her information.

‘No, not really. And before you ask, I am not attracted to women either. In that way, I am no different from most of the Old Timers.’

‘Hmm,’ he grunted and seemed to want to say more.

‘What? It is all right to talk about this you know. We are a very liberal society, as I think you have probably discovered.’

‘Yeah, but not as liberal as the back end of this century. Their media is obscene.’

‘Porn? Yes, it is rather off-putting. I have seen a bit of it while in-situ. Anyway, what did you want to ask?’

‘It isn’t my business, forget it.’

‘Now you have me curious. Come on Luke, we are going to be spending a lot of time together in the next month or more; you may as well clear the air. I will ask you inappropriate questions as they arise. I am famous for it.’

‘Okay, you asked for it, doll. You’re 200 or so, right?’

‘Actually I’m over three hundred years old, given my time in-situ.’

‘Yeah, right. Well, you’re a beautiful gal. In all that time, you’ve never... oh, forget it. It’s not important!’ He threw up his hands in disgusted embarrassment.

Eilish liked watching him blush. She’d never seen anyone blush as he did. It required intense embarrassment or shame to elicit the physiological response and no one in her world felt intensely about anything.

Well, that wasn’t really true anymore. She’d spent time with Julio and he was the epitome of intense. Although, from what he had told her, that wasn’t the case before he met Jane. She brought him painfully back to life; but Julio was an Old Timer, and so little embarrassed him.

‘If you are asking if I am still a virgin at three hundred plus years, then the answer is yes. I think I shared a few pre-teen kisses during spin-the-bottle, but that is about it.’

‘Don’t you miss being touched... held?’ The question was out before he had time to censor it. And after it was, he clamped his mouth shut tightly, obviously angry with himself.

Eilish leant her cheek against a shoulder as she thought about his question. ‘I never had it as a child, so I do not think I miss it. But sometimes I envy you couples – Jac and Cara, Julio and Jane, you and Faith... and the others that are popping up everywhere these days. I wonder what it would be like to be close to someone, feel their warm skin on mine. Even so, it seems to me that for every pleasurable moment such a bond gives you, there is an equally painful one. I am happy to forgo the pleasure to avoid the pain.’

Luke’s face had closed down as he considered her words. Eventually, he looked up and caught her with his intense gaze. ‘Me and Faith, we’ve had our painful moments, especially in the early days when I couldn’t accept New Atlantis, but I know for a fact that neither of us would want it any other way. The highs... the highs are incredible, and I don’t mean just in bed; I get high just holding her. It’s like nothing I’ve ever known before. And I was pretty damned experienced by the time I got to Faith, I gotta tell ya. But, just holding her is better than sex with any broad I ever had. I don’t think I could live without her now. And the brat... well, holding him is almost painfully intense sometimes.’

‘Brat?’ she whispered, moved more than she thought possible by his open sharing.

‘Bart. I call him Brat because that’s what he is most of the time. God, that kid is enough to test the patience of a saint. And ain’t nobody puttin’ me up for

sainthood anytime soon. From the moment I met him, hovering around his fallen companions on that death train tryin' to drag them out...' He stopped speaking while he tried to get his emotions under control.

Eilish had been there. She had assisted with the extraction of those 150 traumatised women and children on the train that was to take them to Belzac Death Camp. She'd been moved by those children, as all the team had been moved by their innocent fear and pain, and she'd been told Bart's story in outline but never from the source.

Eventually, Luke felt able to go on. 'From the moment I met him, it was like I'd found another little piece of myself. Faith gave me a piece, a big piece. And then Bart came along with another piece I didn't even know I was missing. He's like me, you know. Like I was when I was a kid. And my pappy beat the bejeezus outta me for it. I guess I always thought I deserved it. But Bart is one hell of a kid, and he's special and likeable, and I can't imagine anyone wantin' to beat the bejeezus outta him. Oh, a quick clip upside the head, maybe to pull him in ta' line, but nothin' else. And so the more I came to love him, the more I stopped believin' I deserved what my old man handed out.

'So every time I hug that little brat, it's like I'm huggin' that little kid I used to be.' He shook his head and scowled. 'That makes it sound like I only love him because he reminds me of myself. That's not true. I love him for who he is – the brave, rebellious little soldier who wouldn't leave a man down, who'll take on a bully twice his size to defend someone weaker, who questions everything, who seems to have an innate sense of justice and who still doesn't believe his good luck in being part of our family. And I'd have to love him simply because he loves Faith so much it makes him cry. Jeezus, how did we get into all this deep and meaningful cr... garbage?'

'I do not know, but I am glad we did. I was nervous about working closely with you, Luke. You scare a lot of people. I am glad I had this chance to get to know you.'

'To see I'm not scary?'

Eilish laughed as she sat up and began to pull the last of her wreckage of a hairdo down so she could comb out the lengths with her fingers. 'Oh, you are still plenty scary. But in a good way, I think. I feel safer knowing you are here with me.'

Luke's face broke into a bright smile and he ran his fingers through his own lengthened, pomade coated hair. 'Good, that's good. Scaring gals is not somethin' I wanna do. You're safe with me, Irish.'

‘Eil... oh no, do not start calling me Irish! I am not your Brat!’ She tried to sound severe, but all she could do was laugh at his boyish, cheeky grin. How did he get to look like he was eight years old when he was clearly a war-wearied man in his mid-thirties?

‘Anything you say Irish, er, Eilish.’

She picked up one of the long pins she had removed with her hat and waved it at him threateningly. He laughed as he scrambled from the bed, trying to escape her.

At that moment there was a loud thumping against the wall, and they both realised their noise was disturbing the neighbours. They hushed.

‘Does it feel wrong to you that we are rescuing some people, like our Target, and then leaving others to die?’ Eilish said softly, manoeuvring up so she could sit leaning against the headboard as Luke had been doing. The pencil-thin skirt she wore made moving difficult, and her lounging had already creased her clothing badly. Somehow, before they went out in the morning, she would have to try to make right her appearance if she wanted to blend in with Edwardian society, but right now, it didn’t matter.

Luke sat next to her and resumed his position with his elbows on his knees. His elasticised braces pulled tight as he rounded his shoulders.

‘There are a lot of things that are morally ambiguous about what we do. Taking kids away from parents so we can give them to our childless couples for one.’

‘But history says that they would have been taken from their parents regardless. We just give the children a new life.’ This was an argument where Eilish felt on the moral high ground.

‘Sure, and the same could be said for what we’re doing on this Jump. We’re taking children away from their parents, who would otherwise have drowned, so they can have a new life.’

‘But we could just as easily take the parents too. But we will not. Not unless they can adapt to our world. We will leave them behind to drown.’

‘You know more about Crash and Burn than I do,’ Luke said with a sigh.

‘I know, I know. Adults are far more likely to C and B than kids, especially if they are not prepared beforehand. And it takes a certain mindset to be able to accept our world... to accept time travel itself... and few have that mindset. I know that. I do. I have had firsthand experience with people who could not grasp the reality of our world. Even so, I still feel squeamish about talking parents into letting us take their children...’

Luke rubbed his head and then grimaced at the grease on his palm. He wiped it on his handkerchief. 'I hate this stuff!'

'Smells nice though, and it keeps your goldilocks in place.'

'Hmm. Give me a razor and I won't have any goldilocks to keep in place. Where was I? Oh, yeah. The way I see it is, if we had a lifeboat and called for children to board it, they'd want to put their kids on it to save them. Any parent would. As far as they're concerned, once the worry over the safety of their children is taken from them, they can focus on getting to safety themselves. And even though we know they won't be successful, we can at least feel assured that in their last moments they'll be content that their children were saved.'

'But they will not have a choice about keeping or sending their children with us. We will have tricked them into believing they are just trying out the new life raft. They will not know they are gone until it is too late.'

'But they'll know they're at the "lifeboat" when the emergency becomes real to them. Look, it's all about risks and pay-offs. This whole mission is one huge risk. Even though I'm not happy putting Brat in danger, I can see the advantages of having him with us. The pay-off's worth the risk. The parents will feel that way.'

'Bart can convince the children to trust us. And they, in turn, can convince the parents to let us have them...' Eilish frowned. 'Yes, it is a good plan. But he is so young. You will have to keep him close. If something goes wrong, you could lose him.'

Luke's face became the mask of a soulless killer in that moment. 'He's nearly eleven. He went through worse than this at a much younger age so he'll handle it. And I won't lose him. I won't go back without him.'

'What about Faith?'

His eyes were hollow as they looked deep into hers, 'I will not go back without him.'

'Then maybe he is better off not...'

'He's got it into his head that he'll be useful on this mission and there's no telling him he won't. Have I mentioned he's as stubborn as a mule? Another characteristic we share. Both Jac and Chen think it's a good idea. Cara is worried, only because of Faith, but agrees it'll make the transfer smoother. As for Bart, well he'll follow direction. He knows what's at stake. He's survived the Nazis, and he's been well trained. I have to trust that it'll be enough.'

'I guess that goes for all of us. We would not do what we do if we were not willing to face the danger.'

‘We risk our lives to save lives. It’s what we do,’ Luke agreed grimly.

Chapter Three

Max

12 March 1912, London ENGLAND

Maxwell Ingham stared out of his office window at busy Fleet Street below. He loved the cacophony of noise that modern man in his industry could create – the mechanical hum of the automobiles, as they rumbled down the street honking their horns at horse and wagons that might delay or block their passage. Many a flighty horse took exception to this noise and would rear and buck in complaint. People of all classes hurried along the pathways and crossed the thoroughfares at random, often inadvertently walking in front of the speeding vehicles. Yelling and shaking fists would accompany those near misses. It was organised chaos, and he loved it.

His eye was drawn from the general to the specific, as he caught a glimpse of a young woman dressed fashionably in a navy skirt and jacket with a white blouse adorned with a large, floppy bow at its high neckline. A hat, a monstrous navy affair that was utterly impractical for the busy streets, shielded her face. However, when she paused to look up at the second and third stories of the buildings on his side of the road, he gained a much better impression of her appearance.

Her face was pale, milky white with huge eyes and small, upturned nose. Red lips were bowed in a delighted smile as her elegant, gloved hands crossed over heart, as if to keep the organ from jumping out of her chest. She looked to be in her mid-to-late twenties, but there was an air of child-like enthusiasm that belied that age. What little hair was visible beneath the hat was black and wavy, framing her oval face and softening the sharp lines of the outrageous creation on her head.

For the full time he stared at her, he couldn't seem to draw breath. It wasn't until she dropped her head, hurried across the road, dodging horse-drawn and horseless carriages alike, and disappeared somewhere beneath him that he felt his breathing return to normal.

'Maxwell, Darling, what do you think?' A strident voice jarred him from his strange reaction and drew his eye. Coming across the room toward him was his wife, Agnes, dressed in a sunshine yellow day-dress that quite blinded him with

its brightness. It was a wrap-around affair, somewhat oriental in design, with a wide, darkly patterned border that crossed over her bird-like figure.

‘About what, my dear?’ he inquired, knowing exactly what, but wanting to give himself a moment to come up with a suitably diplomatic comment.

‘Why, my dress, silly. Do you like it? My couturier tells me it is the latest thing from the continent, and I plan to wear it to the Royal International Horticultural Exhibition in May. I am taking a risk that no one of any influence will see me in it today. Nevertheless, I just had to show you immediately.’

The small woman pivoted to display her gown and large floral hat. Her mouse-like features broke into a winsome smile.

‘You will turn many an eye, my dear. The flowers will pale into insignificance beside you.’ He spoke the truth, as was his way, but he disguised his thoughts within the effusion of his words, as only a man of the law could do. In truth, she looked hideous, but he had learned early on in their relationship that Agnes did not want to hear the truth. She wanted to mould it to suit herself, and that was what he allowed her to do with his words now.

She blushed coquettishly and giggled. ‘Oh Maxwell, I knew you would love it. Matilda Robson was not so complimentary. But then she is not up with the latest haute de couture, so I dismissed her opinion immediately. You, on the other hand, dear husband, are a man of taste and refinement. I knew you would see its value.’

‘My tastes run to more simplistic and conservative designs, but I do value the unconventional when it is aesthetically pleasing to the eye.’

Agnes smiled sweetly, bowing her head as if accepting another compliment. Then she sighed deeply and waited for him to ask what was wrong.

Obediently, he asked on cue, ‘My dear, what troubles you?’

‘It is father. He is insisting I come down to visit. He assures me I could be back for Easter and the beginning of the Season. His gout is acting up again, and he is driving everyone in the household to distraction.’

Max felt his heart lift. Agnes wanted to go away for a month. It had nothing whatsoever to do with her father; he’d learned this trick fairly quickly after their marriage two years ago. Before that time, he’d believed her to be the gentle, sweet widow she portrayed herself to be. A kind soul, she had been unable to get out from beneath the cruel and tyrannical rule of her father, no matter how hard she tried. She’d told him that her first marriage to an army officer who died in the last days of the Boer War some ten years earlier had been forced on her by that unfeeling man. She’d been only eighteen at the time, and the harsh realities

of a brutish husband in her bed had turned her against marital intimacies from that point on.

‘Of course my dear, you must go to your father. I will rub along well enough in your absence.’ His answer was perfunctory and a little brisker than he was aiming for, but sometimes he tired of her games and he just wanted out.

A fleeting look of calculation crossed her features and her beady, little eyes became cold. The expression told him all too well that she suspected he knew her secrets.

‘Then I will say my good-byes, dear one, for I will be gone by the time you arrive home this evening. If you need me, you know how to reach me.’

‘Of course, my dear. Safe journey. I will see you at Easter.’

With a quick peck on the cheek, Agnes bustled out, closing the door firmly behind her.

Moments later, the door opened and Phillip, his younger brother, entered.

Max sighed with impatience. Today his office was as busy as Charing Cross Station down the street.

‘What did she want?’ Phillip demanded, drawing himself up straight to make the most of his five feet five inches. Max was a good half a foot taller, but his bantam rooster brother had always been the more aggressive of the pair.

‘She wanted to show me her new dress and to tell me she is going to Kent.’

‘What? Again? Good god man, why do you put up with it? You know she is going to see that labourer your Pinkerton found out about. Why would you share her bed knowing she has been with that lout?’

‘Not that it is any of your business but I do not share my wife’s bed. We mutually agreed that such an arrangement would come to an end shortly after we were married. So, I care little who she shares intimacies with.’

‘What if she tries to foist his bastard off on you?’

‘Keep your voice down, man. I do not want the whole practice knowing my business!’

Phillip duly lowered his voice and repeated his question.

‘Agnes is forty years old. She has been involved with this labourer all her adult life and has produced no offspring. I doubt very much whether it will happen now. Be assured that I will not allow any child she might bear to influence your inheritance.’

‘Damn it, Max,’ Phillip fumed. ‘You know it is not your money I am concerned about. I just hate to see such a fine man as you made to look such a fool by that bitch!’

‘Steady on there, I may not care much for the woman but she is still my wife. I cannot allow you to call her names in my presence.’ Max spoke stiffly, keeping a tight rein on his own anger.

He knew his brother was trying to protect him, but it only served to make him feel more of a fool than he knew himself to be. His astute judgements in law, and his access to the seamier side of life because of his legal practice, meant he was rarely duped. However, Agnes had played him from the moment they met. She had heard of his gentle gallantry and of his political stand on the abuse of women, and manufactured a role for herself that could only bring out the protector in him. In his career, he had never met a more capable fraud, and it irked him to have proven to be such an easy mark.

‘Why don’t you take a mistress then? You are a man and have needs, even if our parents tried to beat them out of us. A man of your standing is well within his rights to take a mistress.’

Again, Max sighed heavily. This was an old argument between them. Phillip had gone in the opposite direction to him after their shared childhood. While Max had been the fair-haired child trying his best to be everything his father required of him, even to remaining resolutely virginal until his marriage, Phillip had been a reckless philanderer from an early age. If rumour had it, Phillip already had several illegitimate children and, at thirty-five, still had no plans to marry and settle down.

For not the first time, Max wondered how their childhood had produced such opposite characters. Except that they were both dark-haired, good-looking men, a legacy of their mother’s family, they shared nothing but their career path in common.

‘You, my brother, inherited all the venal vitality for both of us. I have never required a mistress and do not mean to start now.’

‘You... your appetites do not lie in other directions?’ Phil looked uncomfortable for the first time, pulling at the collar of his pristine white shirt.

Max laughed. It was the first time that day that someone had said or done anything to inspire mirth. And he needed to laugh. It was his safety valve. It lightened the heaviness of his life. He let himself enjoy the moment.

‘You have wanted to ask that question ever since we were children. So after nearly a quarter of a century, you finally ask it. Are you sure you are ready for the answer, dear brother?’

Phillip’s face flushed red with mortification and he dug into his pocket for a handkerchief to wipe the sweat from his brow. The room was warm; the fire in

the grate kept it that way most months of the year. However, it was not hot enough to account for the perspiration on his brother's high forehead.

'Yes. If you prefer to bugger boys then I can understand it given our parent's less than gentle ways with us. I will not condemn you for that unnatural proclivity.'

For the first time in his relationship with his brother, Max felt genuine affection for the man. That he would accept him, even if he could not condone such perversion, was the height of magnanimity, and his desire to taunt his brother was instantly gone.

'Do not worry; I have no sexual desires along those lines. In fact, I have little, if any, procreative desires at all. Whether by nature or nurture, I am for all intents and purposes a eunuch and better for it. I would not have survived being led around by my appendage, as you have been your whole life.' He laughed at his brother's indignant huff.

'Led I might have been, but at least I enjoyed it.'

'Mother taught me early that all sexual urges were dirty and demeaning. Even though, intellectually, I know that is untrue, on a visceral level... it has always felt wrong and most assuredly not enjoyable. And having a wife who cringed away from me on our marriage bed and cried when I entered her did nothing to change my feelings.'

'She is a fine actress; I will give her that. After hearing about the ogre she was forced to marry, I can see how that game had to be played out. But surely, once the investigator found out the truth about her lover, a brute of a man if ever there was one, you would not have felt the need to be as gentle and understanding with her?'

'Why do you press me on this? It is none of your affair.' Max felt his anger rising again.

'Because I do not like seeing you like this! God, man, I have idolised you from the moment I could walk. You were my big brother who protected me from harm – even from father's heavy belt where you could. In the courts of law, you are powerful and intimidating, with the keenest mind of any man I have ever known. You could be Prime Minister one day! Yet, where women are concerned, you are emasculated. Do not let her do this to you. You deserve better than this faithless whore.'

'Enough!' Max's voice had dropped to almost a whisper but the tone would brook no opposition.

‘All right, all right, I give in. Live your life as you will, dearest brother, I will say no more about it. However, remember one thing – a life lived without love is no life at all. You are forty years old. Soon it will be too late for you. Life is short and not designed only for work and duty.’

Before Max could reply, Phillip slipped out of the door and left him to his troubled thoughts. He knew he had plenty of time before his next appointment, but for once, the necessities of work were more dreary than pleasurable. He felt a restlessness he couldn’t identify. It had started at the sight of the girl in the street, and his brother’s words only served to inflame it further.

There was a soft knock on the oak door and his assistant poked his head around the edge, his eyes meekly turned to the carpeted floor.

‘Sorry to intrude, sir. But there is a young lady here who wishes a moment of your time. She is not a client.’

‘What does she want?’ he demanded impatiently. Would the interruptions to his day never end?

‘She says she is a journalist and wishes to interview you for a story she is writing.’

Max frowned. This was not the first request for an interview he’d received over the years. His firm represented high-profile cases and he himself was politically active in matters that were controversial. Good press could serve him, bad press... well; he could see for himself the nature of the article the woman wished to write and decide from there. There was time in his schedule and maybe she would keep his mind off his growing restlessness.

‘Send her in. I can give her a few moments I suppose,’ he said ungraciously. Jones had been his assistant for many years and knew his temperament well. There was no need for politeness in their dealings.

When the door opened again, Max felt as if the air in the room had been sucked out of it. In the doorway stood a young woman in a navy skirt and jacket and a big, outrageous hat. A pair of extraordinary blue eyes fringed with sooty black lashes stared across at him and for a moment, he could think of nothing to say. His mind was blank.

‘Mr Ingham? Your assistant said to come in?’ Her voice wobbled slightly with nerves. What was that slight lilt of an accent? Irish? Surely not.

‘Come right in, I have a few minutes to spare. How can I help you...? Miss...?’ Had Jones told him her name? He couldn’t remember. He could barely remember his own name at that moment. A slow, flustered burn started to rise up from his neck to his cheeks.

Something amused her because she smiled in delight. ‘Miss O’Toole, Eilish O’Toole. Thank you for finding time in your busy schedule for me.’

Max gestured for her to take a seat on the far side of his desk and instead of taking his position behind it, as was his usual practice, he drew up a hard backed chair and sat down next to her.

Up close, she was even more attractive than from a distance. Her face was rounded, as was her body. But it only served to make her softer and lusher.

Lush? Where had that word come from? It made him squirm in his chair like a worm on a hook.

He cleared his throat and reached for the glass of water on his desk to moisten his suddenly dry mouth. This was absurd. What kind of fool was he being now? His brother would be laughing at him had he remained in the room to witness this gauche, pubescent behaviour.

‘I am interested in writing an article on spousal abuse for our new magazine, The Woman’s Weekly, which was launched at the end of last year. You have been a divorce lawyer for most of your career and specialise in cases where such violence is the principal grounds for divorce. You were also one of the most vocal supporters of the 1907 revision to the divorce law act, which provided child support for divorced wives caring for their children.’

Max sat back and considered the woman more closely. She wasn’t just physically attractive, her passionate interest in her subject made her character attractive also. But not in a militant, suffragette fashion. He could hear no hatred for the male gender underlying her words.

‘You have done your research, Miss O’Toole. Yes, I have been vocal and active in both legal and political arenas on this issue for many years. However, I thought the content of your new magazine was not inflammatory. This subject is very provocative, even today.’

‘Would you mind if I took off my hat. It is driving me mad,’ she said, suddenly tipping her head to one side and shaking her head slightly.

It was such a natural and ingenuous action that he couldn’t help smiling. ‘Of course, feel free to be comfortable.’

With that, the Irish woman withdrew two long hatpins and removed her ridiculous hat. Suddenly, a wealth of soft, black waves artfully arranged on the top of her head were revealed. His fingers itched to touch them, and once again, he was flabbergasted by his reaction.

She put the hat on the desk, breathing a long sigh of relief. ‘I am so sorry. That was very unprofessional of me. But that thing was giving me a headache.’

‘Think nothing of it. Why you women insist on wearing such outlandish headwear, I have no idea. You look far prettier without.’ He stopped short, as he realised how close that came to a flirtatious compliment. Hopefully, she would take it as a general statement about all women looking prettier without such hats.

Her cheeks bloomed pinkly and she looked away with a shy smile. So, she had taken it personally. And instead of being annoyed or embarrassed, he was pleased.

‘Miss O’Toole, might I offer you some tea and crumpets? It is usually what I require midmorning, as I have no time to break my fast before I leave for the office.’

‘Thank you. That would be delightful.’

Flustered, and yet oddly excited by the turn of events, Max went to the door and put his order in to Jones. It was true; he did take morning tea about this time, but he rarely had the appetite for crumpets. Today it was different. Today he felt hungry.

‘Now, back to our subject,’ Max said, as he sat down across from her edging his chair subtly closer, yet still remaining at a socially acceptable distance.

‘Yes, my hat did cause me to digress. You asked me about the content of *The Women’s Weekly*. You are right, of course; we are not a suffragette magazine. In fact, we cater to the ordinary woman. However, these women are the ones most often affected by the inequalities in the law. So, where possible, in the gentlest fashion, we try to educate our readers about their rights. Too many of them still consider a heavy hand on the part of their husband an acceptable part of married life.’

‘Yes, you are absolutely right. And, unfortunately, the women who are most at risk are those who have few choices. They cannot support themselves, as they are caring for children and so must rely on their husbands for the roof over their heads. We are making some moves to provide for these women, but we still have a long way to go on the issue.’

‘Why have you been willing to take such a controversial stand? As a Conservative, it is rather risky for your political aspirations, would you not say?’

He smiled broadly and gave a little chuckle. ‘Not all Conservatives are conservative, Miss O’Toole.’

‘Please, I know this is also inappropriate, but could you perhaps call me Eilish? Miss O’Toole seems so formal and stuffy, don’t you think?’

Surprised by her suggestion, he nevertheless nodded and gracefully agreed. ‘Certainly, if it suits you better Mi... er, Eilish. It is an unusual name. Please feel

free to call me Max.'

'Thank you, Max. My name is rare. It is derived from Elizabeth, so I am led to believe. In my case, it was a family name. It was my grandmother's.'

'It is lovely, and suits you well.' Again, he caught himself uttering flirtatious compliments. What on earth was wrong with him? The young woman was here to interview him, not to be romanced by an older, married man.

'Thank you again. Could I ask, do you know William Thomas Stead by any chance?'

'Stead, the publisher? I have met the man on occasion. He was a strong advocate of female rights for many years.'

'Indeed. I hear he is travelling to New York for a peace conference at Carnegie Hall next month on the maiden voyage of the Titanic.' Eilish spoke as if the information was of little importance, and yet there was something in her tone that warned him that this was more than just an idle statement.

'Really? I have heard that the voyage had been postponed because of the damage to her sister ship the Olympic.'

'Yes, but she will be ready to sail by the tenth of next month. I have it on good authority.'

'It will be an historic occasion; I am sure.' He felt as if they were feeling their way down a dark corridor, each of them tentative and uncertain where to go next.

'Have you considered such a journey?' she asked.

'Ah, my wife is determined to throw us both into the social whirl that is the Season, which, as you probably know, starts directly after Easter. So, even if I wanted to take such a journey and my calendar gave me space for time off, I doubt she would forgive me for leaving her at such an important time.'

He felt reluctant to talk about Agnes to this woman. Absurdly, he wanted her to think him single and available. And yet, she would already know of his marital status. It would be in his background information along with his political interests.

'The Season does not interest you?' she asked curiously.

'No,' he replied with a little laugh. 'But it is good for my career so I suffer through it. What about you, Mi... Eilish, do you have an interest in the Season?'

At that moment, the door opened and Jones entered carrying a large silver tray containing a silver tea service and two plates of hot crumpets. He distributed the crumpets and then poured the tea. During the minutes he was busy, Max made the most of the opportunity to study the girl more closely. He kept thinking of her as a girl rather than a woman, even though it was apparent she was closer to

thirty than twenty. Even so, it was her bright-eyed enthusiasm that made her appear younger than her years. Next to her, he felt like a very tired and dusty, old reprobate.

As she nibbled on her crumpet and sipped on her milky tea, she looked around his office with interest. It was a room that pleased his aesthetic as well as his business sense. On one wall was a bookshelf that extended from ceiling to floor and contained his legal tomes. On the far wall was a pair of landscapes by a little-known French artist he'd discovered when in Paris several years earlier. They looked colourful and bright against the dark panelled wood behind them.

Many of the fixtures in the room were elegant and natural in the Art Nouveau style, and the flowing lines soothed him and contrasted with the sharp angles of the bookshelf and desk. It was a statement of his nature: straight thinking, softened by a gentle heart.

Suddenly Eilish put down her plate and stood up. With utter astonishment, she hurried over to the paintings and studied them more closely.

'Heavens, these are... they cannot possibly be. Monet? Claude Monet?' She turned back to stare at him in wonder. 'You own two Monet's? Originals?'

'Yes, I think that is the artist's name. I bought them at a small gallery in Paris some years ago. You seem to know the artist. Is he a family friend, acquaintance?'

Eilish laughed loudly, and then covered her mouth to curtail the unladylike volume. 'I am sorry, that must seem very rude to you. No, no I do not know the artist myself. I only know his work. To see his paintings outside of a Knowledge... um, an Art Gallery, is extraordinary. Do you admire his work?'

'Very much. I would have bought more but my budget for such luxuries is limited. I am pleased you are impressed. I am told I have an eye...'

'Oh yes, most definitely. The Impressionist movement revolutionised how we perceive the world and Monet was one of its most accomplished leaders.'

Max studied her vibrant face more closely. This was not just interest in his artwork; this was fascination, and he was transfixed by it.

'I have heard the term, but I am not well versed in the new movements.'

'And yet you possess two such beautiful examples. I am impressed!'

He grinned at her enthusiasm and suddenly felt like a teenager again. He wanted to put on a boater, take a punt and drift languidly down a river with her, much as he'd done at Cambridge so long ago.

He shook himself and tried to get his thoughts back in order. He looked at his pocket watch and realised, with disappointment, that time was no longer on his

side. His next appointment would arrive shortly.

Impetuously he made a decision. 'Mis... Eilish... I have no more time today and I know you cannot have gained the material you require for this story of yours. Would you care to join me for dinner tonight at my club? It will allow us plenty of time to explore all areas of interest.'

For a moment, Eilish looked rather taken back by the idea. Then, as if flattered, she nodded her head and smiled. 'I would enjoy that very much. May I meet you there?'

'Certainly, if you like. I will give you the address.' He scrambled for a piece of paper and pen and wrote hastily. 'Shall we say eight o'clock?'

'Eight it is. Thank you for being so generous with your time. I will look forward to tonight.'

'So will I, Eilish, so will I.'

After the door closed behind her, Max let out a soft whoop of joy. It had happened. For the first and only time in his life, he was passionately and ridiculously attracted to a woman. The desire pulsed through his body like a drug and it scared him a little. However, beyond the fear, was a euphoric sense of destiny, of connection.

This vibrant, bright flame of womanhood was everything he had ever looked for in a woman, even though he had never been aware of it before today. Instead of being some bloodless, asexual being as he had always seen himself to be, he was now something else entirely. He felt like a hot-blooded male.

Thank heavens his brother did not meet her. He would have spoiled everything with his salacious comments. What Phillip would make of Max's thoughts of her lushness was anyone's guess. He would probably turn it into something dirty, as his parents would have done.

Huh! How interesting. His brother had not escaped the influence of that parental imprinting after all. No, he simply embraced what he saw as filth, delighting in its indecency, where Max had always been repelled by it. But what he felt for Eilish O'Toole was not indecent or dirty. It was warm, vibrant and beautiful in the way that his Monet's were warm, vibrant and beautiful.

And now that he had met her, there was nothing that would stand in the way of him claiming her as his own. He would divorce Agnes; he would throw away his political aspiration; he would cripple himself financially, if that were what it took. But he would be free to claim her, because nothing in his life had ever felt so right.

Chapter Four

Eilish

She rushed into the sitting room of their suite at Claridges, dizzy with excitement. Quickly scanning the shared sitting room for any sign of Luke, Eilish was pleased to see she had the space to herself. They had moved into the outrageously priced hotel in Mayfair yesterday after a whirlwind shopping spree. The opulence of the private rooms was still hard to get used to. Thank god money wasn't an issue for them.

Kicking off her uncomfortable, pointy shoes and with hat in hand, she began to dance around the expansive room, singing softly to herself as she went. When the adjacent door opened and she saw Luke standing there staring groggily at her in astonishment, she stopped long enough to grin at him like a loon.

'Who is he?'

That wiped the smile off her face. For a moment, she was too stunned to react.

'The man you've met. I know that look. Who is he?'

Eilish burst into light, high-spirited laughter. 'Is this how Faith looked after she met you?'

'No, Maggie. Faith looked like a deer caught in headlights.'

'Maggie Tasmania? Oh yes, that's right. You were with her when she met Travis. Now that is a beautiful man! Have you seen his performance art?'

'Faith tried to drag me there once but it ain't my cuppa tea. I let her go on her own to ogle his tight arse.'

'Jealous, Luke? I would think you would feel pretty safe where Faith is concerned. Everyone knows she thinks the sun shines out of every pore on your body.'

'Don't change the subject. Who've you met? And it better not get in the way of the mission.'

Eilish frowned as she considered his words. Would it interfere with the mission? It was against Protocol to get involved with a Target but there were precedents for it – Faith and Luke, for instance. Even though, technically, he wasn't her Target. She'd Retrieved him to save his life after he was mortally wounded saving hers from the Nazis.

'I do not know if there is anything there yet, but I felt something. My god, for the first time in my very long life I felt something. And I think he felt it too. I

cannot believe how fast this feeling has hit me. One minute I am sexless. The next I am so sexually charged I am out of control.'

'That's the way it happens for you Old Timers. It's like a button gets pressed from "off" to "on" with no middle ground, and your wits go south with it too, way south, which could be a big problem for the mission. So I've gotta ask you again, who is he?' Luke demanded impatiently, scrubbing his hands through his sleep-tousled hair.

He was not sleeping well in the luxurious accommodation and had decided to stay in bed that morning while she was out making first contact with their Target. Eilish thought his sleep problems had something to do with missing Faith and Bart.

'Our Target, Max Ingham,' she finally brought herself to say.

'I thought he was gay.' Luke plonked himself on the silk covered smoking chair beside the low burning fire the maid had lit some hours before and sprawled out, toasting his bare feet.

Eilish's felt her eyes pop open wide in astonishment. 'What gave you that idea? He's married, after all.'

Luke lifted one eyebrow in cynical response. 'Since when did that mean anything to people who wanted to stay out of prison? Homosexuality was illegal until 1965 here, and the '80s elsewhere in the UK. Our Mr Ingham seems to fit the profile. He didn't marry until he was thirty-eight. He's described as mild-mannered and diplomatic, when he ain't in front of a judge. He sponsors the arts and he packed up and took a trip – what could have been a romantic trip – on the Titanic, without his wife. Not the actions of a devoted new husband.'

'When did you become the expert on gays? And I will remind you that the Inghams have been married nearly two years. Not exactly newlyweds. And from what he said today, he has no intention of sailing on the Titanic. He is planning to take in the Season with his wife.'

'So, not gay. But if he's happily married, why're you all giddy over him?'

Eilish sat heavily on the overstuffed chaise-longue on the other side of the fire. 'I do not know. It just seems right. He does not seem like a happily married man. Not like you. He flirted with me, and I gained the distinct impression that flirting is not something that comes naturally to him. He blushed when I first walked in. It was delightful!'

'Gay. He obviously doesn't know how to relate to women.'

She sighed heavily, looking to the ornate ceiling above for spiritual guidance. 'Have it your own way. Does it really matter? I am having dinner with him at his

club this evening.'

That got her partner's attention. Luke sat up abruptly and stared at her like she was some exotic bird that had just flown in the window. 'Ookay, how'd you swing that?'

'I was able to get in to see him under my cover as a journalist and we talked a little over tea. Then he had an appointment, so he invited me to dinner at his club to continue our interview. Do you know he has two Monet's on his wall? Not well-known ones, but they are certainly beautiful examples of his work. Who has Monet's on their wall?'

'Who the hell is Monet?' Luke went back to lounging again.

'Just one of the greatest painters of the time! Impressionism was revolutionary and it heralded in the age of non-representational art.'

'I like to know what I'm lookin' at, Irish. That weird stuff is not art to me.'

'Monet is not weird stuff. His paintings are beautiful. And Max's paintings are stunning. He bought them in Paris a few years ago because he liked them. He does not even know what he has!'

'Whatever you say,' he finished the line of discussion with obvious disinterest. 'I'll take you to this dinner and wait for you outside. I don't want you out at night on your own.'

Eilish threw herself to her feet with a huff. 'Luke, I am not a child. I have been doing this longer than you have been alive.'

Luke began to rub at his wrists distractedly. 'And in all those years did you ever learn to defend yourself?'

'I never had to. The world is not the dangerous place you think it is.'

'That's what Faith thought before her partner was shot in the back and she was almost tortured and killed by Nazis.'

'This is Edwardian London not Nazi occupied Poland!'

'Danger is everywhere, doll. Ignoring it doesn't make it go away; it just puts you more at risk.' He held out his hands to the fire in frustration and then began to work the bones in his wrists again.

'What's wrong with your hands?' Eilish finally became aware that Luke's pig-headedness might have more to do with some physical ailment than their Jump.

'Nothin', just some arthritis the medics say. Only to be expected with all the Jumping I've done in the last five years. Body's degenerating fast. Faster than the clones.'

'So, if it is giving you trouble, why Jump this time in your Original? You could have transitioned into a clone in plenty of time.'

‘Not sure I’m goin’ to transition. Livin’ inside one of those things... it’s not right for me.’

Eilish sat down again slowly, every sense alert to what she was hearing. ‘Are you saying you are going to let yourself die rather than take a clone body?’

The big man across from her shrugged and turned to stare into the flames. ‘There’s no tellin’ I could do it. I might Crash and Burn. I’m not the most mentally flexible individual.’

‘Maybe not, but you have the willpower of a bull. You are talking about leaving Faith and Bart alone. How can you even consider it?’

Luke rubbed his face with his obviously aching hands. ‘I’ve got some time left still. They say my internals are about equal to a sixty-year-old. If I quit Jumpin’, I’d have maybe twenty good years left with them, long enough to see Bart grown.’

‘I cannot believe you are even considering that! For one thing, life would be a living hell for you without the excitement of Jumping. And secondly, twenty years is no time at all. I should know! It passes in an instant. And you have to know that your relationship with Faith will suffer. Sexually, I mean. And how could you even consider leaving her when you do not have to!’

‘Irish, just leave it, will you? This is my crap, not yours. It has nothing to do with our mission.’

‘That is why you are so blasé about the possibility of not coming home from this Jump. You have already given up! I cannot believe you!’

‘Mind your business, Eilish!’ Luke roared at her, jumping to his feet and storming from the room.

For several minutes after the sound of the slamming door faded, Eilish stood her ground in utter, helpless rage. What kind of coward was he to be willing to throw everything away like that? If she had the kind of love Luke and Faith had, she’d fight tooth and nail to keep it. She’d eat human flesh or worms; she’d crawl through an open sewer... anything! Having your consciousness moved into a new body was nothing. Less than nothing. So the clones were lifeless lumps of flesh and bone before Integration, and they had to be kept on life-support until they were put to use. What did it matter if it meant you had the chance at immortality? She had integrated eight times and was on her ninth life. Before Jac Ulster broke the Nine Life Rule to stay with his Cara, this would have been considered her last life, but she had no desire to give up now. All the changes that were taking place in New Atlantis made it a place of unlimited potential. They had new citizens from a variety of backgrounds, they had children and they

were regenerating their ecosystems from the seeds from the past. It was a magical time to be alive.

That Luke couldn't see all that; that he didn't feel it... seemed like a form of blasphemy. Suddenly, he didn't seem the larger-than-life hero she had taken him for. John Wayne wouldn't have thrown his life away for nothing.

The hotel's lady's' maid arrived at six to help her dress. It took quite a lot of insisting to get it through to the girl that she didn't want her swan bill corset cinched up so tightly she could hardly breathe. Instead, she allowed just enough support to create the odd appearance these Edwardian women seemed intent on creating. To her they all looked as if they were top-heavy Barbie dolls, about to fall flat on their gigantic breasts. The aforesaid breasts were pushed into an oddly low position, like the unsupported bosom of a matron.

The layer-upon-layer of clothing she had to don seemed to go on forever and was heavily scented with violet water. The only saving grace was the delicate, silk stockings that were a pleasure to slip on.

When they had negotiated to a standstill over the different undergarments, the girl reluctantly helped her on with the oriental dressing gown that passed for the latest fashion. It was made of heavy, blue silk with a white border and belt and had wide cuffed sleeves which she hoped wouldn't droop into her meal. The stiff lace collar started to chafe at her neck the moment the dress was buttoned up.

Then, for another half an hour, Eilish let the girl tease and crimp her hair into a Gibson Girl impersonation, with a swath of peacock feathers fanning down over the left side of her pompadour and reaching to the very edge of her face. Passingly, Eilish wondered if the feathers had been fumigated or whether she would start itching from bugs they carried half way through the meal.

Then came the makeup, to which Eilish again took exception, especially the little pot of 'enamel' that would make her skin as pale as a geisha's and she knew contained poisonous lead. Instead, she opted for a little rice powder, rouge and scarlet geranium petals rubbed across her lips. She refused outright the belladonna drops that would have dilated her pupils.

Earlier in the day, she had spent time having her fingernails manicured and buffed. Considering she wore gloves most of the time, this seemed an irrelevant addition to her toilette. However, one thing Eilish prided herself on was getting as realistic an impression of life in other times as she could. If that meant spending hours at a time primping mindlessly, then that was what she would do. It certainly beat reading Luke's Penny Dreadfuls, at any rate. Of course, Varley, the Vampire had been replaced by more up-to-date literature after their shopping

spree, and while she sat through the painfully dreary process of dressing, Luke lounged beside the fire in the sitting room with one of his books.

When she was ready, she left her bedroom to meet her companion. Luke's double take at her appearance almost made her laugh. Even so, she was still angry with him after their earlier confrontation and so she wasn't ready to let her guard down quite yet. She felt, in a way, as if she was fighting for Faith's happiness.

When the maid had bobbed a curtsey and left the room, Eilish rested her hands on her hips and cocked her head to the side. 'Well, what do you think?'

'You look ridiculous, but probably the height of fashion. The colour suits you.'

'Thank you, I guess. Are you ready? We are walking?'

'Yeah, I looked at the map and this club's just a block up and around the corner. As long as those pointy shoes don't cripple you, it shouldn't be a strain.'

'I am getting used to the shoes. At first, my toes felt tortured. But I think they are numb now. I should be fine. Do not forget your bowler.'

Luke grumbled as he ran his palms over the pomade to flatten his longish hair and then placed the bowler on top, rakishly angled over his left eye. Then he saluted her with a wink and offered his elbow. With all the grace she could muster, Eilish bowed her head in response and took his arm.

With barely a word exchanged between them, they walked a block of Brook Street along with all the other evening revellers heading for Grosvenor Square. By the time they'd found the club's discrete but classy entrance, Eilish's feet were killing her. It wasn't just the walk, she realised. She had been wearing these awfully uncomfortable shoes for nearly two days now and her arches and toes were not appreciative. Flat sandals or bare feet were what she was used to at home. And even on Jumps, most eras she had spent time in usually had comfortable footwear she could withstand – like sneakers in the latter part of the twentieth century.

'I'll go get a meal and then be out here waiting for you when you're ready. Don't leave here without me. You clear on that, Irish?'

'Perfectly. Enjoy your meal and feel free to imbibe a little. It might improve your mood.'

'I'd tell you to do the same, but you better stay clear-headed. Will you raise the subject tonight?'

'Not sure. I will play it by ear. Which is what I have done for the last seventy years, I will remind you again.'

‘Yeah, message received loud and clear, doll. Just be careful, okay?’

Eilish nodded and turned to go up the short flight of stairs to the outer doors where a doorman in full livery waited to open the way for her. Drawing in as deep a breath as her corset would allow her, she smiled her greeting to the servant as he ushered her through into the inner sanctum.

Of course, she had read about men’s clubs. However, nothing could have prepared her for the atmosphere once she crossed the threshold. It was like entering a lavish library that smelled of lemon polish and leather. Wood panelling lined every wall, and electric lamps glowed warmly from elaborate sconces attached to the panelling. A wide, but surprisingly steep, staircase was directly in front of her, and the black and white tiled floor beneath her feet had to be marble and onyx.

She was immediately approached by another servant, this time in a white penguin suit, who asked for her name and that of her dinner companion. Then, after being assisted out of her fur, cocoon coat, she was led to a pair of etched glass doors to the right, which led into the only area where a woman was permitted – the dining room.

The ceiling was cluttered with sparkling chandeliers here, which bounced light off every shining surface in the room, especially the silver service. As she glided between the tables covered in white damask, she became aware of the mellow tones of a string quartet playing softly in the background. The room was already quite full, and many heads turned in her direction as she made her way toward the handsome, elegantly attired Maxwell Ingham.

When he saw her, he rose and took her hand. ‘Eilish, you look beautiful!’

In the interim hours since their first meeting, she had convinced herself that her initial reaction to this man was not as startling as she had thought. She had even started to wonder whether Luke was right about Max’s gender orientation. Many women had been fooled into falling for men who had no sexual interest in them.

However, as soon as she saw that look in his heavy-lidded hazel eyes, she knew that what he felt for her was not disinterest. His eyes seemed to devour her and she felt breathless under their powerful scrutiny. Whatever had been seeded between them earlier in the day had blossomed into an even more painfully intense electricity that arced between them now.

‘Thank you, Max. You look very handsome too.’ She allowed the maître d’hôtel to seat her and place a damask napkin on her lap.

Max seemed somewhat taken back by her compliment and she wondered if she had made a social blunder. Did women compliment men in this era? Her cultural download provided her with much information, but there were omissions.

‘I hope you do not feel compromised by dining with a married man in this way,’ he said softly, his low-timbered voice scraping pleasantly across her senses. She loved his very formal Etonian accent, which was not too different from what they spoke at home. It might seem starchy to some, but while there was genuine warmth in the tone, she could not call it stuffy.

‘I am a New Woman, Max; such ideas do not concern me. This is a public place. We are doing nothing wrong. What else matters?’

He smiled at her then and she felt her heart skip a beat. It was such a gentle, heart-felt smile that crinkled the corners of his eyes and warmed their depths.

‘I am glad. It was not until after you left that I realised I may have inadvertently placed you in an untenable position for your occupation’s sake.’

‘Believe me, my occupation has taken me into many far less savoury situations. I am just happy to be here with you so we can continue our conversation of earlier today.’

‘As am I. I have thought of very little else since our last meeting. My clients today have been somewhat at a loss with my woolly-headed assessments of their cases.’

Eilish felt her face warm with a blush. This open sharing of his feelings was unexpected for one who had seemed so proper. It was probably inappropriate for a married man to say such things. Even so, they warmed her and seemed to describe her own distracted state since they’d met.

‘I do apologise. That was an unsuitable admission. I am finding it hard to decide what to say to you. I have never... felt like this before.’

‘Like what?’ she asked breathlessly.

At that moment, a waiter arrived with the bill of fare and proceeded to pour iced water into glasses.

‘Would sir care to see the wine list?’

‘No, thank you. Just bring us a bottle of your best champagne.’

‘Of course, sir.’

Eilish busied herself with the menu. It was in French and she had to consult her download to translate it.

‘The food here is excellent. They have one of the best French chefs in London. Would you like me to suggest possibilities I think you would enjoy?’

‘Please do. Everything looks so delicious. I must tell you though, I do not have a large appetite so only a few courses will suffice.’

‘Good. Our propensity to consume huge quantities of food is only second to the Ancient Romans. I restrict myself to three courses when I can. It is difficult to do when invited to another’s home. Some of the ton seems intent on competing with each other over the amount of courses they offer. I was at dinner with a certain Duchess last season where there were fifteen courses served. Even eating sparingly, I was so uncomfortable by the end of the evening I could barely move.’

‘When so many are living hand-to-mouth it seems indecent to consume excess quantities of food just for the sake of it,’ Eilish said, hoping she did not offend.

‘I agree completely. And over-eating is not good for your digestion or your general health. Have I talked you out of your meal entirely by now?’

Eilish laughed softly and shook her head. Once more, she found herself caught by the mesmerising effect of his warm gaze. How had she lived so long and never experienced this breathless enchantment?

‘Then I would recommend an entrée of Soufflé au Fromage – a cheese soufflé, very light and mild. For the main course, the Steak au Poivre with Cognac Sauce is an excellent choice – not too peppery. A selection of seasonal vegetables accompanies it. Then for dessert, I suggest the Mousse au Chocolat or a Fromage platter, if you do not have a sweet tooth.’

‘Oh, I definitely have a sweet tooth and have a particular craving for chocolate at any time. That selection sounds perfect.’

When the waiter returned to take their order, Eilish enjoyed their interaction. Rather than treat the man as an insignificant servant, Max called him by name and asked after any specialities of the day that might be of interest. He listened with genuine attentiveness to the man’s expert opinion, but then opted for the courses they had already selected.

‘Do you know all the staff by name?’ she had to ask.

‘Most of them. This is my home away from home; particularly since my marriage ... umm... that does my wife a disservice. What I mean is that my work keeps me late most nights and rather than disturb the household, I often eat here before going home. If I am very tardy, I will stay here for the night. Kensington is not far, but it is far enough if I have a late night and an early start planned.’

‘Will you go home tonight?’

‘Yes. My wife has gone to Kent to visit her father. Oh dear, I seem unable to...’

‘Max, please. You do not have to watch your tongue with me. I will not write anything defamatory about you or your domestic situation. That is not the nature of the article. I would prefer it if you spoke honestly rather than politely with me.’

Max’s face showed several emotions in the silence that followed. The first expression was astonishment, the second was disbelief, and the third seemed to be cautious hope, as if he was looking for a trick and yet was desperate for there to be none.

‘I try to always be honest,’ she said again, so that her meaning was clear. ‘Although there are times when honesty does not serve the greater good.’

‘You are a woman after my own heart. There are some men of the law who are accomplished liars and charlatans. I am not one of them. If I do not believe in my client’s case, I do not take it. So saying, I have mastered the art of diplomacy over the years, especially with my wife.’ He stopped and groaned, rubbing his forehead.

‘All right, it is probably becoming clear to you that my marriage is not much more than one of convenience; for my wife’s convenience, rather than my own. We are not happily married. However, up until today, I have not been overly concerned about it. I have never been a particularly hot-blooded man. Maybe my Victorian parents are to blame for that, I do not know. I married Agnes because she seemed to be a damsel in distress and I saw myself as Lancelot or Saint George. Unfortunately, my gallantry was wasted.’

At that moment, the wine waiter arrived and showed Max his selection. They sat in tortured impatience as he opened the champagne with a pop and poured the icy, bubbling liquid into fragile glasses. After tasting the wine, Max gave the man the go-ahead to pour. Then, for several more moments, they sat and drank in silence.

‘Until today?’ Eilish asked finally, picking out the most significant part of the tense speech to focus on. Her voice wobbled unsteadily.

‘Until you walked into my office, to be exact. Please, I do not mean to offend you and I would understand completely if you felt the need to leave immediately. However, I have spent my life constrained by caution and restraint and I am afraid that if I continue in that way, I might lose the only chance for...’

‘Max...’

‘No Eilish, let me finish this blundering monologue before you make your apologies and leave. I have never felt the need for romantic intimacies. My wife does not care for my attentions, and after the initial rebuff, it did not concern me. Nor have I let my attentions wander elsewhere, until today. I am not inviting you to be my mistress, if that is what you think...’

‘Max, stop.’ Eilish interrupted his tortured speech with some impatience. ‘You do not have to say these things to me. I know you are not a man who takes matters of the heart lightly. That you feel something for me is a compliment unlike any I have ever received.’

‘But?’ He looked at her sadly, resigned to his fate.

‘But I have much to share with you about who I am and what I am really here for. When I have finished, you may no longer feel for me as you do now. If that proves to be the case, I will be greatly saddened, because I, too, have never been hot-blooded, as you put it. I have never been interested in men in that way, before. Before today. Whatever is happening between us, you are not alone in experiencing it.’

‘Oh.’

Eilish laughed a little more loudly than was polite and reached over to place her hand on Max’s. She stroked his long, square fingers with her thumb and felt a frisson of excitement pass between them.

‘Yes, oh.’

‘So... what is it that you are really here for?’

At that moment, the waiter returned to their table with small bowls of piping hot soufflé. Rather than answer his question, she made much of nibbling at her food and sipping the deliciously dry champagne.

As the soufflé melted in her mouth, she groaned softly with delight. Max’s head jerked up from his own plate and she saw something primal flicker behind his eyes. She gasped and gently put her spoon down, before the tremor that ran through her shook the utensil from her grip. What was this heightened emotion that was zinging through the air between them?

Suddenly, the layers of clothing she wore seemed too hot and confining. Her skin prickled.

‘You approve?’ he asked, when he could find his voice. It was slightly croaky, as hers would have been if she’d attempted speech in that moment. Instead, she just smiled and nodded as she took another cheesy morsel into her mouth and let it melt there.

They continued in a sexually potent daze until both bowls were finished. Then Max reached across the table and took her hand. He used his thumb to caress her palm for several moments.

‘Tell me this at least – is there a man to whom you are duty bound?’

‘No man, but I do have a duty to perform. It is that which might cause a breach between us.’

‘If you are a Marxist or a Unionist, there will be no breach...’

She laughed again and turned her hand so she could squeeze his. ‘No, that is not it, and we could play twenty questions all night and you would never guess. So please, let us just enjoy the evening and forget about wives and duty and the future. Let it be enough that we enjoy each other’s company and share this delicious meal while the string quartet serenades us with Mozart.’

‘Though my curiosity is going to drive me mad by the end of the evening, I acquiesce. I cannot think of a more pleasant way to spend my time. Have I told you how lovely you look tonight, even if that outfit might be better suited to the bedroom? Oh... I do apologise; I didn’t mean...’

She watched his face flood with heat. The devil in her wanted to make the heat rise a little higher. ‘It would suit the bedroom, well enough...’

His blush became a flush so brilliant that sweat broke out on his brow. She felt a tremor run down his arm and an answering one shivered through her. Thoughts of being with Max in her bedroom at Claridges and slowly disrobing for him made her blood pound fast and hard. Her teasing had backfired, succeeding in arousing her as much, or maybe more, than her intended victim.

It took the main course, the rest of the champagne and the delicious chocolate mousse before they were comfortable to look at each other again. In the meantime, they talked of politics and reform, of the arts and the latest Somerset Maugham play on the West End. Eilish even managed to introduce the subject of time travel with a well-positioned mention of H G Wells’ Time Machine.

‘The idea is too far-fetched. The possibility of stepping out of the river of time, as Heraclitus describes it, would be problematic at best.’

‘But what if it were possible? What would the future be like do you think?’ she pressed, gaze lifting to meet his again for the first time since her bedroom reference.

‘I have thought a great deal about where our world is going. We have automobiles, flying machines, all manner of new contraptions. Where it will end... I do not know. However, I worry that man is like a child with a loaded gun. He is not equipped to handle the dangers inherent in his inventions.’

‘Yes, I agree with you. The next war will hold that up to all thinking men...’ she shut her mouth suddenly as she realised her slip.

‘Next war?’

‘Yes,’ she floundered. ‘There is bound to be one with the state of the Balkans. And when it comes, all of these new inventions will be brought into play by whichever side can wield them.’

‘You believe the Balkans will lead to imperial involvement?’ His brow furrowed at the thought.

‘When Britain joined the Triple Entente it became inevitable. We will slide into whatever confrontation our allies require.’

‘But surely it safeguards us against the Prussians.’

‘Safeguards or seals our fate? Let us not go there. It makes me sad to think of all those soldiers who will die for nothing.’

‘Nothing? If there is a war, it will not be for nothing.’

‘You believe in war?’

‘I believe in Peace, but accept the necessity of war to safeguard our homes and our families.’

‘With God on your side?’ she asked with heavy sarcasm.

‘Yes, of course.’

‘What if the other side believes that same God is on their side? There will come a time when two enemies will sit across from each other, separated only by a desolate stretch of blasted landscape, and both will sing Christmas carols on Christmas Eve to celebrate the birth of the Child of Peace. Whose side is God on then?’

He took the last sip of his champagne, which had long since lost its bubbles, and became thoughtful. ‘Jesus taught us that we must turn the other cheek, but it was also he who expelled the money lenders from the temple by force. I do not know where the line can be drawn between right and wrong, war or peace.’

‘I know what war can do. It is the last recourse.’ Eilish saw the images of her past flash before her eyes. She had been only twelve when the Last Great Plague took 999 of every 1,000 souls still remaining on the planet. Some said it was a biological weapon gone rogue. No one knew for sure. Nevertheless, the devastation of war had never been far away back in that terrible time. Now, standing here in this time before the worst of war had yet to be unleashed on the planet, it was hard to be philosophical about what was to come.

‘You are suddenly very sad, Eilish. Is it the state of your homeland that makes you so melancholy?’

‘My homeland?’ She was startled back to the present by his question. ‘Oh, you mean Ireland? Yes, partly. Never mind. How did we get on to this distressing subject?’

She looked around and noticed that most of the other diners had now left and the waiters were clearing tables.

‘I think it is time for me to go. It has been the most enjoyable evening I have spent in a very long time.’

Max came to her side to help her rise. She was glad of his help. Her head felt light and the ground seemed to be tipping, ever so slightly.

‘Steady there. You stood up too fast,’ Max informed her, drawing her closer to his body to support her. Eilish breathed him in, and the mixture of spicy male scent, leather and tobacco filled her senses.

‘Do you smoke?’ she asked absently, as he led her between the emptying tables.

‘A cigar after a good meal on occasion, that is all.’

‘Hmm... I can smell it on your clothes.’

‘I will have to have words with my Butler if that is the case. He assures me he airs all my jackets.’

‘Oh, do not do that. No one but I would probably notice. My nose is very sensitive to smells of all kinds.’

By the time Max had collected his overcoat and top hat and she her fur cocoon, they had made it outside. The chilly air helped clear her head and Eilish was starting to wonder how she was going to arrange to see Max again. However, the issue was resolved without her involvement.

‘Can I see you again tomorrow night? Possibly to see that Maugham play we spoke of?’

‘I would love to,’ she replied quickly, giving him a delighted smile.

At the bottom of the stairs, they paused. Max looked up and down the quiet street searching for a hansom cab. ‘Can I escort you home?’

‘No... no... I have an escort. There he is!’

Max looked in the direction she indicated and saw Luke prowling toward them, for all the world like a predatory cat. Max tightened his grip on her arm and his body went stiff.

‘It is just Luke. Luke, come and meet Maxwell Ingham. I have told you all about him.’

Luke was several inches taller than Max and somewhat larger in build, but her dinner companion didn’t seem to be covered by it. Eilish could feel the

testosterone simmering and was surprised that she rather enjoyed it. Even so, she hurried to alleviate any misconceptions.

‘Luke is my... associate. His wife is a good friend of mine.’

Both men looked at her as if she had lost her mind and she wondered if she had. Then Max backed down. ‘Well, I will leave you in this gentleman’s capable hands then. Where will I meet you?’

‘Oh, I am staying at Claridges. If you send me a note to tell me what time and what theatre...’

‘No, I will pick you up if you don’t mind. I will send a note to tell you the time. Goodnight, and thank you again for a very pleasurable evening. Luke,’ he nodded at the man who had taken Eilish’s elbow.

‘Bedford... my name is Luke Bedford. Nice to have met you, Ingham. I imagine we’ll see more of each other in the days to come.’

‘Will we?’ The tone in Max’s voice was steely and irritated. It was clear that, no matter what she had said to the contrary, Max saw Luke as competition. Jealousy was an emotion she had little experience with, and it befuddled her now. Why would he be reacting this way when he knew Luke was married? But then, so was he.

A hansom cab was passing and Max hailed it. With a quick nod of farewell, he made his way toward the vehicle and climbed in. They watched him go in silence.

‘Went well then?’

‘Very well. I think I am in love.’

‘Great! Just Dandy!’

Chapter Five

Max

The days passed by in a glorious haze. He saw Eilish every evening and spent all weekend with her, as well. If the whispers around town had started, then he didn't care. They did nothing more than spend time together, often with the predatory Bedford as their chaperone.

He still didn't know what to make of the man; working-class background, certainly, but not subservient. He reminded him of the Union leaders he'd come across at different times, especially since the beginning of the coal strike. And it was apparent that Bedford shared sympathies with the coal miners and knew something of their plight. However, he spoke with an American accent and seemed to be a self-made man, if his clothes and his accommodation at Claridges meant anything.

Eilish had her own room as part of a suite she shared with Bedford, so he had discovered. It made him uncomfortable to know they shared such close quarters. But, from all that he had been told, it appeared that London was home to neither of them and they were staying here for a specific purpose – the duty that Eilish had alluded to on their first night.

What that duty was, he was still no closer to knowing. That she was different to any woman he had ever met went without saying. And it wasn't just because she aroused feelings in him he hadn't thought possible. It was more that something about her didn't fit. She would say the strangest things, like that first night when she'd talked about the coming war. Maybe it was the way she spoke, as if she knew what was going to happen – not as some possible event in the future, but as a fact that could not be disputed or avoided.

When they had taken a picnic basket down onto the Thames Embankment on Sunday, Luke had come along too. Max hadn't wanted the man there, but politeness had dictated that he ask him to join them when he was inviting Eilish out for the day.

They had shared a blanket on the grassy slope of the embankment and listened to the brass band entertaining the crowds on the unusually sunny, spring afternoon. A discussion of popular culture had led Eilish and Luke into a heated debate about the influence the arts had on the thoughts of the common man.

'Look at propaganda,' Eilish had said heatedly, 'portraying Germans as monsters eating children. It only serves to spur on the animosity.'

‘You saw that train carriage. Are you saying monsters didn’t commit that atrocity? They didn’t eat ‘em but they sure slaughtered ‘em.’

‘But that was another war.’

‘Same people.’

‘No, not the same. Those that followed Hitler were simply looking for a way to survive, initially. The Reparations crippled the country...’

‘Who is Hitler and what is this train you refer to?’ Max had interrupted the flow long enough to get his question in.

Both Luke and Eilish had turned to him, as if realising he was there for the first time. Their faces betrayed their confusion and guilt, as if they’d been caught talking out of school.

‘Do not worry about it. Luke and I disagree like this quite often. It was rude of us to exclude you.’

‘But I am interested. It is as if you are aware of events of which I am ignorant.’

Luke and Eilish had exchanged looks, as if trying to decide what to tell him. For not the first time, he’d felt as if they were spinning him a tale, just as Agnes had done before their marriage. However, this tale was not to dupe him in anyway. It was as if they were covering up a state secret. Eilish’s next comment seemed to solidify that view.

‘You know I told you that there were things about me I would need to tell you? To explain about Hitler and the train we alluded to would require me sharing that information with you. When that day comes... well, let me say that after that we may need to go our separate ways.’

‘I do not understand. Are you suggesting you are involved in something illegal or contrary to the good of the British Empire?’

‘No, no of course not. And as I said that first night, you could make guesses about the nature of our situation until the cows came home and you would not come close. Leave it, Max, just for now. There is time yet, and I do not want to spoil these days we have.’

He had reluctantly given in and the conversation had turned on to more familiar ground. However, Max was still left with a sense of disquiet, as if the three of them sat squarely in the eye of a storm. Any moment now the peace and tranquillity they shared would be blown away, and what would be left, he didn’t have a hope of predicting.

During the following week, he found that he was postponing or cancelling appointments with clients, so he could take Eilish to lunch or to Covent Garden.

Luke came with them less and less often and then he disappeared completely. Eilish said he had gone to Southampton, but gave away no more information than that. Max found he didn't care. With Luke away, he had Eilish to himself.

Toward the end of the second week he had known her, Max accompanied Eilish back to Claridges after dinner at the club. Luke was still away. When she invited him up, every alarm bell inside him activated. He wanted to be alone with her more than anything else, but he was still a married man and she was still an innocent, young woman. The old Max would have been a perfectly safe companion, no matter how private their situation. The new Max was not such a certain bet.

Even so, despite his misgivings, he soon found himself accompanying her up to her suite and seated beside the fire with a glass of whisky in his hands. She sat opposite sipping a sherry, as she stared into the languid flames. He was struck anew by how beautiful he found her.

He knew that many people would consider her too plump for beauty, but he found her lush shape infinitely appealing. There had been sleepless nights when he spent hour after tortured hour imagining what lay beneath the layers of her women's clothing. They were ungentlemanly thoughts, but he could not label them dirty or evil as his parents might have. No thought he could hold about Eilish could be anything but loving and natural. More than ever, he was sure that he had found his other half. No matter what his legal status, he now knew that he belonged to no one but her.

'What would you think if H G Wells was right and that there really was a way to travel through time... back to Ancient Athens or forward to... whatever?' Her voice was soft and held a faraway lilt, as if she was lost in her dreams. In moments like this, her slight Irish accent was more apparent and it soothed him with its melody.

'I would enjoy visiting Ancient Athens and Rome, but I believe I would stand out rather like a sore thumb. And, as there are no historical records of men dressed in outlandish costumes standing out like sore thumbs, I must assume that the likelihood of being able to time travel is small.'

'You would not dress as you are now. You would wear the costume of the era and speak their language. History is filled with mention of strangers from strange lands. Who is to say their land was not the future?'

'This subject fascinates you, doesn't it?' He felt urged by some powerful force to leave his place and sit on the floor at her feet. He followed that urging and moved so he could rest his head on her knee. The silky softness of her blood-red

evening gown sent his senses into overdrive. When she reached down and stroked his hair, he felt as if he had died and gone to Heaven. And until he heard the contented masculine sound, he wasn't even aware he'd sighed.

'Yes, it fascinates me. It has for a very long time. It offers the only hope for our world.'

He found it difficult to focus on her words because his full attention was on the hypnotic affect her stroking hand was having on him. Such a simple act of affection was unknown to him. Not entirely, he had to admit. There had been nannies when he was young who would stroke his head when he was sick or in pain. However, none did it from love. And such a touch never came from his mother; her only physical contact was a slap.

He pushed thoughts of his mother away and focused on Eilish and what she was saying now. 'When I was a little girl my mother died and, as I had never known my father, I was left alone. They put me into homes, orphanages you would call them. That is where I learned how hard life could be. And as I grew older, it only got harder.'

'Sometimes I think back to that time and I wonder how I survived, how I learned to be happy. Because I believe happiness is a learned behaviour and I'd had no experience with it after the age of five.'

'Then, when I grew up, the idea of travelling through time became like a Holy Grail to me. I thought, if I could travel through time, I could be happy. I could find what I have been searching for all my life.' Her voice petered out and for a moment, the only sound was the crackle of the fire in the shadowy room.

'For me, the Holy Grail was education,' he found himself sharing. 'I thought – if I could be top of my class at Eton, if I could get First Class Honours at Cambridge, the world would be my oyster. I would be a learned man and have the power to change the world into something better.'

'And you have,' whispered Eilish gently.

'Not enough, not nearly enough. And it has never brought me what I most desired. It never made me happy. You make me happy, Eilish. Only you.'

He felt her lean down and place a gentle kiss on his brow. As if in a dream, he sat up so that he could meet her eye. He needed to see the affection he felt for her mirrored back at him. The room was dark. Only the fire lit the space with its red and gold flickering flames. The air was warm and heavy with wood smoke and violets.

'Travelling through time has made me happy, only because it has led me to you,' she whispered, almost too softly for him to hear. And before he could

process her words, she was leaning down and letting her lips graze his. The little mewling sound she made electrified him.

Terrified of scaring her off or breaking the strange spell that had spun itself around them, he drew himself up so he could get closer to her. He let his fingers stroke the soft warmth of her cheek. Like a cat, she closed her eyes and leaned into his touch, almost purring. Then, before he could think better of it, he let his instincts have their way and he leaned in to claim her mouth.

Nothing could have prepared him for that kiss. It was so different from anything he had experienced before. Her lips were soft and giving, and instead of pulling away in disgust, they opened under his, offering more of herself to him.

When her tongue stroked at his closed lips, it was he who almost drew back in shock. However, it felt so good he invited more and found his own mouth opening to give access to her gentle exploration. When her tongue entered his mouth, his arousal kicked hard against the restraints of his clothes and he sought to shift it into a more comfortable position without breaking their contact. Embarrassed that she might guess what was happening to his body, he tried to keep her focus on their joined mouths.

The kiss seemed to go on forever. He followed her lead and sent his tongue to explore and invade her soft, moist mouth. She let him, and he could hear her breath become gasps and realised that his was doing the same. He drew away from her mouth and began to rain soft, ardent kisses across her cheek and down her neck. Little gasping sobs greeted his every touch and she arched against him asking for more.

Her soft, silky hair touched the side of his face and he could smell the sweet scent of violets in it. This was what he had been dreaming of, imagining for so long, and now that it was here – it was so much better than he could have envisaged. She was so much more than he could have envisaged.

He had kissed a few experienced women in his past and Eilish wasn't one of them. Her every reaction was tentative and genuine, as if she was experiencing these intimacies for the first time. And yet, for all her inexperience, she seemed to have no inhibitions, no shame about anything they did. And because she had none, neither did he. Their kisses, their caresses were as natural as sunshine on water or flames devouring wood.

'Damn,' she grumbled after the kiss had gone on forever. 'I cannot breathe.'

He drew away in concern.

‘No, no, don’t stop. It is not you. It is these damn stays. Even though I do not lace them tightly, the whale bone, or whatever it is, digs into my ribs and cuts off my oxygen supply.’

She was panting. And it was the strangest explanation he had ever heard. But by now, he was used to her strange way of phrasing things.

He drew her to her feet so she was no longer doubled over, and she breathed a sigh of relief as she reached up to stroke at his hair and ears. ‘I need you to know who I am before... before we...’ she said as she leaned in to kiss his cheek, drawing him in close so he could feel her warm body pressed against his hard length.

In that moment, she could have told him anything about herself and it wouldn’t have mattered. All he cared about was her warm, giving body pressed in painful bliss against his own.

‘No... no, it is not fair. You need to know...’ she drew away from him and when he went to follow her, she shook her head, holding up her hands to keep him at bay.

‘Did you not hear what I told you before? I said that I found happiness only when I travelled through time to find you.’

His mind would not focus on her words. All he could think about was that she was holding herself back from him. Keeping him from what he needed most in the world.

‘Max, listen to me. I do not come from here. Neither does Luke. We are time travellers from the future. We come from 2337, four hundred years into your future.’

He laughed then, thinking her joking and tried to go to her, tried to pull her back into his arms where she belonged.

‘I am not joking, Max. I have been travelling through time since it was discovered seventy years ago in my time line and I have enjoyed the adventure of it. Enjoyed the novelty of it – wearing these strange clothes, seeing things I had only ever read about. But I was never happy. It never gave me happiness, until now.’

‘Don’t be ridiculous, Eilish. Come here, please. I need to hold you...’

‘I need to hold you too, but not until you know what it is that you hold. Max, I have lived for hundreds of years. I am an old, old woman. You have to know...’

He swore loudly and spun away from her. ‘If you do not want me to touch you, then I won’t. You do not have to make up outlandish tales to keep me from your bed. I have been there with my wife; I have no desire to go there with you.’

‘I want you in my bed. God, I want nothing more than that, right now. This desire is killing me. But you have to know...’

He spun back to her and snarled. ‘So I know. Now will you open your legs for me?’

She jerked away as if he’d hit her and he couldn’t believe the crudity and cruelty of his words. He wanted to drag them back. Go back in time like her nonsense story and do it all again. Not say those terrible words.

Her face lost its painful shock and hurt and began to suffuse with fury. ‘You think I am a cock tease, is that it? You think I am making this all up to stop you from doing the deed. Fine, that is fine. ‘

She began to rip at her dress, tearing the bodice down the front, struggling to get the crimson, brocade-and-lace dress off her shoulders. He could hear the tears in her voice as she continued to tear furiously at her clothing. ‘Come on, help me, why don’t you. This is what you want. I get that. Goddamn these bloody clothes. How does anyone get out of them?’

He had never heard a lady swear before and his shock at hearing it was almost as great as his astonishment at the hysterical struggle she was having with her gown. Suddenly, all selfish thoughts were gone and the only thing he cared about was the pain he was causing her. Coming to her side, he drew her into his arms and held her while she continued to struggle like a trapped bird against him.

‘Don’t, don’t... it is nothing... do not do this to yourself. I am sorry; I did not mean it. My words were a reaction only. I did not mean them. Shhh... it is all right now, dearest one, be still...’ His crooning words and gentle touch finally won out and she relaxed in his arms, crying softly.

‘I did this all wrong. I should have waited until Luke was here. I must seem like a lunatic to you. A hysterical, overwrought crazy woman tearing at her own damn clothes...’

‘Don’t... don’t.... hush... it does not matter. All that matters is that we are together. That is all that matters.’

She drew back a little and sniffed loudly, wiping at her cheeks. Her gaze lifted to his, and even in the shadowed room, he could see the tears glistening on her thick, sooty lashes. Those eyes seemed huge as they stared into his.

‘If I was not a crazy woman. If what I told you was the truth...’ she shushed him as he tried to interrupt. ‘No, listen. Just think about your answer for a moment. If it were imaginable for someone to travel through time from the future and that someone had been able to extend her life way past anything you currently think is possible, could you love her? If that were true?’

Max pressed his forehead to hers and drew in several deep breaths, trying to clear his mind. He tried to imagine what she said as truth. Could he love her if she were hundreds of years old and came from the future? Of course he could. He could love her if she was a woman poised on the edge of insanity. He could love her if she was set on destroying his whole world. Because, the reality of the situation was, that there was no choice in it anymore. He could love her because he already did.

The revelation was not profound. It had been playing at the edge of his consciousness since he made the decision to divorce his wife. Each day had just brought that idea into higher definition. Now, there was no doubt, no 'what if's or 'what might be's. There was just this: He loved her, whoever and whatever she was, wherever she was from or wherever she would go back to. Even if he had to share her with the moody Luke or anyone or anything else, he would do so. She was everything.

He didn't know how long they stood there, him thinking, her waiting patiently for his answer. When he finally drew back to look her in the eye, he could feel the tension in her body. So tight. So close to shattering.

'If you were an ancient time traveller from the future, I would still love you. I am past the point where I can put any conditions on how I feel about you. I need you. Not to spread your legs for me... I do not know where that crass statement came from. I need you standing here beside me, my companion and life mate. And I will do anything to have you by my side. I had decided to divorce Agnes that first day. It is now only a matter of time and opportunity. The rumours are already rife. I will even let her divorce me on the grounds of infidelity, though the irony of that will not be lost on my brother.'

Eilish reached up and put her fingertips on his lips. 'Come to bed, Max, and help me out of these awful clothes. I imagine some would see them as sexy, the whole bustier and stockings thing, but not me. I just want to be skin to skin with you. '

She led him by the hand into her bedroom where the large, four-poster bed draped in gold velvet, awaited. Turning her back, she offered him what was left of the buttons she had been unable to tear loose. With fingers more nimble than he could have imagined, Max made quick work of the dress. Then, when she had stepped out of it, he slid off her other undergarments until he came to the corset. The bow at the top was easy to undo, and finally he worked the laces loose so that soon the torture device released completely and fell away.

Eilish breathed in deeply and turned around to face him in her bloomers, lace decorated camisole and stockings. Her bounty was apparent and so was the agonising tension in his extremities.

‘Thank god for that. Now we start on you. I hope it will not take quite so much effort to get you naked.’

He felt his face growing hot with shyness and she giggled.

‘I love it when you do that.’

‘What?’

‘Blush. Most of us do not blush, because it requires an intensity of emotion few feel. When you blush, it tells me you feel strongly about what is happening. I like it.’

‘Men are not supposed to blush. It is a womanish thing to do.’

‘Says what rulebook? If you plan on remaining with me, you will have to be willing to throw away a great many of your current rulebooks. You will have to start questioning everything you now believe to be true or real or possible. Can you do that, Max?’

‘I will question, but do not always expect me to accept your answers. I am no one’s lap dog.’

‘I would expect nothing else. And last of all, you will find me less inhibited than most virgins in this time would be. That is because ours is a liberal society where sexuality is not considered a sin or wrong. We just do not indulge in it much, as these clones... sorry these bodies are barren. I have lived a very long time and I have never felt the urge to mate until I met you. However, I do know quite a depth of theory, so please do not misinterpret my forward behaviour for experience.’

He tried to digest what she was saying, but his own limited experience and lack of theoretical knowledge had him struggling to imagine what she might mean. Agnes had pulled away from his kisses and when consummation became a necessity, she lay stiff and still in his bed; her eyes squeezed shut. His fumbling attempts to position his half-erect staff and drive it into her dry core had been the most humiliating moment in his life. The idea of repeating that humiliation with Eilish now made him draw back in dread.

Eilish noticed his resistance. ‘Sorry. Would you rather not? I will understand because, to be honest, I am terrified I will get it wrong or make you think I’m some brazen hussy...’

That was all he needed to hear. She was as worried as he. With determination, he used his lips to silence her concerns and then started removing his jacket,

cravat, collar and shirt. After that, Eilish got involved and began to undress him – and it was the most exciting thing he'd ever experienced; even more thrilling than removing her clothes. Finally, they both stood in their last layers of apparel and, by the electric lamps on either side of the bed, they began to study each other more closely.

'For an older man in a sedentary profession I expected you to have less muscle-mass, but you are lean and muscular. Your shoulders are broader than I would have expected, too.'

He laughed a deep, rumbling belly laugh at her frank observation. 'Thank you, I think. And I will reciprocate by saying that your lush, rounded, hourglass figure is everything I hoped for. Now, unless you want to comment on that other part of me that you must surely know about in theory, come to bed and let us see if we can put some of your theory into practice, for both our benefits.'

She threw her arms around his neck and smothered him with little kisses. When he tried to capture her mouth with his own to deepen the kisses, she slipped away from him. Mischief burned in the depth of her big, round eyes.

'Stop playing vixen, my patience is worn very thin!' he demanded, using both his hands to hold her head still so that he could taste her lips and invade the moist heat of her mouth with his tongue. It took no more than that and the arousal that had burned through them both not long before was again white hot and desperate.

Eilish backed up until they were at the bed and then she let herself drop back, taking Max's full weight with her. Her hands were everywhere at once, stroking, kneading, skimming across his burning skin like a hot knife over butter. Wherever she touched him, he came alive and his senses threatened him with overload. He could taste her salty warmth; he could smell her feminine musk and he could hear her little whimpering noises and moans, as they told him what he did was right.

After the kisses had begun to stray to other parts of her body, she became desperate to remove the last vestiges of clothing that lay between them. With shaking, hasty hands, they removed the fabric until they were skin to skin and his hard length lay pressed tight against her soft belly.

'Dear God in Heaven, how could anyone call this bad,' he mumbled against her neck between fevered kisses. He didn't know how much longer he could last. The pressure was building to the point where he was sure he would explode, but he had learned as a teenager to control his urges, so he would not commit the sin of self-abuse.

‘Eilish I cannot maintain control...’

She opened her eyes and looked down at his throbbing member. Her small hands came together and wrapped themselves firmly around his length and he couldn’t hold back the gasp of pleasure that touch elicited.

‘Then don’t hold back. Come for me, Max. Let me see what it will be like when you take me,’ she said as she moved her hands firmly up and down his length. The unexpectedness of her actions and the pure pleasure of it had him crying out, as wave after wave of wild sensation washed over and through him.

Nothing had prepared him for this, not even the wet dreams he half-remembered waking from as a boy in puberty. This was pure sensation, pure unfettered joy, and he rode it as Eilish’s untutored hands rode him.

When he lay atop her, the sticky evidence of his shame between them, he shut his eyes so he wouldn’t have to see her disgust. When her hands began to stroke his back, he took courage and peeked at her sweat-soaked face. She smiled at him.

‘I think I will quite enjoy you doing that to me,’ she said cheekily, turning to drop a kiss on his temple. ‘But can you ease off a bit. You are making it as hard to breath as those damn stays.’

He used his arms to lift the weight of his body off hers and felt again the embarrassment of the sticky evidence of his release. ‘I have made a mess of you.’

‘Sex, so they say, is a very messy activity. That is half the fun. But you can clean up with the flannel in the bathroom. I do like having my own bathroom.’

He scrambled off her and went for the wet flannel. He washed himself and then brought the cleaned flannel back to wash her. Finally, he lay down at her side, strangely at peace.

‘Max,’ she said tentatively. ‘Would you touch me as I touched you? I have found in the last few weeks that being touched there feels good.’

‘Who has touched you – Bedford?’ His demand was rough, as feelings of rage and possessiveness tore at him like a wild dog.

‘No one. Me. I did it. When I was thinking of you.’

‘You indulged in self-abuse?’ Max spluttered in shock. He didn’t know how he felt about such an idea. At first, it seemed wrong, as it was wrong for him to do such a thing to himself. But then the very idea of her fingers going between her legs to that forbidden place had his staff rising again.

‘I abuse no one, especially not myself. I pleasure myself. Surely, if you can do it, I can.’

‘I do not do it.’

‘Good heavens, why not?’

‘Because it is self-abuse and a sin. ‘

‘That is another rule you are going to have to throw out, dear boy. Giving yourself, or another, pleasure is not a sin. But if you would rather do it for me, that would be good too.’ Her tone was cheeky and he couldn’t hold back the chuckle that accompanied hers.

‘Very well, to save you from the sin of self-abuse,’ he let his hands slide down her smooth, rounded stomach until his fingers grazed her midnight thatch of maiden hair. His arousal was pulsing like a wild thing already and Eilish reached over and stroked it like a cat.

‘You seem big to me. Six inches is said to be average. You seem more than that and a lot thicker than I expected. Having never seen a penis before, I cannot be sure.’

‘Merciful heaven, I see what you mean. You are going to leave me permanently red of face, woman. Alternatively, I am going to become immune to your embarrassing ways and never blush again. That feels so ...’ he couldn’t find a word for it, so he just groaned. Then he decided it was time his outrageous lady did a bit more groaning.

Not sure what he was doing, he let his fingers drift down between her cleft and was delighted by her little gasp and squirm. She was wet and hot and his arousal screamed at him to let him share the experience. But he fought the urge and pressed lower with his fingertips to where he knew his member wanted to go. Eilish’s breath was coming faster now and she opened her legs so he had no impediment to his exploration. Just looking at her laying there with her legs spread wide and his hand clamped over her moist core was pushing him hard. As he sank his middle finger deep into her, she bucked. At first, he worried he had hurt her. Then, when she put her hand over his to hold him in place, he got the idea that he was doing anything but hurting her.

Going purely by instinct, he drew his finger out and then thrust it in again, deeper this time, mimicking his body’s actions. She writhed beneath his hand and he let her ride his finger until she seemed to want more. Suddenly, he had an idea. He removed his hand and moved down the bed, tickled by her obvious disappointment. If he could kiss her mouth and gain such pleasure from it, what would it be like to kiss this secret place?

Avoiding her desperate attempts to stop him, he buried his face in her tight curls and breathed in her scent. It was the most powerful aphrodisiac he had ever

experienced, and when he kissed her with his tongue sliding into her deep cleft, he chuckled with pleasure as she bucked again beneath him and then held his head in place as he used his tongue to explore every crevice and mound he could reach. She was almost crying by the time he had satisfied his curiosity and was content that what he had done to her was driving her beyond sanity.

‘Max, please... I need... I...’ He cupped her core with his hand again and as she ground her pelvis against his hand, he understood that she was getting close to that agonising point he knew so well. But how to push her over? His fingers accidentally found the little lump his tongue had discovered earlier and he stroked it gently. She cried out as if in agony and he drew back in panic. When she calmed, she reached for him with desperate hands.

‘Do it, please. I need you...’

And all thoughts of the humiliation of his marriage bed were forgotten as she guided him to her entrance and very slowly, with agonising care, he slid into her until he reached the barrier he knew was her maiden head. As she sensed him hesitate, she jerked her hips up and impaled herself fully on him, and once breached he sank deep into her hot, liquid well to the hilt.

‘Did I hurt you?’ he croaked, feeling his control shredding like tissue. Concentrating hard, he noted her wordless shake of head, as her hips arched up off the bed so that she could get him even deeper into her. With a long, slow slide, he drew himself back and then plunged into her core again, and her fingernails dug into his back as she began to cry.

Memories of Agnes resurfaced and he made to draw away. She clung to him desperately and he realised again that this was nothing like Agnes. He began to sense what they both needed in that moment. He took the weight of his upper body on his arms and began to drive into her like a piston on one of those new automobiles.

Over and over, he thrust into her, until he lost all sense of where he ended and she began. They moved as one being, a fierce and fiery animal that had only one purpose, and that driving, pulsing purpose came nearer and nearer until, finally letting go of all restraints, he flew, as flames pushed him higher and higher, and then dropped suddenly away, so he crashed down into the ecstasy of the petite mort – the little death.

As he collapsed onto her wet body, he felt the tiny ripples of her inner muscles squeeze him dry. When he had strength enough in his arms, he levered himself off her so that she could breathe. Even so, she fought him when he tried to draw out of her.

‘Please, not yet. It feels so good to have you inside me. It is as if there has always been a space there, deep inside, that I never knew existed. But now it has been filled and I do not want to feel its emptiness again.’ He kissed her damp hair and did her bidding. Then, when he knew he could stay no longer, he withdrew and lay at her side, resting his head on her shoulder.

‘That was worth waiting forty years for,’ he mumbled against the damp strands of her raven-black curls.

‘Forty years? Try waiting three hundred years. And yes, I agree, well worth it.’

He kissed her shoulder. ‘May I stay the remainder of the night? I will try to get out early so as not to attract too much attention in my evening clothes. However, I do not know if I have the energy to move just yet, or for the foreseeable future. I have not slept well of late.’

‘Mmm... neither have I. Turn over and spoon me and let us go to sleep. We will worry about tomorrow, tomorrow.’

‘Spoon you?’

She chuckled and held up her hands, so he could see the position she wanted. And so he spooned her, pressing his chest against her back, and bending his legs up to meet hers. It was an amazingly comfortable and nurturing position. He felt as if he shielded her from harm with his body.

Where she gained the knowledge she had, he did not know. Even so, one thing he knew for certain, knowledgeable in theory she may have been, but she had spoken truly concerning her virginity. He felt immeasurable pride to have been her first. And, if he had anything to say about it, he would also be her last.

Chapter Six

Eilish

She was drawn from deep, dreamless sleep by the light knock at the door. Her first impression was of warmth and the slight stickiness of damp skin surrounding her. Then she registered the late morning sunshine on her face. Easing her eyes open, she looked down at the man's arm that wrapped around her. The sunshine was glistening on the fine hairs of his arm. His skin was so white.

'Damn! Sorry,' an American-accented, male voice said. A door clicked shut.

'Damn!' she echoed, instantly awake and aware of what had just happened. She drew herself out from under her lover and scrambled off the huge bed.

'What?' came the groggy query.

'Luke is back and he just walked in on us. I am going to the bathroom.'

'I will handle Luke.' his voice was no longer groggy and there was steel in its tone.

'Leave it, Max. It is late. He probably didn't expect to find me still in bed. Certainly, he would not have expected to find you here with me.'

'I will handle Luke,' he repeated stonily, as he, too, made to rise.

Groaning, she limped toward the en suite and closed the door behind her. She dreaded what Luke would say. He was so moody and irritable lately, it was becoming a matter of major concern.

After using the toilet, she washed her face and threw on the dressing gown that hung on the hook behind the door. By the time she left the room, Max was dressed in trousers and shirt, but without collar, shoes or socks. He was heading out the door to confront her partner.

'Max...'

'It will be all right, Eilish. I will handle this.'

She groaned again and followed him slowly. Standing behind the open door, she watched the confrontation as it played out.

'Sorry for intruding,' Luke muttered, as he saw Max walking stiffly toward him, his black and white formal attire looking at odds with Luke's daywear. Luke was leaning over the mantelpiece, staring down at the smouldering coals. 'I assume Eilish has told you about us now.'

'About us? I was not aware there was an 'us' where you and Eilish were concerned.' Max was sounding as stuffy as a judge on the High Court Bench.

‘Us as in where we came from and why we’re here,’ Luke explained with pained patience.

‘If you mean that ridiculous story about the future, then yes she has told me. Am I to take it from what you are saying that you believe that nonsense too? Surely you are just humouring her.’

Her temper flared at the patronising tone and she almost entered the room to take issue with him, when Luke did it for her.

‘Don’t talk about her like she’s some brainless bimbo. You don’t humour Eilish, you either take her at her word or you leave her be. Do I make myself clear?’ Luke was dangerous, very dangerous in that moment, and his voice was hard, cold metal rasping on stone. He had turned to stare at his victim like a cat about to pounce.

‘You do not have to defend her honour.’

‘It ain’t her honour I’m defendin’! It’s her intelligence, experience and knowledge. She don’t deserve to be patronised by a limey, stuffed shirt like you.’

Max drew back and blinked rapidly. Eilish couldn’t help but feel the urge to defend him against Luke’s attack. It wasn’t his fault their story was so hard to believe. Luke had not believed it himself for a long time, even when presented with the reality of New Atlantis itself.

But Max was not rebuffed. Instead, he seemed thoughtful when next he spoke. ‘It is clear we are talking at cross purposes. I had no intention of demeaning Eilish in any capacity. I am simply unable to accept this outlandish story of hers. Are you telling me you are three hundred years old, and come from the future too?’

‘Jeezus H Christ, this is why I prefer Retrieving kids! If I have to deal with one more jerk who can’t see what’s as plain as the nose on his face! No, I ain’t three hundred years old. I’m thirty-five goin’ on sixty, because of the goddamn affect time travel has on my body! But yeah, I’m from the future. Not originally from the distant future like Eilish, but far enough to know what’s going to happen to you if you don’t get on board with what we’re tellin’ you. Buddy, you’re goin’ to die unless you let us help you!’

‘Luke!’ she cried, hurrying into the room and taking up a position just in front of Max, unconsciously trying to protect him with her body from Luke’s harsh home-truths. ‘I have not gone that far yet. You have the sensitivity of a bull in a china shop!’

‘So I’ve been told more than once. But diplomacy ain’t goin’ to fix this and all this tippy-toein’ around is driving me loony.’

‘Who are you? What is your part in all this?’ Max asked cautiously, as if approaching a live grenade.

‘Who am I? Good question. I can tell you who I was. I was First Sergeant Lukas Danielewski, Company A, First Ranger Battalion on reconnaissance in German occupied Poland in 1942 when I had the misfortune of encountering three Gestapo agents interrogating my angel. And, before I knew it, I was in wacky world and part of this crazy-arsed crusade to save goddamn humanity!’

He turned away with disgust and stared into the dying fire. For several minutes, there was silence in the room and Eilish could hear the cheery voices of the staff moving along the corridor outside their suite.

‘1942. You come from thirty years into the future when Germany occupies Poland? But Germany already occupies Poland, along with Russia and Austria.’

‘Poland gets its independence and then the Germans invade and start World War II.’

‘World War II? That implies that there is a World War I between now and then?’

‘1914,’ Eilish contributed reluctantly. ‘I told you a little about that the first night at dinner.’

‘How can you possibly know such things?’ Max said with a gasp, reaching out unsteadily to grip the edge of the chair closest to him.

Eilish wanted to go to his side and support him but she knew that in this moment he might reject her, just as he was trying so desperately to reject what they were telling him.

‘And the Reparations from that war will lead the German people to Hitler, a monster, if I remember that conversation rightly?’

Eilish smiled weakly and nodded. ‘Sit down Max, we have a lot to explain and from the look of you, you could do with a drink. Or I could order up breakfast?’

‘I am not hungry, but a stiff drink might help.’ Max took the smoking chair beside the fire and stared thoughtfully into the dark grate.

‘Either you are both escapees from a lunatic asylum, which from your luxurious accommodation does not seem likely, or you are telling me the truth.’

‘Damn the limey bastard is coming ‘round faster than most!’ Luke gave a hoot of laughter. Eilish could see deep circles under his eyes and she wondered when his last good night’s sleep had been.

‘Go home, Luke. You have to take some down-time with Faith to sort this out,’ she said, coming to his side and placing a hand on his shoulder.

‘I can’t. If I go back now the whole mission’ll have to be postponed.’

‘So? You know it doesn’t matter on that end. Whether they leave on schedule just after us, or in six weeks, or a year from then, it will all be the same at this end.’

‘People will be waitin’ around. Other missions will be...’

‘Luke, you are essential to this mission. If you cannot do your job properly, we are all at risk, Bart included. Go home, see Faith, do what you know you have to so we can get the results we need.’

Luke shook his head tiredly. ‘I ain’t never been this bad before. I’m scared... I’m scared of losing Faith and Bart, I’m scared of not being able to Integrate, I’m scared of what it’ll be like if I do Integrate with that lump of dead flesh. But most of all I’m scared I’ll fuck up this mission – and that’ll cost lives.’

‘You are an exceptionally brave man, Luke Bedford. How does a brave man handle fear?’

Luke turned to her and stared deeply into her eyes. ‘He does what he has to anyway.’

She smiled gently, cupping his cheek in her hand. ‘Go home Luke, face your fears, and then come back here to finish what you started. I will meet you at Southampton Dock. Did you get our tickets?’

‘Yes, I’ll take them back with me. I could come back here, if you need...’

‘And turn up looking like you are fifteen years younger, overnight? No, Max will take care of me. If there is a problem, I will come home too.’

Luke sighed heavily and then nodded. He looked over at Max and then back at Eilish. ‘Here?’

‘Yes, why not? It might further convince Max we are not escapees from Bedlam.’

Luke went to his coat, which was hanging on the back of a chair at the small table in the corner. He removed his palm-sized Portal Activator and pressed several buttons. While Max gasped in shock, a sheet of sparking lights eight feet high and six feet wide instantly formed in the centre of the room. The hum from it vibrated through the floor to where Eilish stood.

Without another word, Luke turned and stepped into the light. And as fast as it had appeared, the light disappeared.

‘God in Heaven! You are actually three hundred years old!’ Max said into the silence that followed.

Eilish turned to smile impudently at him. ‘That is your only concern in all this? My age?’ Then she gave a throaty little laugh. ‘It is Saturday morning, you

do not have to be at work and we have the suite to ourselves. Come back to bed and I will show you how active an old lady can be!’

Max shook his head in stunned bemusement as he climbed slowly to his feet. ‘I cannot decide what I need more in this moment – more answers or more bed play.’

‘We can multitask. That is a term that became popular at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Women are better at it than men, as we are better than men at many important things.’

‘I will believe you. In this moment, if you told me Queen Victoria would rise from the grave and take back her throne, I would believe you.’

Eilish leaned up, wrapped her arms around his neck and placed a kiss on his mouth. ‘Oh, she does that in 1913.’

‘What?’ he jerked back from her in horror.

She grinned and giggled. ‘Just kidding! You should see your face!’

‘I am starting to see the justification behind some of the old ways. As your husband, I would feel totally within my rights to put you over my knee and paddle your backside.’ Instead, he scooped her into his arms and padded across the floor toward the bedroom.

‘Lucky we are not married then...’ she replied impudently.

‘That, my dear, is something I plan to remedy at my earliest opportunity.’

‘Do not worry about it. If you come with me, you will leave your marriage as well as your life behind.’

He lowered her gently to the floor next to the bed. ‘I am really going to die?’

‘Not if you choose to join us in New Atlantis. Then your wife will be dead four hundred years and you will have no need of divorce.’

‘Why me? Why did you come back for me of all the people in the world who must die?’

‘Humanity of the future is sterile. It has been for hundreds of years. When we discovered time travel, it became our first task to repopulate the world with worthwhile people from the past who had disappeared from their own time lines. For some, it was getting lost in the wilderness; for others it was falling off boats. But what they all have in common is that their bodies were never found.’

‘And my body will never be found?’

‘That is right. And you are a worthwhile person with a flexible mind who can accept the unbelievable. You have proved that here today.’

‘The proof was pretty convincing.’

‘Yes, but we would never have opened the Portal in front of you if we were not already sure that you were a suitable candidate. Luke might think you are a stuffed shirt, but he also knows what it takes to be a citizen of New Atlantis. He was impressed with the speed with which you came to accept what we told you. It took him many months and he was living in our world at the time.’

‘How does it happen, my disappearance?’

‘Are you sure you want to know this right now?’ she teased, beginning to remove the shoulder of her dressing gown.

Max stopped her and frowned. ‘Yes. I need to know.’

‘You drown when the Titanic sinks on her maiden voyage. Your body is never recovered.’

Max swore loudly and colourfully as he backed off from her and spun around, raking his hands through his dark hair as if he wanted to tear it from its roots.

‘The Titanic, Eilish, the Titanic is unsinkable! Her sister ship the Olympic rammed another ship and tore a hole in her side and she still didn’t sink. This is ludicrous. You cannot expect me to believe this! I am dreaming. That is the only answer. I will wake up with you in my arms on that bed and all of this will be just a dream.’

Eilish came toward him slowly and rested her head on his bent shoulder. ‘Not dreaming, my love. The Titanic will hit an iceberg in the middle of the Atlantic at eleven forty on the fourteenth of April and will sink two hours and twenty minutes later, taking with her two-thirds of those aboard her.’

‘But I am not even planning to take that voyage! Agnes would...’ He stopped and stared suddenly into middle distance. ‘I am going to take that voyage because I met you, and I will not care if it inconveniences Agnes.’

‘And you will take out a large life insurance policy with Lloyds to cover your journey, making her the beneficiary. She will be well set up for the rest of her life.’

He swore again, this time more softly, but with just as much passion. ‘I am not dreaming. This is all true. In a little over two weeks, I will be aboard an unsinkable, sinking liner and will travel to the future to live out my days with a three hundred-year-old woman I love passionately and completely. How is any of this possible?’

‘Come to bed, Max. There is plenty of time to ponder the mysteries of the Universe. Right now, there are better uses of your time...’

He looked over at her and his expressive hazel eyes told her that he was happy to oblige. A slow, satisfied smile crossed his lips and he swung her once more

into his arms.

‘As you have come such a long way to meet me, I had better make it worth your while then...’

Sometime later that afternoon as rainclouds gathered outside the window, Max shifted onto his side and stared down at Eilish as she drowsed languidly at his side. He looked so fierce, suddenly, that her heart lurched. The adrenalin surge, which accompanied her heart’s reaction brought Eilish to full wakefulness as she reached for him.

‘What is it my love?’ she asked.

Max took her hand and kissed it gently. ‘Nothing... everything. I have been thinking over this terrible event that you tell me will happen. That you want me to be part of.’

‘Yes?’

‘If you come from the future and know such terrible calamities befall us, why do you not do something to change them? Surely you could stop this war that is coming knowing what you do? Surely you could warn the Titanic’s Captain so no one need die?’

Eilish sighed and rested her head on his arm stroking it lazily. They had made love three times now and each time was better than the last. Her body was sore and exhausted but her soul reached out for him, wanting to be joined again.

‘We cannot interfere with history. There were many arguments in the early days about such matters. If we truly wanted to change the terrible destruction wrought on our planet, surely we could go back to where it began and effect the changes necessary?’

‘But the more they grappled with the quandary, the more they realised that even if, and there is a significant if in this scenario, we could change pivotal events, might we not inadvertently create even worse results? And while doing that, we might wipe out the ancestors of the minds that discovered time travel so that it never came into being. We would then never go back in time to change the past... the past and future are inexplicably connected. Our world is built on an infinite number of tiny, insignificant events that add up to something monumental. If we know something happened in the past, then it is part of us in the future. We can no more change it as remove a card from the base of a house of cards and expect it to stay standing.’

‘Then how can you justify taking me?’

‘Historically, you disappeared from the timeline. There is no record of you being seen after the alarm was raised. That past will not change.’

She shifted onto her side so she could look him in the eye. ‘Greater minds than ours have grappled with this, and there are interesting anomalies that show, in retrospect, of our involvement. For instance, I was always meant to come back here and fall in love with you. If not, what other reason would you have had for being on the Titanic when you had other definite plans in place?’

‘And Luke has booked our tickets on the Titanic under names of people who our research uncovered never existed.’

Max frowned deeply. She hurried on to try to explain. ‘The records of those who travelled on the Titanic are patchy but quite detailed. By setting our computers to do backgrounds... sorry, a computer is a machine that thinks and performs many of the tasks men previously did. In this case, it gathers information from a multitude of sources and cross checks it with others. In this way, we discovered anomalies... people who were no more than names with false dates of birth and home addresses on the ship’s manifest.’

‘We matched up these details with people on our teams so we knew who would be going, right down to one Michael O’Riley, son of Mary and Ryan O’Riley, who boarded the ship at Southampton as third class passengers. Michael is ten, Mary is twenty-six and Ryan is listed as twenty-nine. The O’Rileys never lived at the address listed on the manifest. In fact, no O’Rileys with those names and dates of birth were ever born. They did not exist. But Mary,’ she indicated herself, ‘her husband Ryan, who with any luck will look considerably younger than twenty-nine the next time I see him, and Michael, who will probably answer more to Brat than Micky, will board the Titanic on the tenth of next month. As will eight other non-existent passengers who were said to have died when the ship sank that day.’

‘Incredible!’

‘It truly is. When we started finding where we may have stepped in, it made things so much easier. But a lot of times we didn’t know we influenced events until it happened... like you. Like Cara.’

‘Cara?’

‘Cara is a Newcomer like you will be. She was Retrieved from 2010, I think. Do not quote me on that year. She introduced the idea of Retrieving children, something our society had been loath to do up to that point. This mission is not so much about Retrieving you and a few other adults we have identified, but forty-eight children in third class. There were huge losses of children in steerage and we plan to offset those losses by Retrieving as many children as we can. We

have no idea how successful we will be, but when it is a choice between death and a new life in a safe and beautiful world, then we will do our best.'

'Why, if there were more losses, are you only aiming for forty-eight?'

'Because those are the children who were never seen during the chaos of the final hours. Or did not match up with bodies recovered and unidentified.'

'And their parents?'

'We will play that by ear. But as a matter of Protocol, we will not take adults who were not vetted first for suitability. Our people have tracked down many of the parents already and have found them unsuitable, several others... we are not sure about yet. But our attitude is that those parents would want us to save their children, if that possibility is open to them.'

'What makes someone suitable?' Max lay back on his pillow and brought Eilish's head onto his bare chest.

'Flexibility of mind, moral character and being a productive member of their society.'

'My affair with you casts doubt on my moral character.'

She chuckled and reached down to stroke his tired member. It jumped into action at the first stroke. He groaned and drew her hand away. 'I am a middle-aged man and should not have the constitution of a young man, as I seem to be exhibiting. If you want me to live long enough to board that ship, treat me gently, I beg you.'

Eilish rose up and kissed him on the mouth, running her tongue along the seam of his closed lips. 'You are simply making up for lost time. All that stored seed that never had a chance to be planted before.' She froze in place.

'What?'

'You will never father a child. That is the price you will pay for joining us. Your seed will become sterile.'

He opened his mouth and kissed her deeply. 'As long as I can still spill my sterile seed in you, I will not care. I did not expect to have children with Agnes, anyway.'

'Yuk, that sounds awful! Anyway, I digress. I was explaining about Cara and the temporal anomalies. Jac was Cara's Retriever and he fell in love with her. He gave her a card and a piece of jewellery and it was not until after he bought them that he remembered seeing the card and the jewellery box on the coffee table in her police files. He chose the card because it looked familiar. It looked familiar because he saw the card he would give her in the police files hundreds of years later.'

‘Then there’s Jane. She was a nineteen-year-old shop assistant in Sydney, Australia, in 1968. Julio met her as part of his reconnaissance. He was there to Retrieve a boy who fell off a ferry. Jane was briefly mentioned as having died trying to save his life. That’s when it got interesting. Jane would never have been on that ferry that day if Julio hadn’t suggested it to her. She was always supposed to be Retrieved, we just didn’t know it.

‘And then there is one of our most unusual cases to date. One of our Researchers fell in love with a young woman in 1810, who history recorded had died in a horse-riding accident four months later. He was devastated, but knew that hers was not a case for Retrieval. She hadn’t disappeared. Her body didn’t go missing.

‘But when he went to her funeral, he spoke to her sister who wondered what he was doing there. He was supposed to be on his way to the New World with his wife. Much to his surprise, he discovered that he had, with the help of two of her sisters, arranged to fake his wife’s accident and burial. Until he learned what he had done, he had no plans to do such a thing. Where did the idea first come from?’

‘My mind is in chaos trying to think my way through all this.’

‘Yes, well you are not alone. There are even more contentious situations, like taking children from paedophiles before they can hurt the child. At first, we thought we had to let such events play out. But then Julio initiated an action that led, inadvertently, to the historical event, and so we started to be more proactive about our rescues. If we thought to rescue a child, then we were always meant to rescue that child. We were changing nothing – simply fulfilling destiny, as it were. That is our mantra now.’

‘What is a paedophile? It is Latin for “child lover.” Are not all parents child lovers?’

‘This refers to sexual love, and often harms the child. It becomes a major problem in the later part of this century. It was probably a problem before, but it was never recognised as such.’

‘Those men exist. We call them buggers.’

‘Nooo,’ Eilish denied tentatively. ‘I think that refers to male homosexuality. Homosexual men are not usually paedophiles. Let us change the subject.’

‘Certainly, especially as my brother has been concerned all these years that I was one.’

‘One what? Paedophile or homosexual?’

‘Both, either... my unnatural disinterest in women concerned him greatly.’ He chuckled amiably.

‘Luke tried to ask me the same question. No, before you ask... he wanted to know if I was interested in women if I was not interested in men. I said I was interested in neither. We are a singular pair, are we not? Until we met, neither of us had any normal sexual urges. Now look at us, at it like rabbits.’

Max choked back a laugh. ‘Are all women of the future so explicit?’

‘From about the middle of this century they started to become less ‘ladylike’ and never looked back.’

‘Well, I imagine I will need to get my affairs in order – very subtly of course – in the next few weeks. In between times, I will busy myself being “at it like a rabbit” if my doe will comply.’

‘Rabbit away, my buck. I find such activity very effective exercise to counter the rich food we are eating so often.’

Max kissed her mouth suddenly and with much fervour. ‘I feel like making the most of my fertile seed while I have it,’ he mumbled against her mouth.

‘You said you were too old and that I would kill you...’

‘I am meant to board that ship, so I doubt you will succeed in killing me. If you do... well, I will die a happy man.’

Chapter Seven

Marco

9 April 1912, London ENGLAND

Marco Lorenza's head hurt. The restaurant staff had stayed late toasting those who would be joining Giuseppe on the maiden voyage of the Titanic and he had been forced to join in their revelry, even though he was not going to share their bounty. It was expected to be financially very lucrative, this first voyage of the Olympic class liner, as the first class passengers would be splashing their money around celebrating the historic voyage. He'd felt more than a twinge of disappointment not to be one of their number. Not only could he do with the money, but to be part of that journey would make for stories he could tell his children and his grandchildren.

Not that he had any thought of marriage and children yet. He was only twenty-eight and nowhere near ready to settle down. There was still so much of the world to see, so many experiences to milk of their novelty. And he needed to be financially secure before he took on the responsibility of a family.

He had seen what settling down young had done to his parents. Old before their time, weighed down with debt and the responsibility of five children, all before they were thirty. They were role models of what life could do to you if you let your heart rule your head. Was it any wonder that his father had involved himself in the worker's demonstration and riots of '98 in their home city of Milano. He had been so angry at the injustice. His children starved while the rich factory owners with corrupt politicians in their pockets used their workers like so much meat and gristle to be chewed over and spat out when they no longer had the strength to be of value.

No, he didn't blame his father for getting involved in that demonstration. He would have gone along, too, had his mother not insisted he stay home and help with the younger children. She had recently given birth to her sixth child and the demands of motherhood were dragging her down. Maria, his ten-year-old sister, couldn't manage her three younger, hellion brothers alone. So he'd stayed to help with his younger sibling, and his father had been killed. Shot dead by the police sent to break up the demonstration.

Shaking his head at that memory, he went to the stained sink in the corner of his room and poured himself a cup of water to wash away the stale alcohol and

the bitter taste of memories from his mouth. When he looked up from the sink and saw his heavy eyed, unshaven face in the cracked surface of the mirror, he sighed heavily.

It wasn't meant to be like this. Working twelve hour shifts in a Ritz restaurant; making barely enough to cover his room in a rundown boarding house in Greek Street, Soho; only able to send a few shillings home to his mother to help her make ends meet.

But back then, he'd had all the insanity of youth telling him life owed him more. Grieving for his father, angry that he had not been there to save him, he turned his fury on anyone who drew his attention.

His mother had been first. He saw her marriage to the foreman of the plant – his father's bitterest enemy – only months after his death as a betrayal. He'd raged at them both, refusing to accept their bond. Time and again the bastard had beaten him into submission, but he'd always come back for more. Finally, after one brutal beating that came close to killing him, his mother had begged him to leave. He was only making it worse for her and the little ones, she said. Mario was a good provider, she told him, and there was no other way for her to support her children. If he could not understand her sacrifice, then he needed to go.

The angry child he had been back then couldn't understand her. To him, her rejection had been the cruelest blow of all. And so he had gone, determined to make his fortune and then return to take his mother and siblings away from that life.

He grunted bitterly at his own naiveté.

Life, he found out the hard way, was not the stuff of dreams and fairy tales, and he was no hero who fought unbeatable odds and won. No, he staggered from one low-paid position in one foreign city after another, his only gift a talent for languages, which at least gave him employment wherever he went. Some might say that his good looks were also a gift, but they were more curse than gift, getting him in more trouble over the years than he wanted or needed.

It had started at fourteen as a lone, pretty boy cast adrift in the world. Men befriended him, and in his innocence, he did not understand why. When he discovered what they wanted from him, he was forced on several occasions to fight his way to freedom. Years on the streets of Milano had taught him to fight, and he had needed those dirty street-skills to escape the depravity of those men's attentions. In retrospect, he wondered how he had gone his whole youth without knowing about such unnatural activity. He imagined his father had kept such

men away from his children. No one had wanted to cross Angelo Lorenza back then.

And when he was old enough that he no longer attracted the attentions of those types of men, his good looks had drawn the enmity of those who envied his easy charm with women. Not that he had ever gone out of his way to attract women, they just came to him: pretty and plain; old and young; rich and poor. They were drawn to his looks like moths to a flame. Once he had satisfied his lust with the novelty of it, by eighteen such attentions only served to annoy him. None of them were interested in him. They saw no deeper than his tall, muscular body, his classic profile and wavy black hair.

Rejecting women's attentions only served to draw enmity of a different kind. No, his looks were more hindrance than help on his quest to explore the world and make his fortune.

For instance, even though he was one of the hardest working waiters at Gardi's Restaurant on the Strand, he was not selected for the Titanic job because he "caused animosity amongst the staff." Women would seek tables in his area and leave large tips that made the other waiters jealous. It didn't matter that he always behaved in a professional manner with patrons. It didn't matter that he shared his big tips with the rest of the staff. They resented him and he knew no way to change the situation.

A few times over the years he'd found a workplace he liked and made friends of some of the staff. But then his other liability would kick in: his itchy feet. Staying anywhere for any length of time was impossible. Boredom would set in and he would start looking for new sights to see, new experiences to explore. Novelty was his most demanding mistress and he could do nothing else but meet her needs, even when it cost him the friendship and comfort of a position he enjoyed.

And it was that mistress who drove him now after a year in London. He was tired of the wet, miserable weather, the superior looks the English threw at anyone who was not their kind. He hated their coldness and impeccable politeness that cut as deeply as any abusive comment. And he hated the dingy room where he tried to sleep while the sleaze of the city endeavoured to keep it from him with their noise.

Marco drew out his cheap pocket watch to check on the hour. He was on lunch shift, which started at eleven o'clock and it was already ten. It was way past time he bathed, but the bath in his building was almost worse than not bathing at all. The water was rusted and rarely hot, the bath required disinfecting before use,

and the floor was so disgusting that he wore a second-hand pair of slippers to the bathroom and left them at the edge of the bath to put on as soon as he stepped out of the water. For this reason, they were now somewhat mouldy and smelled almost as bad as the floor.

Marco settled for a wash at his basin, even though it would not do the job as well as he wanted. Cleanliness was almost a fanatical need for him. He assumed he got it from his mother, who had kept a spotless house and clean, tidy children, no matter how empty their stomachs were. "Cleanliness is next to Godliness," she had told him on many occasions. And though his belief in God was sorely tested after all the misfortunes in his life, the rule of cleanliness still held true.

By the time he walked the three quarters of a mile to the Strand, umbrella held over his uniform to keep off the worst of the drizzle, his mood was anything but good. They would have to start new staff to replace those who were going on the Titanic, and the training of the new waiters would fall to him. Some of the new recruits would have no English, and that would cause problems with the patrons. It would then be his problem to fix.

As he hurried into the kitchen from the back entrance alleyway, Giuseppe Gardi himself caught his eye and motioned for him to come with him. He followed, without question, the tall, dapper figure into his office.

'Enrico has not taken up the offer of work on the White Star Liner as expected and I am one man short. Do you want it?' Gardi demanded abruptly, as soon as the door was closed. His waxed moustache twitched with obvious disdain.

Marco felt his flagging spirits lift. It was the answer to his prayer and his mistress purred her delight.

'Sì, signor. I would be happy to take the position.' He kept his voice calm and polite, because if he gave any indication of his joy, the man was just as likely to withdraw the offer. Keeping his staff happy was at the bottom of the Restaurant Manager's list of priorities. In fact, he seemed to delight in making their lives a misery wherever possible. It had only been that he was away dealing with last minute matters concerning the voyage the night before that the staff had been able to hold their impromptu Bon Voyage party. No such event could have taken place otherwise.

'Then get out of here and make your way down to Southampton by this evening. You can stay overnight with some of the others at Bowling Green House in Orchard Place. It is a residence for Italian nationals and very convenient for the harbour. You will need to be at the docks by nine o'clock, at the latest. The ship sails at midday, and we will start serving shortly after that.'

He handed Marco a letter acknowledging his position. Then, with a negligent gesture toward the door, he dismissed him.

Who would replace him for the luncheon sitting, he didn't know. Nor did he care. He was about to embark on the greatest adventure of his life. Once he arrived in America, he would stay. He had always wanted to see the Wild West and the cowboys and Indians. This was his opportunity. And if he made enough in tips on the voyage over, he might be able to have enough for his transport west without recourse to employment straight away. He didn't want to get caught in New York as so many others like him had done before.

America... the land of opportunity! He had yearned for those fair shores since he was a child, but the cost of such a journey was more than he could raise. Even on the cheapest vessels, it cost almost a month's salary for a steerage class ticket. He had never been able to save that sort of money when he sent every spare penny back home to his mother.

Not that she needed his help so much now. His brothers were all working and his sister Mary was married with children of her own. Only the baby, Rosa, who was now fourteen, was still at home. That his mother had several more children to her second husband was not his concern. He owed them nothing, but helping his mother still remained a priority. It was almost an act of contrition, continuing to send her money. He wanted to tell her he was sorry for his selfishness and cruelty back then, but no words could do his feelings justice. So he sent the money in their stead, and she accepted it for what it was and wrote him long, loving letters every chance she got.

But now he need not concern himself with raising the fare. He could travel for nothing and use his earnings to pay for the rest of the journey west. The West had made many men rich. Maybe now he'd be one of them.

'Marco, where're yer off te?'

The high-pitched voice of a child drew his attention as he hurried down the alley. He stopped to look back at the grubby, little urchin standing beside the garbage bins outside the back door of the restaurant.

'Micky, you're out early,' he said, by way of greeting, smiling at the eight-year-old child with filthy face and ragamuffin clothes. The boy's accent marked him as Irish; one of the many who had flooded into London while famine held their homeland ransom. Marco knew the lad earned his living as a thief on the streets around the Strand, and that he used that money to support his family who lived together in one room in a tenement not far away.

‘Aye, me dah threw me out early-like because pick’ns were so bad yest’de.’ He scratched at his lice infested hair and gave a little, apologetic shrug. Sometimes the boy’s accent was too broad to understand; today was no exception. But, though he didn’t catch all the words, Marco got the gist and felt his heart go out to the child. His own father had been a good man. Micky’s wasn’t. And Micky was in an impossible position.

‘Where yer off te then?’ Micky asked again, wandering over to him on scrawny legs that didn’t seem strong enough to support him.

‘The Titanic. I have to go there straight away. It leaves tomorrow.’

‘That big boat ye yabbered on about? Thought they didn’t want yer fer that,’ he said, his face suddenly alive with excitement. The lad was one of the few friends he’d made in his time in London and the only one he’d shared his disappointment with concerning the missed opportunity to sail aboard the Titanic. Now his little mate was happy for him, even though he would have to have realised that his free meals would come to an end with Marco’s disappearance.

‘Sí, I was not going, but someone has dropped out and they have no one else. So I go.’

‘Aye, there’ll be fair pick’ns on board that mewty craft, I’ll be thinkin’!’ The boy was almost jumping up and down in delight for him. It warmed his heart that the lad cared enough to be so unselfish in his joy for him. He reached into his pocket and found the few shillings he had there. He needed enough for his train ticket to Southampton and his accommodation for the night down there, but surely, he had enough to give the lad a few pennies for a meal?

Then he thought about his accommodation. His room was paid up until Friday and he wouldn’t be able to carry all his possessions with him on the ship. Maybe the lad could use the space and his belongings.

‘Come back to my place and I will give you what I do not need. I do not plan to return.’

The boy’s face became closed and suspicious. Marco was shocked by the boy’s reaction. But then, surely Micky had been subjected to the kind of attentions that had plagued his own youth. It was only sensible that he was cautious of older men.

‘Do not worry, Micky. With all the women I have, my hands are full enough. I do not need to trouble a boy such as you.’ He spoke gently, but with humour, and was pleased to see the lad’s chagrin.

‘It ain’t that. I know you ain’t one of those types. I just don’t like takin’ charity is all.’ The boy slouched his shoulders and kicked at the dirt with his holey shoe.

Marco should have realised it was his pride that was in the way, not his fears. Even getting the boy to take a meal with him had been an act of diplomacy. He would stand outside the kitchen with his own plate piled high with leftovers and offer the lad bits and pieces off it as they talked. Eventually, he’d introduced a separate plate, saying it was a serving someone had sent back. Only when he was sure it wasn’t charity would the boy agree to take what was offered. Micky never begged, no matter how hungry he was, and that was probably the reason Marco liked him so much.

‘Not charity. Just a way of getting rid of what I cannot carry. You would be doing me a service as I have no time to sell it.’

‘Then I’d be more’n happy to help yer out, me boyo.’ His grin revealed stained and missing teeth. No matter how many times Marco had seen that cheeky grin before, the sight made him cringe. His mother would have been horrified by the little boy’s hygiene.

As they walked along, companionably, sharing the umbrella that kept the worst of the rain off them, Marco felt a pang of regret. He would miss the lad and would worry about what became of him. If his father didn’t beat him to death or the police catch and imprison him, then he’d die of hunger or disease, like so many other children in this city. Not for the first time, he felt the anger and frustration such unfairness inspired. Why should a child like Micky starve on the streets as rich men walked by, uncaring? It was probably the reason he did not condemn Micky’s career choice. It was one way to balance the discrepancy.

By the time he had changed into his street clothes and selected what he’d need to take with him, it was well past midday. He shared with Micky some fruit he’d taken from the restaurant the night before and then said his farewells, telling the lad he could use the room until the end of the week. The tears in the boy’s eyes as he waved goodbye were the best gift he’d received in years.

It was just after six that evening when Marco’s train steamed into Southampton Docks Station. By that time, his sadness over leaving Micky had been replaced by overwhelming excitement. He found it hard to believe that his life could change so completely in a matter of hours. It seemed like a million years ago that he had woken up that morning, hung over and depressed because of the state of his life. And now, at the other end of that same day, he was as excited as a small child who was taking his first journey away from home.

It wasn't as if harbours and travel were a novelty to him. He had seen so many of them in the fourteen years since he left Milano that they should have lost their appeal. But there was something different about this trip. He could feel it deep in his bones. It wasn't just the unexpectedness of the trip, or even its destination, or that it was the maiden voyage of the largest ship in the world – the unsinkable RMS Titanic. It was something else entirely.

The only way he could describe the feeling was to say he was finally stepping into his destiny. Until today he had been floundering around on the edges of his life, never sure which way to go. Now the way was clear and straight, and he was determined to greet whatever came with courage and intelligence. He hoped he had enough of both to do the job.

After fighting his way through the milling crowds on the station, he started looking for someone who might point him in the direction of his accommodation. He spotted a wagoner who looked like he might be a local loading his wagon with goods from the train.

‘Which way to Orchard Place, please?’ he asked the man politely

The middle-aged man gave him the disgusted once-over he was used to receiving from the English who resented foreigners, but he was good-natured enough to point off to the left. ‘Follow Canute Road up to Queens Park. It's one o' the roads off the park.’

‘Thank you most kindly, sir.’ He was in the mood to be magnanimous, and along with his polite gratitude, he gave the man his broadest grin. For a moment, the man seemed stunned by his smile, but he quickly recovered, clearing his throat and dismissing the thanks with a grumble as went back to his task.

Throwing his leather valise over his shoulder, Marco started the next stage in his journey with long, jaunty strides.

Life seemed very fine!

Chapter Eight

Lizzie

9 April 1912, Southampton Docks, ENGLAND

As Lizzie stood outside the station in the gathering dusk with the last of her train's passengers, she watched as a handsome young man from her carriage approached a middle-aged wagoner. From where she stood, she couldn't hear what they said, but at the end of the conversation, the smile the young man gave the wagoner was breathtaking, even from a distance. White teeth shone against olive skin, in a grin that split the cold perfection of his features and warmed them to something far more appealing.

She could see that the wagoner was caught in the same spell as she, and it pleased her to know she was not the only fool to be so influenced by a simple smile. When the young man had moved off in long, energetic strides in the direction the older man had pointed, she gathered her wits about her enough to work out her own plan of action. Picking up her small overnight case, having been assured by the stationmaster that her luggage would be conveyed directly to the White Star Docks along with others in the morning, she set off to find a cheap but reasonably priced hotel nearby.

Her first few stops proved to be fruitless and she started to grow concerned as the evening set in. So many places were already full up for the night. It was, she was told, a very important day tomorrow. People had come from all over the country to see the Titanic on its way. She would be lucky to find clean and pleasant accommodation anywhere this late in the day.

In the end, she did find a little Bed and Breakfast several streets back from Canute thanks to the kind assistance of the motherly owner of another establishment who could see her delicate condition. She settled into an airy bedroom on the second floor of the recently renovated Victorian home and breathed a sigh of relief.

Removing her large, black hat, Lizzie sat in the window seat and looked down on the darkening residential area below. Even with the windows closed, she could smell the sea, and an uncharacteristic frisson of excitement darted through her. Several days ago, she had been booked on the Adriatic and worried that her plans might be waylaid by the coal strike, which was crippling transport around the country. Then, with her good luck still running hot, she had received word

that she had been reallocated a berth in second class on the Titanic. And from everything she had read since, the standards for second class on this new ship were equal to first class accommodation on any other liner. The idea that she was travelling on the maiden voyage of such an amazing craft only added to her sense of dazed awe.

The last month had flown by in that kind of wonderful daze. Instead of being numb with her ever-present grief and fearful of what would become of her, now she was energised by her new life as a recently widowed mother-to-be travelling to the other side of the world. And thanks to her progressing pregnancy, she no longer suffered the distress of morning sickness or the dizziness of too tightly cinched stays. Life was certainly looking up.

Her new name was Mrs Anthony Jones, the bride of a Welsh soldier who was killed during a mishap in training only a few months ago. Just before his letter had arrived, so she had informed Bertie. The marriage had been hasty and secret, because her employer did not engage married women. However, she had planned to assume her married name once she finished up at the Peabody's and settled into a soldier's family billet. Then, of course, poor Anthony had died and she had been left in dire straits, until her brother came to her timely rescue.

It was a flimsy story, which she planned to correct once she had time alone with her brother. But until she was sure he wouldn't reject her, she would stick to the fabrication she had come up with and brazen it out. The fact that she had been forced to buy all black clothes, as befitted her grieving state, was not a hardship. In many ways, she still felt she was grieving her parent's death. She even wore a Victorian mourning brooch for her mother, pinned to her black woollen, mutton-sleeve jacket.

Would she be troubled by seasickness? She had been listening to weather reports for the Atlantic and the forecast was for clear skies and smooth waters. There had been mention of ice flows moving further south than usual this year, but she assumed the Captain would know where they were and avoid such impediments. After all, with Marconi's invention, no ship needed to travel blind any longer. Those who ventured first could pass back valuable information by wireless to those who followed behind.

Reaching over to remove the information and tickets she would need the next day from her large reticule, she read again, for the hundredth time, the instructions for departure. The information was quite detailed. She would need to make her way to the White Star dock and be prepared to board approximately one hour before the departure time of twelve – midday. Once at the dock, signs

would indicate where second class passengers were to muster in preparation for boarding. Her luggage, all but her hand luggage, which she would carry on board with her, needed to be marked for the cabin or the hold. As she only had sufficient possessions for one steamer trunk, it was an easy matter to choose to place a 'Cabin' sticker on it.

She would board via the C or Shelter Deck. Stewards would meet passengers there as soon as they arrived and guide them to their cabins. She was sharing stateroom D 53 with another married lady travelling alone. She knew nothing else about the woman other than her marital status, and she only hoped that she proved a friendly and patient sort. It would be nice if she could make a friend, but it would be enough if they could simply share their space in polite conviviality.

More tired than she expected, she washed her face in the small basin in her room, tidied her hair and made her way downstairs to the dining room for supper. Feeling as she did, her plan was to eat a hasty meal and turn in for an early night. She only hoped the excitement wouldn't keep her from her much-needed rest.

Max

With Eilish's gloved hand firmly gripped in his bent elbow, Max steered her through the crowd who had disembarked their train at the dock. The hotel porter, carrying their luggage, cleared a path through the milling passengers for them. The air of excitement was electric and until this moment, Max had not felt any sense of distress over their coming journey. It had seemed unreal. Now it was all too real, as he looked at the faces of the first- and second-class train travellers around him.

Suddenly, the magnitude of what was to happen in a few short days hit him hard. Would that mother with two toddlers be a victim or survivor? How about the tall, darkly handsome young man who was looking around him with such enthusiastic interest? Was this to be the first time he travelled far from home? Or would it be the last time he travelled anywhere?

It did no good to think about it, so he refocused his attention on the lovely woman at his side. They had known each other a month now, and with each passing day, their bond grew stronger. Because of it, he had been able to inform his wife politely that he had made arrangements to travel to New York for work

in a few days and would not be available until later in the Season to accompany her on her many planned outings. He had serenely weathered her tantrums and emotional blackmail, until she realised that her only course of action was a tactical retreat. Over Easter, she was heard to tell friends that, “work must come first, of course, for darling Maxwell.”

He wondered fleetingly whether the rumours of his new mistress had reached Agnes’ ears yet. If they had, she made no mention of them. For the few days over Easter when she was back from Kent and before he had left for Southampton, they had remained as artificially polite with each other as they had always been.

In that time, he had not seen Eilish, and his craving for her had been like a drug. They'd been inseparable for weeks, him staying openly at her suite and going to work from there. Even his brother had made comment on it and insisted on meeting her.

That had been a hard night for him. His brother’s proclivities where women were concerned made Max insecure and jealous. What if Eilish preferred Phillip once she met him? The idea had panicked and horrified him. She was as important to him as breathing now, and if she should leave him, he had no idea what he would do. Of course, Phillip was not her Target, and even if she did prefer him, she couldn’t randomly pluck him off the streets and take him back to her future world. Only specific people like himself had that happen to them.

But, for all his fears, the dinner went pleasantly. Phillip had approved of Eilish and she had been polite and friendly, but no more, toward him. So his sanity was safe for the time being at least. The only issue then had been dealing with his brother’s insistent demands for him to make an honest woman of Eilish and divorce Agnes. How could he tell Phillip that such an action was unnecessary considering he was about to drown? Instead, he put him off by saying he would see to it when he returned from New York.

When he finally saw Eilish again, after nearly a week’s absence, he had been hard-pressed to keep his hands off her. It still seemed incredible the change that had been wrought in him by this one lovely woman. A month ago, he was an amicable, passionless eunuch. Now he was foolishly, head-over-heels in love and had an intimate life second to none. Any lingering concerns about sex being evil or sinful had been washed away by Eilish’s easy pragmatism. He had even pleased himself without a qualm in the days of their absence, because it was the only way he could ease the pressure and stay sane.

And now they were together again, if only for one night. He had convinced her to stay with him at South Western House before meeting up with her team in the morning. During the voyage, she would be acting the part of a third class passenger and they wouldn't see each other until the night of the fourteenth, when they would meet just before the ship hit the iceberg. Then he'd go with her through the Portal.

How was he going to handle spending all those hours alone, sitting next to people in the restaurant or other social areas, knowing that many of them were enjoying their last hours on earth? It was so tempting to try to do something to change the course of history or, at the very least, arrange to save some of the people who would disappear just like him. However, the Retrieval team had analysed the information concerning the ship, its passengers and crew, and they had decided whom they could and could not rescue. It was not his place to try to influence their decisions or interfere with their selection process.

Nevertheless, the risks were great for all of them. Anything could go wrong at the last minute and cause their escape path to be blocked. They might all die when that ship went down.

Max tried to imagine how he might feel knowing that he would die on that ship, when he'd never meant to travel on her in the first place. But, if there had been a choice between meeting Eilish and meeting his death beside her, or living a long and lonely life never having known her, he knew which one he'd choose. As melodramatic as it had always seemed to him, he now knew that one could very easily love a lifetime in a few short days. If they managed to make their escape, then the rest of eternity spent with Eilish would be just icing on the cake.

As they made their way across the road to the large French Renaissance influenced hotel, Max once more thanked his lucky stars. Eilish had told him so much about her future world and the limitless time they had to enjoy it. It was like being told about Heaven and what he could expect to do there. However, to get to this Heaven he didn't need to die first. Not really.

They swept into the main foyer of the hotel and were greeted by a flowing, grand staircase that was quite stunning in its ornate and gilded style. He remembered reading somewhere that this staircase had inspired the impressive centrepieces on the Olympic and Titanic.

At the reception desk, they were greeted by a superior-looking gentleman with a large moustache and a ruler-straight part down the centre of his well-greased hair. As he took their details, his face creased into a subservient smile.

‘Oh, Mr Ingham, delighted to have you staying with us. You have a beautiful suite on the third floor at the front. Dinner will be served at eight o’clock in the main dining room on this floor. If you require room service at any hour, please let us know and that, too, can be arranged.

‘You need not rush for the ship in the morning, as check-in for RMS Titanic can be done from this very desk tomorrow. Then you can join one of our especially arranged trains that will transfer you directly from our front door to the terminal.

‘If you will please now follow the porter, he will take you to your rooms immediately.’

‘Wow, they really go out of their way to minimise the inconveniences of travel, don’t they?’ Eilish whispered as they moved away from the desk.

‘At these prices they would want to. I could buy a race horse for what I am paying for a night here.’ He grinned at her and she leaned up to place a kiss on his cheek.

‘Yes, it is utterly outrageous and unnecessary, but I have come to enjoy the life of the upper-crust in the last month. It will be quite a shock going down to steerage after this. They have only two baths for all of us ladies to share and not many more water closets. I do not know how I will cope.’

‘Well, if you prefer to sleep in comfort or take a bath, you need only come to me on B Deck. I am sure I can bribe a steward to clear the way for you.’

‘Do not tempt me. It has been hell being away from you over Easter, and the idea of you being only a few decks above me will be the worst kind of torture. But it will not be easy crossing the class barrier and we do not want to create rumours of indiscretion that might outlast the ship’s demise. Anyway, I have brought only my steerage clothes with me. The rest I had the maid at Claridges deliver to a local charity.’

‘Not everything, my love. I rescued that wonderful blue dressing gown creation you wore the first time we dined together. It is in my trunk. If you feel like a little luxury or want to spend a little time with your lonely lover, you will be properly outfitted for the occasion.’

Eilish shook her head and slapped him gently on the arm. ‘That was my favourite outfit and it will have to go down with the ship now. I liked to think of someone getting the chance to wear it again.’

The porter had opened the door to their suite and ushered them in. For a moment, their conversation was paused as they entered their ornate and luxurious sitting room. Max had spared no cost on this journey. After all, he

could not take his money with him, and the room they entered was lavish by anyone's standards. Even so, Eilish paid it little notice. Instead, she tore off her hat, rushed over to the window and looked out into the evening's gathering dusk.

'Oh Max, look! We can see the Titanic from here. My god, it is huge. It is one thing to talk about it being the biggest ship in the world; it is quite another to witness its size in person. Do you know that one of those four smoke stacks is a fake?'

Max came over to the window and placed his arms around her waist as he looked out the window toward the dock where the gargantuan Titanic sat passively awaiting its first and last journey. It was an impressive sight, he had to admit, and his inner conflict between awed excitement and fatalistic dread amped up another notch.

'Say you will come to me, Eilish. I am already feeling the pressure of doubts and fears about what we are about to do. If I am left to my own devices, I may well take it upon myself to tell the captain to avoid the iceberg and I will be declared a madman and locked in the hospital infirmary for my troubles. And then you will not be able to save me.' He was only partly joking. It was a war between his needs and those of the many. If he saved the Titanic, if he could save it, he would lose his chance to go to New Atlantis with Eilish.

Eilish turned in his arms and drew him in close, resting her head on his shoulder. 'I know what this must feel like to you. I feel it too. However, we did not cause this terrible calamity and history allows only certain people to survive – on the lifeboats or with us. The rest... for the rest it is their time. I have seen so much death in my life, Max, and most of it was cruel and meaningless. But I have found a way to fight back in my own small way, and I have learned to accept my limits. We are not God, we simply do His Will. We save who we can and we leave the rest to a Greater Power...'

'And the icy ocean.'

'Yes... I will try to come to you. But I will feel guilty enjoying such luxuries while the rest are down below.'

'I do not like the idea of you sharing a cabin with Luke.'

The sadness of the moment before was lifted and Eilish laughed. 'And Bart, please do not forget about Bart. If ever there was a perfect chaperone, it is that boy. He is everywhere at once, never still. I do not even know if he stops long enough to sleep. I imagine I will find out tomorrow night.'

'It is a significant risk allowing a child to take part in this mission,' Max said tentatively, rubbing his cheek against the luxuriant softness of her dark hair.

‘Luke told me Bart volunteered and could not be dissuaded. You have to understand that he is not a normal child. He lived on the streets of a ghetto in Poland for over a year, avoiding capture by the enemy and passing messages for the Résistance. His father was taken early for a work detail, and his mother and sister were taken for the Death Camp not long after that. He was delivering a message when the Nazis came for his mother and he did not know until he came home to find his family gone. When he was finally rounded up, along with several hundred other women and children and thrown into a livestock car with 150 others, he expected to die. They all did. They had heard the rumours.

‘But that was when we stepped in. Faith, Bart’s new mother and Bonded Mate to Luke, was the one to research the missing carriage. It was a mystery of the time, but little about it became common knowledge because the records were largely destroyed by the Nazis to cover up their horrendous crimes. However, Faith set the research parameters and argued for the allocation of research time for what seemed, initially, to be nothing more than a groundless rumour...

‘Anyway, I digress. Bart was only about seven or eight at the time; a tiny little boy suffering from malnutrition. Even so, when we got the children off the train there was Bart, trying to drag a child twice his size toward the door. Even when Luke and Jac went in for the fallen, Bart hovered protectively and would not leave until the last child was removed from that hellhole.

‘So, you see, this is no ordinary child. He knew he could be useful and set about convincing others of the fact. Children can be suspicious of adults, he said, especially strangers on a strange ship. He could break down the barriers and convince the children to join in the “lark.” Then we could seamlessly remove them before the chaos starts. The loss of their parents will be their only trauma and that will be offset by the world they will find themselves in.’

‘I look forward to meeting this young chap. He sounds remarkable.’

‘He is. As are so many of those we rescued that day. It has been a slow process integrating many of the women, though. But we are getting there. That is one of the reasons we do not Target everyone. It is not a kindness to some to be thrown into a world that is incomprehensible to them. You will not understand fully what I mean until you get there, but it is a little like dropping stone-age men into this world, with noisy machines and a way of life that is opposed to every value they hold. Madness, suicide, drug abuse and violence all arise from the clash of such cultures.’

‘So, what you are gently telling me again is that I cannot play God with the lives of these people I will be sharing this journey with. I must be satisfied that

we will save a goodly number and leave the rest in the hands of God.'

Eilish laughed mirthlessly. 'Yes, exactly. And I will come to you if I can. It will depend on how fast we make contact with our Targets and how well we convince them to follow our instructions.'

'Then there will be two reasons I will be hoping for a speedy outcome to your mission. I miss you already.'

She reached up and began to undo his tie and the buttons of his collar. 'Let us not worry about dinner then. Let us make a few more memories, instead, to get us through the next few days.'

'We are certainly a pair of rabbits. I can hardly credit this total change of character. Nevertheless, I am glad for it.' He took her mouth in a hungry kiss. 'Very glad, indeed!'

Chapter Nine

Pia

10 April 1912, Southampton ENGLAND

Pia Rogaland stepped out into the chilly darkness, every sense on high alert. Ahead of her Luke Bedford was already scanning the back alley behind the tenements for any sign of life. The eerie glow of the open Portal illuminated the cobblestone lane in stark relief, and the stench of refuse and unemptied night soil cans covered the more subtle scent of the sea. Somewhere nearby a vigilant dog began to bark.

Moving out of the way of the Portal, Pia was only half-aware of the rest of her team stepping out to join her. More important in this moment were lights in windows that might indicate an unwanted witness to their arrival. But, though she searched the brick rows of cramped dwellings on either side of the lane, she could see no lights.

As the last team member arrived, the Portal light was suddenly extinguished. For several minutes, the utter darkness in its place pressed heavily around her. The dog stopped its irate barking and only the distant sound of wagons moving along the lamp-lit main road could be heard.

Pia shivered. It was always hard to handle the instant change in temperature from New Atlantis to the Jump destination. In this case, it was from thirty degrees Celsius to about eight degrees. The heavy coat she wore, which only moments before had been sweltering, was now having trouble keeping out the cold. She wrapped her woollen scarf more tightly around her neck and buried her gloved hands in the deep pockets of her coat.

Then, wordlessly, the group started moving down the heavily rutted alley toward the streetlight at the end of the lane. Her sensitised hearing picked up the sound of six sets of footsteps padding carefully along with hers.

When they reached the street and stood beneath the dingy halo of lamplight to get their bearings, she looked closely at each of the faces that surrounded her. These were people she had known and worked with for at least a year, and though she didn't know any of them as friends, except Jane, she trusted them all with her life. It was part of the job – trusting your team. If you couldn't do that, then you were better off not Jumping. It took her a long time to learn that lesson.

Trust didn't come naturally to her. It might have been because her mother had left her when she was a child. It might have been because her husband had left her shortly after he'd married her for the baby she had subsequently lost. They'd both been eighteen; too young to have made a go of it, even if the conditions had been optimal. However, the Second Dark Age had not been optimal for anything but death and the fragile bond between two lonely teenagers had easily been severed when their child was gone.

The Last Great Plague had come along just a few years later and taken what was left of those she cared about. It left her to fend for herself in the deserted, snowy streets of Stravanger, Norway, until help finally arrived two long weeks later. That, too, might have been the cause of her distrust. Being the only one left alive in a village full of the dead was an eternity when you believed you were the only person left alive on the planet. Who else was there to rely on then but yourself?

However, if she was honest, none of that was the reason for her distrustful nature. It was more that she had never expected anyone to care enough about her to stand by her. After all, she was nothing special—just a tall, gawky girl too shy to string more than two words together. Not particularly pretty, not particularly smart, not particularly funny or interesting. Why would anyone feel the need to have her around?

Jane NewSW was one of the few people who had ever seemed interested in befriending her over the years. Beautiful, bright and beloved, Jane was everything Pia wanted to be. And though Jane had told her on many occasions that in her Original she had been shier and even more socially inept than Pia, she still didn't believe it. After all, the dashing handsome Julio Santa Catarina would not have fallen head-over-heels in love with the girl Jane described herself to be back then. He was a lone wolf with a chilly chip on his shoulder before Jane came into his life. A man who cared so little for others and who could have any woman he wanted, would hardly fall for someone who wasn't beautiful and delightfully special. Only someone incredibly rare would have tempted such a jaded pallet. It didn't make sense the way Jane told it, so she knew Jane exaggerated or told white lies to make her feel better.

She watched Jane now, resting her head against Julio's shoulder, looking up at him impishly to make him smile. And even though he was obviously tense and worried, Julio couldn't help smiling down at her and gently stroking back a tendril of bright copper hair from her perfect face.

Feeling like an intruder on a private moment, Pia turned away to the other loving couple in the group, Cara Westchester and Jac Ulster – their matching white-blond hair made them look more like brother and sister than Bonded mates. Jac was a six feet six inch Nordic giant – well, he was in this body. His Original body had been shorter and less coldly perfect. However, Jac had been mortally injured in-situ, and the only body available to replace his own had been the unused spare of a recently dead friend. Jac had changed their world the day he took on that new body and broken the nine-life-limit on their lifespan, and he had done it for Cara, who now stood at his side, her carefully controlled excitement alive in her big, blue eyes.

That left Luke Bedford, the American World War II ex-Commando and Bart, his adopted son. In this moment, they both looked deadly, and Pia wondered at the Fates that had given Bart a new father who, in temperament and looks, could have been his biological parent.

The rattle of a passing horse and wagon drew her from her musing. She expected the driver to look at them with curiosity, but he didn't as much as glance their way. He may have seen many such groups already that morning making for Southampton docks a mile away, all the possessions they had in the world contained in battered hand luggage or knotted cloth.

'Let's get going,' Jac said quietly, repositioning his satchel on his shoulder and taking Cara's gloved hand in his to draw her along beside him. Pia noticed he limited his strides to match those of his shorter mate. Julio did the same, although the discrepancy in height between Julio and Jane was not as pronounced. Luke and Bart kept up with no trouble, and Pia, with her long legs, also found the pace well within her range. Her valise was light but bulky, so she carried it at her side.

Time passed in a haze of impatient worry. Every stage of their mission played over and over in her mind so that the dimly lit, foreign streets they passed were just a background blur; unreal and yet entirely too real.

How long had they been walking? It felt like forever and yet the dark, cramped rows of houses flew by quickly as they strode ever closer to the sea. Surprised, Pia noted the sky lightening on the horizon. Was dawn so close? Sunrise, she knew, was at 6.15 a.m. at this time of year. That meant it was probably getting close to six now.

The misty air she breathed out told her it was cold, but the exercise was warming her up, so she no longer felt it. For the first time since their arrival, she felt excitement rising. Ever since she'd been told their mission destination she'd

been quietly thrilled. She'd Jumped to some amazing places since joining the Child Retrieval program six years ago, but nothing as significant as this.

Although there were a hundred things that might go wrong on this journey, the very fact that they were making it was awe inspiring. Not only were they going to be part of one of the most famous events in history, they were going to save many of those who had been doomed. Not one or two, as they did on any average Jump, but maybe as many as sixty. More, if their ad-hoc investigations unearthed new possibilities.

By the time they reached Canute Street, the excitement had completely cancelled out the worry. The seeping light seemed to lift her higher with each passing moment. There were more people here too; shopkeepers preparing to open their stores, wagons loading produce to be delivered to the docks, and everywhere there were people moving in a steady tide toward the monumental outline on the horizon. Even in the pre-dawn light, Pia could identify the four smoke stacks of the titan. The buildings surrounding it seemed dwarfed beside it.

'It is quite a sight,' said a young man walking alongside her. She hadn't even noticed him there. With a quick glance to see if there was someone else he was speaking to and then another to see if any of her companions would comment, she found herself obliged to reply.

'Yes, it is.' Her voice sounded strange to her own ears, wobbly and a little croaky. For not the first time she mentally kicked herself for her inconsequential comment. If this young man with his Italian accent was to be a fellow traveller, then this was a perfect opportunity to engage him. It was her job, after all, but where she could talk freely and easily to children, adults had always been problematic.

The issue was resolved when Julio turned to the man and gave him a nod. 'You on board today?'

The stranger smiled brightly, and even in the pre-dawn light, his teeth shone white against his olive skin. It was a stunning smile and she felt her heart give an odd, little leap at the sight. What was this? She never found men attractive, other than in a purely aesthetic way. Any passion she once had in her youth had been numbed out of her by the Last Great Plague and the acquisition of a cloned body. This unusual attraction must just be the excitement of the journey finding a suitable outlet.

'Sí, I am going to America. This time yesterday, I had no hope. Today the world is my oyster!'

It surprised her how willingly he shared his feelings with them.

‘A very big oyster,’ put in Jane, giving a welcoming smile to the young man. Pia noted the way Julio’s arm tightened ever so slightly around his mate’s waist.

‘A titanic oyster,’ the young man said with a laugh. He didn’t seem drawn to Jane, as most men were. She noted that Julio had picked this up too, because he relaxed a little.

‘Are you travelling today?’ he asked Pia, who was still walking at his side, her head lowered, watching everything out of the corner of her eye.

‘Yes... yes, we are. We’re going to New York. Some of us have family there.’ It was their cover story and it came easily to her lips. She was pleased to note her voice was a little less croaky this time.

‘Ah, sí, New York. But I have seen my share of cities. I am bound for the Wild West. I want to see the prairies where the blue sky goes on forever. I want to see the Indians and the cowboys. I want to drink whisky in a saloon with swinging doors.’

Despite her shyness, Pia laughed and looked at him properly. His enthusiasm was infectious. Although she knew that the true west was largely gone by 1912, it would be quite something to see those dusty towns, set against majestic scenery.

‘Most Indians are on reservations now, so I have read,’ she said, giving him another shy smile in answer to his own. Even in the semi-light, she could see his dark eyes assessing her, as if she were an amusing anomaly.

‘Then I will go to the reservations. I will go everywhere.’

‘You like to travel?’ she asked, shocked that she was actually interested in the answer and no longer just making conversation.

‘Sí, I am what you call a ‘rolling stone.’ I have been travelling Europe since I was fourteen. But, until now, I have not had the chance to go where my heart has led me...’ His voice took on a faraway tone, as if for a moment he was somewhere else.

‘Are you a third class passenger like us?’ Bart asked, moving to the other side of the young man and somehow absorbing him into their group.

‘No, I am a waiter in the restaurant.’

Pia felt her heart drop in a most uncharacteristic way. There was suddenly a pain in the centre of her chest, as if an enemy had pierced her with a blade. Her breathing became erratic, and for a moment, she felt hot and dizzy. Panic, she realised with astonishment. She was having a panic attack. But such a thing was impossible! Clones never felt the level of emotion required for such a condition. What was happening to her?

Glancing to the right, she let her gaze caress the handsome Italian. The sick feeling increased, as she thought about him drowning as the Titanic drowned. He was so full of life and joy that he drew her like a magnet. Such a bright light should not burn out so early.

Pia could feel the atmosphere change within her group. They all knew what happened to the À la Carte employees. Except for the female cashiers and one assistant to the chef, they all died; kept below deck by overzealous stewards. This handsome, young man with his merry smile would never see the Wild West and the Indians. His oyster would be his coffin.

‘Have I said something wrong?’ he asked, frowning and looking around at the group as they walked on silently.

‘No, no of course not. Why would you think that? We’re just surprised.’ This was Cara, speaking for them all, her gentle American accent warm and friendly.

‘Do you get to eat all that fancy food that’s left over?’ asked Bart, redirecting the conversation and covering up their reaction admirably.

Their companion laughed. ‘Oh, sí, I eat what is left. I am a bottomless ummm... how do you say?’ He looked at them helplessly, as he searched for the word he was looking for. His command of English was admirable, but there were understandable gaps.

‘Pit,’ supplied Luke with a grin. ‘You’re a bottomless pit. A man after my own heart... or stomach, in this case. They say the food, even in steerage, is good on the Titanic. And lots of it.’

Their new friend looked surprised. ‘Some of you are American?’

‘I’m from Philly,’ Luke went on, and then nodded toward Cara and Jac. ‘My cousins are from New York State. We’re going home after visiting relatives in Sweden and Finland.’

‘So you could tell me all about America then. You are not American?’ The waiter was looking at Pia again, interested in her answer. She blushed.

‘No, I am Swedish. I am going to America with my Irish cousins and their friends and family.’

‘We’re English,’ Jane put in. ‘We met up with the others in London and decided to travel with them.’

‘You are also rolling stones, I think.’

Pia laughed shyly and shrugged. ‘Not me. I have never been anywhere.’

How interesting, it almost felt like the truth. Even though she had Jumped to many countries and many different times in the last six years, most of her life she’d lived on a rural community within the Gaian Confederacy in what was

once the Bavarian Hinterland. In those 200 years, she'd worked as a medic and had felt no desire to change location or career. Then, when news of the Child Retrieval Program became common knowledge, she had submitted her name immediately. She still didn't know what had driven her to make such an uncharacteristic move, or why she was accepted for the position over other candidates.

'Maybe your heart also leads you to America...' his deep voice was strangely gentle now, as if they shared a bond, a common goal. It was so incorrect that she shook her head emphatically and looked away.

'My heart leads me nowhere. I go where I am needed.'

Jane looked over her shoulder at her with a funny expression on her face. 'Is that why you're here? I had wondered.'

At that moment, they reached an ornate corner building across the road from the railway station and a small figure stepped out of the darkened doorway and hurried toward them.

'Ah, there you are. I was hoping I would catch you as you passed!' It was Eilish and she was beaming brightly. She moved into the centre of the group and gave Luke a big hug.

'Luke, you look fifteen years younger. Amazing what a month away will do for you!' They laughed as old friends. Pia was surprised. During the prep period of the mission, Eilish and Luke had seemed like polite strangers. How had that changed in a few short weeks? She knew that Luke had Jumped home a week or so into the mission and gone immediately to the medical centre for integration. Up to that point, he had been a rarity in their society, a person still in his Original. Most people integrated with their cloned new bodies as soon as they were ready. She had heard that Luke had not even wanted a clone grown. However, the mission had only been postponed a month while he integrated, so there must have been one prepared for him.

'I feel like my old self,' Luke replied, kissing Eilish on the cheek. 'Thanks to you, Irish.'

'Damn, you are never going to let go of that are you?' Eilish exclaimed in amused frustration. Pia didn't understand what she meant and from the looks exchanged in the group, no one else did either.

'Everything all right on this end?' Jac asked Eilish as they all started moving again, this time across the railway tracks and through the gates to the docks.

The crowds were getting denser now as the sun peaked over the rooftops. The sky became a pale blush of blues and greys and Pia was reminded of a sepia

photograph.

‘Wonderful. Max is ready for extraction, although...’

‘Mary, let me introduce you to our new friend,’ Luke interrupted hastily, drawing her over so she could see the stranger in their midst. Eilish was startled into silence.

‘We haven’t introduced ourselves,’ Luke said in his broad Philly accent. ‘I’m Ryan Luke O’Riley. They call me Luke, and this here’s my wife, Mary. She’s been visiting friends here in Southampton for a few days. And that’s my son Micky. Irish, this is...?’ He paused and looked at the stranger.

‘Oh, sí, I should have introduced myself earlier. I am Marco Lorenza.’ He gave a little bow as he walked, doffing his cap. In the morning light, his hair was the blue-black of a raven’s wing. In fact, it was not much different in shade or texture to Eilish’s wild locks. Pia’s fingers itched to touch it.

Gasping softly, she curled her fingers into tight balls in her pockets. Where had that thought come from? She never wanted to touch anyone, although she often felt a pleasant warmth if she were placed in a position where cuddling a child in her arms was necessary.

However, this urge was not like that. This was almost a compulsion. Her mind conjured up the silky texture of the soft curls, enticing her to reach out across the short distance between them, to stroke back that black hair from his handsome face.

When he put his cap back on and covered those curls, it was a profound relief.

‘Nice to meet you Marco. You are travelling on the Titanic too?’

‘Sí, I am a waiter on the Titanic.’

Cara interrupted to fill Eilish in. ‘We just met Marco as we were walking down. We told him that you’d been visiting family in Sweden and are now going home. Marco, Mary and Luke have lived in America since they were children.’

She paused, and then pointed at the other members of the group. ‘The sweet young lady at your side is Petra, who is Luke’s Swedish cousin and my half-sister. And this is my husband, Jan, and I am Hilda. The English are Jane and Peter Davenport. We are glad we have had this opportunity to meet you. I don’t think we’ll have that chance again once we’re on board. They’re strict about keeping staff and passengers separate.’

Marco nodded his head in greeting to each person, in turn, as they were introduced. He seemed surprised by the last statement. ‘Is that so? I will be most disappointed not to have a chance of finding out more about America from you.’

By this time, they'd reached the first of the buildings and there were signs pointing in all directions. People were milling around, some of them looking lost, others just waiting. However, they were all getting in the way of the vehicles that were trying to move along the dockside.

'I will say good-bye, then. It has been good to meet you all.' Marco turned to Pia and gave her a warm, slightly puzzled smile. 'I hope I get to see you again before our journey ends.'

And with that, he was gone, moving off at a relaxed lope, his bag swung over his shoulder. He seemed so free and easy, so confident in his direction and his place in the world that Pia envied him.

However, in the next second, she realised how misplaced her envy was. This handsome, young man's dream of America would be swallowed up by the cold Atlantic Ocean in a few short days. There was nothing for her to envy there. The sudden, wrenching grief that thought evinced was overwhelming. She felt tears stinging her eyes and she blinked them back.

There would be many she would meet in the coming days who would be living their final hours. She couldn't hope to save everyone. But there were those she could rescue, and that was what she needed to focus on. That was why they were here.

The others, like this young man, would have to be let go. They couldn't save everyone.

Why did that thought, which had always been her mantra in the past, now seem like a cruel and blatant cop-out? How could she be expected to stand back and watch that young man die so blithely? It almost felt like she was willingly allowing her own heart to be cut out of her chest.

However, that was exactly what she would be forced to do. Because, no matter how she felt about it, her mantra was the truth: They couldn't save everyone.

Chapter Ten

Lizzie

It was just after nine when Lizzie finally reached the huge gates that led to the White Star Line dock. Here the titan sat patiently waiting for the million tiny activities to be done with, so she could leave the land behind and get back to where she belonged – the sea. Craning her neck back, Lizzie tried to see the pale orange stacks that were already billowing threads of steam into the blue sky. However, the ship was too high; all she could see was the endless black side of the liner as it rested against the overcrowded jetty.

People were everywhere, like so many ants in a disturbed nest. She struggled through the crowds toward the sign that indicated the second class passengers' departure point. As one rough lout pushed past her, she lost her balance and almost fell. A strong arm caught and righted her, and for a moment, she felt oddly safe, as if she had found an island in midstream to rest on.

Looking up, she saw that her saviour was a young, good-looking man with dark hair and serious, brown eyes. For a moment, she rested in those warm, earthy depths. Then, giving herself a little shake, she drew back and smiled shakily.

‘Thank you, sir, I thought I was about to fall.’

‘Clumsy oaf should have been more careful. Are you well enough now?’ His voice was a pleasant tenor with an accent that she couldn't identify. The gentle smile he gave her revealed surprisingly white, straight teeth.

‘Yes, thank you. It is rather hectic, is it not? I am not sure where I am meant to be. I keep looking for the second class signs but...’

‘Where is your husband? Surely, he should be taking care of you in your...’ He stopped and blushed, looking down at the road beneath them. ‘I do apologise. I should not have referred to your delicate condition.’

Lizzie smiled and pressed his jacket-covered arm with her gloved fingers. ‘Think nothing of it. My condition is apparent to anyone with eyes. And I am a widow, travelling alone to New York.’

The young man's gaze lifted and met hers. There was a burning light in those brown depths now that she didn't understand.

‘May I assist you to your destination then? I am Karl Langman from Ontario, Canada. I, too, am travelling second class.’

Lizzie felt a strange flutter in her chest. There was something very endearing about this overly serious and proper young man. It was as if she was meeting an old friend for the first time in many years, familiar and yet different.

‘Do I know you? Have you spent any time in England, in the last few years?’

‘No, I do not think we have met. This is my first trip to England. I have been here for only a very short time.’

Karl had taken her bag from her and, very quickly now, they began to make their way along the dock. With Karl clearing the way for her, Lizzie was feeling a great deal less overwhelmed.

‘My name is Lizzie Faul... oh no... it is Mrs Anthony Jones. I still have trouble remembering that. We were married for such a short time.’ She hated lying to this young man more than she thought possible. However, it was imperative that she stick with her story or she’d find herself entangled in her own deceit.

‘I am sorry for your loss. How is it you find yourself travelling to New York at this time?’ Karl manoeuvred them around a horse and wagon that were offloading fresh fruit and vegetables into the bowels of the ship.

‘When my husband died, my brother in New York, my only remaining family, offered me a home with him.’

‘You will like New York, I am sure. I have spent time there and it is a very busy, youthful place.’

‘My brother manages a store in Queens. Do you know Queens?’

‘No. I have never been to that area. I have spent more time in Manhattan. Nevertheless, I am sure Queens will suit you well.’

By this time, they had passed through the gates that led to the second class departure area. Suddenly, the overwhelming crowds eased up and they could pass through the different stages of their boarding without trouble. By the time they walked up the gangway to the C Deck companionway, two fresh flowers in her hand, Lizzie felt very relieved.

Handing her boarding pass to the crewman at the end of the gangway, she was introduced to a young, ginger-haired stewardess with a friendly smile. ‘D 55, Madam,’ she said glancing at the boarding pass. ‘If you will follow me...’ She started across the deck for the enclosed part of the ship.

‘May I follow along? I am in D 51,’ Karl asked the rapidly moving stewardess.

‘Certainly, sir, you will be just a few staterooms away. Both of you will find being next to the dining room a great convenience, I imagine.’

Lizzie found it difficult to keep up with the young woman ahead of her, but being free of her luggage made it easier. Karl strode along just behind her with their luggage. After a quick glance in her direction, the stewardess took them to the small lift rather than the stairs. Within moments, they had descended to the deck below and were greeted by two large, varnished wooden doors and a wall of wood panelling that seemed to stretch endlessly on either side.

Ignoring the doors, the stewardess turned to the right, or starboard side of the ship, and took a few steps over to a line of cabin doors. Then the young woman stopped.

‘You are here, sir,’ the stewardess indicated the stateroom closest to the stairs. She then continued along a short passageway that ran parallel to the double doors and wood panelling. At the very end, she opened a door on the left.

Karl, Lizzie was pleased to see, had followed along with them, carrying her bag.

‘If you need anything just ring the bell. My name is Lucy and I will be your stewardess for the duration of your journey.’

After a quick curtsy, the woman was gone, squeezing past Karl’s tall body and making her way back to the staircase.

Lizzie moved into the stateroom so that Karl could follow her and put down her bag.

‘This is nice and airy. The porthole gives a lot of light,’ remarked Karl, as he put her bag on the six-foot long divan under the porthole. There was a pair of bunks across from the divan. Two foldaway sinks, with a mirror in a cabinet above were located on the far wall. There was also a large teak wardrobe and a metal rack for cases next to the door. The walls were white and smelled freshly painted.

‘I would suggest you take the bottom bunk. Climbing around in your condi...’ He stopped short once again and sought for a change of topic desperately.

‘Mr Langman... may I call you Karl?’

‘I would be honoured.’

‘Karl, you do not have to be circumspect about my condition. I am not. I like to think of myself as a New Woman. Pregnancy is a part the female lot. It is not something to be ashamed of or hidden away, as Queen Victoria would have had us do, and you are perfectly correct, climbing up onto the top bunk would be dangerous in my condition. I hope my roommate, Mrs Duncan, will be accommodating.’

Lizzie put her bag onto the bed and opened it. She removed her nightdress and put it under the pillow, then turned, as she noticed Karl edging for the door.

‘I can do this later. Shall we make our way up on to the deck? Or will we take the tour? I rather like the idea of seeing the general areas of first class. They said they would be open to us until departure. It would be interesting to see how the other half will be living on the trip.’

Karl smiled his relief and offered her his arm. ‘I would be honoured to escort you on a tour of first class. I would very much like to see their gymnasium up on Boat Deck. It has the most interesting assortment of equipment, so I have read.’

She picked up the two carnations she’d been given at the bottom of the gangway. One was hers and the other was Karl’s. Taking his, she threaded it through his lapel buttonhole. Then she did the same with her own.

‘How do you know where to find this gymnasium?’ she asked, taking his arm.

‘I made a point of studying plans in advance of my journey. I like to know the lay of the land, as it were.’

They briefly stopped off to drop Karl’s hand luggage in his much smaller stateroom, and then they took the lift up to the very top of the ship. Here, they wandered along the deck, admiring the smoke stacks at close quarters and looking down at the dock, far below. There weren't many people up here yet, and it was pleasant walking in the morning sunshine along the pristine, varnished deck.

‘There do not appear to be many lifeboats,’ Lizzie commented, as they passed four of them on the starboard side and headed forward.

‘Not nearly enough,’ Karl replied darkly, and she felt a shiver of fear run down her spine. Why should it matter how many lifeboats there were? This was the unsinkable Titanic, after all. Such safety precautions were unnecessary for them.

They passed through the gates that separated second from first class and found the gymnasium. It was a large room filled with an assortment of devices. A huge dial, like a clock, occupied a space on the far wall alongside a large map of the world. A series of arched windows occupied two full lengths of the other walls, all frosted so that they allowed the maximum light, while protecting those in the gym from the prying eyes of those passing along the promenade.

There was an odd collection of apparatus spread around the decked floor that Lizzie found intriguing. Karl climbed onto one piece of equipment that had a horse's saddle. When he pushed a lever, the device began to move, mimicking the gate of a horse. She laughed with delight and clapped her hands.

‘Faster, go faster!’

Karl obediently pushed the lever further down and the saddle began to move with more speed, as if he was in full gallop. It was fairly apparent that Karl was not a horseman, for he was having difficulty maintaining his seat. It was hysterical.

‘Do you feel you are getting exercise?’ she asked him.

‘I feel like a butter churn,’ he replied breathlessly and reached down to turn off the contraption. ‘I think I’ll stick to the equipment back home.’

He dismounted unsteadily and Lizzie couldn’t help taking his arm. She looked up at him and grinned brightly. It was a long time since she’d had such fun. Being with Karl was such an unexpected gift, and they seemed to have fallen into a companionship that had the ease of years, rather than a little more than an hour.

‘What next?’ she asked, looking around at the other gadgets. There was one that seemed to be for rowing and another for bicycle riding. Another had a label that said camel-ride. She could only wonder what that looked like in action.

But it seemed Karl had had enough of experimenting, so the camel-ride went untried and they made their way out of the gym. A little further along the Boat Deck, they came to the entrance to first class. They stepped over the lip of the door and entered the reception area.

The Grand Staircase took Lizzie’s breath away. She looked up at the bright glass and metal dome above their heads and gasped in awe.

‘How beautiful!’

‘Yes. They spared no expense on either of the Grand Staircases, fore and aft. Look, this is a clock called “Honour and Glory.” See the two angels on either side of the clock face? They are Honour and Glory. Beautifully wrought, as is everything here in first class.’

The lovely clock showed the time to be eleven thirty. They still had half an hour to continue their tour. They chose to walk down the grand, curving staircase, rather than taking one of the three lifts. On each floor, they were greeted by sumptuous furnishings and artwork. On D Deck, there was even a large tapestry on the wall that was obviously a replica of a much older work of art.

They took a seat at a table and looked around them in contented pleasure.

‘I could get used to this,’ Lizzie said with a sigh. ‘It will be so much harder adjusting back to the more conservative comforts of second class after this taste of the good life.’

Karl laughed loudly, and for a moment, seemed rather nonplussed by his own display of emotion. Then he shook it off and turned back to her with an admiring smile. It was so nice to have a handsome young man taken with her in this way. She would have expected her pregnancy to put men off. No one found a swollen belly attractive. However, Karl's eyes rarely left her face, and they still held that odd fire, banked now, as if he was hiding his true feelings from her.

'You have made this morning so much better than I expected. I am used to having to do things for myself, and it is such a gift having a man treating me as a rare flower in need of care.'

'Lizzie, may I call you Lizzie?' When she nodded, he went on. 'Lizzie, you are a rare flower, and I am delighted to have the opportunity to care for you, if only for a few short hours until other single gentlemen pick up your scent, as it were.'

She laughed. 'You make it sound like men are roaming the ship, sniffing the air like foxhounds.'

'Men can be like that at times. If any should give you trouble, just call on me. I will make swift work of them. As long as they are not too much bigger than me.' He laughed at himself and she liked that about him. He was modest and self-effacing, but not in a demeaning sort of way. It was as if he did not realise just how attractive he was to the opposite gender. As if he was unused to conversing with women.

'Do you have sisters?' she asked him, following through on that thought. It may well be that he did not have much opportunity to associate with women.

'Sisters? Why, no. I had a brother once, long ago. But he died, as did my parents.'

'Who raised you?'

For a moment, Karl looked rather puzzled, until he put the pieces together. 'They passed after I was grown. I am older than I look.'

She studied his unlined face with its square jaw, straight nose and broad forehead. A stray lock of brown, undressed hair fell across that brow and she had the strongest urge to stroke it back out of his eyes. He looked to be no older than twenty. How old could he be to have been fully grown when his parents passed long ago?

'What do you see when you look at me that way?' he asked her softly, leaning in so their faces were only a foot apart. His warm, brown eyes seemed to engulf her and she bathed in them, soaking up their heat, allowing them to heal the pain and fear of the last year and more.

Looking at him like this, Peabody and his painful attack seemed like it happened to another girl. No one who looked into these brown eyes could be as besmirched and unworthy as she'd felt herself to be for the last five months. It was as if, in these precious moments, she was reborn, her agonising past wiped away. Once again, she was the light-hearted girl she'd been at College, before that fateful train accident took away her past and future.

'Lizzie?'

'Hmm?' she had completely forgotten what he'd asked her.

'What do you see when you look at me with such concentration?' he repeated.

'I... I do not know. I just find your visage appealing. You look young... younger than me, and yet you seem to be so mature. So calm and collected, as if you have seen so much and weathered many storms. Yet you have emerged unscathed. That sounds silly, I do apologise.'

He took her gloved hand and held it between his own. 'No. It is not silly at all. I have never met anyone who could read me as you have just done. I have spent a very long time mastering my demeanour so that others cannot see my thoughts. My father did not approve of emotions. It feels good to be seen...'

'My father could be a hard man, too. It was their generation, I think. But I believe men feel just as deeply as women, and it seems unfair that you should be forced to hide those feelings just because you are a man.'

'It was not about being a man for my father. It was about being an intellect. Emotions dulled the intellect.'

'What is your career path?'

'I am a medical researcher. A physician.'

'But you are so young!' she said with stunned amazement.

'As I have said, I am older than I look. And my education was accelerated because of my intellect.'

'Is that why you have trouble talking to girls, because you were always around people older than yourself?'

He looked at her in astonishment and then gave a soft hoot of laughter. 'Do I have trouble talking to girls? I thought I was doing very well with you, Mrs Jones.'

'Oh, I do apologise. I did not mean it as an insult. You have been very good company. But I just sense that this is new to you, this level of... intimacy, for want of a better word, which we have developed so quickly. I like that you are ill at ease with my gender. If you are, of course. I may have that entirely wrong.'

‘No,’ he admitted with a slow shake of his head. ‘You do not have it wrong. I talk quite freely with colleagues who are women, but do not quite know how to converse socially. And yet, you are right. That does not seem to be the case where you are concerned. I feel like I have known... never mind.’

‘Like we have known each other for a very long time? That is how I feel, too.’

‘You do? Is that what you meant when you said you thought you knew me?’

‘Yes. Never mind, that was the ship’s horn. Shall we go out on deck and wave to the people?’

Karl stood and helped her to her feet. ‘Yes, let us go aft on the B Deck promenade. We should see those on deck and those on the shore quite well from there. I have friends in steerage I would like to see, just to know they boarded safely.’

Later, after the madness of that tearful departure was over, she went back to her stateroom alone to freshen up before luncheon. At the door, she met an angry-faced woman with faded blonde hair who had to be Mrs Duncan.

‘I suppose you were the one who commandeered the bottom bunk. Well, I am sorry my dear, but you are to be disappointed. I will be sleeping in the bottom bunk.’

She saw that her bag and night attire had been removed from the bunk she had left it on and placed on the divan. Her mouth fell open in astonishment. For a moment, she was lost for words.

However, Lucy came to her rescue, appearing in the doorway with a knowing, compassionate glance. She placed blankets and linen on the divan before turning to Lizzie. ‘Never mind, Madam, I will make up the divan for you. Can’t have you clambering about in your condition, can we?’ I’ll make it up while you are at luncheon. Then if you feel like a little rest in the afternoon, you will be able to do so.’

‘Where am I expected to sit, may I ask, if she takes the only seat in the room?’ demanded the middle-aged blonde imperiously.

‘Your cabin is for sleeping, Madam. There are plenty of places to sit quite comfortably around the ship,’ Lucy replied cheerily.

Lizzie was so grateful to the young woman she could have kissed her.

Hurriedly, she left the stateroom and made her way down the corridor to the water closets. Then, at the sink, she washed her face and brushed back stray wisps of hair that had escaped the knot on the top of her head after she’d removed her hat.

The twinkle in her eyes was new, she realised, as she studied her face in the mirror. And her lips seemed to be turning up at the ends without her conscious thought.

This was what it felt like to feel romanced, she realised wonderingly. After everything she'd been through, finally her life had turned along a new and exciting path. Suddenly, she felt young and dizzy. Not even her obnoxious roommate would be allowed to spoil her new-found pleasure.

Chapter Eleven

Eilish

The walk up the gangway into the bowels of the Titanic was one of the most memorable moments in Eilish's long life. The noise and the chaos, the smell of the sea mixed with the acrid smell of coal smoke, unwashed bodies and fresh paint, all melded together to imprint itself indelibly onto her memory. She wished she could be sharing the moment with Max. It was an ache in the centre of her chest just knowing that he was somewhere nearby and yet she could not go to him. What would his first impressions be of this mighty liner?

They had not slept at all last night, desperate as they were to make the most of their time together. He was as passionate and greedy as any teenage boy. Her own reactions to their closeness continued to amaze her. She hoped to get an opportunity to talk to Jac or Julio about what was happening to her. It would have been better if it were Faith so she got the female perspective, but the men on this mission were the only ones here who knew what it was to fall in love after hundreds of years in a sexless, clone body. Getting Luke's second-hand impression didn't really help.

She glanced back at Luke, who was following her up the gangway. He looked so young! It was such a shock. And the worry lines that had been etched so deeply into his face were gone. Although, if he kept frowning as he was doing now, they'd be back fairly quickly. But for all the frowning, he seemed oddly light, as if the decision to change bodies had lifted a huge weight off his soul. Not only did he look younger, but he seemed younger now, too.

A child began to cry a few passengers ahead of her and she gritted her teeth, as the sound jarred her nerves. They were all tired and fed up with the delays of the process, and the children were having the hardest time with it; no wonder so many of them were whining and crying. The medical exam, or what passed for one, had been insulting and cursory. The most that they could say about their health was that they ran no fever and had no head lice.

It was even more insulting to know that the first and second class passengers didn't have to go through the health exam. Heaven forbid that anyone should suggest that the upper classes might be diseased. But, keeping in mind the times, they had all borne the poking, prodding and combing in patient silence and moved on to the next checkpoint.

Now, hours after reaching their designated area at dockside early that morning, they were finally getting their chance to board. Eilish took a quick smell of the flower she had been handed at the start of the gangway. Every person boarding was being given one, and though the carnation was wilted after hours out of water, its scent was still fresh. She couldn't remember reading anywhere that flowers had been given out on this maiden voyage; it was a little detail that seemed like a glaring omission.

They stepped through the companionway and down off the wooden gangplank into the interior of E Deck. For some reason she noticed the new linoleum tiles under-foot. Not what the first class passengers would be walking on, she was certain of that.

Stewards in white coats were yelling instructions as they looked at tickets and pointed off in different directions.

'Keep moving. Have your tickets ready. That's right, keep going straight ahead...' the closest one was yelling. His voice was already raspy from yelling over the chatter.

She, Luke, Bart and Pia were on the one ticket under the assumed names of Mary, Ryan and Michael O'Riley and their cousin Petra Yohansen. They were allocated a four-berth cabin in Area K, which Luke told her after studying the deck plans at home, was on E Deck. Cara, Jac, Jane and Julio were on the other ticket as Jan and Hilda Braun, and Jane and Peter Davenport. They had a four-berth cabin just near theirs. It was going to take some getting used to using their aliases and accounting for their odd mix of nationalities. Karl had been lucky. They'd found a Karl Langman listed on the second class passenger list who had no paper trail. It meant that he didn't have to try to answer to any but his own Christian name.

The passenger list hadn't included all cabin allocations, so she knew from planning discussions that they had decided to get cabins close together for ease of communication. It might have been better to be spread out so they could mix more readily with their neighbours, but someone had pointed out that mixing was much more likely in the recreational and dining areas than in the corridors outside their cabins.

Eilish was glad they were all close together. It was somewhat frightening to be surrounded by so many strangers, all intent on finding their berths. More than a few women were now crying too. Female stewards were hurrying into their midst and gently helping them find their way. It was all so confusing and overwhelming.

But for them the chaos was short lived once the stewards had shunted them off in the right direction. Cara's cabin was down a small passage and had a porthole that let in streams of bright sunlight. Theirs, on the main passageway they colloquially called "Scotland Road" or the "alley," had no such source of natural light. She was already envying Cara's cabin, not only for the light, but for its potential quietness at night.

In all other ways, their cabins were identical. They had white walls and bunks and a sink with a holding container above it that she knew the steward would refill with fresh water daily. The bunks had mattresses, linen, pillows and blankets. There was no space for wardrobes, so bags had to be stowed under the bottom bunk and coats hung on hooks on the back of the door. What they lacked in size, they made up for in freshness. The smell of starched sheets, fresh paint and a slightly acrid scent she determined was the glue used to adhere the lino to the floor, all pointed to the virginal quality of their accommodation. All in all, considering the times, the cabin was remarkably comfortable.

Once they had checked out each other's cabins, they retired to their own berths. Luke and Bart took the top bunks without asking and neither she nor Pia complained. She had no desire to scramble up to the top bunk in her long skirts, and she imagined Pia felt the same. They all slumped onto their new mattresses and relaxed for the first time since dawn.

'I sure prefer our method of travel. It might be pure hell for a few seconds but then it's over. I thought we'd never get on board the way it was going down there,' Luke said from the bunk above hers.

'The future does have its distinct advantages.' Eilish laughed and turned over on her wire-sprung mattress. It was worlds apart from the bed she'd slept in last night in the hotel. Well, sleep was not the right word for what they did in that bed, but it was certainly much more comfortable than what she had now. She wondered what Max's bed on B Deck would be like.

Stop that! You have left that world behind for now. Focus on your job, not your creature comforts.

'I'm starving! When's lunch again?' Luke asked, after a comfortable silence had fallen between them for a few minutes.

'After the ship leaves the dock at noon. What time is it now?'

She could hear Luke rummaging around in his pockets for his watch. 'Hmm, it's just gone eleven. So no food for another hour and half then. I wish I'd eaten more breakfast. But even so, it's been more than five hours since we left.'

‘Oh, for heaven’s sake, stop moaning.’ She sat up, rummaged through her own small satchel and produced leftovers from her early-morning breakfast feast. She handed out somewhat dented croissants to each of her cabin mates and settled back with her own. ‘You can thank Max for his foresight. He ordered a breakfast this morning that could have fed half a dozen lumberjacks. I would have brought the jam and butter, but I did not think they would travel well. I have four apples too, but I think I better see if the others want them.’

‘You’re a doll, Irish. Glad I had the good sense to make an honest woman out of ya!’

‘Yes, thank you Eilish,’ mumbled Bart between mouthfuls. He was turned on his side stuffing almost the whole pastry into his mouth at once. He looked so hungry that she tore off half of her own croissant and offered it to him as the last of his own disappeared.

For a moment, he hesitated, torn between hunger and politeness. Then when she nodded at him and smiled, he took it from her and gobbled the other half down. ‘You’re a growing boy, Bartholomew. You need to keep your carbs up.’

‘Here,’ Pia said, offering up half of hers too.

Eilish refused to take the pastry from the quiet girl in the bottom bunk. ‘No, you haven’t eaten for hours, either. Bart’s had enough to keep the wolf from the door for the moment and the boys can wait another hour or so for more.’

Eilish felt rude rejecting the offer. Pia seemed to take it as a personal rebuff and nodded with embarrassment, drawing back the food as if hers wasn’t good enough to share with the boy.

She had partnered with Pia on several missions over the last few years and worked closely with her during the planning for this one, but she’d never been able to break down the girl’s reserve. The only people she’d ever seen her relax with were the children and Jane. But then, few people could keep up their barriers around Jane.

It was almost like Pia felt unworthy to be there with them. As if she thought there’d been a bureaucratic error that had allowed her to participate, but that at any moment it would be corrected and she’d be out. Didn’t she realize how good at her job she was?

Collecting the four red apples from her valise, she made her way to the other cabin and sat down to catch up with the inhabitants for a few minutes.

‘Luke looks better,’ she said as she perched on the edge of the bottom bunk next to Jane.

‘Thanks to you,’ Cara replied from the bunk across from her as she took a bite of apple. ‘Oh, I needed this. I’m starving.’

‘Told you to eat more before we left,’ Jac said absently from above her, chomping into his own apple with relish.

‘The food was Max’s bright idea. He has them quite often.’

‘Luke says you have formed an attachment with your Target,’ Jac said, a note of concern in his voice.

‘Yes. I would never have thought it possible. I have never been romantically involved with anyone... ever. And then I met Max and I felt like I had been hit with a brick.’

Jane laughed and nearly choked on a piece of apple. Julio jumped down from his top bunk and was at her side in a second, pounding her on the back until she recovered. When she stopped coughing Julio wrapped his arm around Jane’s shoulder and drew her in close.

It was such a sweetly protective gesture that Eilish was left to wonder if Max would have been so quick to assist her in such a situation. Yes, came the answer immediately. She felt a warm glow of contentment at the thought.

‘That pretty much describes it,’ Jac said from his bunk. ‘I was the first to fall foul of irrational passion, and I thought it was because I hadn’t made the shift into my new clone properly. I went crazy in those early days.’

‘Hey, you make it sound like a bad thing!’ Cara quipped indignantly and kicked the springs above her with her foot. Jac laughed and leaned over the side of the bunk to blow a kiss to his mate.

‘Never, my love. But it was unsettling, to say the least, after three hundred years of emotional stability.’

‘I thought there was something wrong with me too. I remember you taking me aside, Jac, and telling me I was in love. I did not believe you,’ Julio said with a little laugh, as he gathered Jane closer.

‘I guess it has been easier for me, because I have been witness to the rest of you, but I never thought it would happen to me. I did not think it was possible because I was prepubescent at the LGP. I thought that the mental aspect of romantic attachment had never had the chance to develop. I was wrong.’ She sighed soulfully, and then blushed as the others smiled knowingly at her.

‘I was only ten at LGP and I still fell, so I do not think that is a factor,’ Julio added thoughtfully.

‘I’m glad for you, Eilish,’ Cara said softly. ‘Luke says that he’s a good man and a suitable Target.’

‘Yes. He came to it very quickly, once the two of us started on him. And of course, seeing the Portal in action was just the icing on the cake.’ She did a quick change of topic. ‘I am glad Luke went home. He was a mess.’

‘I had been worried about him on this mission for some time,’ Jac said, sprawling out so one leg hung over the side of the bunk and the other was bent up until it almost reached the riveted bulkhead above him. The bunk was not going to be a comfortable fit for his huge build. ‘But he was closed down. Even Faith could not reach him.’

‘I know. He had convinced himself that he would not be coming back from this mission I think.’

‘What did you say to convince him?’ Cara asked.

‘I do not know for sure. He was telling me how afraid he was that he would C and B, and yet how terrified he was that he might cause problems on this mission if he stayed in his Original. I just asked him what a brave man would do when faced with such fears... and he knew the answer immediately. I think he had always known the answer. He just needed to reach that point when he was ready to own it.’

‘Yeah, timing is everything with change. Until someone’s ready, words are wasted...’ Cara said.

‘Not wasted. I think they are remembered later when the time is right. And sometimes you have to hear a message several times before it gets through.’ Eilish played with the edge of her dark woollen skirt, wishing for the feel of the clothes she had worn with Max. Annoyed with herself, she forced the comparison away.

‘Yes, you’re right, of course. I saw it often enough with my kids back home and with the kids at our school. Anyway, Luke’s now in his first clone with no adverse effects. Faith is relieved and happy, and Luke’s able to concentrate on his mission again.’

‘He looks so young!’ Eilish chuckled. ‘Such a baby face. All those tension lines are gone. Although they’ll be back in a few years.’

‘Baby face! I will call him that the next time he tries the Arian Pinup Boy on me again,’ Jac declared with satisfaction.

‘I might have to use it on him myself if he keeps up the Irish thing. He is so annoying!’ But, she was smiling as she said it, and she realised with a start that she had become very fond of Luke in the time they’d been together in 1912.

‘How did the Integration happen?’ she asked, curious for details she knew she wouldn’t get from Luke.

'We were all there waiting to come through when he stepped back out of the Portal,' Cara explained. 'He said everything on the other side was fine, but that we'd have to postpone for a month because he was going to get Integrated. Then he just walked out, with Bart following along like a puppy behind him. By the time someone notified Faith and she got to the medical centre, he'd already gone through the process and was in his clone. She was furious that he hadn't waited for her, but that passed quickly once she realised what it meant for them.

'He probably didn't need the full month to get control of the clone, but we waited that time just so he felt confident.'

It made sense to her, knowing Luke as she now felt she did, that he wouldn't want Faith there with him when he went through the process just in case he Crashed and Burned. And he would want to do it quickly, like peeling off a plaster. Feel the fear and do it anyway. It was definitely Luke's mantra.

They felt the thrum of engines start up beneath them. The whole cabin began to vibrate slightly.

'Is it time?' Jane asked as Julio took out his pocket watch.

'Nearly. Shall we go up on deck and wave farewell with all the others? It is an historic moment, after all.'

Jane scrambled out from the bottom bunk and made a half-hearted attempt to straighten the pompadour on top of her head. It was leaning hazardously to one side and a long tendril had escaped it completely and now hung down her back like a thread of fine, copper wire.

'Let's go, guys. The Titanic's maiden voyage starts now. We don't want to miss it.' Jane grinned at them and opened the cabin door.

Collecting the other three on their way, they went up onto the Poop Deck. Unlike the other passengers, they had studied the ship's blue prints and knew exactly how to navigate the confusing labyrinth of passages. They simply followed what constituted the tail end of 'Scotland Road,' the main arterial passageway that ran the full length of the ship – almost a quarter of a mile in length – up the main staircase for third class until they reached C Deck. Here they stepped out onto the aft end of the open Well Deck. Then they took the ladder up onto the Poop Deck at the very stern of the ship.

The deck was thick with milling third class passengers, all trying to get a position on the rail from which to view the dock. In every hand there was a flower, and many passengers were throwing their blossoms overboard to the docks below, hoping those they left behind would catch them.

Rather than take up a space that belonged to the real passengers, the New Atlanteans stood back and looked around at the excited, tearful and joyful faces. There were no crying children now, and the level of noise was deafening, as people chattered elatedly to their companions on deck or yelled down to the dock below, trying to attract the attention of well-wishers.

Sea gulls arced, screeching, overhead as the ship's horn blasted and the motion of the engines and spinning propellers vibrated through the decks and the railings. Eilish knew that there was now at least one of the three monstrous screw propellers churning up the silty water beneath them.

She wondered fleetingly how Jane felt about those propellers. She had been torn to pieces by a much smaller version of them. Some time she needed to ask Jane about that, if she didn't find the memory too painful. To be sucked into one of those spinning blades must have been the worst kind of nightmare. At least when the Titanic sank there would be no knife edged propellers to catch victims unaware.

Eilish found her eyes turning up unconsciously to the higher decks. Here she could see the better class of passenger lining the rails, some in top hats and outrageous bonnets. Her eyes sought out a familiar figure on A Deck, and sure enough, there he was, searching the Well and Poop Decks with his keen eyes, rather than looking down at the crowds on the dock.

The minute Max caught sight of her, he grinned broadly and took off his bowler hat and waved it at her. More thrilled than she could have imagined at such an insignificant gesture, she grinned back and waved. Then, while they continued to stare at each other longingly, a man came up to Max's side and spoke to him. He looked away for a second while he answered and then turned back to indicate in her direction.

It was Carter! Of course, Carter was with Hugo Vance, one of their other first class Targets. She should have recognised his tall, rangy physique and bright copper hair, even from this distance. He was one of the adult Retrievers and had therefore been allowed to stay with his Target, as had Finn who would be boarding with the art nouveau master craftsman, Jean Pierre Arceneau, at Cherbourg.

'Look, its Carter,' she said to Cara, who was standing next to her. With a smile and a wave, the blonde acknowledged the other Jumper.

'So Carter is safely aboard. I wonder where Karl is.' Cara said, searching the second class promenade on B Deck.

Sure enough, just coming around the corner and moving aft toward them was the very youthful-looking Karl Ontario, with a pretty, young woman on his arm. She was smiling up at him as if the sun shone out of him, and Karl was bending down toward her as if trying to catch every word she said.

‘Looks like Karl is angling for a shipboard romance. How very unlike him!’ Eilish said with a laugh.

‘What?’ Jac was now at her other side and scanning the B Deck. ‘Not another one. He has to keep his eye on the ball. He’s the only one of us in second.’

At that moment, Karl looked across at them and waved exuberantly. If you didn't know he was a 200-year-old man, you would take him for the youth he appeared to be in that moment. He seemed so vital and alive. Not like the quiet, sober and professional man she had known for so long. It was more than the youthful body he now inhabited. It was something else.

‘She looks rather plump around the middle, don’t ya think,’ Luke commented, following their line of vision. ‘Maybe she’s pregnant. That’d explain it. Can’t see the Doc lettin’ a pretty face side-track him.’

‘Wow, your eyes are good! How could you see that from here?’ Eilish asked.

‘I’m really keen on this clone. Everything runs like new. My hawk-like eyesight’s just the start.’ Luke looked like a cat that had just drunk the cream.

‘Not bad for a lump of dead meat, huh?’

Luke grinned down at her. ‘Nope, not bad at all.’

Eilish turned back to look at Max again. He was intently watching her and when he saw her turn to him, he smiled again. Oh, how she loved that man! She couldn’t credit the overwhelming feelings that coursed through her in that moment. Her man! That calm, intelligent and infinitely patient man was hers now, and she planned to never let him go.

Chapter Twelve

Marco

The galley of the À la Carte restaurant was frenetic with activity as the whistles and horns for Titanic's imminent departure from Southampton were sounded. But it was an organised and systematic activity, somewhat like a mechanised factory floor. Most of the staff knew each other from the two Ritz restaurants in London and worked well together, easily slipping into the roles they'd held on shore like well-oiled cogs in a machine.

When Marco had joined them an hour earlier, there had been a few disgruntled comments, but no one had questioned his presence. They all knew Gardi's volatile temperament well enough not to show their displeasure overtly. The Manager of four Ritz restaurants, two in London and now one on each of the sister ships, Olympic and Titanic, was a talented businessman who had risen from nowhere to wealth and prominence by the time he was forty. He was a pragmatist first and foremost, and would discard inefficient or problematic staff dispassionately and without a qualm. And he never played favourites. This meant that no one felt secure enough in their position to voice their disapproval of his choice in Marco, in case they themselves were next to be let go at the end of the voyage.

The Head Waiter called his staff together in the dining room, allocating tables and assistants to each waiter on duty. There were thirteen waiters and eighteen assistant waiters employed to cover both the restaurant and the adjacent Café Parisien. With nine waiters and twelve assistants serving fifty tables and catering for up to 140 dinners in the restaurant at any one time, and four waiters and six assistants serving twenty-one tables catering for up to sixty-eight patrons in the Café from eight in the morning until eleven at night, their workload was immense. But so would be the payoff. Tips were expected to be substantial on this maiden voyage and would be divided among all the staff equally.

After allocating staff, the Head Waiter addressed the issue of working hours. He was a reed thin French man in his late thirties with a high-pitched nasal voice that Marco found irritating. He listened intently, nevertheless, as all instructions were essential to the smooth running of their domain.

'From our experience on the Olympic, we know that patronage will be spread evenly across opening hours, with light periods expected until ten o'clock in the morning, and then again between three and five o'clock in the afternoon. It will

finally drop away from ten o'clock in the evening. Those wait staff assigned to work from eight o'clock will work a split shift with a three-hour break from three. Those who start at ten o'clock will work through until ten.

'During off hours staff will remain either in their cabins or in the third class recreational areas. Under no circumstances are staff permitted to enter passenger's cabins. Any staff found doing so will be summarily dismissed and all earnings forfeited. Any questions?'

Marco looked at his assistant, Paulo, a seventeen year old from the second London restaurant. He looked very nervous and Marco had to wonder how much experience he'd had up to this point. Never mind, he was used to being stuck with the beginners. They said it was because he was a good teacher and very patient. He knew differently. It was because inexperienced staff meant more work. But the added work didn't faze him. On this voyage, nothing would faze him.

As he and Paulo started laying out their tables in the restaurant, his mind turned back to that morning for the hundredth time. From the moment he awoke before dawn and hurriedly departed from his accommodation, he'd felt an uncontrollable excitement. At first, he thought it was because of the journey to America, his dream-come-true, but when he met the party of immigrants on the way to the docks, he knew differently. As soon as he'd noticed the tall, slim blonde he walked beside, he'd felt an undeniable need to speak to her. And when she had responded, stiffly and shyly at first, his heart had nearly jumped out of his chest.

Petra. Her name was Petra and she was Swedish, although you would never know that by listening to her. Her English was as unaccented and perfect as many of the ladies who frequented his restaurant in London. What was it about her that attracted him? It wasn't her looks or her manner. Neither of these was exceptional, although he liked her tall, boyish figure and fair, lightly freckled complexion. And it certainly wasn't because she was showing him any interest, because she had barely looked at him the entire time they walked together. Nor was it because he was desperate for female companionship; he had more of that than he needed. Given half the chance, he would have sworn off women completely.

So, there was no reason for his interest in her. And yet as soon as they'd met, the overwhelming drive towards some unknown goal had disappeared and he was left feeling oddly content, as if he had reached his destination. Left to his own devices, he would happily have followed her onto the ship. However, the

only way he could board was via the crew's gangway, and the chances of seeing her again were next to none, especially with this rule about non-fraternisation. Maybe he would seek her out in New York. But he didn't even know her last name or where in the city she was heading.

From the sensation beneath him, Marco could tell that the liner was now on the move. He knew from experience that little tug boats would be guiding their way out of the harbour into deep water. Once they left shelter and headed out to sea, the engines would be engaged fully and they would be on their way across the Channel to France.

It was a beautiful day, and he wished he were outside on deck watching the waves break over the prow. Unfortunately, such pleasures were for the passengers alone. His job was to feed the very richest of those passengers and reap the rewards.

'Did you see all those flowers the passengers had?' Paulo said, in his Genovese accented Italian as they laid silverware in neat rows on white damask tablecloths.

'Sì,' he replied absently.

'I wonder how many friends caught their flowers when they threw them. It would make a nice keepsake.'

Marco clapped the lad on the shoulder with a grunt of amusement. 'You have the heart of a dreamer, garzone. I think America will be the perfect place for you.'

'Oh, I won't get to see America. We are in dock only a few days. But I have my sketch pad, so I will capture something of the place for my memories.'

'You draw?'

'Poorly, but I have never been long without a pencil in my hand.'

'But for now you have a fork in your hand, what artistry can you make of our tables with that, garzone?'

'A picture perfect, signor.'

'Excellent. Let me see your work then.'

By the time the first of their patrons began to drift in for luncheon, their tables were perfect. With swift professionalism, Marco seated those shown to his tables and began to meet their needs. He felt the rush of expectancy that always came at the beginning of a shift. Who knew what patrons would be seated at his tables? Who knew what they would talk about while he stood by attentively waiting on their every spoken and unspoken need? And who knew how much financial gratitude would be shown him for his exceptional service?

What would Petra be eating down on F Deck right now? Nothing like what they would be serving. Even so, he could see her sitting there quietly, grateful for anything she was given, smiling her shy, sweet smile at anyone who gave her the time of day. What if one of those single men down in steerage took a fancy to her? He felt jealousy rear its head and the shock of it had him frozen to the spot for an instant. Jealous? He was never jealous.

But, if Petra should share one of her rare, sweet smiles with one of those uncouth louts below decks, he would beat the recipient bloody. Those smiles were his, even though she didn't know it yet.

Max

As Max walked slowly back to his stateroom on B Deck, his mind was on Eilish. She had looked so different standing down there on the Poop Deck with the other third class Passengers, her clothes drab and conventional, her wild, black hair uncovered. Even so, her smile had been the same as she waved at him from across the expanse of the Well Deck, and he knew her blue eyes would be dancing with delight. How was he going to make it through the next few days without her? Certainly, meeting Carter Dundee and Hugo Vance had taken his mind off his loss for a few minutes.

When the tall red-haired Scot had approached him in the reception area on B Deck shortly after his arrival, he had not known what to expect. Eilish had mentioned that there were others of her kind on board shepherding their Targets, but he hadn't expected to meet any of them; however, Carter had approached him and shook his hand firmly.

'I am a friend of Eilish and Luke,' he had said, and the expression in his eyes told him that he was more colleague than friend and that this meeting was not social.

Carter had introduced Hugo Vance, a structural engineer who was responsible for many of the railway bridges that were springing up across the country. He wondered how Vance felt about leaving his life behind. However, as the man was in his late sixties, he imagined it would be less of a loss than a gain to leave this life behind and start a new one in that future world.

Max had taken his leave of them shortly after the ship had sailed and agreed to meet them for dinner in the À la Carte restaurant that night. They'd been surprised to hear that he would be taking all his meals in that restaurant rather

than the first class Dining Saloon. But, as he had told Eilish when he had booked his ticket, he had no desire to sit through countless numbers of courses, listening to boring snobs wax lyrical about the indulgences granted to their class on board the Titanic. Especially when he knew many of those people would be dead in a few days.

No, he would take his comparatively frugal meals in the restaurant on his own, as often as possible, and then retire to his stateroom to read. A daily walk around the deck and possibly a game of squash might be necessary to overcome his restlessness, but the less he mingled with the other doomed passengers, the better he would feel.

Spending time in his stateroom was not going to be a hardship. It was luxurious, as was to be expected for the price, and the sea view from the window was spectacular. He boasted a large bed sitting room in the Empire style, all white and gilt panelling and furnishings in light, flowing lines, with striking crimson, silk damask wallpaper and matching crimson Axminster carpet. There were two beds, one a lavishly draped four-poster and the other a single beneath the window. The room also contained a large wardrobe, two sinks with an ornate mirror above, a chaise-longue and a small table and two chairs.

Because he had hopes of Eilish joining him, he had also paid for the use of the attached bathroom and water closet. It would be a luxury not to have to book his bath time with a steward down the corridor, but if he had been travelling alone, he would have done just that. However, his imagination had already conjured an image of Eilish reclining in bubbles in that large claw-tooth bathtub attached to his room, her damp curls rioting around her pink face. That image alone was worth the money he'd spent.

And after all, he could not take his money with him. Even so, it was hard to be indulgent after a lifetime of frugal living. He knew that New Atlantis had no use for money and that he would find it luxurious in comparison with what he had known, yet he knew it was still comparatively economical. The world had wasted its resources for hundreds of years, so Eilish had informed him, and so they had been forced to find more sustainable and environmental ways to survive in the post-apocalyptic world after the Second Dark Age. He thought their focus would suit him well.

As he opened his stateroom door, he noticed that his steward, a slim, upright gent with a neat moustache called Hughes, was placing a large vase of flowers on the table in the centre of the room. They were such a splendid bouquet, he

could not help stopping at them and leaning down to breathe in the scent of the blooms. Eilish would love this, he thought with a pang.

‘They are lovely, aren’t they, sir? Our florist at Southampton is one of the very best. They supplied all the passengers with a flower each to throw to those on the dock as we left the quay.’ His accent was polished and reminded him of butlers he’d come across in his time. Even so, the man was not stiff and overly formal and his smile was genuine.

‘Yes, quite lovely. My lady would love them.’

‘Your wife could not join you on this trip?’

Max had almost forgotten he had a wife. His only lady now, in his own mind, was Eilish.

‘Umm, that brings up a ticklish point, Hughes. How much can I rely on your discretion on this journey?’ He sat down on one of the cushion-backed chairs and crossed his legs.

‘Completely, sir, of course. In what manner do you require this discretion?’ Hughes straightened the other chair and picked up the stray leaves that had fallen from the vase.

‘My lady, who is not my wife, is travelling third class with her family. I will need to get messages to her on occasion and there may be times when she will come to me here. She may even join me at dinner in the restaurant. I know there are strict rules pertaining to the class divisions on board, but I do not believe anyone will be the wiser if she were to join me here on occasion.’

If Hughes was shocked by his suggestion, he showed no sign of it. For a moment, he remained thoughtful. ‘Getting a message to her would not be difficult. I can deliver that myself. However, getting her into first class might be trickier, especially if her appearance...’

‘Her appearance will be perfectly respectable, although once she has access to her clothes here, she will be resplendent.’

‘Yes, sir. Do you know what deck she is on?’

‘E Deck. K 101.’

‘That should make things easier. There are first class staterooms on E Deck, and if I get the young lady through from Scotland Road to the first class lift, it will only be a matter of steps to get her from there to your door. A carefully placed gratuity for the lift operator should ensure his discretion.’

‘Perfect, Hughes. And you can be assured your gratuity will be substantial with this added service you do me.’

‘That is not necessary, sir. This is part of my job.’

Max studied the man's serious face. He really meant it. He would do what he could to assist without requiring extra payment for it. What a rare find! Fleetingly, he wondered if he would be one of those few stewards who survived the coming days. He would ask Eilish when he saw her.

More content now that he had a way to Eilish, he pulled out a book from his carry-on luggage and started to read.

'You are not dining, sir? The first trumpet has sounded.'

'As I am not in the army, I do not plan to heed the call of the horn. I will dine when I feel the need at the restaurant or cafe on this deck.'

'Very good, sir. Does that mean you will not be dressing for dinner? I did notice when I unpacked your trunk that there was evening attire there.'

'When my lady joins me, then I will dress formally. Otherwise, I will relax and avoid the strictures of my class.'

'Very good, sir. Is there anything else I can do for you now?'

'No thank you, Hughes. You have taken a great weight off my shoulders already. I will call you if I need you.'

'Yes, sir.'

With that, his steward left the room and Max could relax fully for the first time since Eilish left him that morning. He wondered idly how her accommodation compared to his own. He would expect to fit at least two cabins into the space he had before him, and she certainly wouldn't have the view he now enjoyed. However, he would give up all his luxuries if he could join her in her cramped and uncomfortable quarters. He even suggested that early on. But she had been emphatic that they could not deviate from history. Records showed that Maxwell Ingham had been located in Stateroom B 64 on this fateful journey, so that was where he must stay.

Restless at the way his mind was turning, he threw his book down and went to the window to peer out at the grey sea. They would be reaching the French Coast by evening and would be making the return journey to Ireland later tonight. After that, by tomorrow afternoon, they would be leaving the British Isles behind them forever. He couldn't stop the involuntary shiver that ran down his spine.

Chapter Thirteen

Karl

Karl's hands were shaking as he clung to the smooth wooden railing on Boat Deck staring down at the passing jetties and docks that lined Southampton Channel. He noticed a giant liner, the New York, was behaving strangely as they passed her, rocking like a plastic boat in a bathtub and pulling away from its moorings. For a few minutes, he was sure the two mammoth crafts would collide, but then the tugs pulled the New York back into place and the Titanic continued on its journey out to sea unscathed.

However, it was not the near miss with the other liner that had his hands shaking. It was the pretty young woman he had just spent the last couple of hours with.

At first, he hadn't noticed his reaction. Standing on the dock looking up at the Titanic had been exciting enough. When he'd spotted the pregnant woman being pushed out of the way by an inconsiderate lout, he had simply reacted, reaching out to support her because he was near enough to do so. There had been an elevation of his pulse rate when her big, blue eyes turned up to him in gratitude, but that was understandable, given the situation. However, from that moment on he couldn't tear himself away from her. It was like he had found something precious, the answer to a complex problem, and he needed to evaluate it, consider it and sit with it until he was sure of its ramifications.

And he told himself, initially at least, that it was just good fortune that he'd found a possible Target, even before they reached the liner. But he would be lying to himself if he continued to hold to that argument. Lizzie's pregnancy had nothing to do with his interest in her. And the longer he was with her, the stronger the physical pull became. Until now, standing on the deck having only left her minutes ago, he felt bereft and his hands were shaking like he had the DTs.

He didn't know what was wrong with him. There was no discernible cause for this physiological phenomenon. It wasn't nerves. If it were, he would have experienced it when he first met her. It wasn't a malady he had contracted because his immune system, like all citizens of New Atlantis, was in peak condition. It might be a side effect of the new clone he had taken on six months before, but that was unlikely. Most of the 'running in' issues had been overcome by this time.

He remembered talking to Jac when he first came back with Cara seven years ago. Jac had been concerned by similar symptoms, including a sex drive that was quite uncharacteristic. Now Karl was feeling the same kind of out-of-control arousal. This was something that wasn't just uncommon in his past clones, but had been unknown to him in his Original. He could count the number of times he'd been sexually aroused by a woman in his Original, and it had never happened in a clone.

Certainly, he'd been attracted to Faith Lincolnshire and felt close to her after all the years they'd worked together. It had been unsettling when she had fallen in love with the loud, rough soldier from 1942, but it hadn't affected his heart. He hadn't been "heart-broken," as they called it, when he lost the object of his affection.

No, he'd just regretted losing Faith from his life. They'd made a good team and he'd worked well with her. She'd always been able to determine his needs, even before he did himself. It had been difficult finding an assistant to replace her.

But this feeling he had for the terribly young and innocent Lizzie Jones was something quite different. She didn't make him feel comfortable. Her effect was closer to discomfort, although it was too pleasurable to be true discomfort. It was more that she unsettled him and somehow made him feel emotions he'd long thought denied to him. Just as this mission had inspired deeper, more intense emotions from him, so did she. And they'd only just met. What would it be like after he grew to know her better?

He was glad she was pregnant. He'd memorised the names of every woman who had been rescued from second class and Lizzie had not been one of them. In fact, there'd been no mention of her in any of the eyewitness accounts of those last hours before the ship finally sank. That meant that she was a candidate for selection. Her pregnancy made her even more suitable. And though he wasn't trained to identify the qualities of prospective Targets as Retrievers were, he did know from personal experience what it took to be able to adjust to their world. It felt like Lizzie might well have those qualities.

He was glad. The idea that she would be left to her fate when the Titanic sank in four days' time was unthinkable. However, he'd have to convince her to come with him of course, and that might not be easy. He wasn't good at explaining this kind of thing. Let him loose on accelerated cellular regeneration and growth or DNA replication, and he could explain their intricacies until the cows came home or until the students grew bored. But not this. This required emotional

sensitivity, and he'd never had the call for it before. In fact, according to his father, such sensitivities were a scientist's greatest enemy.

There was a backup plan, of course, for if he discovered women who were possible Targets among the second class passengers. He could get a message to Cara and bring her in to talk to the women. It would be the best way. Then he could be assured Lizzie would agree. Cara had a way about her. She had, right from the start. A rare find, her presence had changed their world for the better in so many ways.

He remembered how terrified she'd been about going through her first transition. Calming her had been part of his job and he did that well. People told him he was a sturdy rock they could cling to. It pleased him to be seen that way. Now, his tranquillity had evaporated and he was adrift in an emotional storm he wondered if he'd survive. And at the very centre of his maelstrom was a fragile, young flower he had no idea how to care for.

When he looked into Lizzie's eyes, he saw the shadows of her pain and terror, and yet on the surface she seemed so confident and self-assured. Her attitude to her pregnancy was very atypical of the age. He'd wanted to kick himself when he'd first made mention of it, thinking that she would be offended by a strange man speaking of such a delicate matter. However, she'd been remarkably blasé about it, in the way her grandchildren would be by the end of the century.

But of course, if she were Targeted, then there would be a child, but there would be no child of her child. Her offspring would be infertile from the moment it crossed the Time-Space Continuum.

It was an interesting phenomenon that a fertilised embryo could successfully cross over into their world unscathed and develop to full term, but the rest of the mother's unfertilised eggs would die. He was glad that Lizzie would have at least this one opportunity to bear a child. It was a gift every woman in his world would have envied.

The ship had left the harbour now and was well out to sea. The engines had picked up and the wind was buffeting him hard on the unprotected Boat Deck. His bowler hat, which he still found annoying to wear, was in his cabin. And he wore none of the pomade in his hair that men of this era had such a fondness for. His hair was cut short, but not buzz cut as he was used to, and he had been forced to comb his forelock to the side. However, its slight curl made it difficult to train and it now fell in a familiar way across his forehead. He should have trimmed it; he knew, but it was hard to change habits of hundreds of years. Now that forelock blew about in the wild wind, stinging his eyes.

He turned to go inside. Just as he was about to do so, he saw a couple walking toward him. The woman was very pregnant, possibly close to full-term, but rather than holding her arm in a caring way, the man with her seemed to be dragging her along striding out angrily. If he kept that up, Karl could see that the woman would trip and fall.

With no conscious thought of action, he stepped into the path of the couple and reached out to steady the woman. She was breathing fast and there were tears in her eyes.

‘What is the meaning of this?’ the man demanded. He was in his mid-twenties with a rather old-fashioned handlebar moustache. His chin receded badly and his eyes bulged like those of a goldfish. His mousey brown hair was glued back with pomade that Karl could smell from where he stood on the windblown deck.

The woman, on the other hand, was quite pretty, even with the puffiness her pregnancy had brought to her face. Her hair was light brown and fashioned in the pompadour style that so many women of the era favoured. She was struggling to keep her broad-brimmed hat on her head.

‘Your wife was about to fall, sir. Had you not noticed?’

‘Don’t be absurd, of course she wasn’t. Gertie has become lazy of late and after our sedentary morning, she needed a stiff jaunt around the deck for her health’s sake.’

‘Not at this late stage in her confinement, sir. Unless you want to bring on her child early.’

‘What business is it of yours you impudent pup. Get out of our way. We still have a lap to complete.’

‘I am a physician, sir, and as such, your wife’s condition is my business. Let me take her down to luncheon and you can join her once you have taken your constitutional.’

‘Stuff and nonsense,’ the man muttered but released his wife. ‘You medical men think you have all the answers. My mother rode to hounds until she was ready to drop every one of her six children and she never lost one.’

‘That may well be as your mother might have been one of the rare breed with a strong constitution, but your wife appears to not be so well favoured. She is exhausted, and I would guess feeling every ache and pain right now, particularly in her feet.’

‘Well, do what you must. Take her inside. I should have paid heed to my mother. She told me Gertie would be a poor breeder.’

With that, he strode off, leaving Karl to hold up the young woman left behind.

‘I am sorry for his manner, sir, and appreciate your concern. He is just over-anxious about this voyage. He is not usually so harsh.’

‘I understand perfectly, my dear lady. Let me accompany you down to the dining salon on D Deck. I will introduce you to a young friend of mine who is, like yourself, in a delicate condition. She could do with someone to share her experiences with.’

He led her back along the deck until they reached their entrance to the lower levels, then he called up the lift to take them down to D Deck. He had already reserved a table for him and Lizzie without her knowledge, and he would now attempt to include Gertie and her husband on their same table.

Sure enough, just as the gong was sounded for luncheon, he was able to speak to the maître d’ and arrange for Gertie to join them.

At that moment, Lizzie came down the short corridor that led to her stateroom, and seeing him, smiled brightly. She hurried to his side.

‘Oh Karl, I was hoping I didn’t miss you for luncheon. It will be good to see a friendly face across from me. My roommate is proving to be anything but friendly.’

‘I am sorry to hear that. I have taken the opportunity to reserve a table for us together and have just included Mrs...?’

‘Howard,’ the woman provided.

‘Mrs Howard and her husband. I thought you two might have a deal in common.’

Lizzie smiled gently at the frazzled woman at his side. ‘Certainly, you are welcome to join us. You look quite done in. I am not looking forward to the later stages of my confinement as it seems exceedingly uncomfortable.’

‘It is. I cannot wait for this little one to be born. The doctors say I have another two weeks to go. I do hope not.’

‘Why are you travelling so late in your term?’ Lizzie asked, as she came around to the other woman’s side and took her arm, while Karl guided Gertie toward the open Dining Saloon doors.

‘My husband was offered a position which he needed to take up immediately. I would have preferred to stay at home with my family until after the birth, but Oliver insisted that we not be separated. He is a dear that way.’

“Dear” was not how Karl would describe the man, but it was not his place to comment. Instead, he held out the chair for Gertie and then did the same for Lizzie. Finally, he seated himself across from Lizzie, so he could watch her without drawing attention to his actions.

He took in their long table covered with white damask cloth and an array of silverware. It was not as heavily laid out as he expected the first class tables would be, but that suited him perfectly. Although he loved his food and had always had a big appetite, the Edwardian upper-class delight in gorging themselves with course after course of delicacies was an anathema to his sense of fairness. While children starved in the streets, the rich stuffed themselves to bursting. The imbalance was obscene.

He took up the menu, which had a picture of the Titanic, the meal and date printed on the top. There was more than enough on offer to meet his needs he saw. He would start with the chicken and vegetable consommé, following it with roast beef and Yorkshire pudding. Then he would try to find room for the fruit tart and coffee. While he waited for others to be seated at their long table and the waiter to come to take their orders, he buttered his bread roll and nibbled at it.

It had been a long morning and he was hungry. He, Carter and Hugo had left London that morning on the special White Star Line train. He had travelled first class with them and enjoyed a late breakfast on board. However, that was four hours ago now, and so much had happened since then that he felt decidedly empty. He poured himself a glass of iced water from the jug in the centre of the table, after offering the jug to Lizzie and Gertie.

‘Hungry?’ Lizzie commented, as she watched him tear into his roll. He felt himself blush.

‘Rather. It has been a long morning. I had something on the train down from London, but that was hours ago.’

‘You are still growing, from the look of you,’ Gertie commented with more animation than she had displayed so far. ‘My mamma used to say that boys had to grow into their feet. And from the look of yours, Mr...’

‘I do beg your pardon. I am Karl Langman. Please call me Karl.’

‘I had better not. My husband is a stickler for observing the rules of etiquette. But thank you, Mr Langman. As I was saying, from the size of your feet, Mr Langman, you still have some growing to do.’

‘Gertie, control yourself,’ muttered her husband as he seated himself next to her at the table.

‘It is perfectly all right. It is a fair observation. I do have big feet, but I can assure you I will be growing no taller. This is my limit, just over six feet.’

‘Gertie does not think before she speaks, do you Gertie? It is a habit we are endeavouring to correct.’ Oliver Howard continued on in the same vein, indifferent to the embarrassment of his wife or those he shared the table with.

There were more people now joining them, and for a while, the introductions flowed fast and furious as the waiter took their orders. Then, while everyone settled in, Karl took the opportunity to ask Lizzie about her roommate.

‘She was not willing to take the upper bunk and when our stewardess offered to set up the divan for me, she complained there would be nowhere for her to sit. It does not bode well.’

‘Ah well, you have only a few nights to share your sleep with her.’

‘More than a week you mean. I may have to ask for another berth if things do not improve.’

Karl realised his mistake as soon as he’d said it. He was working on four nights on board; everyone else was expecting at least seven. He would have to watch himself. It was little mistakes like that which could catch them out.

‘Sounds a poor sort,’ observed Oliver, eavesdropping on their conversation. ‘We haven’t been introduced, my dear lady. Are you the doctor’s wife? No wonder he was so concerned about my Gertie’s condition with you being in the family way, as well.’

Lizzie blushed and took up her bread roll to butter. ‘No, sir, Mr Langman and I have only recently met. I am Mrs Anthony Jones, a widow travelling to family in New York.’

‘Well, Mrs Jones, my Gertie and I will take you under our wing won’t we my dear? Not proper to spend an inordinate amount of time with a bachelor. People might talk.’

Lizzie looked up from her bread roll and glared at his smarmy face. ‘Thank you for the offer. I will enjoy spending time with your wife on this journey, as I will enjoy my developing friendship with Mr Langman. I am a widow. It is totally acceptable for me to associate with whomever I choose.’

Karl was so proud of her he could have cheered. It was as polite a put-down as he could have hoped for, and the man sniffed his offence and turned away. The secret smile she sent Karl’s way further buoyed his spirits. She may have been through her share of hardship, but his Lizzie was not cowed by it by any means. His respect for her grew apace with his affection.

The soup arrived quickly and they dropped into a comfortable silence, as they enjoyed the well-prepared consommé. If it was any indication of the standard of the food they could expect, then they were in for a treat.

By the time they reached the fruit tart and coffee, Karl was comfortably full. He nibbled at his tart and watched Lizzie eat hers with obvious delight. He

realised that she had probably gone a lot longer since her last meal than he and pregnancy increased the appetite.

After the meal was over, Karl offered Lizzie a walk around the promenade. Before she could accept, Oliver Howard interrupted.

‘It was only a little under an hour ago you were telling me my wife should not be taking exercise, and now you are offering it to Mrs Jones? What kind of physician are you?’

Keeping his calm, Karl came around to help Lizzie to her feet. ‘I am the kind who will allow my companion to set the pace and be willing to stop as soon as she tires. Something you might consider doing, Howard.’

He ushered Lizzie from the room without a backward glance.

‘He is a prig. I feel so sorry for that poor woman being married to him,’ Lizzie said as they took the lift up to the Boat Deck.

‘With any luck she might be free of him shortly,’ Karl said before he realised his mistake.

‘Shortly? What have you in mind?’ Lizzie asked curiously, as he opened the companionway door to the outer deck. The fresh sea air and sunshine greeted them like an old friend.

‘Nothing, I mean nothing. Ignore me. I forget we have known each other for such a short time.’

‘So you would explain if you knew me better. How very curious, Mr Langman.’ Her tone and the use of his surname told him she was playing. He decided to play along.

‘If I knew you better, Mrs Jones, there would be many things I would tell you that are more than curious.’

‘So why not forget that we have only just met and go with your feeling of familiarity. I am like a cat where my curiosity is concerned.’

‘But curiosity killed the cat.’

Lizzie laughed and turned to walk away, her hair blowing loose as a gust of wind caught the knot on the top of her head and tugged it free. She gasped and reached for the unsecured tendril.

Karl doubted he had ever seen anything as beautiful as those golden brown locks billowed about her flushed and smiling face, as her surprised laughter tinkled like the sweetest melody.

Before he thought better of it, he pulled her gently into a less breezy spot against the side of the ship and dropped a kiss on her cheek. Her look of surprise was equal only to his own.

What she did then was even more surprising. While still drawn close against him, his body shielding her from the wind, Lizzie stood on tiptoe and kissed his cheek in return. Before he knew what he was doing, he was kissing her back, covering her warm, wet mouth with his own. Unsure what he was doing but letting his instincts lead the way, he immersed himself in her. The taste, texture and scent of her overwhelmed him, arousing him instantly.

He was not a virgin. Just. There had been that time at a lab Christmas party back before the LGP when a drunken co-worker had dragged him into a storeroom and seduced him. He had very little memory of the act, not then, nor 200 odd years later, but he was sure that this kiss with Lizzie was nothing like that frenzied, forgettable joining.

When she whimpered and opened her lips, inviting more, he felt his arousal escalate. He opened his own lips and tasted her velvet soft inner mouth with his tongue, finding himself driven crazy by the warmth and heady scent of her. Then, as the excitement became nearly more than he could bear and he wondered desperately what he could do next to take the feeling further and higher, she drew back from him abruptly, almost fearfully, and dropped her head.

'I... I am sorry,' he found himself stammering, taking a step away from her, so she had room to leave if she wanted to.

'Do... don't be. I just became frightened. It was not you...'

'I did not mean to frighten you.'

'I know. It is not you. I... I had a bad experience with a man and for a moment, I was back there. I am sorry. You are nothing like him. Your kiss was nothing like his.'

He reached out, drew her in close and began to walk with her along the deck. He wanted to protect her from her past and from everything that frightened her. Where this need came from he had no idea, but if he could have had armour and a charger, he would have slain her dragon in an instant.

Foolish idiot, he thought, but his hold on her didn't lessen.

'I am not like him. You need never be frightened of me,' Karl told her as they walked, her small body stowed so neatly under his arm.

'I know that, Karl. I do know that. I wish I could tell you about it, but you would think poorly of me, and I could not stand that right now.'

'I could never think poorly of you. However, when you feel you can trust me, I am here to listen.'

He felt her nod her head against his shoulder. He squeezed her reassuringly.

The afternoon sun shone down on them as they walked on.

Chapter Fourteen

Pia

The afternoon was spent familiarising themselves with their surroundings and their fellow passengers. It was hard not to feel the excitement in the air. After a surprisingly good and filling lunch, those in steerage were more optimistic about the coming journey. They had all heard horror stories of the North Atlantic crossing from other migrants, but the hardships suffered by those others seemed to be irrelevant to them here on the mighty Titanic.

As Pia stood up on the Poop Deck with Bart, feeling the sun on her face and the wind in her hair, she felt light. They would succeed in their mission. They would save many of the people around her now, and their world would be better for it.

Bart caught her eye as a young family of Swedes passed them by, chattering away, their eyes as big as plates. Pia nodded at the unspoken question and moved in to follow them. Bart did the same.

‘It is big isn’t it?’ Bart said in Swedish to the boy about his own size. He craned his head back to look at the smoke stacks that were billowing grey stream into the blue sky above them.

The lad nodded enthusiastically. ‘My dah says it’s the biggest ship in the world. Big as the tallest building, bigger than the pyramids in Egypt.’

‘Pyramids? What’re they?’ Bart asked. Pia marvelled at his deft approach. She could see exactly what he was doing, giving the boy a position of power because of his knowledge.

It worked. The boy began to chatter on to Bart as if he were an old friend. For a moment, Pia simply watched him work. He had their names and where they were heading before a minute had passed.

‘Your brother?’ asked the mother, eyeing the new member of her brood with amusement.

‘Oh... no, my cousin. I am travelling with my cousins to family in New York,’ she answered in Swedish.

‘We have family there too. It is hard to leave home, though, knowing we will never see Stockholm again.’ The woman sounded wistful, and she stroked the white-gold hair of the little girl clinging to her long skirts. ‘It is hard too, because I do not speak English and Americans are very impatient with foreigners, so I hear.’

‘Yes, they are. I am lucky. I speak English, Finnish and a little German. I have a gift. My only one, unfortunately’

The woman looked at Pia closely. ‘Not your only one. You have a sweetness of nature that is a gift. And you are pretty.’

Pia laughed shyly and looked at the deck under her feet. ‘No, I’m not. I look like a boy. My mother used to say I should have been a boy.’

‘You are no boy. Mothers can be so unthinking sometimes. We say things in passing, never realising our children hear and take them as gospel. Your mother probably thought you were lovely but never thought to say it.’

Pia turned to look at the heavily-lined face of the woman beside her. She was not much more than thirty, but privation and the harsh climate in the north had ravaged her pale skin badly. Her dark blonde hair, a similar shade to her own, was streaked with premature silver.

‘You are very kind and wise. I should introduce myself, as Micky seems to have already done the honours with your children. I am Petra Yohansen. I am from a little village in the north you would never have heard of.’

‘You would be right. I know little about anywhere but Stockholm. My family has lived there for generations. I am Danira Ahlberg and this is my husband, Harald. Harald, this is Petra Yohansen from home. She and her cousins are going to America too. She speaks English. Maybe she can help us learn a little.’

Harald was a tall, straight-backed man with a fierce expression. His sandy blonde hair and beard were in need of a trim and he seemed to carry a chip on his broad shoulders.

‘I will learn English if and when I have to, woman. Don’t trouble me with it now.’ He turned away and walked off to join the other men standing smoking nearby. From their colouring and the conversation, it was clear they were also Swedish.

‘Harald is not happy to be going to America, but he has not been able to find work for some time and so he decided we would go. I have not helped. I am very sad to be leaving home and do not like change. I do not understand the way the world is moving. Sometimes, I just want to hide away in a corner with a blanket over my head and forget everything.’

Danira’s face became a picture of distress, as she realised how much she had shared with her unknown companion.

Pia reached out and took her arm in comfort. ‘We all feel like that at times. I’m sure you will be fine in the new world.’

Tears began to trickle down the older woman's face and she brushed at them absently. 'I don't think so. I have been struggling for a long time. I don't think I have the energy to go on. If not for my little ones, I would have given up long ago. I am sorry; I should not be troubling you with this, stranger that you are.'

'Take heart Danira, life will get better; I know it.'

When the little girl at her skirts began to cry, obviously picking up her mother's distress, Pia crouched down and began to talk to her, getting her to watch the smoke streams and the seagulls that were dive-bombing overhead. It felt easier to talk with the child than to her mother, and the tiny tot quickly stopped crying and gave Pia a watery smile.

Bart had led the older children away down the deck and the child, who could be no more than two, looked after them enviously.

'Would you like to go with the others?' she asked, watching the huge blue eyes following her siblings. Even so, the girl was afraid to leave her mother in this strange place, and so she clung to what she knew.

'May I take her to see what the older ones are doing? We won't go off the deck,' Pia promised the mother, who had become lost in her grief.

Distracted, Danira nodded, and after offering the small girl her hand, Pia led her off in the direction Bart had gone. She felt happy with the child's trusting, little hand in her own. It felt right. All the while, she talked with the girl, who was named Tiggy, and laughed with her until it felt like they had been friends forever.

A bit like how it had felt with Marco earlier in the day. She pushed the thought away. Marco, of the beautiful smile, was gone from her life now, just as quickly as he had come. It was no good mooning over someone like him.

But her heart ached when she thought of his fate. He seemed so full of life, so ready for the new world to come. What a pity he wasn't ten or fifteen years younger. They would have taken him to their world, a place that would have filled him with wonder more exciting than the Wild West could ever be.

She looked around for Bart and the children and saw Cara talking to another group of fair-haired people sitting on the benches.

Then she saw Jane, drawing hopscotch squares on the deck with a piece of chalk, a circle of children around her. How like Jane to have so quickly attracted attention. She noticed it was not just the children who were looking at Jane. Many of the men were eyeing her appreciatively, especially when she laughed.

Casting around for the last woman in their group, she found Eilish sitting on a bench with a little boy about the same age as Tiggy on her lap. She was talking

with great animation to the mother who had a slightly older child on her own lap. Another child, a boy about five, was clinging to Eilish's skirts and looking up at her as if she were a wonder.

She found Bart and the other four Ahlberg children playing with another group near the stern of the ship. They were squabbling happily over something, and Bart was laying down the law. He had already established his position, and the children deferred to him.

Pia wandered over with Tiggy and sat down on the edge of the group. They seemed to be playing a game that involved jumping over legs laid flat on the deck. She couldn't understand the rules, but the children did, and when the one who was doing the stepping put his foot wrong, they all jeered and he had to sit down and be replaced by another.

Thumb in mouth, Tiggy watched the game with rapt attention. Pia could see this was unsuitable for a child her age to play. In fact, a four-year-old was having trouble because his legs were too short to provide proper hurdles. However, Tiggy didn't seem to want to join in; she was happy just to stand on the side and watch.

Every so often, one of Tiggy's siblings would smile over at her and wave and she would wave back. Content to mind the children as they played happily, Pia let her thoughts turn to the memorised list of children they were Targeting. The Ahlberg family were part of that list, as was the other group of children playing with the Ahlbergs. Six-year Anna Paulinus, her legs laid out in a line with her brother's, had introduced herself when she noticed Pia there. They were from Finland, she told Pia across the head of her brother.

Pia knew that these three children of the Paulinus family were on their list too, but a fourth child, a babe, was not. Records had him found dead in his mother's arms after the Titanic sunk. They, therefore, had no alternative but to leave mother and child to their fate.

Looking around she noticed Jac talking to a young couple near the railing. They were dark haired and fair skinned, so she wasn't sure of their nationality. And from the distance, she couldn't hear what language they were speaking. The woman was obviously pregnant and her young husband seemed lovingly attentive, his face alive with excitement. Could they be possible Targets? The woman was a definite possibility and if her mate were suitable, he would be Targeted too. They were not about to split up loving couples unless absolutely necessary.

That thought turned her mind back to the Ahlbergs. Although Danira seemed a wise and loving mother, her self-proclaimed fear of change did not bode well for a new life. If Pia read the signs correctly, she would not be considered a suitable candidate for the Gaian Confederacy. Nor would her husband be considered acceptable with his blatant unwillingness to consider learning English when he was moving to an English-speaking country. That was a fair indication that the man would not have the kind of mindset necessary to adjust to life in New Atlantis.

But how did you take children from their parents? It was cruel and arrogant of them to try. Yet it was not her decision. She had agreed to take part in this mission, knowing what they would be forced to do. Now that she had met some of the parents, she couldn't turn around and fight against their government's decisions.

The rest of the afternoon passed in a busy blur. She lost count of the children she met and talked to. At one point, she even joined the hopscotch game Jane had started. It was fun to play again like a child after hundreds of years as an adult.

When the gong called them down to F Deck for their tea, Pia tagged along with the Ahlbergs. The dining room was mid-ship and accessible only from Scotland Road on E Deck. So they had to go down the stairs from Well Deck to E, along the eight-foot-wide main artery, and then down more stairs to mid-ship F Deck.

The dining saloon was split in two by a bulkhead. On the aft side, the single men took their meals, and on the forward side, the women and families ate. Pia noticed how restless Harald was sitting with his family. It was clear he would prefer to have been sitting with the other single men.

Pia helped the younger children make sandwiches of their cold meat and pickles that were set out at the end of the tables. Then, she took a moment to study the day's menu as she nibbled at her own thick sandwich. They could also have tapioca for pudding, she noticed. And later, for supper at eight o'clock, there was something called a cabin biscuit with gruel and cheese. Her only experience with gruel was from *Oliver Twist* where he asked for more. It was a form of porridge, she thought. Why would they be having porridge for supper?

It was unlikely that she would be finding out this evening, as she was sure she would not want any more food tonight. However, the children might, as they were always 'bottomless pits.'

That term reminded her once again of Marco. He had been so funny when he tried to use the colloquialism. She could imagine him eating everything left over in the restaurant tonight. The food up there would be a lot different to what they were eating down here, but she didn't expect it would taste all that much better. For her, the fresh bread with butter and the cold beef left over from dinner she expected was tasty enough. Although it did feel strange eating real meat. Back home, no one ate meat anymore, but the vegetarian alternatives didn't taste all that different to what she ate now.

By the time she had her coffee and tapioca pudding, she was comfortably full and so were the children. The younger ones were becoming grumpy with tiredness and mothers around the room were folding little bodies against their breasts and crooning to them softly.

She looked across at Eilish, who was sitting beside the woman she had been with on the deck. She held a sleeping child in her arms while the mother fed another toddler his pudding. She seemed to be a relaxed and happy part of that group.

Once dinner was over, Pia walked back to the Ahlberg cabin on F Deck to help Danira put the younger children to bed. It was just after seven o'clock and she knew that they were arriving in Cherbourg soon to pick up more passengers and mail.

After she had sung Tiggy to sleep, she left Danira with four-year-old Harald and five-year-old Sigrid and went back to her own cabin. From the sounds coming from the ship itself, she could tell they were now lowering gangways and fresh cargo was being stowed. The engines were silent, and the steady vibration she had become accustomed to throughout the afternoon was missing.

She lay down on her bunk and closed her eyes, thinking only to rest them for a while. Much later, the light went on and the others came quietly into the cabin. Pia shifted restlessly on her bunk, but did not wake. And it was not until early morning that she again woke up.

It was dark inside the cabin but her internal clock told her it was nearly dawn. She climbed to her feet, distressed to realise that she had fallen asleep fully clothed, for she was sure she must now look crumpled and bedraggled. She grabbed her fresh underwear, brush, soap and towel and made her way down to the one bath set aside for the ladies of third class. No one was around except for a few stewards preparing for the day, so it felt quite luxurious to have the bath to herself for a half an hour.

By the time she was dressed and tidy, she was ready for the new day. After dropping off her things in her room, she went up on deck. The sky was lightening, but the sun was not yet up. She stood above the propellers staring out to the east, her hair blowing gently in the breeze. The air was fresh, but not as cold as she expected, and the smell of the sea reminded her of home, both the home she vaguely remembered as a child in Norway and New Atlantis more recently. She realised with a start why New Atlantis had felt like home when she first arrived there even though she had been living inland for nearly 200 years. Once the sea was in your veins it never left, no matter how long you were away from it.

Breathing it in, she smiled as the sun began to slip slowly up over the watery horizon, golden and bright.

‘It is beautiful, sí?’

Startled by the male voice with its noticeable Italian accent, Pia jerked back away from the sound.

‘Sorry, sorry, Petra I did not mean to frighten you.’ It was Marco, and he looked tired but peaceful as he stood at the railing next to her.

‘How was your first day?’ she asked, turning back to the rising sun.

‘Very busy, which is good. We make good money. But I did not sleep well in my bunk last night. Too many snoring men around me.’

She smiled at the image and found herself looking back at him. He was smiling that beautiful smile at her. ‘I fell asleep in my clothes at the same time as the children went to bed. I did not even hear the others come in.’

He ran his eyes over her body and she felt her heart give a little pleasurable skitter. ‘You do not seem too worse for wear. Not too creased. Do I have that word right... creased?’

‘Yes, creased or crinkled. I am glad. I did my best to brush out the worst of my night after my bath. But I was not sure it would pass muster.’

‘Pass muster? What is that?’ he asked, leaning his elbows on the railing next to her and turning his head so he could look at her more closely.

‘Inspection. Pass inspection, like in the army. It is just a saying.’

‘Ah, yes, the English and their sayings. Or is it a Swedish saying?’

She shook her head and laughed lightly. ‘No, English. I did not expect to see you again. I thought you were not allowed to mix with us.’

He turned around and leaned his back on the railing, elbows bent, head back, looking up at the pale sky where stars still twinkled. ‘I did not expect to see you again either, but I am glad I did. We are allowed to spend our off-time in the

general areas for third class, but we will be put in irons if we go into a passenger's cabin.'

'Not really?' She turned fully to face him, concerned by such a severe punishment.

He laughed, his white teeth bright in the morning light. She loved the sound of his laugh, so deep and yet so light. 'I am joking. No irons, just the loss of our jobs and pay, which in some ways is worse than irons. So, I do not expect to see anyone breaking that rule.'

'Well, I suppose they cannot stop you mingling if you are allowed up here with us. What did you have for dinner last night?'

He looked a bit surprised by her change of topic but he answered her readily enough. 'A bowl of soup, left over pommes dauphinoise, that is potatoes in a cheese sauce, half a duck, a few truffles and a crème brûlée. What did you have?'

'A meat and pickle sandwich and tapioca pudding.'

'Hmm, I think I would have preferred yours.'

'Me, too, although I like crème brûlée.'

He looked startled again. 'You have had such a dessert in Sweden?'

Pia realised her mistake instantly, but for the life of her, she couldn't think of a reply, so she just shrugged and changed the subject. 'French food is everywhere, I suppose. Do you cook?'

'No, no. I have tried, but I tend to be too impatient and end up with half cooked food or burnt offerings. I stick to serving patrons. I am good at that side of it. What do you do for work?'

'I... look after children,' she said, keeping as close to the truth as possible. 'I am a nurse too.'

'A nurse? A medical nurse?' His eyes lit up.

'Yes, for many years, and then I decided to work with children.'

'Many years? You cannot have worked for many years; you are little more than a child yourself.'

Again, Pia realised her mistake. She was not suited to this work. It was easier Retrieving children where there was less contact with adults and fewer mistakes she could make.

'I... I am older than I look. What about you? Have you always been a waiter?'

He let her change the subject, although there was a curious light in his eyes. 'I fell into restaurant work when I left home at fourteen. It is easy to get work in that field wherever I go.'

‘Ah, yes, the rolling stone that is now rolling to the Wild West.’

He laughed a little at himself and shrugged. ‘Yes. I might become a cowboy and rustle cattle.’

‘You are going to steal cattle?’ She gasped, drawing back.

‘Steal? No. Gather them together and move them along.’

‘Muster. You are going to muster cattle.’

‘I thought that was an inspection by the army.’

‘It is. It is another meaning for the word. A muster is a gathering, whether of men or animals. In the army it is when men are gathered that the inspection takes place.’

‘English is one of the hardest languages to learn I have found. There is no pattern to it.’

She smiled and nodded.

At that moment, a young man came up onto the Poop Deck and made his way over to them speaking rapid Italian to Marco.

‘Ah, Paulo,’ Marco replied in English so that Pia could understand. ‘I could not sleep, so I decided to start my day up here in lovely company. Petra, may I introduce you to my assistant, Paulo. Paulo, this is Petra from Sweden who is going to join family in New York.’

The boy, not more than sixteen or seventeen, smiled and bowed to her. Her heart lurched sadly, as she thought of this youth dying in a few days too. He was young enough to Target, surely.

‘How old are you, Paulo?’ she asked, suddenly determined to try to rescue him.

‘I just turn seventeen.’ Paulo struggled with English.

‘So young to be travelling across the world alone,’ she said.

Paulo shrugged eloquently and then turned to go. ‘We are wanted in kitchen soon, Marco. Do not be long.’

‘Okay Papa, I will be along,’ Marco said, shooing the boy away. Then he turned back to Pia. ‘He is my assistant but he is already giving the orders. But he is a good garzone.’

‘He seems nice. I... I had better go in. I have enjoyed seeing you again. Do not eat too much.’

As she strode back along the deck to the ladder, she could feel Marco’s eyes on her. It felt exciting and a little forbidden to attract the attention of someone like Marco. But then, Marco would probably flirt with anything in a skirt. He had that easy way about him and women would fall at his feet. He probably

didn't see her as any more than a possible conquest, her obvious innocence a challenge.

No, it did her no good to let her feelings grow toward the young Italian. He was not for her. No one was for her. And in a few days he would be dead. Her chest hurt at the thought.

Chapter Fifteen

Marco

Thursday, 11 April 1912, TITANIC

Marco watched Petra hurry away into the early-morning sunlight like the devil himself was on her tail. And maybe that was how she saw him. It was apparent that she was nervous around him, uncertain how to take him and not willing to let down her guard and trust the stranger that he was. He wondered what had made her so skittish. Was she like that with all men, or was it just him she thought so little of?

It frustrated him. Where all his life women had fallen into his lap unwanted, the one time he did want someone she didn't seem to care for him at all. He knew he didn't have much going for him but his looks, and if she was a nurse, then probably doctors were more of interest to her than a mere waiter. And his conversation had not been particularly entertaining or imaginative... he seemed to have lost his easy banter when he was around her. So, all in all, it was no great mystery why she would not be interested in him.

Ah, but she was lovely. It was hard to keep his thoughts organised when he was around her. When he had seen her leaning against the rail, face turned toward the rising sun, straight, fair hair blowing in the breeze, his heart had seemed to stop for a second. And when it resumed, it was beating much too fast and his breath caught in his throat.

It had been like a dream-come-true seeing her there, especially as she had been on his mind ever since the same time yesterday. In a way, it felt as if he had been drawn to her like iron filings to a magnet. When he came on deck it was with no hope of seeing her again, and yet, there she was, and the restlessness that was his constant companion settled and he relaxed, content just to be with her.

However, where he was content she was not. She couldn't get away fast enough. He needed to face facts – she was not interested. Better for him to focus on his job and his future and stop craving what he couldn't have.

Resolutely, he turned away from the railing and headed down to his cabin to clean up and dress for his morning shift. Money had been excellent yesterday, and there was no reason why it shouldn't be just as good today. Before he knew it, his share of the tips would be enough to get clear across the country. Maybe he would go gold mining and make his fortune that way.

However, his dreams didn't seem as rosy anymore. All he could think about was that the further west he went the further away from Petra he would go.

Maybe he could stay in New York for awhile, find work there. He kicked himself for not asking her last name. Of course, given her distrust of him, she might not have told him even if he had asked. How could he find her in a city as large as New York if he didn't even know her last name?

Pondering his problem, he went through the motions of his morning until, before he knew it, the luncheon crowd had come and gone and his shift was over for three hours. More tired than he could remember being in a long time, he decided to take a nap.

On his way down the corridor they called "Scotland Road" he came across a group of third class boys gathering; even from a distance, he could sense the aggression in the air. He sped up a little so that he could step in if need be.

What he saw surprised him. Petra's young cousin was facing off with a boy a head taller and a good deal heavier. They were speaking loudly and angrily in a language he didn't know, but from the look of the boy cowering behind Micky, Petra's cousin was standing up for the lad against bullies.

While he hurried toward them, the face-off ended with a punch thrown by the bigger boy. Surprisingly, Micky was not there to feel the brunt of that punch. He had sidestepped and dropped low, leading with a right of his own into his opponent's unshielded gut. Micky's punch hit home, and he stepped back as the boy crumpled.

However, with a word, the downed bully had his henchmen grab Micky's arms, and when the boy was held tight, the bully came up from the floor and pounded into him viciously; several hard blows to the belly and then one to the face.

'Hey!' Marco yelled, breaking into a run. The boys looked up and backed off as he barrelled toward them. In a second they were gone, leaving Micky collapsed on the floor, his little friend whimpering at his side.

Dropping to his haunches, Marco tried to get a look at Micky's injuries.

'You hurt bad?' he demanded.

The ten year old looked up from where he lay, crumpled in on himself and shook his head. Even so, it was clear he was, as he didn't even have breath enough to answer. Marco hoisted the lad up into his arms.

'I'll take you to the doctor.'

'No... no!' Micky cried with a groan. Then in gasping words he said, 'Take me to my cabin 101. I'll be okay.'

‘On this deck?’

The boy nodded and indicated with his head further along the corridor past Marco’s own cabin. His little friend seemed to have vanished as they strode on down the passage and through the doors that separated the third class cabins from the crew’s area.

At 101, Marco knocked on the door and hoped there was someone down here. Most people were up in the recreational areas at this time of the afternoon. Before he had time to worry, the cabin door opened and he saw Petra standing there. She looked at him in stunned surprise. Then, she gathered her senses when she realised who he was holding.

‘Bart. What has happened?’ she demanded, as she moved out of the way so Marco could bring the boy in and lay him gently on the bottom bunk.

‘He got in a fight with a couple of lads bigger than him. They gave him a good hiding before I could get there to break it up,’ Marco told her, standing back and letting her take charge.

‘Where was he hit?’

‘Two or three to the gut and one to the face. The bastardos had him pinned. He didn’t have a chance.’

She nodded and started to feel the boy’s stomach carefully. The boy cried out when she touched something tender. Petra felt more carefully around that area.

‘I think he has cracked a rib. His spleen is tender too. God help him if it has ruptured with the primitive equipment available here.’

She started to inspect the boy’s face then, wiping away the blood with her fingers to find its source. It dribbled from his mouth and from a cut on his cheek. After checking his mouth, she nodded. ‘Looks like they knocked out a tooth. Hopefully, that is the only cause for the blood in his mouth. If not, he has internal injuries I cannot identify. Damn, I need Karl. He would know what to do.’

She stood up and scrapped her hand through her hair, thinking all the while. ‘Can you get to second class? There is a passenger called Karl Ont... no, damn. What is he calling himself? Lang... Langman. His name is Karl Langman. Can you get him and bring him here?’

‘Would it not be better to take him to the surgeon on board?’ Marco asked, a little confused by what she was asking of him.

‘That quack? He will probably want to leech him or something. No, Karl is the doctor we need. Will you get him, Marco? Please? Tell him it’s Bart.’

Looking at him like that, she could have asked him to go to the moon and he would have tried his hardest to get there. If she needed this doctor in second class, he would get him. He nodded and turned, hurrying out of the cabin and through the “crew only” door into the second class reception area. Here he looked for a steward. After a few moments, he saw one coming toward him.

‘I need to locate a passenger. It is a matter of urgency. Karl Langman.’

The steward took in his uniform and frowned. Then he nodded and went to his storeroom. Here, he pulled out a list of passengers and their staterooms. ‘He’s on D Deck, 51. But he won’t be in his room, like as not. But his steward might know where he is. I’ll show ya. This better be important or you’ll be skinned alive for being in this area, cobber.’

Marco made no comment. He just followed the young steward with his strange accent up the stairs to the deck above. When they got to 101, the steward knocked on the stateroom door. There was no answer. A young stewardess hurried toward them, her eyes alight with curiosity.

‘Lucy, do you know this bloke, Karl Langman? This here waiter needs him. Emergency he says...’

The pretty redhead frowned. ‘That’s Mrs Jones’ friend. She’s lying down at present. I’ll go ask her if she’s awake.’

While Marco waited impatiently, Lucy disappeared up the passage and through the door at the far end. In a few seconds, she was back with a lady following closely behind. This woman was obviously in a delicate condition and looked somewhat ruffled.

‘What is wrong? Why do you need Karl?’ The lady demanded.

‘He’s a doctor. A boy has been injured and his nurse has sent for Karl Langman.’

‘Why not go to the surgeon?’

‘He knows better what to do, so she says. Can we find him?’

The lady frowned thoughtfully. ‘He may well still be in the library. That was where I saw him last.’

‘I’ll go,’ offered Lucy. ‘Where does he need to go?’

‘E Deck, third class. If you get him here, I will take him the rest of the way.’ Marco scrubbed at his greased-back hair impatiently.

Without another word, Lucy took off at a run up the stairs. Marco couldn’t help being impressed by how quickly she moved. He wondered if she was a country girl. Such women were known to be more athletic than others of their gender.

‘I better get back. Hope ya find your doc. I’m Jacko, by the by, and ya know where to find me if ya need me again, cobber, all right?’

‘Sí. Thank you, Jacko. Where are you from? Your accent I do not recognise.’

The young man beamed at him. ‘Bloody Australian, aren’t I? See ya.’

With that, the young man disappeared down the stairs back to his own area. That left Marco with the lady, and he glanced at her nervously. She looked vaguely familiar, but he didn’t know where he would have seen her before.

‘You can go back to your nap, Signora. I am sorry to have disturbed you.’

‘Oh, yes... no, I will wait to make sure he is found. The boy is badly injured?’

‘He was beaten by a much bigger boy. Very hard punches to the gut and his face before I could get to them.’

‘Oh, dear. But I wonder why they sent for Karl. You said the nurse sent for him?’

‘Sí. But not the nurse on the ship – a passenger. The boy’s cousin. I do not know why they want this Signor Langman, but she asked and so I came.’

The lady smiled at him knowingly. ‘Ah, a damsel-in-distress. She is pretty, this cousin?’

Marco looked at her more closely. She was very young for all her black widow’s weeds and bulging belly. ‘Yes... no... I mean, not what you would call pretty, but I see her that way.’

‘She is a lucky girl, then. Oh, here they come...’ She turned away, looking over Marco’s shoulder as they heard hurried footsteps approaching.

A young man, not much over twenty, bounded down the last stairs. He rushed over to them with the stewardess two steps behind.

‘Are you all right?’ He demanded of the lady.

‘Yes... yes, it is not me. It is a boy. Do you know his name?’ She turned to Marco and asked.

‘His name is Micky, but I was told to say it is Bart.’

‘Bart is hurt? Take me to him, now!’ The young man’s authority was imposing and Marco reacted instinctively. He led the way back down the stairs. In a matter of minutes, they were through into third class and at Petra’s cabin.

The young doctor didn’t knock. He just opened the door and stepped into the compartment. From the doorway, Marco could see that Petra had the boy’s shirt off and had been bathing the blood from his face. After a few hasty words between them, Petra stepped out of the cabin and left Langman to carry out his diagnosis.

‘Thank you, Marco, for what you have done,’ Petra said, pressing his arm tightly with her fingers. Then, as if realising what she’d done, she drew back and became flustered. At that moment, the man Marco knew as Luke came barrelling down the passageway toward them.

‘This kid just found me and told me Bart’s hurt. Where is he?’

‘Marco found him and brought him here. I sent for Karl because I was worried about internal injuries. He took a beating, if only a short one, thanks to Marco.’

Luke turned to him and nodded. ‘I’m grateful. If anything happened to that brat, I... What does Karl say?’ He seemed to be overwhelmed with emotion and was having a hard time fighting it down. It surprised Marco that this man would feel so deeply about a young cousin.

‘Is that you, Luke?’ Langman called out. ‘Do not panic, Bart is fine. A cracked rib and some bruised internal organs. He has lost a back tooth, too, which I think he swallowed, but he will be fine. A few more blows, though, and it might have been a different story.’

Karl came to the cabin doorway. ‘I’ll strap up his ribs and he will have to take it easy for a day or two.’

‘His work?’ Luke asked.

‘He can still talk and move around, just a little slower than his usual fast-forward. He can complete his mission.’ The young doctor turned back to his patient.

‘Mission?’ Marco asked in confusion.

‘Bart’s mission is having fun. That is what he meant.’ Luke covered admirably, but Marco was not convinced, especially as he caught the guilty look that passed across Petra’s face. However, he wasn’t about to ask any more questions, especially about the discrepancy of names. They all had more pressing matters on their minds.

‘I will go then. I hope Bart, or Micky, is well soon.’

‘Thanks... if you hadn’t been there,’ Luke said, obviously finding it difficult to offer gratitude.

‘I was just in the right place.’

‘No, you went out of your way to help. You may get in trouble for going into second class,’ Petra piped up.

‘I am glad I could help. Tell the boy to pick on someone his own size next time, sí?’

‘Not going to happen. Must have been protectin’ some kid. He wouldn’t fight, otherwise.’

‘Sì, he was. A ragazzo, a... a lad smaller than him. And the other three were a head taller. Bullies.’

‘Of course,’ Luke commented without emotion.

He started to walk away. Petra followed him. ‘Thank you, again. You do not know how grateful we are to you. Bart is important to us, very important.’

‘Please, no more. I did what anyone would do. I am glad I could be of service to you.’ He took her hand and kissed her fingers gently. When he looked up to meet her gaze, he was thrilled to see fire there. So, he was no longer the devil. His heart surged upward.

‘I finish at eleven tonight. Can you meet me on deck?’

‘I was told they made the women clear the decks by half-past-ten last night,’ she said.

‘Try. There is a sheltered spot at the end of the Poop Deck, quite near where we were this morning. I will be there. But if you do not come, I will understand.’

Marco left her there, her mouth moulded into a moue of indecision. He would have to hope that in the coming hours she would decide it was worth the risk to see him. He hurried back along the corridor to his own cabin and the nap he knew he was now too wound up to take.

Chapter Sixteen

Lizzie

The last day had been the most wonderful in her life. And it was all because of Karl, who had just raced away to assist a young man from third class he seemed to know. It was exciting to see him take charge that way, as if he was born to it or had been doing it for many years. And yet he was so young. No matter what he said about being older than he looked, she knew that he could not be more than in his mid-twenties – too young to wield such authority.

She compared the man who had just left with the youth who had kissed her on the deck yesterday afternoon. They were worlds apart. That Karl had been unsure of himself, overcome by emotions he did not know how to handle. The kiss had sizzled right down to her toes, but not because it was confident or skilled.

In her younger years before her parent's death, she had been kissed aplenty by boys in her town and at college. Those kisses had been sweet and ranged from amateur to highly skilled. On the other hand, the kisses Peabody had forced on her had been anything but sweet. She shuddered at that memory and forced it away.

Karl's kiss had been inexperienced but overwhelming. It had threatened to send her over some unknown cliff edge into a place that felt both unsafe yet enticing. However, the deeper into that kiss she'd gone, the more insistent the memory of Peabody became, until she'd recoiled from Karl as if he were that other man.

And she'd hurt her new friend, more than he would admit.

For the rest of the evening, he'd been on his best behaviour, shepherding her around and taking her to dinner. They'd even walked along the Boat Deck as the sun set over the Channel and the Titanic slipped slowly into Cherbourg to begin the process of unloading and reloading passengers and cargo once more. It had been so romantic standing up there with him warmly pressed against her side, the sun a golden ball sinking into the molten sea in front of them. Yet he made no move to repeat his embrace or kiss. It was as if her rejection had forced him down another track in their budding relationship; a track that she didn't want.

What did she want? Love and marriage? How could she even think of it with another man's illegitimate child inside her? He'd be repulsed if she were to tell

Karl what really happened. He'd blame her or, at the very least, see her as defiled. Even so, if she didn't tell him how could she enter into an honest relationship with him with such a lie between them? He deserved better than that. He deserved better than her.

Earlier that morning when she was trying to sort out her worries in her mind, she had gone to the library on C Deck to sit quietly over a book. While she was there, she'd met two young American women called Felicity Carmichael and Rose Travers. They were married ladies who, it transpired, were also with child. But unlike her, they each had a loving husband who was the father of their soon-to-be offspring.

They had shared a happy hour chatting in the library until a disgruntled reader lost patience with them and asked them to be quiet. The girls had taken their leave then so Lizzie could continue her reading, and she had hopes of meeting up with them again. It was amazing how many women she had met who shared her condition. Of course, in terms of the number of people on the ship, there was probably nothing abnormal in it. Nevertheless, to her it felt like she was drawing pregnant women to her like flies.

Over lunch, she had mentioned the women to Karl and he had seemed interested to meet them. For some reason, he was fascinated by motherhood. She wondered if her condition was the only thing he found interesting about her. But no, that would be selling him short and that was unfair. Karl liked her, she was sure of that. And he genuinely seemed to enjoy her company, pregnant or not.

Gertie, or Trudy as she preferred to be called, had been at each of their meals, and the more Lizzie saw of her husband, the more she disliked him. Trudy seemed to be a pleasant young woman who deserved better than that overbearing bully of a man. Unfortunately, unless Karl had some mysterious way to lure her away from the oaf, she could see no other future for the girl.

Now, too restless to relax, although she was exhausted from her sleepless night with her snoring and complaining roommate, she had gone back up to the library in search of a quiet place to sit. She had barely seated herself when Karl came into the room, his eyes searching the space until they found her. Once he'd caught sight of her, he beamed and hurried over.

However, before they had a chance to greet each other, the American women, dressed in pale summery dresses, also entered the library and came toward her. It seemed the perfect opportunity to introduce them all.

'Mrs Jones,' called Felicity, the younger of the two women. 'We were looking for you and hoping to convince you to join us for tea.'

Lizzie smiled her pleasure as she rose slowly from her place and took Karl's arm. She led him the short distance to meet her two new friends.

'I would love to, as long as you would welcome my friend, Mr Langman, too. Karl, this is Mrs Carmichael and Mrs Travers. They are both returning to America for their laying-in because their husbands think it safer. Ladies, Mr Langman is a doctor who has just now been down to assist a young boy who was beaten badly by bullies. How is the boy, Karl?'

The two women were instantly interested and concerned.

'Oh, Bart is a bantam rooster. He is down, but he is by no means out. A cracked rib, missing tooth and some bruised internal organs.'

'Oh, the poor lad. How old is he?' asked Rose, the short, plump one.

'He is nearly eleven but small for his age. He has a penchant for taking on opponents twice his size. Usually he wins. Unfortunately, that was not the case this time, as his opponent had two assistants who held Bart while he did his worst. If one of the waiters from the first class restaurant had not been passing and put a stop to it, it would have been far worse.'

'I wouldn't have expected that kind of to-do in second class,' Felicity commented frowning.

'It was in third, actually.'

'You went down into third? But that is not done, is it? I was told that if we passed into third for any reason, we would have to undergo a thorough health inspection once we arrived home. They can carry diseases you know.' Felicity's frown increased. She was the tall thin one with metal-framed glasses that sat on the end of her freckled nose.

'Disease, if it were on board, would know no class barriers, I do assure you, ladies.'

'How do you know the lad?' Lizzie asked. 'When the waiter told you his name you were quite concerned.'

'He is the son of a friend of mine.'

'You have friends in third class?' Rose asked in surprise.

'You have spent too much time in Europe, dear lady. In the Americas, there is supposed to be only equality for all.' There was a note of censure in his voice.

Lizzie looked at Karl in surprised agreement. Not that she'd ever thought about it much, but she had heard America was free of such artificial divisions and been glad of it.

'You are right, of course, sir. But there is a natural division between men, is there not? You are a physician and would naturally gravitate to those in your

field. What would you have in common with labourers and such? Those people in the third class on this ship?' Rose asked.

'You would be surprised, Mrs Travers, you would be surprised. Can I escort you all to tea?'

With little titters of assent, the two young women joined Lizzie and Karl around the tables that had been set up especially for afternoon tea.

Once settled with their cups and a large plate of freshly-made iced-biscuits between them, the conversation drifted on to many topics of light conversation. Then Karl mentioned a book he had read and interest sparked immediately.

'H G Wells' Time Machine? Why of course I have read it,' Rose announced with enthusiasm. 'Wells has such a vivid imagination, don't you think?'

'Is that the story about the man who travels into the future and back?' asked Lizzie with interest.

'Yes, that is it. The hero goes through time, watching the place in which he resides change with the passing years, until he comes to a time when the world is a violent place filled with monsters,' Rose volunteered with much delight.

'Do you think it is possible to travel through time?' Karl asked them. His tone was light, but Lizzie was getting good at reading his emotions, and there was something here that went deeper than a light chat about a fantastic topic.

'I think anything is possible. After all, it was not so long ago that man thought the world was flat or that we could not fly. Who is to say that, in some future time, man can do all manner of things, even fly to the moon!' This was Felicity, her more relaxed tone in stark contrast to Rose's vivacity.

'Yes, I do believe you are right.' Lizzie nodded her head thoughtfully. 'But I wonder what it would be like, that future world that could invent a time machine.'

'Better than ours, I would hazard to say,' Felicity said, languidly. 'They would have educated every child, fed the starving and stopped war.'

'But man will still be man. He will always want to wage war or see himself rich while another is poor,' Lizzie replied sadly.

'It will take near extinction to change man's ways,' Karl said, his voice oddly hollow.

Lizzie glanced at his closed face, wondering what he was thinking and why he had started this strange discussion in the first place.

'I agree. There is talk of war even now, and our men have not yet recovered from the Boer uprising. We have a lot to learn before a Utopian world is our legacy.' Felicity frowned again.

‘But it would be exciting to visit other times,’ put in Rose breathlessly. ‘I would like to see Ancient Egypt and the pyramids as they were being built.’

‘Would you like to visit the future too?’ Karl asked Lizzie, drumming his fingers on the arm of his chair.

Lizzie was becoming more and more concerned by the direction this conversation was taking. It had become far more than just idle chatter and Karl's edginess was disconcerting. What was going on?

‘Yes and no. What if it were awful there? Like in the book,’ Lizzie hedged.

‘What if it was beautiful and peaceful? And you could choose to follow any life-direction you wanted.’ Karl was staring at her intently now, his eyes burning bright.

Rose cocked her head to the side and smiled. ‘A utopian world? Yes, I would like to go there.’

‘Would you, Lizzie?’ Karl asked, never taking his eyes from hers.

‘Would you be there?’ she asked playfully, trying to ease the tension in the air.

‘Oh, yes, I will be there. At your side, as long as you want me.’ He smiled a gentle smile that seemed to take the strain from his face. But his eyes continued to burn as they held her gaze.

‘Would I get to come back here?’ she asked. She noted that the others were now listening intently.

‘No, because there would be no life here for you once you left. It would appear as if you had died.’

Lizzie thought about this very carefully, considering all she would be leaving behind if she were to go to this make-believe future with Karl.

She would lose her brother and his new family. But she felt as if she lost her brother many years ago. Reuniting with him now was just the only doorway that had opened for her. What if there was another doorway, one that had Karl in it?

‘Yes, I would like to go to that utopian future world, even if I had to leave everything here behind.’

Karl smiled at her approvingly and reached across to squeeze her fingers with his own. ‘I am glad. Really glad.’

‘I would like to go, but I have my husband and family to consider,’ Rose said, sighing deeply.

‘What if it were the only choice? What if... say... this ship was about to sink and you knew you were going to drown and the only choice was to travel to a new life in another time?’

‘Oh, now I know we are in the realm of fantasy,’ said Felicity with a sniff. ‘As if the Titanic could sink. Better to say there was a fire on the New York docks on our arrival.’

‘All right,’ Karl allowed, smiling at Felicity indulgently. ‘Whatever catastrophe you like. However, this man from the future knows it will happen and offers you a way out, a way to survive. Do you take it?’

‘Of course, that is too easy a choice. If it were death or a new life in utopia, then of course I would choose a new life. Anyone would.’

‘Not anyone. For some, losing everything that they loved would be worse than death.’

‘I have my baby to consider,’ Felicity said very seriously now. ‘I would never choose death, when I would be choosing it for my child as well.’

‘Excellent answer, Mrs Carmichael! So, if the Titanic sinks, I will make sure there is a place in the time machine for you then.’ Karl gave a light laugh, trying to lift the mood.

‘Me too,’ Rose piped up. ‘I want to come too. I think it would be very exciting.’

‘Then your place is booked as well, Mrs Travers. And one for Lizzie. And what about Gertie?’

The women considered this for a moment.

‘I think she would be happy to get away from that awful husband of hers. She would be at the head of the line,’ Felicity said with a cynical laugh.

‘Oh, you are quick to sign his death warrant, aren't you, cruel woman?’ Lizzie joked.

‘If you took him along, he would do nothing but complain. Have you heard him going on about this ship? You would think he was travelling on a tramp steamer rather than the Ship of Dreams.’

‘He thinks we should have the same luxuries as first class and yet not pay for them,’ Rose said with a scowl. ‘My Freddy would have a word or two to him about his ingratitude.’

Lizzie knew that Rose's husband was a missionary in Africa. That was where she had been until her condition changed. Her husband had then put her on the first steamer north, determined to keep his wife and child safe. She would go home to Pennsylvania until the baby was old enough to survive the many illnesses that ran rampant through the native populations.

‘My Maurice would do more than have a word with him if he spoke so disparagingly to Trudy in front of him. Oliver is a spineless bully who picks on

those who are weaker than him. Maurice hates that.' Felicity dropped her china cup back onto its saucer with a clatter.

'So, we coax Trudy into coming with us on the time machine then,' Lizzie said lightly. 'And leave her husband to make his way the best he can.'

'Agreed,' Rose said with a laugh.

Lizzie glanced at Karl out of the corner of her eye. He seemed strangely satisfied by the way the conversation had gone.

After tea was finished and the Americans had decided to go back out on deck, Lizzie took the moment to inquire further about the incident in third class. The more she thought about it, the more it seemed odd that Karl would know these people so well, that they would choose to call him down from the upper decks rather than go to the doctor on board.

'How do you really know those people in third class? They obviously think highly enough of your medical training to have sent for you over the surgeon. And they knew where to find you.'

Karl turned to look at her intently, as if weighing up possibilities. 'Let us say, just as a hypothetical, that people in the future could travel through time as we were saying. And that those people knew that this ship was about to sink, taking two-thirds of the people on-board to their death. They might send a team of people back to rescue who they could. They would need to spread their team across the different classes so they wouldn't miss locating the people they needed to rescue. However, if anything untoward should happen to one of them, they could call on the assistance of another of their team somewhere else on the ship.'

'Karl,' she exclaimed with frustration. 'I do not want to play this game anymore. If you do not wish to tell me how you know those people, that is your right, as I do not want to intrude on your privacy. But at least say so directly...'

Karl leaned over and took her hands in his. He turned them over so he could look at the lines on their palms.

Running his finger along the lines slowly, he became even more serious. 'I am not playing a game, Lizzie. Everything we have been discussing here this afternoon is not the realm of fantasy. It is fact. In a few days' time the Titanic will sink and you will not survive it unless you come with us to the future.'

She pulled her hands away from his and stood up, wishing that her head didn't become light at such sudden movements. Clutching her brow, she shook her head.

'Are you delusional? Or are you playing some cruel game with me?'

Her voice was louder than she wanted, and several other ladies finishing up their tea looked over in their direction. She wanted to walk away with her shoulders back proudly, but her legs were so wobbly under her that the best she could manage was a stagger.

Karl was at her side in an instant, supporting her with his warm strength. It took everything she had to draw away from him.

‘Please, let me go. I do not wish to continue this conversation a moment longer. Good day to you, sir.’

She walked out onto the aft promenade and drew in several cleansing breaths. The ship was under a full head of steam now that they had left Queenstown behind them. All she could see was grey ocean and a solid line of the horizon where it met the pale blue sky. It was quite beautiful, she realised. But she couldn’t appreciate it in this moment because it felt as if her heart had just been torn out of her chest.

Karl was a mad man. He thought he came from the future in a time machine and that he was going to whisk her away before she died in some terrible calamity. What had he said first before Felicity pooh-poohed his suggestion? That the Titanic would sink? How absurd a fantasy was that? Everyone knew that the ship they sailed on was the safest in the world. People called it unsinkable. Why would he create such a fabrication when it was so blatantly wrong?

She felt the warm tears trickling down her cold cheeks. He seemed so genuine, so caring and so sane. In the moments she thought they were talking about a future together, she had been happy to consider the idea, even when she had known him for only a few days. Back then, she’d even been hopeful that he might understand the awful thing that had happened to her and not think less of her for it.

However, now that dream was smashed. And she must pick herself up, as she had been forced to do so many times in the last year and a half, and soldier on. Karl had to be put behind her. She only hoped that he would heed her wishes and stay away. She might have to warn the other women about him too.

What if he were dangerous? What if he would not leave her alone and kept on about this crazy idea? Would she need to report him to the Captain? That would be an extreme measure. But she had been the object of one man’s crazy infatuation and she would not be another’s. Whatever she had to do to protect herself and her baby, she would.

Chapter Seventeen

Max

The day dragged on endlessly. He'd watched their entrance into Queenstown Harbour in the early afternoon, the emerald green hills of Ireland dramatically rolling out along the shore. He'd seen the new passengers and cargo loaded. He'd even enjoyed the speed they got up to once they left the harbour, as if the Titanic were a huge horse that had finally been given its head. It almost felt like now that the ship had done its duty by the ports of Europe, she could stretch her legs and reach for the distant shores of America.

Not that she would ever reach those shores. She would fall at an icy hurdle half way there and sink without a trace. Damn, he wished he could get that out of his head for even a few, short minutes.

He wandered along A Deck promenade, lost in thought, lost in hopeless conjecture about what might be if he could change the events that were to come. Even though he knew it was wrong, his mind played with the possibilities.

What if he talked to the Captain and told him about the ice?

But Eilish had said the Captain would be warned by Marconi about the ice sheets in the area and would ignore them, thinking his unsinkable ship could avoid any approaching danger.

What if he alerted the passengers and prepared them for the lifeboats so that more could be saved? Eilish had told him that many of the lifeboats would be half empty when they were lowered away.

But how could he let them know without casting himself into the role of crazy man? They all thought the ship was unsinkable. They'd hardly rush to board a lifeboat just because he suggested they do so a day before the event transpired.

No. No matter which way he looked at it, there was no recourse for him but to accept fate.

Max glanced up and saw a young couple walking toward him, very much in love, if their attentive looks were any indication. Was she with child? He let his eyes linger longer than was politely necessary. When the man's hand lay for a second on his wife's stomach, he had his answer.

These two were possible Targets. He must find Carter and Finn and tell them about his find. He knew the two Jumpers, as they were called, were assessing the other passengers for any prospective Targets. Who better than a pregnant woman

to add to their group? But he would need to know their names and a little about them if he were to assist.

With an unacceptable lack of decorum he stopped the couple and introduced himself. Their stunned surprise was politely hidden and they greeted him warmly.

‘No, I do not think we have met. Mr Ingham, did you say? We are not from England. We just joined the ship at Queenstown. I am Phillip Lunridge and this is my wife, Clarissa. We are from Portland, Maine. We have been travelling Europe on our honeymoon for the last three months and now we are returning home.’

‘Am I correct in surmising that there will be happy news for your family when you arrive?’

The young woman blushed and dropped her head demurely.

‘As a matter of fact we only found out before boarding the ship. Clarissa has been feeling unwell in the last few weeks and I finally convinced her to see a physician. We will be parents in just over six months, so he told us.’

‘Congratulations. I could see a warm glow around you two, as if you shared some good news of that kind. I hope you do not mind that I mentioned it. My wife and I have long wanted children but have not been so blessed.’ He lied admirably, convinced as he was in the rightness of his actions. He was attempting to save this couple’s lives and that of their unborn child; a little lie like this was acceptable.

And in the back of his mind he realised that it was not entirely untrue. He and Agnes may not have wanted a child but he did. And now, of course, he would never be a father. Committed to a barren woman in a barren world, a child was never to be his.

However, he had Eilish, which was enough for any man.

‘I am sorry to hear that. It is truly a gift all loving couples should share.’ Clarissa raised her head and spoke softly for the first time. Max could see she was a serene young woman and seemed very content with her condition.

‘I will let you continue your exploration, and I hope we will meet again during the voyage. It is quite a ship we travel on.’

‘Indeed. The “Ship of Dreams,” they are calling it.’ Phillip smiled down at his wife and squeezed her arm.

As they went their separate ways, Max could only think that those dreams would soon be nightmares from which most would never wake.

Nevertheless, he must find Carter and Finn and tell them of his discovery. These were possibly another two who could be saved. Maybe they could get Eilish up to talk with the wife. A woman could be more open with one of her own gender.

He knew he was clinging to straws. He kept trying to find a reason that would bring Eilish to his side. It had been a day and a half since he'd seen her and it felt like a year and a half. He'd barely slept a wink the night before because she was not by his side. On top of the sleepless night in Southampton, it meant he would soon be too fatigued to function.

Eilish

The large family wandered around the Poop Deck, the children agog with saucer-eyes just as everyone else had been the day before. It was therefore easy to identify these people as the new arrivals from Queenstown – the O'Hallorans, if Eilish didn't miss her guess, and they were her Targets.

She wandered in their direction and started up a conversation with the total strangers, just as she had done so many times in the last day and a half. One of the good things she had discovered about sea travel was that people were far more willing to make new friends than they would have been at home. There was something about them all being strangers in a strange world set adrift on the empty ocean.

'You just come on board?' she asked the wife, a dark-haired woman in her late thirties who looked tired and fed up.

'Aye, and weren't it about time, I'm thinkin'. We sat around on our behinds almost the whole day waitin'. And now we're wanderin' around here like lost sheep. What time's tea?'

Eilish was shocked by the litany of complaints the woman spewed out, even before they'd exchanged names. Even so, she knew what it was to be tired and fed up, so she gave the woman the benefit of the doubt.

'There's bouillon for you and the little'uns shortly, if you've a mind. Otherwise tea is at six and supper at eight. The food is good and plentiful, you'll be finding.'

'You're Irish then,' the woman stated more than asked, as Eilish exaggerated her long-forgotten accent to create a bond.

'Oh, aye, County Cork, and you?'

‘County Clare. What will we be gettin’ for tea then?’

A whining child began to tug on his mother’s skirt and the woman back-handed him without comment. The boy, who must have been about five, burst into noisy tears and his big sister grabbed him and pulled him away. The girl was probably eleven or twelve, but she had eyes that were far older. Eilish didn’t miss the sullen look she threw at her mother as she comforted her brother.

‘I’m to the bar,’ said the husband, who had only been partially listening to the women’s conversation.

‘Oh, aye, leave me with the brats why don’t yer? You’ll be the death’o me, Mick O’Hallaran, you surely will!’ The woman whinged at her man in much the same way her son had done to her only moments before. Eilish was waiting for Mick to apply the same rough punishment to his wife as she had meted out, but he didn’t. He just shook his head and sidled off as sullen and put upon as his children.

‘Tea is cold meat and pickle on bread and a pudding.’

‘Is that all?’

‘Well, dinner was a large roast. You can’t expect hot food for every meal,’ Eilish found herself responding indignantly.

‘I haven’t eaten nothing since I broke me fast first thin’. You’d ha’ thought they’d a given us summit while we waited. But oh no, not those buggers. Treat us like scum, they did. I’ll be expectin’ better in America...’

‘I’m sure you will,’ Eilish said without inflection. She was already fed up with the woman and wanted to get away. However, the children were her first concern. ‘Would you like me to give you a break for a while with the young ’uns.? My son is ten and he’s already got the little ’uns playin’ nice together down in the General Room just below us.’

‘Sure an’ wouldn’t that be fine to be rid of the lot of them for an hour.’ She turned to her children. ‘Go along wi’ ye now and meet up with some of the other young rascals. No fightin’, you hear, or I’ll take me spoon to yer behinds good an’ hard.’

As Eilish guided the children away, leaving their harridan of a mother to lean on the railings and look out to sea, she knew that they would not be Targeting this set of parents. These children would not know what to do with the love and care that would be showered on them in New Atlantis. It warmed her heart to think of it.

‘I’m Mary. What might your name be, lass?’ she asked the older girl who had taken charge of her crying brother.

‘Maggie, missus, an that’s Micky and that’s Aine and Siobhan.’ She pointed to the twins girls who looked about eight. They had more freckles on their faces than Eilish had ever seen.

‘Call me Mary, please. And you’ll be likin’ me son Micky. He’s about your age, I’m thinkin, and not bad for a boy.’

Maggie grinned at her and Eilish was shocked to notice the girl was missing her front teeth. Surely, her adult teeth would have grown in by this time. Her shock must have registered on her face, for Maggie lost her smile and covered her mouth with her hand.

‘Me mam can be heavy handed wi’ the drink in ‘er,’ she said by way of explanation as she looked away.

‘Oh, aye, well that can be fixed. In the new world, anything can be fixed.’ She didn’t want to say too much about New Atlantis, but she could give the girl some hope. It was little enough after the life she’d been living.

‘It’ll cost. Even in America, things’ll cost.’

‘You have my word that you’ll have the prettiest smile in the world in no time, Maggie lass. Wait and see.’

She took the children by the hand and led them down to the General Room where she knew Bart was holding court. He’d already started spreading the idea that they were all going to have a surprise party to christen the lifeboat that had been made especially for children. His subjects were all sworn to secrecy, and that only increased their delight.

It would be up to Eilish and the other adult members of the team to convince the parents to let their children take part in the lifeboat party and subtly reassure them that if the worst were to happen, their children would immediately be placed on the boat and taken to safety. All they would need to worry about in that unlikely situation were themselves.

Eilish saw Bart and the children as soon as she entered the General Room. She was once again in awe of the boy, as she watched him issue orders in various languages and organise his motley subjects into games they could all enjoy. Bart was a wonder. He seemed to know exactly what to say to each one to get the responses he required. And even as injured and sore as he was after the beating he took only an hour ago, he was back with the children acting as if nothing had happened. He was now a bit of a hero to the children because the boy he’d protected had passed the word around. They all stared at Bart’s bruised face in awe.

She left the children with Bart and Jane and went down to the cabin for a brief lie-down. She had slept poorly the night before; partly because she was sharing space with three others, but mostly because she missed having Max at her side. She wanted to see him desperately, but until the children were sorted, she could not neglect her duty.

So far, things were moving admirably, except for Bart's altercation. They'd agreed that one adult would stay close by Bart at all times from now on, just in case the bully-boys decided to return. She'd been hard-pressed to stop Luke from going and looking for the culprits. Only Jac's sharp order had pulled him into line.

What must it be like to have a child you cared so much about? Wonderful and yet fearful, she imagined, always worrying about the harm that might come to him.

Would she and Max adopt a child? She would love to now that she'd found the man she wanted to spend the rest of her life with. A child would add a dimension to their relationship that would make it all the more perfect.

However, it was in the early days yet. Who knew how he would react to his new life. He might lose interest in her once he had all those beautiful women to choose from. She was under no illusions about her appeal; pretty, yes, but not nearly as beautiful as so many others in her world. Max would be spoiled for choice.

Karl

Karl prowled along the length of the promenade on the Boat Deck like a caged beast. He wanted to scream and pound his fists into something hard. He wanted to throw himself down into a kicking, shrieking tantrum. He wanted to heave himself over the railing and end it all in the cold ocean depths.

How could he have been so stupid? How could he have been so inept? Of course, she wouldn't believe him after their little 'what if' fantasy over tea. What gave him the idea that she would? The look she'd sent him when she agreed she would come if he were there? That was the only indication he'd been given that she was open to his fantastic scheme. But obviously, she'd simply been following a hypothetical idea through to its conclusion. She didn't consider it real or even possible.

Maybe he was the mad man she now saw him as; he felt like it. Never in all his years had he felt so overwhelmed, so out of control. Where had his mild, balanced and analytical mind gone? If this was what his father was knocking out of him when he was a child, then it was fairly done, because while in this state, he couldn't function, he couldn't think.

The pain in his chest was excruciating and he knew that no drug or medication would ease it. No doctor could cure it. His heart was breaking and he was helpless to stop it.

It had been an awful day. An awful twenty-four hours, in fact. Ever since he'd made the mistake of kissing her yesterday afternoon on deck he'd been spiralling out of control. That was why he'd backed off from her, played it safe, trying to act as if his totally uncharacteristic behaviour had never happened. He didn't do things like that! He didn't kiss women he had only just met. He didn't force his attentions on them so they felt they had to pull away, giving him the polite brush-off line: 'It isn't you, it was me.' How often had that line been used to mask rejection?

And he'd managed to keep their relationship on a friendly level from then on, even though every moment had been torture. Even though in every moment he'd wanted to pull her into his arms and cover her face with wild kisses.

Maybe it was his way of self-sabotaging. Maybe he had raised the subject of New Atlantis so crudely so that she would reject him outright and he wouldn't have to suffer the agony of the unknown. It was the only explanation. The only thing that made sense in this irrational pool he was drowning in.

He needed to talk to someone; someone who understood. And he needed to fix what he had broken with Lizzie. Not for his sake – that was over before it even started – but for her sake. She had to be convinced of what was to come so that she would choose to go with them; because the alternative was unthinkable.

Cara. He would get Cara up here to talk to Lizzie and the other women. Who would have thought that there would be four pregnant women suitable for Targeting in second class? They had estimated one, if that. Records showed that the women in second class had been proportionally high in the survival stakes; most women in first and second had made it to the lifeboats and lived to tell of it.

That even one of those who hadn't survived should be pregnant was unexpected; that there were four... unbelievable. He was not equipped in personality or training to coax these women into choosing his world. What a botch he'd made of it so far; and all because he was too emotionally involved.

He wanted to go home. He wanted to get back to his lab where everything was clear-cut and comprehensible. In his lab there was no mystery, no erratic thoughts and feelings. There was just the beauty of science. That was where he belonged. Not here on a doomed ship trying to rescue lost souls. That was for braver, more flexible minds than his.

Some people just had a knack with people. They understood how they worked, as he understood science and the human body. People like Cara, Jac and young Bart; it came naturally to them. How could he have been foolishly arrogant enough to think that he could do their job? What he had done was take the place of a more competent Retriever, and now he would be taking Cara away from where she was meant to be, where she was most needed, to come and do his job for him up here in second.

He strode back to the companionway and made his way to his cabin. The young stewardess in his area was the person to get the message down to Cara. Lucy was her name and she was another who would die on this floating coffin. Could she be rescued, too, even though she wasn't pregnant? She was young and mentally flexible. She'd proven that this afternoon with Bart. New Atlantis might suit her well.

He took the stairs two at a time, unable to maintain his outward composure. It was late – almost dinner time – and soon the reception area outside his cabin would be jammed with impatient dinners waiting for the doors of the saloon to open. It would be difficult to find Lucy in that crowd.

Luck was with him. He had no sooner turned the final bend in the staircase and he spotted her walking past with a tray of food.

'Lucy,' he called breathlessly.

Lucy stopped and looked in his direction as he jumped down the remaining three stairs to get to her. He had flown down these same stairs with her hot on his heels only a few hours ago. Then, he'd thought Lizzie was in trouble, because he hadn't taken the time to get the full story from the young stewardess before taking to his heels. Impatience. He was displaying uncharacteristic impatience in all his dealing with Lizzie, and his behaviour was letting the team down.

'Yes sir?'

'I need a favour; a rather big favour.'

'Certainly, sir. Anything I can do to help. Is it to do with Miss Lizzie?'

'No... well, yes, in a way. I have a friend... a nurse who is in third class. It was she who sent for me this afternoon to deal with her cousin's injuries. I need her to come up and check on Lizzie and possibly a few of the other ladies in the

family way. She is quite brilliant in her field and I think it would help the ladies to have her input.'

'I could get the matron to look at them,' offered Lucy.

'No, no, your matron is probably very good but this requires expertise she would not have. Cara's specialty is obstetrics.'

'Ob what, sir?' The young woman's brow creased with confusion.

'Obstetrics. It is the branch of medicine that deals with childbirth.'

'She's a midwife, then?'

'Yes... in a way. Can you go down to third class and find her and tell her I need her as a matter of urgency? I do know that moving between classes is frowned upon, but I would not consider it if it were not necessary for the well-being of these ladies.'

Lucy looked down at the tray she held thoughtfully. 'I would be happy to go down and pass that message. Third class will be going to tea shortly as you will be. Maybe I could go down after dinner and see if I can find her. Do you know her cabin number?'

'K 107. Tell her that Karl has four ladies in a delicate condition who need her help immediately. Tell her I will be in my stateroom waiting for her. Bring her back with you if you can.'

'Certainly, sir. Do... do you think it might be possible... No, I'm sorry, it doesn't matter.'

'What Lucy? What might be possible?'

'Well sir, I may be in the family way myself. I'm not sure. Do you think this nurse would be able to tell me?'

Karl felt his heart lift. Yes! This pretty young girl had just saved her own life.

'I am sure she will, Lucy. She is very good; I assure you.'

With a shy smile, Lucy nodded and went on her way. For a moment, Karl just stood watching her go. Another one. Five women he could possibly save. Ten new lives for his home. This was bounty, pure and simple. These people of the past took birth for granted. They even regretted their condition if it was not economically or socially beneficial. However, to those who had not borne children for hundreds of years, every pregnancy was a gift; every child a much-anticipated gain.

Feeling a little better than he had since seeing Bart, he went to his stateroom. He didn't want to see Lizzie over dinner. It was too soon. He needed to get his emotions under control before he did that. And they were being so well fed on this journey that he could afford to miss a meal.

He was lucky in his roommate. Old Mr Bridges spent all his time in the smoking room when he wasn't sleeping. They'd nodded politely as they passed but had been able to keep their personal lives separate; unlike Lizzie and her roommate from hell. Mrs Duncan was driving the poor girl to distraction. And now he'd made her lot all the more difficult. Oh, he hoped Cara would be able to work some magic with these women, especially Lizzie, because he certainly was making a mess of it.

Chapter Eighteen

Lizzie

The dinner group seemed somewhat lacking. The American girls had joined her and the Howards, and though they kept up a steady chatter as the courses of pea soup, followed by roast turkey, cranberry sauce and dessert of plum pudding with American ice cream were served her, it seemed a dull affair. She noticed that the others had chosen different meals to her own but all seemed happy with the standard of their fare. Except for Oliver Howard, of course, who grumbled about each course; however, he did it quietly these days, aware that his criticisms didn't go down well with his dinner companions.

Trudy had come out of her shell a great deal since yesterday, and it was good to see her laugh with the other women, even under the fierce eye of her husband. Maybe there was hope for the girl yet without recourse to leaving him. Of course, if Karl's nonsense were to be believed, Trudy could leave her husband here and go to a future perfect world when the Titanic sank. She shook her head in utter bewilderment. How could he possibly believe such nonsense? He seemed so sane in every other respect, even slightly more sober than a young man his age should be, and yet he held these delusions.

'What is it?' Felicity asked, as they stood up to leave the table. 'Are you wondering where Karl is? He is such a lovely man and is quite taken with you, my dear. Is it too soon after the loss of your husband to be considering a replacement?'

'No, no... I mean yes, it is, and no, I am not wondering where Karl is. I imagine he is keeping his distance from me after we had a set-to earlier.'

'Do tell; I cannot imagine either of you having words.'

'Oh, it was silly, really. It all came from that nonsensical conversation over tea in the library.'

'The time travel one? I found it fascinating. He was really quite taken with the idea, wasn't he?'

'So much so that he thinks it is real. He says the Titanic is really going to sink and that we can escape only by time travelling to that world he spoke of – that utopia.'

'But he was joking with you, of course, Lizzie. He cannot possibly believe such a thing. He is a very sane, down-to-earth young man. I know people. There is absolutely no way that he is deluded or mentally unstable.'

‘But he was deadly serious, Felicity. He really believes he is from the future and we are all doomed.’

Felicity tipped her head to one side and studied her quizzically. ‘Why does this so upset you? Is it because you are interested in him?’

Lizzie shrugged and looked away. ‘I was. I will admit that. He is the loveliest man I have ever met. However, this... this delusion puts him beyond the pale. He might even be dangerous if he tries to pressure me on this.’

‘No. I will not believe that for a moment. He is more likely to fall on his sword for you than injure you in any way. Talk to him again. Try to find out why he believes as he does. Maybe someone has convinced him of this story. Someone he respects.’

Lizzie nodded, frowning. ‘Yes, maybe I should hear him out. I was very rude this afternoon. I dismissed him out-of-hand after all he has done for me. I... I will go and see him now. Will you come with me? I must admit to being a little frightened of seeing him again.’

‘Certainly, I will be your protector.’ She laughed at the absurdity of such an offer. ‘But I am sure there will be no need of it. Do you know where his stateroom is?’

‘Just here beside the reception area. It is unlikely he will be in his cabin at this time though, surely.’

‘We will not know unless we knock.’

At Karl’s door, Felicity knocked out a loud rat-a-tat-tat with her knuckles on the wood. To Lizzie’s hypersensitive nerves, it was too loud and abrupt.

Instantly, the door opened. From where Lizzie stood, she could see a young woman perched on the divan behind Karl, who now stood in the doorway, looking nonplussed by their intrusion.

Lizzie was horrified and humiliated all in one moment. So he was not only insane, but a womaniser, and had replaced her in his affections in a matter of hours. And this woman was willing to come to his room unchaperoned. What kind of woman did that make her?

‘Lizzie, Felicity... Mrs Carmichael, should I say. What a surprise. Would you please come in? There is someone I would like you to meet.’

‘No... we do not want to disturb you,’ Lizzie replied abruptly taking a step back. However, Felicity was quick to catch her by the arm and urge her forward.

‘Certainly. Come Lizzie, let us meet Mr Langman’s friend.’ Felicity glared at her as if trying to give her an unspoken message.

What was she about? Why would she want Lizzie to meet this so-called friend?

Nevertheless, she let Felicity have her way and moved into the small stateroom. Reluctantly, she sat down next to the strange woman.

On closer inspection, Lizzie had to admit the young woman looked nothing like a slattern. She was older than they, possibly nearly thirty, and she was beautiful in the Nordic way of white-blonde hair, pale, perfect skin and bright, blue eyes. Those eyes looked into Lizzie's now, as if searching for something.

'I am glad to have this opportunity to meet you, Mrs Jones. Karl has told me all about you. I am Cara Westchester, and my husband and I are close friends of Karl's.'

'This is Felicity Carmichael. She is one of the others I told you about.' Karl introduced Felicity, who sat on Lizzie's other side. Karl stood, unsure whether it was better for him to sit, stand or go. In the end, with a little nod from his Nordic friend, he sat on the bunk across from them.

'Karl tells me that he has told you about our mission and that you are understandably disbelieving.'

Lizzie couldn't believe her ears. This woman was talking about Karl's delusion as if it were the weather. She looked at Felicity to gauge her reaction. The woman seemed attentive and waiting.

'Yes... yes he has,' Lizzie conceded cautiously.

'There are eleven of us on board who are from the year 2337. We are here to save your lives if that is what you desire. No matter what you have been told to the contrary, the Titanic is not unsinkable. In a few short days, it will hit an iceberg in the mid-North Atlantic and sink with more than two-thirds of the souls aboard. We cannot interfere with that historical event but we can mitigate the outcomes somewhat. We are here to save your lives because, historically, your time is up.'

Lizzie listened to the woman in stunned astonishment. She sounded so sane, so in control of her faculties, and yet she had to be as crazy as Karl to believe what she was saying.

'Have you convinced Mr Langman of this?' Felicity asked calmly. Lizzie suddenly realised where her new friend was going with this. Of course! Felicity thought it was this woman who was delusional and had convinced Karl of her story. He wasn't insane; he was just gullible. Lizzie's relief was immense.

'I do not need to be convinced, Mrs Carmichael. I am well aware of the truth of what Cara is telling you. Lizzie, you wondered how I could be a doctor at

such a young age? I told you I was older than I look. I have been the Head of the Medical and Research Centre in New Atlantis for more than two hundred years. I am a respected member of our society, a leader if you will, but I have botched this mission badly. I am not a Retriever and never should have put myself forward for this mission.'

'Retriever?' Felicity asked, still cautiously attentive.

'Those who travel through time do so to Retrieve certain people. We are called "Retrievers," and believe me, I know how you feel right now and what you must be thinking because I was where you are seven years ago. I was Retrieved, and I thought my Retriever was a very deluded young man in need of help. It took him a great deal of effort to convince me of the truth. But now I'm the co-leader of the Child Retrieval Program and we're here to rescue forty-eight children in third class who will not survive the days to come.'

'Why would you do this? Come back here and rescue people like this?' Felicity demanded.

'Our world is sterile. Two hundred years from now there will be a great plague that will sweep across the planet, killing nine hundred and ninety-nine out of every one thousand people. Those who survived, people like Karl here, found they were sterile. In our future, we're all sterile. The only way we can repopulate the world is by bringing people like you to it. We are particularly interested in the children, as we cannot bear them.'

Lizzie tried to take in what the woman was saying but it seemed so far-fetched that her brain just turned off. And yet, she was saying that Karl had lived through this plague 200 years in the future. That he was sterile. No wonder he was so interested in her pregnancy.

'But we are not sterile, obviously. Is that why you want us?' Felicity asked, for all-the-world as if she believed what she was being told.

'We want you because you carry new life, not because you're fertile. Because, even though you are most gloriously fertile at this moment, you will not be so once you cross the Time-Space Continuum. Your child will not be harmed, and you will have a painless, safe and perfect delivery when you reach full-term. However, after that you will bear no more children. On the upside, I can promise you that you'll be treated as goddesses in the coming months and our people will spoil you rotten, as they will the children.'

'Time-space what? Is this the time machine?'

'Time-Space Continuum. Time-line, if you will, that links this moment with the next, this place with another. There is no time machine,' interrupted Karl,

impatiently. 'That was my hapless attempt at introducing the topic. You will walk through a Time Portal... a gateway between this time and ours. It takes no more than a moment.'

'It wasn't hapless, Karl. You're being too hard on yourself. As I was trying to tell you before the ladies arrived, it's quite normal for those being told about this to react negatively at first. It's a lot to take in. Believe me, I know. Jac not only had to open the Portal for me, but walk me through it to Ancient Greece before I believed him. I use Wells' book quite often as an intro to the subject.'

'You have been to Ancient Greece?' Felicity asked, in hushed, excited tones.

What was this? Felicity seemed to believe this woman. How could she be taken in by this nonsense?

'Only briefly, unfortunately, just to prove it to me. We arrived on a hill above one of the first Olympic games; it was quite a shock to see naked men throwing discuses I have to say.'

'They really did that? I thought it was artistic licence.'

'Oh, no. They were all naked. Jac, my husband, who is the Jumper who Retrieved me, said he actually had to run a race stark-naked on one particular occasion. I would like to have seen that to be honest.' Cara laughed lightly, winking at Karl.

'I will need to talk to the other two ladies. Is it possible for you to make the introductions, Mrs Carmichael?'

'Please, you can both call me Felicity. I... I do not know what to say. It is all so much to take in. You are telling me there is no way that I will survive this ocean voyage. That I will drown with the ship if I do not choose to go with you?'

'That is exactly it. If you choose not to believe us or prefer to take your chances on being saved, then we won't press you further. However, I would ask that you don't tell others what we're sharing with you now. For one thing, it will get us locked up. For another, it might cause a panic. Either option is to be avoided at all costs.

'We're not allowed to interfere with historical events. We can't change history, even if we wanted to. The only reason you're Targeted is because none of your bodies were recovered nor were you seen by survivors on the decks during the final hours. To us, that means we took you or can take you. The bottom line is, one way or the other, no one will ever see you again after the ship sinks.'

Lizzie's numbed brain was starting to come back to life. She was starting to consider the possibility that what this woman was saying was the truth.

'How can a ship that is supposed to be unsinkable sink?' she asked.

‘An iceberg will tear a hole in the starboard side of the vessel. Water will pour in and fill the water-tight compartments at the forward end of the ship. That will weigh the front down until the ship finally breaks in half. Then both halves will sink. It will take a little over two hours.’

‘When? When will this happen?’ Lizzie asked fiercely.

‘I cannot tell you that until you have made your decision to come with us. But it will only be a matter of days.’

‘What proof have you that what you tell us is the truth?’ Felicity asked.

Cara laughed. ‘Well, I can’t open the Portal for you like Jac did for me. You have to be stationary for that. Let me put it this way, if you accept that what we are telling you is possible then on the night we leave, you will have all the proof you need. If the Portal doesn’t take you to the future, then you have lost nothing. We will simply be poor, deluded souls who have fooled you for a while. You will continue your journey and arrive in New York next week as planned. You will have lost nothing.’

Felicity considered these words carefully. ‘I will agree to remain open. I will need to know more. But as you say, we lose nothing by going along with you. Unless we have to pay for this trip or you will set us off in a lifeboat in the middle of the ocean.’

Cara laughed and nodded her head. ‘You’re very astute, Felicity. No one could sell you a condo, sight-unseen, in the Florida swamps.’

‘I beg your pardon?’

‘Sorry, it is a confidence trickster’s game in my time to sell land in swamps to unsuspecting marks. And to answer your question: No, this will cost you nothing. And you will not be asked to leave the ship by any means but the Portal. And once that opens, you won’t doubt us anymore.’

‘Then I will take you to Rose and possibly Trudy, they will likely be up listening to the band on C Deck.’

‘I am not supposed to be here. I am travelling third class. Could I ask you to bring the ladies to me?’

Felicity nodded and rose. She looked at Lizzie with an uplifted eyebrow.

‘I will stay here if it is all right with you.’ Lizzie tried to smile at her friend but failed. She was feeling quite light-headed.

‘Certainly. I will return shortly.’

After the cabin door closed, a pregnant silence fell.

‘I do not know what to believe,’ she said finally.

‘Have you had any indication that Karl was anything other an intelligent, rather serious young man during the time you have known him?’ Cara asked.

Lizzie looked over at Karl, who was frowning and looking uncomfortable. ‘No. I never took him for deluded. He seemed very nice and normal.’

‘He is. If what we tell you is the truth, then that’s exactly what he is. Karl, while we wait for the others do you want to find that stewardess who brought me here? It might be better to include her while I’m telling my story again.’

‘Certainly. Good idea.’

‘I’m full of ‘em doc, you should know that by now.’ Her drop into a strange idiom made Karl smile as he left the stateroom in search of Lucy.

‘Why is Lucy being included?’

‘She told Karl she thought she was pregnant and wanted to see the nurse – that’s me – to confirm it. I’m not a nurse, and I can’t confirm it other than by the usual methods of missed courses, sore breasts and morning sickness. But, either way, Karl seems to think we should take her. She’s been willing to step outside the tight constraints of the ship’s regulations to help us and seems to have an open, flexible mind. That’s all we ask. We don’t Target people who we believe will not handle the differentness of our world. Only minds that are flexible and resilient can handle the shift. I was closer to that world than you are, but it was still confronting for me. Especially the clones.’

‘Cones?’

‘No Clones. You might not have worked it through yet, but when I told you Karl went through the Last Great Plague, two hundred years hence, you may not have noted the mathematical difference between 2337 and 2120, which is the year of the plague. Karl, and my Jac, and most of the others on this mission are hundreds of years old. We have not discovered the fountain of youth. Our bodies age normally. When one reaches old age, we simply change it for a new one made from our own cells.

‘I am fifty-two years old... I know; I don’t look it, do I? That’s because I shifted my consciousness, who I am... the thinking/feeling part of me that makes me who I am... I shifted that to a new twenty-year-old body seven years ago. So I look twenty-seven. Up until six months ago, I knew Karl as a middle-aged man. It was a real shock when he shifted into this young body. But he wanted to come on this mission, and I think that, on some level, he knew he was going to meet you. So he took on a younger version of himself.’ Cara was quietly thoughtful for a few moments before she went on.

‘Karl is behaving strangely. And he is worried, very worried. He has always been very serious, very controlled and very proper. A lot like my Jac. But now he is different – emotionally volatile, riding a roller coaster... oh, you don’t know what that is. He is going up and down emotionally. That only happens to these people... the “Old Timers,” as they’re called, to distinguish them from us who have been brought in from other times. We’re called “Newcomers.” Old Timers are never out of control and they have little-to-no sex drive. Sorry, don’t be offended. I speak from my own time where such things are freely discussed. So, when Old Timers fall in love it’s a great shock to them on all levels.’

‘Fall in love?’ Lizzie repeated breathlessly.

‘Yes, hadn’t you guessed? Karl has fallen in love with you. It might seem fast but it always is for them. Love at first sight. And they don’t know how to handle the sexual arousal or the heightened emotional responses. So be understanding with him. He’s the best. And even if you don’t feel the same, just be gentle with him. He’s like a teenage boy, all shyness and naiveté.’

‘He loves me?’

‘Yes.’

‘Oh. Did he say as much?’

‘He described his symptoms and told me about you. I made the diagnosis. He doesn’t know what to make of it yet. He’s just so worried he blew it with you over the time travel thing. He doesn’t understand that it’s hard for everyone when they’re told this stuff for the first time. To him, it’s all he knows. For us, it’s as out-there as anything can be.’

‘You speak strangely.’

‘It’s because of where I’m from.’

‘Where is that?’

‘New York State, 2010.’

‘2010?’

‘A hundred years from now. A very different world.’

‘Yes, I suppose it would be,’ Lizzie said politely. She was stopped from going further by the arrival of Karl and the other women, including Lucy.

‘We aren’t all going to fit in here. So Lizzie, will you go with Karl and he can answer any more of your questions you might have. I’ll talk to the others. Felicity, will you stay for moral support?’

‘Certainly, and I have more questions I have thought of while I’ve been gone.’

‘Good, then I’ll answer them after I explain the basics to the others. Come in, take a seat. A bit crowded but we at least have privacy.’

'I'm not sure I should be here. I have work...' Lucy said nervously.

'You can be away for a few minutes. This is important. A matter of life and death, you might say. Grab a seat.'

And, as Lizzie closed the cabin door, she heard Cara start to tell them her story.

She went up onto the promenade on the Boat Deck with Karl. It was dark and the stars shone brilliantly from the inky sky. The air was chilly and she shivered. Karl took off his coat wordlessly and draped it over her shoulders.

They walked; nodding at the other couple strolling by. Yet somehow they remained locked inside their own little bubble.

'Cara says you have fallen in love with me,' she said at last, settling on the least confronting aspect of the last hour. She didn't want to think that the man who might love her was hundreds of years old and came from the distant future. She didn't want to think about the strangely spoken, yet compelling woman, who said she was from 2010. And she most certainly didn't want to consider the possibility that the ship that seemed so firm beneath her feet might soon sink into the unfathomed depths below them. It was all too difficult.

'Did she? I wish she hadn't.' Karl pulled at the collar of his pristine-white shirt.

'It is not true then?'

'It is true. Well, I am starting to understand that being in love might explain this uncharacteristic behaviour on my part. I do not force my attentions on women as a rule.'

'You did not force your attentions on me, Karl.'

'Yes, yes I did, and I am most deeply sorry. I will not let myself lose control again.'

'You did not force yourself on me. I kissed you back. Surely, you felt that?'

He threw a quick, uncertain glance in her direction and then looked out to the glittering, black sea. 'All I know is that you pulled away. You did not enjoy it.'

'I did. However, there is much in my past that I have not told you...'

'There is not a lot in my past, which you do not now know and still cannot believe.'

'You are truly several hundred years old?' she found herself asking, though she really didn't want to know.

'Yes. Up until six months ago, I would have looked more like your father than your contemporary.'

‘So Cara said. I cannot imagine you old. Although you certainly behave more maturely than young men normally do.’

‘Yes. I hope the idea of an old man being in love with you doesn’t concern you. I will not force myself on you; I assure you.’

She gave a little laugh and felt the sadness that was her constant companion. ‘You would not be the first.’

‘I beg your pardon?’ His voice was tight with surprise and an emotion she could not identify. She cringed at her own stupidity, but decided it might be best to get it over with. If he knew, it might help him get back his much desired emotional equilibrium by shocking him out of his love for her.

‘I am not Mrs Jones. There was never a Mr Jones. I was accosted by my employer, the father of the girls I was governess to. The result was this child.’

‘Oh, my dear girl,’ Karl wrapped his arms around her shoulders and drew her in. It was the last thing she’d expected and the most welcome. ‘Did he hurt you?’

‘Not really, other than the bruising on my arms where he held me down and the blood and pain when he... you know. I was a maiden.’

‘Poor lass, how awful for you. Did you report him?’

‘No. Well not until my condition became apparent to my employer’s wife. However, she denied it could have been her husband. She terminated my employment, saying I was a bad influence on her daughters.’

‘She knew. She would have to have known. People can hide from the truth, but on some level, they cannot escape it. How do you feel about this child, knowing it is his?’

‘I do not think of it as his. His part was brief. This is my baby. It will always be my baby. I am the one who creates it from my flesh.’

‘I am glad. The child is innocent in all this. And it is a gift, no matter how it came into being.’

‘You really think that? I thought you would be horrified.’

‘I am; but not at you or the child. Only at the bastard who hurt you and the way you were treated after. How could you think otherwise?’

She nodded her head and wondered how she could have thought otherwise. He was the kindest, gentlest man she’d ever met. And lunatic or not, she knew she was also falling in love with him.

‘So, you see, when you kissed me, for a moment, I felt like I was back there with him on top of me... and I was terrified. I knew it wasn’t him. Your kiss was nothing like the horrible kisses he forced on me as he tore at my nightdress. Even so, for a moment, I panicked.’

‘Understandable, perfectly understandable. I will not put you in that situation again.’

However, when he started them walking once more, he continued to keep his arm around her shoulder, comforting her with his warm strength. At the end of the promenade, they paused and looked aft over the Well and Poop Decks and beyond to the white wake that broke the blackness of the ocean.

Lizzie turned in his arms. ‘Karl, I would like you to kiss me again, please. I really want you to.’

He looked down into her eyes. And even though the darkness of the moonless night was only illuminated by the dim lights along the deck, she could see his uncertainty. So, she stood on tiptoe and placed her mouth on his.

Karl’s response was immediate and stunning. It was like a dam was opened and he kissed her with all the passionate intensity he had displayed the day before. But this time, she didn’t draw away in fear. This time, it felt natural and good and she gave herself over to it, enjoying the sweet innocence and passion of his lips.

When he pulled gently away and looked down at her again, his breathing irregular and forced, she smiled up at him. ‘See, no fear this time. I liked it. Will you kiss me again?’

He gave a little bark of laughter and shook his head. ‘You do not have to ask.’ And his mouth was on hers again, opening and encouraging hers to open, too. She allowed the strange vulnerability of it and only gave a little start when his tongue licked in to taste her. That move felt wicked, yet delightful, and she opened to him, wanting more of the passion that was building deep inside her. Karl deepened the kiss, devouring her mouth wildly; his fingers stroking her back wildly, beneath the cover of his jacket.

Breath ragged, Karl finally dragged himself away from her and leaned against the railing. ‘If I do not stop now, I am not sure I will be able to.’

‘You are not experienced with women.’ It was more a statement than a question.

‘Is it that obvious?’

‘Yes. But I like it. It just seems strange that a man as old as you say you are...’

‘Would be an innocent? I have never had much need for physicality. I like my food. That is about the extent of it. So there have been no women in my past; except for one hasty interlude in a storeroom at a party back in my Original.’

‘Original?’

‘That is what we call the bodies we were born with. Those bodies functioned normally. The cloned bodies, with their sterility, rarely experience passion. Should I say, experienced, in the past tense. Which for me was good, as my whole life revolved around my work.

‘It is because of my work, my research, in part, that humanity has been able to continue. I was involved in clone research back before the LGP.

‘That is how we measure time. The LGP was the turning point – the Last Great Plague. Nothing was the same after that. The population was further decimated and we had no way of continuing on without the use of clones.

‘Up until recently, we thought we only had nine lifetimes and after that, the race would end. So we started bringing in new life from the past. But then Jac met Cara and changed everything. Cara has been a catalyst for such regeneration in our world. She is amazing.’

Lizzie nodded and leaned in to rest her head on his shirtsleeve. He was cold and she felt guilty for taking his coat. Leaning in to him, she shared some of her body-heat.

‘She is very believable. Is she really from a hundred years into the future?’

‘The twenty-first century? Yes. She was a teacher of autistic children before being Retrieved. I doubt anyone but Jac would have Targeted her. We were very conservative back then and Cara was always asking why things had to be the way they were. She believes in change, and that was an anathema to us back then. We just wanted to stay the same so we could keep the chaos at bay. Batten down the hatches and soldier on. But she wouldn’t let us. Any of us. And because of her, we are alive again. Sometimes, painfully so.’ He stroked her arm as if reassuring himself she was real.

‘I cannot imagine such a calamity. For so many to die at one time. Terrible.’

‘It was just the last in a century of calamity we call the Second Dark Age.’

‘I am glad I will not live to see that time.’

‘If you come with me, you will live beyond that time. My world... it is beautiful. New Atlantis is the centre of the world government, which is called the “Gaian Confederacy.” It is built on the remains of the first Atlantis that rose again from the sea, not far from where we are now. It is classically beautiful, but with modern conveniences, like moving walkways for transport instead of wagons or cars... automobiles, horseless carriages. No one is in a hurry, because we have all the time in the world. We occupy our time as we choose and all our wants are met without the need for money.

‘I have a house up on the coast. It is far too big for me and I converted a portion of it into a laboratory; I do some of my work from there. The rest of the time, I work at the Medical Centre. My life is busy and worthwhile.’

‘But you have had no one to share it with?’

‘No. I have never needed that – up until now.’ He looked down at her and smiled. She felt her heart do a little dance and smiled back at him.

‘You would want me even though I carry another man’s child?’ she asked cautiously, thinking it was too good to be true.

‘As you said, this is your baby. As such, I would want it as I want you. But you must have time to decide. This is too soon. We have hardly met, but in New Atlantis there will be time for us to get to know each other better and you can decide if you wish to live with me then. Become my Bonded Mate.’

‘Bonded Mate?’

‘We do not marry formally. Well, we didn’t until recently. One of our number... a Researcher... fell in love with a girl from the early nineteenth century and for her he arranged a marriage. The minister was another Researcher who had spent most of his life in the early Christian era. Anyway, Rene married Livy and that has started a trend. Jane wanted a wedding then. And of course Julio could not deny her. Faith is talking about being next, but I am not sure how she will talk Luke into it. Luke is another Newcomer. He is from 1942 and was a soldier in the Second World War at the time.’

‘Second World War? When was the first?’

‘In a few years from now. 1914 until 1918. They called it, erroneously, “the war to end all wars.” It didn’t. It just opened the way for an even worse world war that... never mind, you do not need to know all that.’

‘I would like to be married. I do not think I would feel comfortable being with a man without vows being exchanged.’

‘I understand. If you would like to marry me that would be...’ Karl paused thoughtfully.

‘Good?’

‘Very good. I just had a thought but it is too soon. I cannot trust my judgement right now...’

‘What thought? Tell me!’

‘Captains can marry people.’

Lizzie felt the fear and excitement building. Could she do that, marry this man she hardly knew, a man who claimed to be from the future? Who may well be insane?

‘No. There was no record of any such wedding taking place on this maiden voyage...’ He corrected himself hurriedly.

‘Oh,’ she felt the disappointment keenly. Then she shook herself. This was madness, even thinking such a thing was possible.

‘But it can be arranged as soon as we get home. If you want...’ he sounded uncertain, a little lost.

‘I would like to marry you, Karl Langman. When and where is up to you.’

‘My name is Ontario. Karl Ontario. We take the last name of the state or province from which we came. I was Canadian. You would be Lizzie Kent, although if you married me you might change your name. It isn’t very clear, as marriage has not been part of our culture for hundreds of years. Livy took Rene’s name but Jane kept hers. However, that is because she thinks Santa Catarina is a mouthful. She is married to a Brazilian. You will meet them both when we go through the Portal. They are down in third class now, as is Cara’s Jac, Luke the soldier and his adopted son, Bart, who was also Retrieved from 1942. Bart was the boy I went to see this afternoon. He was beaten badly but he has had worse. He is almost eleven and this is his first mission. From what Pia was saying, he is doing a brilliant job winning the children over. We are hoping to rescue forty-eight of them.’

‘You are taking the children? What about their parents?’

Karl frowned and sighed, drawing her in closer so he could tuck her head under his chin. She could hear his voice rumble under her ear when he spoke. ‘That is one of the contentious parts of what we do. Some parents we will take if we feel they will handle the new world. If not, we will just rescue their children.’

‘That seems cruel.’

‘Some people do not adjust to our world. It is no kindness to take them there. And most parents would be happy to know that their children were being saved from death and given a chance at a good life, even if it is without them.’

‘I suppose...’

They stood together watching the stars, the black ocean and the white wake for a long time.

Chapter Nineteen

Pia

It had been a good day, except for the beating poor Bart had received. Luckily, he wasn't badly injured and he'd been up and about, back at his job, less than half an hour after he was knocked down. She had made him go to bed directly after tea, though, and had sat at his side, stroking his head until he finally fell asleep.

His last sleepy words still echoed in her mind. 'We should take Marco. He's a good guy...'

And Bart was right. From all she had seen of Marco, it did appear that he was a 'good guy.' However, that didn't mean they could Target him. If they took every good person on the ship, there would be a noticeable discrepancy in the number of victims. And history said that there were hundreds of people still on the decks when the ship went down and many more in the icy waters. If they took everyone, then history would be noticeably changed. And that they couldn't do.

So Marco was not a Target. And that thought started an ache in her chest she couldn't explain. Why should she care? She didn't know him. She'd barely exchanged more than a few words with him. They were ships passing in the night. That was all.

Even so, as time ticked on and she knew that it was drawing close to eleven o'clock, she felt drawn to meet him as he'd asked. After all, he had helped them at risk to himself. He deserved that much from her.

So when the others came in for the night with the word that there would be a meeting in the morning when they were allowed to return to their cabins, she donned her coat and scarf and headed out onto the deck.

Pia didn't see any crew as she made her way out the companionway onto the Well Deck and then took the short flight of steps to the Poop Deck. It was cold up there at this hour. She shivered and tightened her scarf around her head and neck. Then she scurried into the shelter Marco had told her about and crouched down to keep hidden.

What would happen to her if she was found on deck after curfew? She didn't know. But she didn't want to find out.

After what felt like hours, she heard footsteps approaching. She held her breath and hoped it was not a crew member discovering her hiding place.

Luckily, when she looked up she saw it was Marco, his white grin lighting up the night. He dropped down to her side and sandwiched in beside her so that if anyone passed it would look as if he was there alone. He wrapped the blanket he was carrying around their shoulders and snuggled in.

It felt so different to be close to a warm, hard-bodied man. Except for the children, she could not remember a time in the hundreds of years of her life since the LGP that she'd been this close to another human being. She could smell his male scent, subtle but intoxicating. She had to fight the urge to sniff deeper and draw his scent into her lungs.

'I did not think you would come,' he said softly. 'I am late. The last patron left right on eleven and we had to clear the table.'

'I did not know what the time was. I have no watch.'

'Why did you come?' His voice seemed tentative. All his usual charm and confidence were missing.

'You asked me to. And you helped us. We are grateful.'

'You did not need to come out of gratitude. I said I would understand.'

'I... wanted to come.' She suddenly knew the truth of her words as she said them. She did want to come and spend time with him, even though they had no future, even though he was too handsome by far to be interested in someone like her. He'd asked her to come and she'd wanted to come.

'I am glad. You are not scared of me now?'

'I was not scared of you before!' she said indignantly.

'Yes you were. You were shy and scared like a little mouse.' He was teasing her, and the laughter in his voice made her smile.

'Does that make you the cat playing with his catch?'

The chocking sound was almost too loud. He hushed and didn't speak again until he had himself under control. 'Do you want me to play with you?'

She sighed heavily and rested her forehead on her drawn up knees. 'I am not used to playing. I have never been played with. You are better off finding another mouse if you want to play.'

She felt his hand on her hair, stroking it gently.

'I do not want another mouse. I think you see me as something I am not, Sweet Petra. I do not have trouble getting women that is true. They come easily, often when I do not want them. You are different. I have known that from the first moment we met. I do not want to play cat-and-mouse games with you. I want to know you... and I want you to know me.'

'In the biblical sense?'

‘I do not understand...’ he said, the frown readily identifiable in his voice.

‘In the Bible, to know someone means to have sex with them.’

She could hear the surprised intake of breath and then the slow exhale. ‘No, not in the biblical sense. As people. I have not been friends with a woman... ever. I would be your friend.’

That thought filled her with a fierce joy. He didn’t want her as another notch on his bed head. He wanted to know her as a person. How strange and wonderful was that concept?

‘Then tell me about yourself, Mr Cat. Tell me why you left home at fourteen to see the world.’

‘Ah, sweet Mousie, that is a sad story that you might not want to hear.’ She heard the sadness in his voice and the resistance to going there. And she wanted him to go there.

‘Tell me, if it is not too painful.’

For a long moment he was silent. Then, as if he’d made up his mind, he cleared his voice and started to talk. His deep, gentle baritone lulled her, as the words tore at her with their sadness.

‘My father was a good man who tried to do his best for his family. But, working in a factory in Milano was not the way to become rich and so our family struggled, often not having enough to eat. I joined him in the factory as soon as I was old enough, doing jobs that were dangerous... sometimes deadly. But I was lucky or quick. I do not know which. And I survived.

‘Then the men started to grow angry with their treatment and their wages, which were not enough to feed their families, and they went on a demonstration. I wanted to go, but I had to stay home and help my mother. If I had gone, I might have been able to save my papa. But instead, he died, shot by soldiers sent in by the government to break the demonstration up. I was thirteen, almost fourteen.

‘My mother married the factory foreman soon after. I was angry with her for so quickly getting over my father. And I was angry with the man who thought he could replace my father. I was angry with everyone back then – especially myself. The new husband tried to beat me into line, but it only made me worse. In the end, my mother sent me away. I have not seen her or my brothers and sisters since. I send money, though, to help out.’

‘You were so young to be on your own.’

‘Sí, but I was not the only one. Orphans crowded the streets like rats, and I became a very clever rat. Then, I decided to leave Milano and see the world. And rather than be a rat, I became a bell boy or a scullery hand. Eventually, I

became a waiter, and because I pick up languages fast, I found I could go anywhere and find work. So I moved from one country to the next, never staying anywhere more than a year.'

'It sounds lonely.'

'Yes.'

'I am sorry.'

She felt him shrug beside her. 'Life is lonely, even when you are surrounded by people.'

Pia wanted to deny his words but their truth hung heavily between them. Did she feel lonely surrounded by people? Yes, yes she did. She had been lonely ever since she woke up alone in Stravenger after the LGP.

'Tell me of your life, sweet mouse.'

'I have no special story to tell. My family were all killed in a plague that swept through our town. I worked as a nurse and then with children, as I told you this morning. And now I am here.'

'Where you are needed.'

'Yes.'

'It is good to be needed. But what are your needs? Who do you need?'

'No one. I have no needs. I am happy as I am. I need no one.'

'Tut, tut, that is a lie. You do need people. We all do.'

'I do not. I can get by on my own. I always have.'

'Getting by. Surviving. It sounds... I was going to say sad, but then I realised it sounds like my life. I am not sure I see my life as sad.'

Pia felt tears sting her eyes and she hastily wiped at them with her gloved hand. 'Life is just life. It is not sad or happy; it just is.'

'Tell me the happiest memory you have.'

'Rolling down a grassy hillside with my brother on a hot summer's day,' she answered immediately. 'It was so hot we had gone swimming in the river, and it was icy because it carried the thaw from the Fiordlands. I think we fell and rolled at first by accident. Then we enjoyed it so much we kept going up to the top of the hill and rolling down it again. I was black and blue afterwards and my mother was furious with us. But it was such fun. If you try to say something when you are rolling like that it comes out all wobbly like this.' She made her voice vibrate and wobble until Marco laughed.

'I remember riding on my papa's shoulders through a marketplace feeling like the king of the world,' Marco said, after he stopped laughing. 'My papa was a

big man, tall like me, and so he was head and shoulders higher than most people. With me on his shoulders, I could almost touch the sky.'

For a moment, they sat enjoying their memories. 'I remember the first child I helped. She was lost in the forest and my partner and I were looking for her. We thought we would reach her before she got too deeply into the forest but we were delayed. When we found her, she was so happy she threw herself into my arms and I swung her around and around until we were both dizzy. Then we brought her to... safety. Now she is much loved and very happy.'

'Your partner?'

'We work in teams, for safety. Not usually the same person every time. That time it was my first rescue and I was with Ca... Hilda. You know Hilda. She is the pretty blonde with the very tall husband.'

'Ah yes, as distinct from the very pretty red head with the English husband.'

'Right. That's Jane.'

'You say that like Hilda and Jane are a different species from you. Or they belong to a club that excludes you.'

'They are very pretty; beautiful, in fact. It is an exclusive club.'

'You are pretty, too, my sweet mouse. Do not discount yourself so readily.'

'I am pretty enough, but nothing special. Not very pretty like Jane or Hilda or even Eil... Mary.'

Marco shifted around to the side so he could look her in the eye. His gentle fingers lifted her chin so she could do nothing but meet his incisive gaze. 'What you look like makes no difference. I should know that better than most. Your beauty shines out through your eyes and it makes you lovelier to me than either Hilda or Jane. '

'I'm nothing special,' she said softly.

'You are to me. I can have almost any woman I want. But I want you, sweet mouse. Does that not make you special?'

'You have tickets on yourself, as Jane would say, Mr Cat,' she said indignantly, trying to pull away.

'That saying means I am arrogant? Maybe, but I just speak the truth. It is not a sign of specialness that I can have any woman. I did nothing to get this face or body. I inherited... that is the word, is it not, inherited? I did not earn them. It is nothing to be good looking. It is more important to be sweet and kind and genuine.'

'Nice,' she said with a shudder.

'Sí, nice. There is nothing wrong with nice. I am not nice and I wish I were.'

‘I think you are nice,’ she offered shyly.

‘With you, maybe I am. With you, I want to be nice. Can I kiss you, sweet Petra? Would that make me not nice?’

She drew back a little at the shock of the request. She wasn’t sure if this was part of the game he was playing or something else. But in this moment she didn’t care. More than anything she wanted to be kissed by this handsome Italian.

Something in her face must have given him the answer he was looking for because he moved slowly toward her, lifting her chin up just a little more so he could align his mouth with hers. Then he was kissing her deeply, and the thrill of it thrummed through her system like the vibration of a guitar-string being plucked. Her whole body vibrated and sang out its joy.

She pulled away with a start, terrified by what she was feeling. Terrified by what this man was starting to mean to her.

‘Too much?’ he asked shakily. She was pleased to note that he too was moved by what had happened between them.

‘Yes. Too much, too soon. I can’t... not with you... you cannot know... I... I am sorry; I have to go.’

She tried to climb to her feet, but his hand tightened on her arm and held her in place. ‘I am sorry; I will not do it again. Please stay. Do not leave me yet.’ His voice pleaded with her as her heart pleaded with her. And uneasily she gave in and relaxed back into her place. But now she kept as much space between them as she could.

‘Was that so bad?’ he asked, his obvious concern in every word.

‘Not bad. But I cannot.’

‘Do you belong to another?’

‘No, no of course not. It is not that. You... you and I will go our separate ways in a few days. We will never see each other again. I cannot start something now... when it will end so soon.’

‘But it does not have to end. I will stay in New York. I will court you formally. Then we will marry and I will take you to see the Wild West.’

Her shock was extreme. It tore all thoughts from her mind. All that remained were his intentions. He wanted to court her. He wanted to marry her. How cruel was such an idea when she knew his fate?

‘I cannot! Do not think such things. This is madness; I must go.’ This time he did not try to stop her when she climbed to her feet.

Then she was running across the cold deck, away from the first man she had ever wanted, away from the intensity of feeling she had lost the ability to

withstand.

When had she felt like this before? In her Original? It was that long since she had felt these feelings. But even then, she could not remember ever feeling this needy, this desperate to be with someone, to kiss and hold and join with someone.

No, it couldn't be. She had to finish her task and return to her world. And Marco would... die. What other choice was there?

Chapter Twenty

Eilish

Friday, 12 April 1912, TITANIC

After a filling breakfast of porridge, ham and eggs, fresh bread and marmalade, and several strong cups of coffee, the eight of them roamed the decks until they were given permission to go below to their cabin. The young lad who was their steward was friendly, helpful and quick to let them know when inspection was over so they could return.

Once in cabin 107, two people sitting on each bunk, the meeting started.

‘First, I received word just a few minutes ago from Teddy, our steward, that Eilish is needed up in first class. They have located another pregnant woman, a recently wed lady, it would seem. The guys aren’t sure how to handle it,’ Jac started.

Eilish felt her heart lift. Finally, she was going to get to see Max again and she had a legitimate reason to do so. ‘When will I go?’

‘The note said for dinner. How can you have dinner up there? You’ll stand out like a sore thumb with those upper-crust elite.’

‘Max has one of my dresses. I will look well enough and we will dine in the À la Carte Restaurant away from the bulk of the elite.’

‘Good enough. The note said they will invite the young couple to join them for dinner. It seems Carter, Hugo, Finn and Jean Pierre will be joining you.’

‘Excellent. It will give me a chance to find out how things are going with them. I am assuming they are all on board, so to speak.’ There was a titter of amusement around the group.

‘Right, then that is sorted. Cara, what were the results of your trip to second last night?’

‘Good. Karl had laid the groundwork with three of the ladies and also discovered the stewardess is pregnant. It’s a regular breeding ground up there! I took them all aside in Karl’s stateroom and laid it out for them. I think some are still a little shell-shocked, but I think I’ve convinced them that it’s worth considering if the alternative is death. Karl will handle any questions they might have and as Lucy will be with us; it will make it easier getting them all to the extraction point, wherever that might be.’ She gave Luke and Julio a playful

glare. They all knew the men had been scouring the ship for a suitable spot but were still undecided about the exact extraction point.

‘Oh, and just a little grist for the gossip mill – our doctor has fallen foul of the love bug. He's down with it bad and I couldn't be happier.’

‘Cruel woman,’ Jac said with a smile. ‘Who's the lucky girl?’

‘One of the pregnant ladies, luckily; otherwise, it might be a bit dicey bringing her along.’

‘Why can't we rescue a few worthy individuals? It is not fair that we are only Targeting pregnant women and children! It's prejudice!’ Pia exploded vehemently, before collapsing into a horrified little ball.

‘Not you, too?’ Jane announced with a chuckle. ‘Who is he? One of the Swedes?’

‘No. It is no one. I just meant... it is not fair that we leave good, decent people here when we have it in our power to save them!’ Pia was almost in tears and the others exchanged troubled looks.

‘Marco,’ Bart provided with a grin, as he threw a ball of squashed up paper from one hand to the other. ‘It's Marco. He helped me yesterday. He likes Pia.’

‘He doesn't!’ Pia interrupted quickly, but her tone made a lie of her words.

‘He helped Bart, I say he deserves a place with us,’ Luke said firmly, giving the fair boy at his side a gentle shove so he was put off his next catch. The boy scowled good-naturedly at his father as Luke went on as if nothing had happened. ‘And I'd like to bring in a couple more stewards other than this pregnant girl for logistical purposes. Our steward is a good kid, bright and flexible. He'll do well in New Atlantis. And he can run resistance when we're trying to get the kids where we need 'em. If we have a few coming down from first, then we might need one of theirs as well.’

‘I concur,’ Julio said. ‘One of the problems we are having with the extraction point is being too visible. If we have crew members with us, we have a legitimate reason to be wherever we are.’

‘Eilish, find out about a suitable steward while you are up in first tonight,’ Jac said. ‘And unless there is anyone who has a strong reason why we shouldn't include this Italian waiter, speak up now or he's in.’

Eilish turned to look at Pia, curled up in a tight, anxious ball at the back of the bottom bunk across from her. The moment Jac gave his approval, her body relaxed and, if she wasn't mistaken, let out a soft sob.

She wasn't mistaken, because Jane heard it too and drew the girl over and wrapped her arm around her. ‘Did you think we wouldn't want him to come if he

has your heart? Are any of us that cruel? Of course Marco will be with us. He is an open, adventuresome type; he'll probably make a great Retriever.'

'I did not feel it was right to put him forward,' Pia said with a sob. 'I do not know what is wrong with me. I do not cry.'

'Join the ever-expanding club, dear girl,' Eilish said with a grimace. 'You will get used to it after a while. I did not know what hit me in those first few days with Max. I still feel like I am someone else. Someone who is madly happy, and yet strangely distraught, when I am away from him.'

'Sounds familiar,' Julio put in, leaning down over the edge of the bunk so he could look at Jane and give Pia a little pat on the foot. 'At least you have chosen someone who is almost as handsome as me. It shows you have good taste.'

Jane kicked up with her foot and grazed the side of his impudent face. 'He's better looking than you, mate.' Her Australian accent suddenly more exaggerated. 'You're lucky Pia saw him first or you might be missing a wife about now.'

Pia gave a little sniffling laugh as Julio pulled an outraged face and tried to grab Jane's long leg as her skirt rucked up to her thighs.

'Play time is over children. We have more decisions to make.' Jac called them back to order sternly.

Julio disappeared back to the top bunk and Jane and Pia became suitably restrained. However, Eilish watched Pia's face, and as the reality of the decision began to settle in, she began to glow. In that moment, she was every bit as beautiful as the girl who sat next to her. So this was what Pia had been missing all along. It was like she was shucking off a blanket of loneliness and distrust, and underneath, she was a bright, burning flame of quiet beauty.

Eilish had only glimpsed Marco in passing that first morning, but if he had this effect on their girl then he was definitely worth Retrieving. All she hoped was that he felt for her what she obviously felt for him. Handsome men could be superficial, playing with the affection of women with no serious intent. It might be worth checking out just to be sure.

'Right now, we have made contact with all the children and evaluated the parents. Eilish, your results?'

'No go for the O'Halloran parents. They would not be happy with us and the little ones will be better off without them. They will be easy enough to separate from the parents, as that pair barely notice where their kids are half the time anyway. The O'Shea's are different. She is lovely and I think she would make the shift successfully, if only to care for her children. Unfortunately, the father is

a bigoted oaf and might cause problems if we took him. I am not sure the wife would go without him, though. Then there's the young couple who we didn't expect. She is about to drop any time. I think they are both suitable.'

The list of possible candidates went on for some time, each person discussing those within their designated group.

Finally Jac tallied up the list. 'That's sixty-five, including Freddy the steward from third, the six from second, and possibly six, including a steward from first and Marco. Did I miss anyone?'

Everyone shook their heads.

'Good, so that just leaves extraction. What are the possibilities at this stage, gentlemen?'

'We need somewhere that's big enough to hold this number of people, that's easily accessible for all three classes and deserted at that time of night,' Luke said. 'We're considering an empty cargo hold on G Deck forward, but that'll be flooded shortly after impact, and as we have to wait till the ship stops before we activate the Portal, that might prove problematic. The squash court is another possibility. It's accessible to all classes, it's big enough and empty at that time of night. But it may begin to flood fairly quickly after the water-tight doors are closed. But, from the records, there may be a fifteen-minute leeway there. Worth considering.'

'Then there's the third class General Room. It's closed up early, although the next door smoking room stays open until eleven. We would need to get the key because it'll be locked up for the night and it isn't easily accessible to the other classes. They would need to come down to E Deck, cross over into third and go up the aft stairs. Going across the decks is too chancy; especially after the ship hits. But I think we should have everyone inside and ready to go before the collision has occurred and the ship comes to a standstill. There are a few other possibilities, but at present none of them works well enough.'

'What about the second class Dining Saloon? I was up there last night and access is easy. The room is locked up after dinner clean-up, which is by ten, but Lucy might be able to get us the key,' suggested Cara.

'I haven't seen that area.' Luke frowned as he thought. 'We've mainly been focusing on third class areas, although the squash courts are technically first class but they're in the third class area of the ship. How easy is it to cross into second from third?'

'One 'crew only' door next to the stairwell. Then it's just one flight up. At that time of night there'll be few people around.'

‘I think it is less likely to cause a stir if second and first passengers were found in third class than if a flock of third class children are seen in second.’ Eilish piped up. ‘These stewards are fanatical about the rules, except for a few odd ones here and there. If we run into stewards in second who see the kids and set up an alarm, we will not be able to quiet them down, with our own stewards running interference or not.’

‘Yes, I am inclined to agree,’ Jac said. ‘Look into second class Dining. Maybe get Karl’s evaluation, and maybe Lucy’s. But have a fall-back plan.’

After a little more business, Jac called the meeting to an end. They all breathed a sigh of relief. It was a complex and problem-thwart mission, and they were all on tender-hooks because of it. Thinking about all the Ts that needed crossing was time-consuming and stressful, especially when life and death evaluations of possible Targets had to be included.

‘Right, then, we will convene again on Sunday morning for last-minute updates, changes, etc. But we have a plan, ladies and gentleman, and everything is going to plan so far. Let’s keep it that way. If Bart can stay out of the way of flying fists, we should be fine.’ Jac threw a cheeky grin at the lad sitting beside his father on the opposite bunk.

The boy smiled back sheepishly, his makeshift ball finally coming to a standstill. ‘If he’d taken me on by himself, I’d have nailed him good. He cheated!’

‘Bullies do that. I thought you, of all people, would have realised that by now. Stay clear of them. And good job with the children. We would not be as far ahead with them as we are if not for you.’ Jac’s praise was like water to a drowning man. Bart lapped it up and Luke glowed with pride.

Eilish was pleased that Jac had singled the boy out for praise. Sometimes it was easy to take Bart for granted; he was such a little professional. However, he was still a child, and needed the verbal approval of adults he respected, just so he felt he truly belonged.

The meeting broke up and they all went to their posts. Eilish dawdled behind so she could have a quiet word with Pia as they walked back to their own cabin.

‘Are you all right now?’ she asked, as they closed the cabin door behind them. She didn’t want to intrude on the very private Pia, and yet she felt the need to share what was happening to her with a woman who might understand.

‘Yes, although I feel like someone who has just been given an undeserved gift and has no idea what to do with it.’

‘Why would you say undeserved? You have been an excellent Retriever in the last six years, everyone says so. Why should you not get to be happy when it is within our power to give that to you? He does feel the same way about you, doesn't he?’

‘I think so. He... he said he would stay in New York and court me and then take me to the Wild West when we married. It was quite a shock when he said that. He could have anyone he wanted, why would he so suddenly decide on me?’

‘Because you are pretty and sweet and there is something about you that men find appealing. I do not know what to call it, but it brings out the protectiveness in them. I have seen it work on our men, even though they are all taken.’

‘I do not want to be protected! I can look after myself.’

‘I know you can. It is the impression of vulnerability that is appealing, not the reality. Please do not take it the wrong way. I always seem to say the wrong thing to you. I am sorry. I just wanted to compare notes. I have never felt this way before. It is all very strange and unsettling. The men have been through it, Jac and Julio. But they are men and it is different for them; it has to be. I just wondered what it feels like for you.’

Pia looked at her in astonishment. ‘You do not always say the wrong thing. You are very good with people, very good with your words. How could you think otherwise?’

‘You get all prickly sometimes. I just thought I offended you, somehow.’

‘Am I prickly? I do not mean to be. I am just used to my own company. I do not work well with others. I will try harder.’

‘No, don't! Now I feel worse. You have nothing to try harder about. Look, forget it, this was a bad idea.’

‘No, please Eilish, I want to try. Let us sit down and I will try to put into words what I am feeling about Marco, about everything, because it is not just him. It is as if he has unlocked a long-dead part of me and now I am feeling in every area of my life and it is not all good.’

They sat on opposite bunks and leaned in toward each other as Eilish replied ‘That is it. I know exactly what you mean. It is like a door has been unlocked, or a dam unblocked, and all these forgotten feelings pour out. And I do not know how to handle them anymore. I used to, as a child. But that is so long ago; I cannot recall. And of course the sexual feelings are totally new to me. I was prepubescent before the LGP. I never experienced sexual feelings in my Original.’ Eilish felt herself blush at the direction the conversation had taken.

‘I did. And I had sex quite often back then – I was even married for a while. But sex was nothing great. I think it was probably me. I just wasn’t into it that much. It was more that I thought I should be, because every girl I knew was. So I did it. And well... nothing really. That is what I am scared about with Marco. What if it is nothing with him too? I do not want to disappoint him. He is so experienced with women. If I am a cold fish, he might be turned off by me.’

‘Has he kissed you?’

‘Yes.’

‘What was that like?’

‘Scary and out of control.’

‘But good?’

‘Yes. I did not want him to stop. He is very good at what he does and I wish he was not so experienced.’

‘Max was not experienced at all. In fact, he was raised to think sex is dirty and bad so he had never even pleased himself. It was the-blind-leading-the-blind with us. But at least I knew the theory, and the passion just exploded between us and did the rest. It is incredible and I am weak from wanting him twenty-four hours a day. It is madness, but good madness.’

Pia was blushing at her frankness and Eilish felt she might have gone too far. But then the sweet, serious girl smiled shyly.

‘I feel like that too. I cannot think straight. My body is hot and sensitive, and if I accidentally touch it, a flash flood of pleasure washes over me. I couldn’t sleep last night. We were up on the deck until all hours under a blanket. And even though it was only one kiss, it felt world-shattering. And I had to get away because I thought he would have to be left behind and that we could never be together. Now... now I am happy and scared. I have to find some way to tell him, but I am not good with such things.’

‘Do not put yourself down so much. You are as good as any of us. Convincing people that we are time travellers from the future is not easy. The children are so much less trouble.’

‘Yes they are. Thank you.’

‘For what?’

‘Talking like this to me. I feel a little better about what is happening now. You see, I never thought I would meet someone I felt like this about. I thought I was too damaged. So when it did, I did not trust it. Now, hearing what it is like for you, I feel more confident to go with it.’

‘How are you damaged?’ Eilish asked gently.

For a moment, she wondered whether Pia would reply. Then she gave a little nod, as if giving herself permission, and started to talk.

‘I was in my twenties when the LGP took place, living in a village in Norway that had been the home of my family for generations. It was once a thriving city, but by the end of the Dark Age it was not much more than a village of white wooden houses around the harbour side. When I woke up to find everyone dead, I thought I was alone in the world. Something broke inside me in those weeks before I was found. I do not even know what it was that broke.

‘I felt rejected. That sounds wrong, but that was what it was like; as if I was left out of something that everyone else had been included in. That I was not good enough even to join them in death. I wanted to kill myself, but I felt as if that would make me the uninvited guest at the party. I did not know what I had done to deserve my fate, but I decided it must have been something very bad to be so excluded. I went mad, I suppose, and never fully recovered. Even now I wake up each morning and my first thought is to check that there are others alive nearby.’

‘You are not alone in that last habit. One of the best things about sleeping with Max is that I am always aware of him there, alive beside me. I do not wake up with that fear anymore.’

‘You feel like that too?’ Pia’s face was a picture of stunned happiness, as if she had discovered a miracle.

‘Of course. I imagine many of us Old Timers feel that way. All of us woke up to find ourselves alone, Pia. You may have just been alone longer than the rest of us. For me, living in a city, I found the few other survivors pretty quickly. Faith told me that she was alone in her little fishing village until a man from another village up the coast passed by in his boat looking for survivors. Most of us do not talk about those times because they are still too painful to remember, but maybe that is wrong. Maybe if we talked about it more, we would realise that we are not as different as we think we are. And maybe we could let our ghosts finally sleep.’

Pia’s eyes filled with tears and she brushed them away absently. ‘You might be right. I feel like a load has lifted off my shoulders just by telling you. I didn’t think anyone felt like me. Everyone seems to cope so well, even back then. It always felt like I was the only broken one.’

‘Not broken, just a little dented around the edges. Maybe now you can smooth out the dents and start to really live with Marco’s help.’

The smile Pia gave her was like the sun breaking through on a cloudy day. She was radiant.

Chapter Twenty-One

Lizzie

‘If it’s true, I will never see Freddy or my parents again,’ Rose said with a sad little sigh, as she leaned over the railing on B Deck promenade and looked down on the open decks below.

It was late afternoon and they had just shared tea in the library. It had been as different an occasion today from yesterday as it was possible to be. The five of them had sat quietly sipping tea, deep in thought. Even Trudy had seemed troubled and reflective. It was only now that they were out on deck without Karl that their worries seemed ready to be exposed.

‘If it is true, this ship will be gone and so many people dead.’ Felicity gave a little shiver.

‘I tried to tell Oliver that the ship was going to sink, but he told me not to talk rot and would hear no more.’

‘Oh Trudy, you know you were not to mention this to him. What other reaction did you expect to get?’ Felicity scolded.

‘I know, I know, but it is hard to keep something like this from one’s husband. I know he is not perfect... All right, I will be honest; I know he is not likeable, but he is my husband. For better or for worse, you know. And it feels a little like I’m murdering him by omission.’

‘So you tried and failed; be content with that. You did what you could. And maybe this is all balderdash and we will arrive in New York just as planned.’ Even as she said this, Lizzie knew that there was no chance that they would be arriving in New York. Somehow, in the last day, she had come to believe what Karl had told them without doubt.

It was the stories of New Atlantis that had convinced her. He had such an easy way of telling them, as if they truly were memories of his past. They were far too elaborate to have been the concoction of an insane mind. And Cara’s nonsense support only made his position stronger.

‘Is it awful of me to hope we do not land in New York?’ Trudy asked tentatively.

‘Not at all. The idea of New Atlantis is very appealing. And I would much rather believe it exists than believe that Karl is a mad man.’ Lizzie gave a little, jerky laugh.

‘You are in love with him, aren’t you?’ Felicity asked.

‘Yes, I do believe I am. Is it too sudden do you think? I only met him Wednesday, and yet it feels like years since then.’

‘I do believe in love at first sight. I have never experienced it myself. My feelings for Maurice are much more pragmatic. He was a good man who offered for me, and as there was no one I liked better at the time, and I was rather interested in the travel marriage to him would include, I said yes. Nevertheless, I do believe people can meet and fall helplessly in love at first sight.’

‘I came to love Freddy as I watched him work with the natives in the Congo. It was never a grand passion.’ Rose sighed again, and Lizzie noticed a tear at the corner of her eye.

Lizzie placed a gentle hand on her shoulder. ‘Freddy will live on in his child, Rose, just think of that. And he would want you to be safe. Why else did he send you home when he found out you were with child?’

‘I know... I know... but I will miss him terribly.’

‘Let us not dwell on what we may lose. Let us think about what we might be gaining. New Atlantis sounds wonderful. Karl has told me such stories.’

‘It does sound amazing, doesn’t it?’ Rose perked up a little. ‘To think that they have no need of ships like this. That they can move through space in a blink of an eye from one side of the world to the other.’

‘And no disease or illness. To be able to live indefinitely in those clowns.’ Trudy clapped her hands like a little girl.

‘Clones, Trudy. Karl explained cloning to me. It is very interesting. To think that inside a little drop of my blood is a blue print of every aspect of who I am, right down to my preference for using my left hand rather than my right. And that they can build a whole new body from that blue print, not in nine months like we are doing now, but in a month – fully grown to adulthood. It is incredible.’

‘Is it too incredible, do you think?’ Felicity ventured. ‘Are we being too gullible, letting ourselves be drawn into the possibility of this world?’

‘Does it hurt to imagine it if it turns out not to be true? It will provide a wonderful tale to tell our grandchildren in years to come. We sailed on the maiden voyage of the grand Titanic with people who thought they were from the future and believed the ship was going to sink. What a laugh we will all have then.’ Lizzie gave a little giggle. ‘I am enjoying imagining that world. It is better than reading a romance novel to while away the hours.’

‘True. It is something to think about, isn’t it?’ Trudy pulled at her hat that was being dislodged by the wind. None of the others had worn hats because the wind

made it a precarious activity. However, Oliver insisted Trudy maintain the proprieties, and so she wore her hat outside and bore the consequences.

‘How is your little stewardess holding up? She cannot talk to people as we can with each other,’ Felicity asked Lizzie.

‘She looks very drawn and serious; not the smiling lass she was the first day. I have told her she can talk to me about it all if she needs to. I have to wonder if she feels it is her duty to tell someone about what is going to happen.’

‘But they will think she is mad. Who would believe her?’

‘Precisely. I think that will be what stops her. However, she has more of a duty to this ship than we do. It must be extra hard for her.’

‘We will try to support her a little, shall we?’ Rose suggested stoutly.

‘Yes, I think we should. Safety in numbers, as it were. If we all stick together, we will at least not feel like raving lunatics, even if others might see us as such.’

The four of them gave a little laugh, each wondering just how far from the truth that statement might be.

Max

The quiet was getting to him. Maybe he needed to go out on deck for some fresh air. But Eilish might arrive while he was gone, and he might miss valuable time with her. His note had said to come up for dinner and she knew she had to get dressed beforehand. She might arrive any time.

Max had set Hughes to keep him posted on news via the network of stewards they had established in each class. It was all rather like espionage, if you could escape the fact that they were not spying so much as formulating an escape plan. Each piece of the plan had to work or the whole thing would come crashing down on all their heads. And the days were passing so fast. It was already Friday evening. That left two days for everything to be put in place.

Funny, when he thought that way, time did seem to be passing far too quickly. Yet, when he thought about Eilish, then it felt like time was dragging its heels like a reluctant school boy.

The sudden knock on the door had him jerking to his feet in an instant. He spun around to see Eilish, dressed in her white shirt and black skirt, hustling into the room, closely followed by Hughes.

His heart exploded in his chest. At last, she was here. Part of him thought she never would be. Part of him still considered her some wonderful dream that he’d

soon awaken from.

But not now. In this moment, she was real. And her pale cheeks were flushed, as she gave a delighted little squeal and flew into his arms.

‘Oh dear, that was a close one. Some snooty woman just saw us in the passageway and demanded to know who I was and what I was doing here. Hughes said I was an off-duty matron sent from second class to see to a lady. I am sure she wasn’t convinced; however, she let it go. My, I now know what it means to have your heart in your mouth!’

Hughes closed the door behind them and gave a cheery smile too. His moustache seemed to arc upwards with the grin. ‘That was Mrs Dallwinkle. She is the resident busybody. Hopefully, there will be no repercussions. I don't think she got a close look at the young lady.’

‘I will deal with it if there are repercussions, Hughes, you need not worry. Thank you for your assistance in this. I am very grateful.’

‘Think nothing of it, sir. It has been a bit of excitement in my day. This job can be lacking in excitement sometimes, I must admit.’

‘There is more than enough excitement coming...’ Max caught himself from going on and grimaced. Eilish nodded her head, reassuring him his mistake was not a disaster.

‘Actually, Hughes, if you enjoy excitement, there might be more afoot if you cared to be involved.’ Eilish smiled at Max’s consternation.

‘More than happy to oblige. Just ring the bell and I will be with you in a jiffy.’ With that the steward bowed his way out the door.

As soon as the door closed, Max swept his love into his arms and ravished her mouth. It was the only word to describe the full-on assault on their senses that left them both breathless and laughing at its end.

‘You have missed me then?’ Eilish said, with a gasping little laugh when they finally broke apart.

‘Missed you? My good woman, I have been going insane here without you. I had even started to wonder whether you were real. That maybe I fabricated you out of a lifetime of thwarted sexual desire.’

‘What time is dinner?’

‘I have arranged a table for eight o’clock.’

‘Good. It has just gone six. It will take me an hour to get ready. That leaves us an hour to prove that I am quite real. Let us start in the bath. I have been having my own fantasies about that bathtub. You have no idea the Spartan conditions I

have been living in down in steerage. I have done no more than top and tail myself since I left you Wednesday morning.'

'I will draw a bath for my lady immediately then. I have had my own fantasies about you in that tub myself.'

'Not with me alone in there, I hope.'

'Why of... are you suggesting I wash your back?'

'No, I am suggesting you hop in the bath with me. It is big enough, I presume?'

'I... I would think so,' Max couldn't believe Eilish was serious. The idea of bathing together seemed scandalous.

'Come on, time is a-wasting. I have information to convey and it would be just as easy to combine two or three activities in one to save time: bath, sex and talk...'

By the time they had played in the bath, talked and made passionate love, they were ready for dinner. Hughes had hung Eilish's dress out for her and she took it into the bathroom to change. When she reappeared, dressed in her oriental finery, peacock feathers atop a rather natural looking concoction of curls, she pirouetted for him.

'Do I look suitably first class, having not drawn on the services of a maid?' she asked.

The flow of the oriental-style, blue gown was such that it would take an expert eye to see that she was not in stays and Max appreciated the soft, natural curves he could discern under the silky fabric with his lover's intimate perspective.

'You look ravishing but totally respectable. No one would ever guess you had just come up from the bowels of the ship. But,' he turned her around and scooped up a stray length of black curl that had missed being ensnared. He poked it in behind the peacock feather before dropping a kiss behind her ear. 'I am glad you left me some small thing to do. There, now you are perfect.'

'As are you, my darling; so very debonair and sophisticated. I'm thinking James Bond at this moment.'

Max frowned in confusion. 'James Bond?'

Eilish kissed his cheek and gave a delighted little laugh. 'A fictional character of the latter part of this century. A very cool, sexy spy from Her Majesty's Secret Service. All you need is a martini, shaken, not stirred, and you would be perfect.'

His frown didn't ease. 'But one never shakes a martini. It bruises the gin.'

Eilish tipped her head to the side as if she was thinking. ‘Really? I was sure I got that right. Ah well, I am not an expert on twentieth century pop culture. I will check with Luke. I have no cosmetics, does it matter?’

‘You look better without. I quite forgot how beautiful you are.’

She smiled at him. ‘You are prejudiced.’

‘I am.’ He kissed her tenderly on the lips.

‘About Hughes. It was decided at a meeting this morning to invite several stewards to join us. It will give our movement around the ship legitimacy. Do you know Hughes’ situation – family and such? He seems the sort who would fit in with us well enough.’

Max felt a surge of surprised delight. ‘He would indeed. I have been wishing since I met him that I could offer him an escape. But I didn’t know if he was a survivor or had been seen when the ship was going down.’

‘I was going over the list in my mind as we were coming up. Desmond Hughes, First Class Steward, was lost at sea, his body never recovered or identified. And there was no mention of him in the records during the sinking. We are safe to include him if you feel he is right for the job.’

‘Good. That is a big weight off my shoulders. I have intentionally limited my contact with the other passengers because... well you know why, but I have had to interact with Hughes. I have found him such a decent chap, and so accommodating. It has quite depressed me to know he would not survive. And as far as family is concerned, he has none. He is a bachelor, spending all his time on one ship or another since he was a young lad.’

‘Excellent, so there will be less resistance. We might call him in after dinner? I would say in the morning, but I will have to make haste down to steerage in the morning.’

‘You will stay the night then?’ Max beamed at her as he stroked the side of cheek.

‘Only if we sleep. I have not had a good night's sleep for a week. I find I cannot sleep well without you beside me. And then, of course, like Tuesday night – I cannot sleep with you beside me.’

‘To be honest, I was hoping for a good night’s sleep myself. I just want to ‘spoon’ you while we sleep. More will have to wait until I am rested.’

‘Old man!’ Eilish exclaimed with amusement, reaching up to drop a kiss on his cheek.

‘Who is calling the kettle black, old lady?’

‘Hey, it is impolite to remind a woman of her age. Let us go. The others will be waiting. I am looking forward to what these chefs can produce. The food in steerage is abundant and tasty enough, but it does lack subtlety and variety. I would kill for a French pastry filled with cream!’

‘Your wish is my command, my lady. Shall we go? The restaurant is at the aft end of this deck. Not far.’

As the maitre d’hôtel guided their large party to Max’s usual area of the restaurant, he couldn’t help the pride and possessiveness he felt when he saw the males in the room staring at Eilish. Men always turned to look at her, but tonight their envious glances were particularly sweet. Even Hugo and Jean Pierre seemed smitten.

However, it was the look on Marco’s face that was most amusing. His handsome, young waiter always presented as the epitome of serene, deferential respect. But when he first caught sight of Eilish, his mouth had dropped open and he seemed completely at a loss for several moments.

Then Eilish had smiled at him impishly as, flustered and red faced, he moved to hold out her chair.

‘Mrs O...’ the young man started to say.

‘Marco,’ Eilish interrupted, just loud enough to drown out the rest of the name he had been about to call her. She nodded at him regally.

After that, Marco seemed to pull himself together and proceeded to serve them in his usual, exemplary fashion. Max was left wondering how they knew each other.

For the rest of the evening they groomed Phillip and Clarissa Lunridge, the young newlyweds who were expecting their first child. Phillip was proving to be a worthy chap, and both Carter and Finn seemed to approve. They deftly introduced the topic of science and the extent to which it might go one day. By the end of the meal, the young man was agreeing wholeheartedly that time travel could be possible and that there might be such travellers amongst them even today, enjoying the historic, maiden voyage of the Ship of Dreams.

After dinner, he and Eilish made their polite excuses and returned to his stateroom. Before kisses became something more serious, they called for Hughes and Eilish got straight to the point.

‘Hughes, in a few nights time there is going to be a gathering of people from the different classes. We would like you to assist in this assembly. The gathering will also offer you a new start in life in a brand new society where you will have the freedom to follow any life-path you choose. Would that interest you?’

Hughes looked startled as she explained her offer, then he became cautious. ‘This is not spying, is it Madam? I mean, we are not talking about causing harm to the British Empire by this gathering?’

Eilish laughed and Max found himself smiling. The man had no idea!

‘Absolutely not. In fact, we are offering you a place in a world free of war or want of any kind. If you are willing to leave your current... position.’

‘Sir?’ He looked at Max for reassurance.

‘Believe me, Hughes, what my lady is offering you is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity that you will not want to miss. I, too, am leaving my current life behind to take up this opportunity. We will not be sorry.’

‘Can I think about it, sir? I will certainly help you with your gathering, but I am not sure if I am ready to leave my current employer.’

‘Take the night to think it over and tell Eilish your decision when you come to take her back to steerage early in the morning. Think carefully though, because there will be no going back once you decide. However, your new life will be more than you ever dreamed possible.’

‘This isn’t some religious gathering is it? The Second Coming. My mama used to be on about that when I was a lad.’

‘No, not religious in any way. I would tell you more, but at this stage it is fairly straight forward. Either you want a new life or you are content with this one. Although I must warn you that this one may be short-lived,’ Max said.

‘I will lose my position?’

‘I am afraid so. Do not make your decision based on your current situation because that will change quite dramatically shortly, and not for the better.’ Max hated being cagey, but he could see why Eilish was taking this line. It was all true, but it also left out major aspects that they could not afford to have out if Hughes decided against their offer.

‘I will let you know in the morning then, sir, madam. I will say goodnight now, unless there is anything else?’

‘No, Hughes, that will be all. If you can be here at half-past six to take Eilish back, I would be most appreciative.’

‘Certainly, sir. Goodnight to you both.’

When the stateroom door closed softly, Eilish walked into his arms. ‘Well that went well, except for Marco. His disapproval of the antics of Mary O’Reilly was in every line of his body.’

‘How do you know him?’

‘We walked to the docks with him the first day and he has captured the heart of a member of our team. Pia. I think I have mentioned her. She was upset because she thought he would be left behind, but we assured her we would not leave anyone she cared about behind.’

‘So the lad will be coming with us? I am glad. He and his young assistant are a jolly pair.’

‘Not the assistant, I’m afraid.’

‘No? That is unfortunate.’

‘Our list is not limitless.’

‘I know, but he is not even a man yet. To be cut down so young...’

‘Max...’ Her tone was cautionary.

‘I know, I know. Come to bed my love. I think sleep will have to wait a little longer. I find the idea of you in my arms has awoken my carnal desires once more.’

Eilish giggled and began to unbutton the silk, dressing-gown dress she wore. ‘You are a mind-reader, sir. You should run séances in your spare time.’

The dress dropped to the floor at her feet, revealing her naked body beneath.

‘Oh woman, you will be the death of me!’

Chapter Twenty-Two

Marco

Saturday, 13 April 1912, TITANIC

Dawn was lightening the sky along the straight, blue line of the horizon. The chill breeze on his overheated face was pure pleasure, but it did nothing to cool his roiling emotions. He hoped that these few moments on deck alone might calm him, bring him back to centre. However, instead, his mind turned back to the memory of Petra standing on this very spot as she watched the sun rise.

It felt like a hundred years ago. And yet it was only two days past. Still, when every moment of every minute of every hour of those two days had been focused on her, time became skewed somehow. Elongated like melted taffy.

He loved her. That was the decision he had come to after she had dashed away from him the other night. Why else would he propose to her like that? He had never considered courting any girl, no less offering marriage. He wasn't in a place for marriage he had told himself many times over the years. But in reality, his financial situation had never been the reason he had never made the offer. The real reason was always that he had never been in love. And now he was. And wasn't that an agonising, ridiculous situation, because the girl he loved did not care for him.

No, that was not entirely true. He knew she felt something for him. She wouldn't have kissed him the way she did if he revolted her. But instead of being pleased by the thought of him courting her, she was horrified. It was probably because he was not good enough for her and she knew her family would not approve. He understood that. What did he have to offer her but a few pounds in his pocket and a lot of dreams? Foolish dreams that would come to nothing, just as they'd always come to nothing.

Going to America would change nothing. He was the problem. If he had any potential, he could have made a good life for himself in any of the cities he had lived in over the years. If he had potential, he could have become another Gardi and owned his own chain of restaurants by now. Instead, he was a penniless, pretty-boy waiter with only worthless dreams to call his own.

She was right to reject him. She was better off without him.

But no matter how he argued against the foolishness of loving someone who didn't love him back, his feelings wouldn't co-operate. And every thought and

every breath belonged to her.

And now there was an even heavier weight on his shoulders. He knew something about her cousin's wife that he wasn't sure what to do about. He almost dropped the plates in his hands when Mary O'Reilly had walked into the restaurant, dressed in a fine silk gown on the arm of the distinguished Maxwell Ingham. And she had acknowledged him as if it was an everyday thing to see a waiter she knew from third class while she hobnobbed with those in first.

Mr Ingham had called her Eilish all night. He had even introduced her to the young couple at the table as Eilish something... not O'Reilly, certainly. And several of the other men at the table seemed to know her well. Was she a high-class lady of the night? Men often came into the restaurant on the Strand with such women.

But she couldn't be doing something like that with her husband down in steerage. Surely he would know. And Luke O'Reilly didn't strike him as the sort to share his wife with anyone. And what about her son, Micky, who everyone called Bart, who knew a very young doctor in second class and could call on him at will. What about him?

And now that he thought about it – Luke looked way too young to have a son Bart... or Micky's age. He looked a lot younger than his wife, Mary... or Eilish.

It made his head spin, trying to work out what was going on and what part Petra played in it all.

As if thinking of her had drawn her into being, he saw Petra coming toward him out of the corner of his eye. He spun to face her, his eyes searching her face for some sense of what had brought her here. Was it an accident, or had she intentionally come in the hope of seeing him?

'I hoped to find you here. I waited on deck last night but you did not come, so I thought to try again this morning,' she said, in answer to his thoughts.

This was a dream. His sleepless nights had finally resulted in hallucinations. Surely, she wouldn't have gone to such trouble to find him?

Even so, he answered the hallucination, just in case she was real. 'I... did not know you would be there. I would have come if I had known. I thought you did not want to see me again.' He sounded so needy, even to his own ears.

'I wanted to see you. I... have to talk to you, to explain. But first, I need to know if you were serious about wanting to court me.' Her voice was little more than a whisper and he had to strain to hear her over the sound of the wind and the rumbling engines.

‘Yes. I know I am not good enough for you, but I am a hard worker, and I will prove myself to your family if I have to.’ Marco edged toward her, needing to be close to her after all this time. Needing to prove to himself that she was really here.

Much to his delight, she didn’t back away when he reached out to stroke her cold, wind chaffed cheek.

‘Will you kiss me then? I need you to kiss me again.’

Her words seemed too good to be true and he didn’t need to be asked twice. He drew her into his arms and placed his lips tenderly on hers, afraid to be too anxious, too rough with her, in case he scared her away again. However, instead of drawing back as he expected, she deepened the kiss, opening her mouth so that he could delve deep into her hot sleekness, tasting her with his eager tongue.

When she moaned, he worried. But instead of stiffening, she seemed to melt into him even more, until he was going crazy with desire for her. Kissing was not enough, touching her wasn’t enough. He could breathe her familiar, tantalising scent into his lungs, but he wanted more.

And because he didn’t know how long he could go on before he tried to take more, he drew away from her and set her at arm’s distance until he could get himself under control again.

‘Petra, sweet Petra, what does this mean?’ he asked raggedly.

‘My name is not Petra it is Pia. I am not Swedish. I am a citizen of the Gaian Confederacy, although I was born and raised in Norway.’

‘I do not understand. Why tell me your name was Petra if it is not? Is this like Micky, who is really Bart, and Mary who is really Eilish?’

‘Yes, exactly. And Karl Langman, the doctor from second class who is really Karl Ontario. And Carter and Finn, who had dinner with Eilish last night. You will not find their names on the passenger list. None of us are who we said we are. And because of that I could not be with you.’

‘But now you can? I do not understand. Why would you all use different names? How can Luke’s wife be in first class having dinner with another man?’

‘Eilish is not Mary, and she is not Luke’s wife. Luke’s wife is at home waiting for him to finish this mission.’

‘This mission? What mission? The more you tell me the more confused I become. Tell me straight. What is going on? What are you doing on this ship with these people?’

‘Let’s sit down in our little spot and I will tell you everything. I am cold.’

Instantly, he drew her into his arms to lend her his warmth. Then he guided her to their little nook, sat her down in the corner and joined her there on the deck, sealing her in to the corner as he had two nights ago.

‘Tomorrow a very terrible thing is going to happen to this ship. Tomorrow night the Titanic will hit an iceberg and sink, and many, many people will go down with her because there are not enough lifeboats. And even those there are will mostly be half empty because of mishandling.’

‘What? No, this ship cannot sink. They say it is unsinkable. How do you know this?’ His mind was reeling and he couldn't take in all she was saying. And he certainly couldn't believe it.

‘I know this because it is history. I have read the accounts; I have seen the press clippings – the newspaper reports. I know everything about the sinking of this ship from history.’

He sat quietly, trying to take in her words. Did he misunderstand the word “history”? He thought it meant events in the past. But such an event would have to be in the future, if it were to happen at all. Was she a fortune teller, a diviner? How could she know what was going to happen in the future?

‘What does history mean?’ he asked tentatively.

‘It is the record of events in the past.’

‘That is what I thought. How can you know it as history if it has not happened yet?’

‘Because I come from the future, Marco. My friends, co-workers really, my team... we come from the future, where the sinking of the Titanic occurred hundreds of years in the past.’

‘Hundreds? Hundreds of years ago? Petra, that is not possible...’

‘Pia. My name is Pia. It is possible Marco because I am here. We are all here on a mission to save some of the victims of this terrible calamity. We are going to save you.’

‘Me? You are going to save me from what? I do not need saving!’ Confusion was giving way to anger and he felt more in control when he was angry. But he didn't know where to direct the anger. Not at Petra... Pia, he couldn't direct it at her. So, where? At this crazy story she was telling. That was the only place.

‘Yes, you do need saving, because the stewards will keep all the restaurant staff below decks until it is too late for you to get on a lifeboat. You will die with them unless you come with me.’

That rang true. He could imagine those arrogant pricks keeping them down below so that they didn't get a chance to take places that they believed belonged

to the English or Americans.

But if she knew what was going to happen, why didn't she do something to stop it? Why sit back and let all those people die?

'Tell the Captain. Let him know about the iceberg.'

'We cannot. And, in actuality, he will be told, but he will not take steps to safeguard against it because he puts too much faith in this unsinkable Ship of Dreams. We cannot change history. It is not possible to change history. But we can offset some of the losses. We have come to rescue the forty-eight children in third class that didn't survive. We have come for pregnant women who do not make it to the life boats.'

'I am not a child or a pregnant woman,' he pointed out stonily.

'That was why I was so upset the other day. I thought you would have to remain and I could not bear to feel as I do about you and have to watch you die.'

'But you said I was to be rescued...'

'Because of how I feel about you. The team have agreed to include you in our number. You wanted to take me to the Wild West; well I want to take you to a far better place than that. I want to take you to my home. Will you come with me?'

For all the confusion in his mind, the last question seemed to ground him, bring him back to what was important. Would he go with her? Yes, anywhere. If that was to New York or some future place hundreds of years away, he would go with her.

'Yes.'

'Yes?' she repeated in surprise.

'Yes, I will come with you. I will go anywhere you want as long as I can be with you. I have roamed Europe, restless and unfulfilled for fourteen years looking for something that seemed just out of reach, until I met you. Being with you makes me feel content, complete. I will follow you anywhere.'

Her wide mouth broke into a stunning smile then, and he had to reassess his description of her. She was not just pretty, she was beautiful. And she glowed as bright as the rising sun that was only now lightening the ship around them.

'No more questions? You do not need to think about it?' she asked cautiously.

'No. Just tell me where I have to be and I will be there.'

She threw herself into his arms, covering his face with joyous kisses until he kissed her back and turned the kiss into something deeper, richer and all encompassing.

'Hey you two, none o' that!' The cockney voice broke into their private world and had them jumping apart. They looked up to see a crewman staring down at

them with a grin.

Hurriedly, Marco climbed to his feet and then helped Petra to hers. Pia, her name was Pia, he reminded himself in stunned amazement.

‘I better go,’ he said reluctantly after the crewman had moved off with a laugh.

‘Okay. Come to the cabin on your break.’

‘I am not permitted into the cabins.’

‘Or you will lose your job? You do not have to worry about that anymore.’

‘No. I suppose not. Are you sure?’

‘Yes, I am more than sure. I will be waiting for you at three. Do not tell anyone what I have told you.’

‘Sí, I will not, and sí, I will be there. With rings on!’

‘Rings?’

‘Sí, is that not the saying?’

‘Oh, no, you mean bells on. You will be there with bells on.’

‘Bells? Why would I wear bells?’

Pia laughed at him and gave him a quick kiss. He tried to deepen it but she was gone before he could react. With a happy laugh, she ran off down the deck, her blonde hair blowing wildly around her. He had never seen anything so glorious in his life.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Lizzie

On her way back to her room after breakfast, Lizzie found Lucy sobbing quietly into a handkerchief outside her door.

‘What is it Lucy?’ she asked urgently, putting a comforting arm around the girl. She looked behind for Karl, but saw that he was detaining her roommate so they could have a moment alone.

‘I can’t come, Ma’am. I’ve thought it through a hundred times and I can’t come.’

‘What? Why ever not?’

‘My place is here. If... if the ship is going to sink, then I have to do what I can to save the passengers in my care. I can’t just run away.’

‘But you will be helping the passengers. You will be helping forty-eight children, not to mention your own unborn child, to safety. We cannot do this without you. Would you be able to help that many people if you stayed?’

Lucy stopped crying and looked up thoughtfully. ‘I didn’t think of it that way. Do you really need my help?’

‘Of course. We are going to be moving all those children with only a handful of adults. They will be frightened and will not know what is happening. You must help us get them safely to the Portal and through to the other side. Karl says they are bringing several other stewards, too, just to help. It is your duty to help us.’

‘Yes ma’am, put like that, it is. But I won’t go through. I’ll stay and go back to help with the others once all the children are gone.’

‘As you will, Lucy. However, do remember that you are not solely responsible for this ship. There are other stewards who must do their part too. Once you have done your duty, you have every right to put your child first.’

Lucy looked unconvinced, but she wiped her eyes and gave a watery smile just as the termagant forced her way past Karl and headed towards them.

‘You two can get out of my way too. Who do you think you are, blocking the passageway so people cannot get where they need to go?’ Mrs Duncan complained waving them out of her way as if they were annoying flies.

Hastily, they stepped back and pressed themselves against the wall so that the large woman could pass by and enter their stateroom. She shut the door behind her with a resounding thud.

‘I will not see it as my duty to save that woman,’ Lucy whispered with a giggle.

‘No. The trouble is Karl says she is one of the ones who does get saved. She probably forces her way onto the first available lifeboat and be damned to everyone else,’ Lizzie whispered back.

‘I had better get back to work. Thank you, ma’am. I feel better about this all now. I didn’t like to feel like a rat deserting a sinking ship.’

‘You could never be a rat, Lucy. Even if you put yourself at the head of the line, you would be legitimately entitled to because of your child. Remember how important that child is to where we are going.’

‘Funny, isn’t it, Ma’am? I’m not married and I was thinking I might have to do away with it or give it away when it was born because I couldn’t keep it. And now there is this place that wants me because of my baby; a place that won’t see me as a bad girl. It all sounds so... perfect.’

‘It does, doesn’t it? Yes, that new world wants you and your baby. Just remember that.’

She followed Lucy back up the short passageway until she met up with Karl, who had been waiting watchfully for her. The breakfast crowd had drifted away up the stairs to their leisure pursuits, and for a few minutes they had the reception area to themselves.

‘Is Lucy all right?’ Karl asked, as he nodded to a woman who was one of the stragglers from breakfast. She was a tiny woman with sleek black hair parted down the centre and huge brown eyes that seemed to take in everything around her. Lizzie had seen her roaming the decks and the corridors at all hours of the day and night.

‘Yes. She had convinced herself that she had to do her duty and stay to help the passengers. I told her she would be helping passengers go through the Portal. I said we needed her to help with all those scared children.’

‘If Bart does his job there will be no scared children, just excited ones up for an adventure. They will not know what happens back here.’

‘They will one day.’

‘Yes, there will be a record of those last hours back home for anyone who wishes to see it – for closure. However, by the time the children are ready to watch that, they will have accepted their new life. Children are amazingly resilient.’

‘I suppose they are. I hope I am. Would you mind if I took a few moments to lie down on your bed? I am not sleeping and I am so exhausted all the time.’

‘Certainly. My roommate has gone up to the smoking lounge for the day. You will not be bothered.’ He opened his door and ushered her in.

Then, when he began to close her in, she got up the courage to speak. ‘Karl would you come in with me?’

His face was a picture of astonishment and eagerness. Clearing his throat, his skin turning bright pink, he stepped in after her and closed the door.

‘If I lie down, would you stroke my head for me?’ she asked, feeling like she was taking advantage of his good nature.

‘Of... of course. Do lie down.’

She removed her shoes and jacket and lay down on the top of the already made-up bunk. Karl took off his coat and sat down on the floor beside the bed. Then he lifted his hand and began to gently stroke her brow. It felt like heaven.

‘You know,’ she whispered. ‘Even if this all turns out to be a hoax, I am glad I met you. I have never felt as loved as I have in these last few days. I cannot regret that.’

‘I do love you, Lizzie.’ His voice was no more than a deep rumble in the air. She took comfort from it and the gentle, repetitive movement of his fingers on her skin.

‘I love you too.’

For a moment, his fingers stopped, and then they started up again.

‘A month ago, I did not have a friend in the world and I thought I would be cast out on the street like a scarlet woman. Now I have everything I have ever dreamed of and more. I am so grateful to you.’

‘A month ago, I was a lonely man beginning a great adventure I hoped would cleanse my jaded pallet. I never expected to find love, to have the possibility of a family. I never thought such a thing was possible for me.’

‘Karl, would you kiss me?’

His fingers stopped moving but they didn’t leave her forehead. Then very slowly he drew himself up onto his knees and leaned in toward her. She closed her eyes and waited, and for a terrifying moment, she wondered if he would actually do it. Then she felt his lips play over hers gently, tenderly, as if she were the most precious thing in the world to him.

She opened her lips and invited more. He responded by intensifying the kiss, leaning in, so that their mouths were pressed together as if they’d never part. Then, when the first pleasure ebbed, he began to use the soft flesh of his bottom lip to caress her as he gently nipped at her upper lip with his teeth. It was so unexpected that she drew in a startled breath.

He withdrew immediately. 'Did I hurt you?'

'No. It was just unexpected. No one has ever nibbled me before.'

'I didn't know I was doing it. I am sorry.'

'Don't be. Kiss me again, please. Nibble me, do what you will to me. I am yours to do with as you will.'

He gave a self-conscious laugh. 'Do not say such a thing to a man or you might be taken at your word.'

'I want to be. I want to know what it is to be with a man without pain, fear and humiliation. It is all so new to me. I do not know where to start.'

'Let me touch you then.'

Her gaze jerked up to meet his. 'How?'

His fingers moved to her blouse and began to unbutton each pearl slowly, waiting for her to stop him. Her pulse began to race, but she didn't move. She wore no stays and all that covered her breasts beneath her top was a chemise of white lawn. When the final button was undone, he drew back the sides of the blouse and pulled it free of her skirt. Then he began to stroke at the thin, cotton fabric that clung to her swollen, sensitive breasts.

'You are so beautiful,' he said in hushed awe.

His gentle strokes were wonderful and she relaxed beneath his tender touch, no longer embarrassed by what he was doing. But when his fingertips closed around the tip of one nipple, she nearly jumped off the bed.

'Too hard?'

She shook her head and lay still once more, letting him resume his exploration. He tweaked the nipple again until she felt a hot pooling between her legs. Then, while she was trying to come to terms with the strangely delicious sensations flooding her, his fingers left their play and stroked up to her shoulder. She wanted to tell him to go back, to finish what he'd been doing, but she was too shy.

However, suddenly something warm and wet pressed down on her breast, and she groaned with pleasure as his mouth sucked in her nipple along with its cotton covering. Convulsively, she reached up and buried her hands in his brown hair, feeling its silky strands, unmarred by greasy pomade. When he gently grazed the nipple with his teeth she clutched at his hair, pulling him closer, whimpering in delighted agony as the sensation threatened to overwhelm her.

Then his mouth left off its ministrations and moved away. She whimpered again, this time in disappointment. When he blew onto the damp cotton, she shuddered.

‘How do you know all of this?’ she asked, as he cupped her furthest breast in his hand and kneaded it gently like bread dough. He began suckling on her other nipple through the fabric.

She arched her back, not understanding why, but trusting that her body knew what to do. His tongue left her breast and licked a trail up to her throat, where he began to kiss and nibble her there as he kneaded her full breasts with sure, gentle movements.

‘I am an avid reader. There was a time I thought I should explore sex as part of the human experience so I did my research. However, I could never find a woman I wanted to experiment with.’

She chuckled, as her face began to burn with embarrassment. ‘You can research this in your world?’

‘You can research anything in my world. Am I doing it right?’ His voice was very low and growling, and his breath, as he exhaled onto her skin, sent her into excited rapture.

‘Oh, I think you are doing it right. I have never felt so... delicious. What happens next?’ she said breathlessly.

‘What do you want me to do next?’

She shook her head. ‘I have done no research. I do not know what there is on offer?’

‘There is a buffet of pleasures. Try what you want and then move on.’ He chuckled against her skin and even that felt wonderful.

‘Kiss me then, and continue to touch me as you are doing. I like that very much.’

He moved up so that he could kiss her deeply and this time it was not tentative exploration. This time, he kissed her like he wanted to devour her and her senses reeled from the onslaught. Shakily, she wrapped her arms around his neck and pulled him closer, needing him as close as it was possible to get. Her breaths came as croaky gasps when he gave her space to breathe but she didn’t care. Nothing mattered but their mouths and the rhythmic kneading of her breast.

Then, that wasn't enough. She wanted more. She wanted to feel his skin on hers, not separated by starchy fabric that chaffed her sensitive skin.

‘Take your shirt off?’ She made it a question, in case he thought her too forward. He ripped the shirt from his body and followed it with his undershirt. She opened her eyes so she could see what he looked like, and she moaned with delight at the sight of him. His torso was tanned and muscular, with a scattering

of hairs fanning out from the centre of his chest. His shoulders were broad and solid. Up close, he looked so much bigger without his shirt than he had with it.

Tentatively, she reached out and stroked his skin, feeling the ridges and the wide expanse of muscle across his chest. It was his turn to groan.

‘You are beautiful,’ she said, not realising she used the exact words he had used when he saw her for the first time. Instantly, he was back covering her mouth with his once more. This time he was frantic with desire. She ran her hands along his back, feeling the muscles flex beneath her touch. Then he was kissing his way down her neck and the friction of his bare skin on hers was bliss.

‘Can we... be joined when I am with child?’ she asked shyly, as yet another ripple of sensation made its way down to her core.

‘Of course, as long as there are no complications. Is that what you want? Are you sure you do not want to wait until we are married? I might be a mad man and you will feel worse...’

‘You are no mad man, Karl. I trust you with my life. And I do not want to wait if it does not hurt the baby and you do not mind me being fat.’

His laugh was a joyous thing. ‘In our world, your body swollen with new life is the most glorious thing there is. You have no idea how beautiful you are to me like this.’

‘Then, if the door is locked, let us remove our clothes and... come together. I do not remember how it happened before. I was too terrified to pay attention. I know it hurt between my legs; that's all.’

His hand ran down the length of her body and cupped her between her legs through her clothes. She bucked against his hand in surprised pleasure.

‘That didn't hurt,’ she admitted with a gasp.

‘Let me get this skirt off you and see if I can get the rest of this right. I feel my control is reaching its limit and I may need to relieve the pressure before we go further.’

‘Relieve? How?’

‘Don't concern yourself, beloved. I just need to...’

Her hand found its way to the front of his trousers and felt something hard there. The groan he let out told her not what she did was good or bad, but it was definitely significant. She felt her way along the length of the rod-shaped part of him she discovered. This muscle was harder than the muscles in his chest.

Suddenly, he clamped her hand hard against him and his body jerked convulsively as he cried out in agony. Struggling to free herself, she tried to

draw away, but he pressed down on her hand as the waves of his pain washed over him.

Finally, they stopped, and he laid his head on her breast drawing in deep gasps of air.

‘I am so sorry if I hurt you. I did not mean to,’ she said finally, stroking his damp hair back from his face.

‘You did not hurt me. I just released my seed. Not in a suitable place, but I do have a spare pair of trousers with me.’

‘Your seed?’

‘It is what made you pregnant. Seed was sown in your womb. My seed, of course, would never make you pregnant, mores-the-pity.’ He drew back from her and squeezed in beside her on the narrow bunk. He rested his head on her shoulder and she felt a blooming sense of tenderness for this exhausted man at her side.

‘Have we been joined?’ she asked.

‘Ah, no. Not as yet. We will get to that shortly. This body should not take long to recuperate. In the meantime, I will continue exploring after I remove these.’

He slid off the bunk and shucked off his pants revealing his full, glorious nakedness to her. She loved the flat expanse of stomach and was curious about the thatch of dark hair below it. And what nestled in its curly depths. However, she could see nothing long and hard like she had felt only moments ago.

Before she could question him, he began to remove her skirt, petticoats, chemise and, finally, bloomers. It felt strange to be naked before him, yet she was not embarrassed. His admiring gaze would not allow it.

Then he was stroking her from her throat to her breast, over her gently swelling stomach and down to her thighs. Each time he did it, she felt the delicious tension, which she had thought gone, returning with even more force. She arched up to meet his roaming hand as his naked body lay pressed to her side. He kissed her again, deep and probing, while his hand moved lower, until he cupped her maidenhair in his palm and pressed in with his fingers.

‘Ohhhh...’ Flustered, aroused, restless for more, she writhed under his hand and she looked up to see him smiling.

‘What?’ she asked, as his touch threw her into another wave of pleasurable sensation.

‘I seem to be doing something right. And I was correct about this body.’

‘I... ohhhhh... I do not understand.’

‘Fast turnaround. Just touching you here.’ He pressed his fingers into her core and she bucked. ‘Is making me hard again.’

‘Hard?’ She looked down his body and saw a most peculiar phenomenon. There was a shaft growing between his legs, and it grew larger and larger the longer she looked.

‘What?’

He reached out and took her hand, placing it on the growing thing that was now lying flat against his belly. She recognised the feel of it from before, and as she touched the thing it jerked in response.

‘What is that?’ she asked, in astonished curiosity.

‘That is what will join us. Soon. However, I want to prepare you first.’

Before she could ask how, he was dipping his fingers deeper into her core and her legs fell apart automatically to give him greater access. When she realised what she was doing, she tried to draw her legs together. But he wouldn’t let her.

‘Don’t... please. I know you feel vulnerable spread open like this but that is what I need to see right now. You have no idea what the sight of you like that does to me.’ He moved his fingers and she jerked against his hand. Then he was stroking her with those fingers in the damp cleft between her legs and she felt the tension inside her building even higher. Her skin was so hot and clammy she didn’t know what to do with herself. All she could do was writhe against his clever hand as it pleased her.

There came a point when he clamped his mouth around one nipple and sucked hard on it while he touched her down below and something happened, something incredible, and she felt her body explode with pleasure until she was crying out, just as Karl had done not long ago.

He lifted his mouth from her breast as she came back to earth.

‘Did I release my seed?’ she asked, as she felt the tension building again and she wriggled under his still moving hand.

‘In a way. I am going to replace my hand with my pe... manhood now. Are you okay?’

She nodded mutely, wondering what was to come. It couldn’t be better than what he had just done to her.

But then he was pressing the hard cylinder of flesh into her and she felt her body stretch to accommodate it. When she thought there was no more room inside her, he stopped. For a long moment, he stayed still, holding the weight of his body off her with his muscular arms as he looked down into her face.

‘Okay?’ he asked.

She nodded again. 'It doesn't hurt like last time.'

Then he was drawing back from her and she didn't want him to go. Had reminding him of that other man turned him from her? Before she had time to feel the full sting of his rejection, he was driving back into her body once more. The sensation was slicker and more pleasurable this time. When he pulled back again she let him, knowing what was to come. When he thrust into her this time, harder and faster, she felt it right at the deepest part of her, and little ripples of pleasure started to make their way outward from that centre.

'Ohhhh....' She gripped the blanket beneath her convulsively as she waited for the next thrust.

Then he was moving steadily faster and faster, thrusting into her body as his skin became damp and hot and his muscles rigid with tension. And she found she was going with the movement, feeling her way, matching her rhythm to his. Lizzie watched his face as the sensations built. Sweating, features strained with deep concentration, he pounded into her again and again. She met his every throbbing thrust until she felt that strange explosion rippling through her again. Her body stiffened in response and she rode out the exquisite pleasure, only partly aware of the sound of Karl crying out above her as he rammed home one more time.

They were soaked with perspiration as they lie next to each other, bodies satiated and still.

'I didn't know...'

'Hmmm?' He nosed into her neck, found her ear and began to nibble on the lobe. Her body responded with another wave of pleasure.

'That. What we did. I didn't know that was "joining."'

'Hmmm.' He bit down a little harder on her lobe and she moaned.

'I thought it would hurt like... like with...'

'Do not say his name. He does not exist. This was when you really lost your virginity and when I lost mine. Everything else... gone as if it never was.'

'Women say it is uncomfortable even when it doesn't hurt. I do not find it so.'

'Good. I did it right, then. Now shhhh... I am tired. Sleep for a little while, hmmm?'

She nodded her head. Now that she thought about it, she was tired too. Exhausted, in fact, and with his body plastered to hers, she let herself drift off into peaceful oblivion.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Marco

‘Marco, what the hell are you doing? That’s the wrong plate!’ The Sous-Chef yelled at him in rapid and guttural Italian.

Marco looked down at the plate in his hand. It was supposed to be a quail’s egg entrée for Table 31, but instead he held a chocolate fondant. He frowned in confusion, put the plate back where he found it and looked around for his own order.

‘Your head is somewhere else. Get it back here before you find yourself out on your arse!’ This was the chef who had heard the reprimand over the general din in the kitchen. All the meals were laid out on the long, wide side-boards with their numbers next to them. Each was in a specific area allocated to a different waiter and his tables. It was an easy matter to come in, check your area and scoop up the food that was ready to go. However, for some reason, Marco had picked up a plate in another waiter’s area.

He looked up at the chef with vague eyes and nodded. It almost felt like he was drunk. Nothing was making any sense to him today. He had gone through the morning and now the luncheon rush in a blur. People spoke to him but he didn’t understand them. The only thing that made sense to him was the smile of a lovely, young woman who thought she was from the future.

In his mind, he had gone over and over their strange conversation that morning. He couldn’t believe his good fortune. After not seeing her for a whole day and believing he had lost her forever, she had come to him, offering herself to him like a dream. Her story about the ship sinking and being from the future was just nonsense. Even so, he would go along with her until he could prove her wrong. Then he would care for her as she unravelled the confusion in her head.

However, he was the one confused in the head, or that was what the Chef would have him believe. And if he was making mistakes like this one, then he was probably right. A woman wasn’t worth ruining his life over. And he needed the tips he would get from this journey to start his new life. Start his new life with Pia, his inner voice added.

He scooped up the right plate and hurried out into the dining room. It was busy. More than the usual numbers of patrons were eating with them today. Gardi had said that this was common at this stage in every journey. The passengers were becoming bored with the Dining Saloon and their choices there.

They wanted a change of scene and different (“superior” was Gardi’s word) food to eat.

Whatever the reason, the result was the same. They were being run off their feet and the tips were handsome. The cashiers, two young girls who were distantly related to Gardi, had told them the total so far today. It was higher than for any day to date. He couldn’t afford to throw all of that away by being distracted.

Giving his patron, a bluff old army major with a walrus moustache, his quail eggs and a winning smile, he saw Paulo clearing Table 32. He had proven to be an excellent assistant: fast, careful and efficient. Marco rarely had to correct him. The boy had become a friend, too, his easy manner and friendly loyalty a balm for the wounds the grudging looks and snubs from the other staff unerringly left behind.

The staff from the second Ritz restaurant in London hadn’t known him, but it just took a few negative comments about him from those who did for his reputation to spread. That Paulo ignored the other men’s attitude and accepted their slights because of the side he’d taken only increased his affection for his assistant. They had become the ‘us’ to the many ‘them.’ It felt good to have someone on his side for a change.

‘Busy,’ Paulo commented as he passed.

He put on his best smile and was slightly mollified to realise that it was Mr Ingham and two of his friends who were being directed to the table. The man regularly chose to sit in his area. He liked to think it was because he provided superior service. It couldn’t be the location itself, because they were the closest area to the kitchen, which made it busier and noisier than elsewhere in the elegant, gilded room.

‘Marco, you will be joining us so I have been informed,’ Ingham said with genuine warmth.

Marco had liked the man right from the first meal. He was not one to put on airs and graces but treated everyone the same, calling him by his name, asking his opinion about the selections for the day. And he was not a big eater. At some meals, he would only have one course. Other times, when he dined with friends he would have more, but he was never one of those who gorged himself on one course after another.

‘Joining you, sir?’ He had no idea what Ingham meant.

‘Pia has told you about what is to come?’ The gentlemen at the table exchanged guarded looks.

‘Pia? Oh... oh, yes. She has told me. I... do not really know...’

‘It is all very overwhelming at first, I do understand, and totally unbelievable. However, I have seen evidence with my own eyes that what they tell us is true.’

Marco stared at the man in shocked surprise. He knew that Mary... no Eilish... had been with this man the other night and it had partly got through to him then that Ingham was somehow involved, but this overt discussion of this fanciful tale was more than he expected. He believed the delusion went no further than Pia. That she would soon realise her mistake and then let him help her back to sanity had been his only goal. But now he saw that there were others involved in this insane hoax – respected, intelligent men. Could it be real?

‘Yes, sir.’ He settled on a waiter’s neutral comeback.

‘You have a little time to come around to it. Has she told you when it happens?’

‘Not... exactly, sir. Soon, is all she said.’

‘Yes, too soon. I will just have the chicken chasseur and some fruit and cheese for dessert. You, Carter?’

‘Eating with you is such a relief, Ingham. Those endless courses down stairs drive me to distraction.’ The man called Carter grinned at Ingham and then Marco. ‘Pia is a sweetheart. You are a lucky man; I hope you know that.’

‘You... you know Pia?’ he stammered in surprise.

‘We have worked as part of the Retrieval team for many years, although I am part of the adult team and Pia works with the children.’

‘You... you are from the f...’

‘A little circumspection, please. Yes, Finn and I both are. He was the man with the dark skin who was with us the other night.’

‘I see...’ But he didn’t. How could the men all think that they were from the future? It was like some secret club they all belonged to. And within that club, they shared wild ideas and performed outlandish rituals.

‘I will have the same as Max. What about you, Hugo?’

‘I’ll go along with the crowd; may as well save room for dinner tonight. It’s said to be the crowning glory of the voyage and there will be dancing afterward. Quite a special to-do. Almost a step back to Almacks of yesteryear.’

‘There will be none of that where you are going, you are aware of that?’ Carter said seriously.

‘Oh, I know, dear boy; you have properly educated me about your... home. But there’s no reason why I shouldn’t enjoy my last days of indulgence, is there? My swan song, as it were.’

Marco bowed his way out and returned to the kitchen to place the orders. With only two courses, he might just be free by three.

The conversation was troubling. He had convinced himself that Pia was foolishly misled or deluded, but if these men believed it, could it possibly be true? And if it was, that meant that Paulo would not survive the sinking of the ship. What had she said? The staff would be kept below decks by the stewards? It was only to be expected from those snooty upstarts who saw any foreigner as inferior. How could he possibly go with Pia to safety and leave the boy to die?

When he brought the main courses back to the table, he paused indecisively.

‘If I may ask something of you?’ he addressed Carter, whose bright-red head was already bending over his plate sniffing it appreciatively.

‘Carter, he means you,’ Ingham poked the other man in the side to get his attention. Carter looked up with an interested smile.

‘My assistant is only seventeen; barely more than a child. Could he be included?’

Carter frowned and began to tap on the white tablecloth with his elegant fingers. ‘It is a hard path we follow, Marco. There are many who deserve to come but we cannot disrupt the events to a significant and obvious degree. If we say yes to one, it opens the door to another and another. Then where does it end?’

‘But you have made an exception in my case...’

‘For Pia. Love is a rarity in our wor... home. For Pia to have found love is exceptional. And if we were to reject you, it is tantamount to condemning her to a solitary existence for the rest of her life. We cannot do that. She is too precious to us.’

‘She is precious to me, too, though I have known her for such a short time. It just seems unfair. Look at him, sirs; he is full of life, anxious to please. I have rarely met a person I respect as much, for all he is barely more than a child.’

The three men turned to look at the boy who was just finishing up with the napkins on the freshly set up table nearby. When he saw them all looking at him, Paulo smiled.

‘I do understand. However, there are rules that we must follow. Protocol. We do not go against Protocol,’ Carter said with regret.

Marco nodded curtly and walked away, his back ramrod stiff. It was easy for them to dismiss the boy. Their Protocol was just an excuse to play God. If they wouldn’t take Paulo, then he wouldn’t go either. That is, of course, if this whole story were true. It still seemed fantastical to him.

Pia

She lay back on her bed staring up at the mesh underbelly of the bunk above. It was three o'clock and she expected Marco to arrive at any moment. Her long, bony fingers shook uncontrollably at her sides. What if she wasn't responsive enough for him? Would he reject her? If he did, what did that mean for his place in New Atlantis? He was a special case, only because of her. If it didn't work out between them then, technically, he should not be allowed to come.

The idea that he should remain to die was unthinkable and she pushed it away. Even if he rejected her, she would not let on to the others. She would save him anyway, knowing she would be able to handle seeing him with another woman back in her world as long as he survived.

There was a soft knock and she jumped to her feet and opened the door. With a quick look around the corridors, Marco stepped into the cabin and closed the door behind him. He had come straight from the restaurant and was still in his waiter's jacket and bow tie. His hair was slicked down and parted on the side. He looked every bit the continental waiter.

'I am sorry I am late. We have been very busy today.' He looked down at her with soft, brown eyes.

'It does not matter. Thank you for taking the risk to come here.' She played with the edge of her skirt shyly.

'How could I not? I have been unable to think, or work, or do anything else since this morning. I cannot believe that you want me.'

'I cannot believe you want me,' she said with a little laugh.

He drew her into his arms and placed a gentle kiss on her forehead. 'How could I not? You are like no other woman I have ever met. I cannot imagine my life without you now.'

'Yes. That is how I feel. However, there are still things about me, about our world, that you must understand. I do not want you to agree and then regret your decision later.'

'Regret being with you? Never. Regret not dying? What do you think? Regret leaving Paulo behind... yes.'

'Paulo?'

'My assistant. I spoke to Carter, the red-haired man, over luncheon. I asked him if Paulo could be included. He said it would be against Protocol, whatever

that word means. He said that if they made an exception for one, then it opened the door to more and more. But I am already an exception because of you. It seems such a little thing to include the boy. He is only seventeen!’

‘Oh, Marco, I am sorry. Really I am. But I did not expect to be able to include you. They are bending the rules for me already... we cannot expect them to bend them further. Maybe you could tell him what will happen. Tell him to go up to the decks before the alarm is given. He might get away if he is out of uniform.’

‘But you said that history cannot be changed. Only one of us survived, and that is not Paulo.’

‘Yes... I do not know. Please, can you let this go for now while I tell you the rest?’

He removed his jacket, collar and bow tie and then drew her down with him onto the bunk, resting with his back against the bulkhead, arm around her shoulder. ‘So tell me what I must know.’

For a short time she was quiet as she gently stroked his white, starched shirt with shaking fingers. Where did she begin? How did you tell someone that the girl he thought was no more than a few years younger than him, was, in fact, hundreds of years older? What did that do to his desire for her?

‘In our world we are sterile. There has been no child born to us for hundreds of years. The only children are those we bring in from the past and they become sterile once they have passed through the Portal.’

‘That makes no sense, Pia. You had to have been born.’

‘I was born before the Last Great Plague that killed almost everyone and sterilised the rest of us. I was in my mid-twenties when that happened.’

‘So you time travelled to this later time, hundreds of years later?’

‘No. Time travel was only perfected about seventy years ago in our timeline.’

‘I do not understand. You are only in your twenties now. How can you...?’

‘I am two hundred and fifty years old, Marco, with my time in-situ added to my personal timeline.’

Marco laughed so hard his eyes watered. She let him finish before going on.

‘We all age. However, rather than die and end our race, our consciousness – our being – is transferred into another body, identical to the last, but younger. This is my fourth such body. If you come to my world you will also live for many, many hundreds of years by Integrating with new bodies when the old one wears out.’

‘Pia, you are already expecting much from me... to believe that you can travel through time, that you come from the future, that this unsinkable ship will soon

sink. This is too much; you cannot expect me to accept this?’

She turned around and took his face in her hands, meeting his eyes with a steady gaze. In the shadowed recess beneath the bunk, his eyes were dark and huge. His beautiful lips were drawn tightly closed in frustration.

‘If you love me, you will trust me. You must trust that I would not lie to you or try to trick you in any way. Can you do that?’

He let the breath he held out in one furious gust, leaned in and kissed her in defeat. His kiss was angry and frustrated, but she could feel the capitulation there too.

‘I love you and I trust that you would not lie to me.’

‘Good. So does it make you feel any different toward me, that I am so old?’

‘No. I am in love with the girl who sits before me, no matter her age.’

‘Good. That is good. Next. I am not a virgin. Well, this body is, but I am not. I was sexually active in my youth, but I have not been with anybody since the Last Great Plague.’

‘Hundreds of years ago?’

‘Yes.’

‘How can your body be virginal and you are not?’

‘My hymen is intact. My maidenhead on this body has never been breached.’

He blinked rapidly and frowned. ‘You are a virgin then.’

‘Physically. Even so, I will not seem that way when we... make love. I do not think I have forgotten how it works, even if I am a bit rusty.’

‘I will show you, gently, when we are married.’

‘Marco, I do not want to wait. I want you now, so you know what it is that you are getting. It is the way of the world in my time.’

‘I will not take your maidenhead without the sacrament of marriage. I have had many women, my Pia; I will not lie to you. But none have been virgins. I could not do that to you.’

She sighed heavily. This was what she had been expecting from him. He was a man of his era and it only made sense that he would see this as honouring her.

‘All right, if you are sure, we will wait until we get home. Once there, you will see how the world works and that may soften your hard line.’

‘I am not being rigid, Sweet Pia; I am being honourable.’

She sighed again and rested her forehead against his. ‘I know you are. It is just so damned inconvenient and unnecessary. But I am pushing you too hard. Let us just lie here and talk some more.’

They shifted position so that they were lying in each other's arms on the narrow bunk. As she started to talk more about her world and what he could expect she became aware that he was very quiet. She lifted her head from his chest and realised he was sound asleep. There were dark circles under his eyes and she had sensed his exhaustion every time she'd seen him in the last few days. Now his weariness had caught up with him. She smiled and lay back on his chest. It felt good to be this close, listening to the sound of his slow and steady heartbeat. It felt right. No matter what the future held for them, this bond they had formed was right. She could not regret it, no matter what might follow.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Eilish

Sunday, 14 April 1912, TITANIC

They all sat huddled on the bunks in K 107, the air electric with tension. After days of preparation, D-Day was upon them, and they were all overwhelmed with the monumental task ahead. Eilish looked at Cara, who was sitting with her knees drawn up and her back resting on the bulkhead. Her elbows were leaning on her knees and her hands were running through her white-blond hair distractedly.

Eilish knew how she felt. However, instead of the exhaustion that seemed to be everyone else's burden down here, she was fresh and invigorated, having spent the night again with Max in his luxurious bed. Guilty that she had been given this bonus, she thought to make up for it by doing more today.

'Right then, let's do a recap on our Targets,' Jac finally said when the silence became oppressive. 'Eilish?'

'The young couple in first is on board, reluctantly. Like some of them, they are playing along, expecting it to be a hoax that they can just forget about later. That is okay, as long as they follow through and get to the extraction point. The others are all a go up there. Carter will bring them down with Hughes, the steward, once we know where the extraction point is.

'The families I have been working with are all a go, as is the young Irish couple. I have not changed my assessment of the parents. We will not take babies under one year old unless the mother is coming.'

'Yes, unfortunately, that is the general consensus. Getting the younger children away for the 'treat,' will be hard enough, but mothers will not part with babes at the breast so easily. How are the children taking it, Bart?'

'Great. They're all really excited that they're having a party for their very own life boat. Keeping it secret has been the hard bit. The little'uns are talkative, but as they don't know where the party will be held yet, the vagueness of it all has put the eavesdroppers off – mostly. Those boyos...' Eilish noted that Bart's accent and lexicon had become decidedly Irish in the last few days. He was a born chameleon, blending in wherever he was. '...the ones that beat me up. They're hangin' 'round a bit too much, like they're just lookin' for a chance to

throw a spanner in the works. But with Jac or Julio around they don't get a chance to get close enough.'

'Good, those boys are trouble; you can see it a mile away,' Jac said. 'Freddy, the steward, was saying that they had been caught pilfering beer from the bar in the forward General Area. Their parents have been forced to pay for what they took. The stewards have all been alerted to keep their eyes on them. Pia?'

'Families are all set. They know there will be someone sent for the children just after eleven and that the children will be taken to safety in the unlikely event that the ship should sink. No one seems concerned about the unusualness of the secret party.'

'Marco had a problem yesterday when he fell asleep in our cabin. Paulo came looking for him when he was late for his shift. Freddy saw him come out of the cabin, but I told him he was with us so he didn't report him. I am concerned that Marco may not come if Paulo is not permitted to join us. The boy is very important to him.'

'Does he know D-Day is today?'

'Yes. I told him yesterday and he is still cautious. He is a loose cannon, unfortunately.'

Jac frowned down at the girl who sat perched on the edge of the bottom bunk beside Jane. 'This boy is only seventeen?'

'Yes. A really lovely boy, and devoted to Marco, if yesterday's wake-up call was any indication. Loyal, courageous...'

'We have already increased our numbers substantially with the pregnant couples, the women in second and the stewards. I am loath to allow other random individuals to be Retrieved just because they are a friend of a friend, as it were,' Jac said slowly.

'We have all found people that we would like to save,' Luke put in, 'but we can't. The numbers are becoming unwieldy already. Every extra person puts the whole mission at risk.'

'So few of them survived from the À la Carte Restaurant, surely for equity we should include the boy,' Cara said, shifting out from beneath the bunk so she could see and be seen by the men above. 'The female cashiers and the chef's assistant are the only ones who survive. That is the worst loss statistically of all the groups outside the engine room.'

'We are not here to be fair, Cara. We are here to rescue children, pregnant women and a few Targeted adults the system identified.' Jac's voice was strained

now.

‘We cannot risk the mission,’ Julio said, ‘even though it burns me that these English pricks kept those men below decks until the boats were all gone. Jac is right. We cannot risk the mission by including extra people.’

‘You’re the first one to go against Protocol when it suits you,’ Jane piped up, scowling at her husband.

The energy in the room was becoming negative and charged with anger. They were close to flashpoint.

Eilish raised her voice and brought order. ‘Let us leave the lad on the side for the moment. We need to conclude this meeting and get back to our places. Luke, why not tell the others about the extraction point.’ She had got the details herself from him the night before so she could share them with Max. It had been her excuse for going back there to be with him.

Much to her surprise, the energy in the room changed at her words and calmed significantly. Luke immediately stepped up with his report.

‘Yes. The second class Dining Saloon. We talked to Lucy and the other steward in second who will be joining us, Australian on this deck called Jacko. He helped Marco get the message to Karl. We can get the children up the victualling crew’s stairs from Scotland Road right up into the first and second galley kitchens. The kitchens and pantries for both classes sit between the first and second class Dining Saloons; the first is forward of the kitchens; second is aft of the kitchens. So, once in the kitchens, the children will head aft into second dining.

‘The stairs are near the engineer’s mess, but at that time of the night there won’t be a lot of people in that area. With Freddy and the Australian on point we should be okay. Jacko is getting keys from the storage room for the door at the top of the stairs.

‘The chief first class steward’s office is in the kitchen area and he sometimes works late. If that’s the case, we’ll deal with him before he raises the alarm. Lucy will get the keys and bring the seconds through the main doors into their dining room. They can meet outside without causing any undue attention.

‘Hughes, Max Ingham’s steward, will get the key into the first class Dining Saloon and bring their group through into the kitchens and across into second dining. All those interconnecting doors will be unlocked.’

‘When you say “deal with” the chief steward, what do you mean?’ Cara asked tersely.

‘I’ll knock him out. Don’t worry yourself, doll, I won’t kill him.’ Luke gave a humorous grunt.

‘But you may condemn him to death if he stays unconscious too long. Has anyone checked the records for this head steward?’ Cara continued.

There was silence as Julio used his modified Tablet to access the information required. They had been careful about the amount of future technology they’d brought with them. If any of it fell into the wrong hands there would be a temporal anomaly created. So Julio carried a palm-size Tablet, as did Karl and Carter. Finn and Karl both had PAs, Portal Activators, which had taken them to their Targets initially. Eilish also had a PA because of her work with Max. Jac had the PA that had brought the bulk of the team through on the morning of the tenth.

‘Doesn’t survive,’ Julio announced, ‘and no mention of him in survivor’s records.’

‘That doesn’t mean I caused his death because I knocked him out,’ Luke announced fiercely. Eilish knew that Luke’s warrior background was often at odds with the peace-loving ethos of New Atlantis.

‘Let’s check him out,’ Jac said. ‘If he is suitable and he does turn out to be in his office at the time; we will knock him out and bring him along. Otherwise, Luke will disable him only sufficiently for our needs. Am I clear?’

‘Crystal. I don’t wanna be the cause of anybody’s death,’ Luke announced brusquely. He glared down at Cara who glared right back.

‘Good. Then we have a plan, people. We will start moving the children to the stairs at the bottom of the galley in stages from eleven fifteen onwards. Jacko, the second class steward will stand sentry at the bottom of the stairs after unlocking the upper door and checking for crew in the galley kitchen and pantry areas with Luke and Julio.’ Jac gave the two men on the opposite bunk a nod.

‘Bart, you will be with the first group of children in and will be in charge of keeping them quiet. We’ll get the firsts and seconds in at the same time so they can help you supervise. The rest of us will be shuttling children with the help of Freddy along Scotland Road to Jacko in stages. As we deposit each group, we go back for the next until our individual quotas are met. At which time we go up into second dining and assist with the children.’

‘What if there is a problem with the children at any point?’ Cara asked Jac.

‘Luke and Julio will be moving through the relevant Decks – F and G aft – checking for problems. I will check E Deck aft. Luckily, the families and couples are all located in the aft end of the lower decks. It makes muster easier. If we

encounter stewards, we say we're taking the children to the toilets on D Deck. If we're caught on Scotland Road or anywhere not directly on the path to the toilets, then we say we're lost. However, we do not allow a steward to redirect us. Luke, Julio or I will deal with any stewards who become difficult.'

'There sounds like there'll be a good deal of "dealing with" obstructers,' Cara commented acidly.

'What do you expect? That we will go totally unnoticed? There will be problems. We must be prepared for them and act accordingly. All we can hope for is that any we have to "deal with" will be on their feet and able to escape if that is their destiny. There will be no "Come with me if you want to live...," Cara.' Jac used the Terminator quote to ease the tension.

It worked. Cara grinned and nodded at her mate and Luke burst into loud guffaws of laughter.

'What?' Julio asked the laughing man at his side.

'Famous quote from an Arnie Schwarzenegger movie. I love that guy!' Luke answered between gales of laughter.

The others not up on twentieth century pop culture nodded absently but it was enough to get the group dynamic back in line.

'I will get the details up to the other classes and until eleven, we'll go about our day as usual. Pia, what time does Marco finish on B Deck?' Jac asked.

'Eleven.'

'You will get him to meet with Carter outside the restaurant entrance. They'll escort him from there at just after eleven. Do you think that will work?'

Pia frowned for a moment, thinking. 'I will let him know when he comes to see me at his break. We are not risking him being seen in the cabin so we will meet on aft Well Deck outside the third class entrance. What do I tell him about Paulo?'

The tension was immediately back in the room. 'He cannot bring the boy, Pia; I'm sorry.'

'What if he will not come without him?' she cried desperately.

'It won't come to that,' Jac assured her. 'He wants to be with you.'

'The boy is important to him.'

'I know. It will work out.'

Eilish watched Pia's face lose all animation and close up. It was like she had been given a wonderful gift and just when she had finally accepted that it was hers, someone had taken it away from her again. Her resolute acceptance was heartbreaking.

Karl

Karl agreed to join the ladies at the church service in the first class Dining Saloon at ten thirty. In a way, it was like a funeral to him, knowing what was to come in the next twelve hours. He wasn't alone in the feeling, as he sat between Lizzie and Felicity with the other two women on either side of them. He could sense the sadness around him.

From everything he had read on the subject, the Captain had been as fooled by the builder's claims as everyone else. He had expected the ship to perform with the flexibility of a much smaller liner and he discounted the impact that the south drifting ice flows were having on the crafts making the Atlantic crossing that night. His arrogance and ignorance were partly to blame for the ship's demise. However, he was by no means the only culprit.

After the service, Karl took the opportunity to introduce the ladies to Carter and Finn, who were there with their Targets and Max Ingham.

'You have received instructions?' Karl asked the men.

'Eilish was with me last night and acquainted me with the details. I have told the others,' Max Ingham replied his face very stern and focused.

'Then we will meet you all at extraction. Good luck,' Karl said after shaking each man's hand in turn.

He noticed the women were just a little more convinced after that meeting. As if first class men of repute could not be wrong. How typical that attitude was of the times.

He heard Trudy whispering to Felicity as they passed that, 'if a respected barrister and engineer consider this venture legitimate, then who are we to disagree?' Lizzie, who heard the comment too, smiled up at him.

Trudy had been their problem-child over the last day or so, as she had been see-sawing backwards and forwards. One moment, she was all for staying with Oliver and seeing what happened. The next, she was all for becoming part of the new world without her troublesome husband. This might just be enough weight to push her in favour of the extraction.

As he tucked Lizzie's hand securely in at his elbow, he knew that if nothing else, he had the lady at his side convinced. It did not take men of authority to tip her in his favour. She believed it all because she believed in him. It was the most

powerful accolade he had ever received. And he loved her for it more than he ever thought possible.

Life with Lizzie was going to be a wonder. He'd never felt as happy and optimistic in his life.

Marco

All day Marco had been on his best behaviour. It had been a close call yesterday when he'd fallen asleep in Pia's cabin. If it hadn't been for Paulo, he would have been fired and maybe worse – not that it wasn't worth every moment.

He still couldn't believe his luck. That a woman like Pia would want to marry him when he had nothing but himself to offer her was amazing. The story she told him about the future and her age were just that – stories – their truth still remained questionable, even though he knew Pia believed every word of them.

For a time there he had weakened and almost given in to her plea to consummate their union without marriage. However, the fact that she was a virgin put too much pressure on him. He wanted the first time with her to be perfect. And for that kind of perfection he needed wedding vows, flowers and a real bed to lay her on; not a hurried coupling on a narrow bunk between shifts in the restaurant. She deserved better than that. She deserved better than him, if he was truly honest with himself.

Nevertheless, she knew what she was getting and she still wanted him anyway. That was all that mattered. Her age, her home and the possible sinking of the ship were all irrelevant next to that.

He'd managed to get away right on time from his split-shift today, as it was a much slower day in the restaurant-half of the business. Interestingly, he noticed that it was the turn of the staff in the Café Parisien to be run off their feet. So it all balanced out in the end, and they would all have a share in the bountiful tips that still flowed freely from the pockets of their rich patrons.

Of course, if Pia was right, then the money was immaterial. The ship would sink tonight and any cash they'd earned would go down with it along with the men who'd earned it.

Now that he had the day and time of the incident, it felt that much more plausible, especially as he was to meet Maxwell Ingham and his friends outside the restaurant just after eleven. It seemed amazing to him that such rich and

influential men were meeting him, especially so that he would make the extraction point without issue. Such special treatment was more than he deserved.

What did they all do when this Portal didn't open? Would they just laugh and say it was a mistake? Would the men of influence be angry at being tricked or would they laugh, too, because they had been party to the hoax all along? Entertainment for the voyage.

He remembered hearing about a group of religious fanatics who had gone into the mountains north of Milano to await the Second Coming of Christ. They'd been so sure that it was to be on the last day of the century. But when January 1, 1900, dawned, what must they have felt like? To be found to be that wrong about something so important must have been shattering. It must have crushed their faith.

It would crush Pia's faith, too, and her belief in herself when this Portal didn't open. And for no other reason, he would be there tonight so that he could pick up the pieces for her. She would feel devastated, humiliated, confused and even betrayed. And she would need him then, as she had not needed him up to now.

He pushed away the thought that she might be right because that would mean Paulo would die and he couldn't face that possibility. More so now after what the boy had risked coming to find him the day before. If not for Paulo, he would have been in real trouble. Instead, he was just a little deeper in their bad books for being a bit late for shift and more crumpled than usual.

They had accepted his excuse that he had fallen asleep but there were whispers going around that he hadn't fallen asleep in his own bunk – and if not there, then where? Some of the other staff had seen him with Pia on deck and the word had got around. Jealousy and indignation fuelled the gossip, until Gardi had taken him aside that morning and asked him straight-out what was going on with the third class passenger.

He'd told Gardi that Pia was just a girl he talked to sometimes on deck. Nothing more, he'd assured the sceptical man. However, it was good that he'd met Pia on deck today, because if he'd gone anywhere near her cabin there would have been eyes on him reporting his actions, and Paulo wouldn't be able to save him then.

The boy was a gem. He was the best friend Marco had ever had and he deserved a long and happy life. And he would get it, too. If Marco had to move heaven and earth to give it to him, he would. It didn't matter what it cost him personally because for too long he had lived selfishly.

Why else would a loving mother reject him? Even back then it had always been about what he wanted, what was best for him. He hadn't cared about his mother's feelings, about the sacrifices she was making for her family. It was his jealousy and pride that had forced her to turn against him.

And the older he got the more self-centred he'd become. He took women as easily as he took breath. And he discarded them just as easily as he exhaled, never considering their damaged pride or hurt feelings. He moved from place to place without concern for the people he left behind. When his mistress called, he would follow. Look at poor little Micky. Who would feed that child now that he had left? He could have done more for the boy, but all he'd been worried about was the Ship of Dreams and his new, perfect life in America.

Well, it would never have been perfect; he knew that now. And so he'd deserted the child for no good reason. He wouldn't do that again. Not to Paulo. This time, somehow, he would put the boy first. His selfish desire for the love of the sweet Pia would have to come second to the boy's life. It was time he thought of someone other than himself for a change.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Lizzie

She had decided not to return to her stateroom that evening after dinner. The last thing she needed was to run into her rude roommate who would be full of questions about where she was going and with whom. Mrs Duncan's opinion of Karl had been very derogatory, and Lizzie had found it difficult to be civil to the woman since she had voiced her views the day before.

Restless and uneasy about what was coming, Lizzie had barely been able to eat a thing at dinner and when she had asked for a glass of wine, which Karl told her was bad for the baby, he'd given it to her anyway and poured one for himself as well. She noted even the teetotal Rose accepting a glass of wine with her main course.

After their meal, they'd adjourned to the upper areas to listen to the band play for an hour. Then they'd taken a stroll around the deck as the temperature continued to plummet. When she remarked on the noticeable drop in the temperature, Karl was quick to inform her that at seven o'clock it had been forty-three degrees Fahrenheit and that by half-past eight it had dropped to thirty-three degrees Fahrenheit. By ten o'clock, it would have dropped another degree.

The ladies stayed together for moral support. As they walked around the boat deck clad in their warmest clothes, they looked anxiously out at the almost mirror-like surface of the water. It seemed impossible that anything out there could cause this great ship around them to founder. Even Lizzie, who had come to believe in Karl implicitly, could not imagine anything big enough in those smooth, dark depths that could rip a hole in the side of the solid bulk beneath them. And the absent moon and the serene, starry sky above seemed to deny the very possibility of disaster on this oversized mill pond.

'Might you have the night wrong?' Rose said, voicing all their concerns. 'I mean, from that far in the future, what would one day here or there be?'

'No, Rose, there is no mistake. One of the reasons the ship is caught unawares is that there were no waves breaking over the ice to warn of its size. And the flatness of the ocean adds to the optical illusion, which is already being created by the atmospheric conditions. Look at the horizon.'

They all did as he bid them. It seemed obvious where the sea met the inky blackness of the sky.

'Now look really closely about an inch below the horizon,' Karl went on.

Lizzie studied the horizon a little more closely and then looked just below it. There seemed to be another line running parallel to the skyline.

‘There’s another horizon,’ Trudy declared first, her face flushed with excitement.

‘Indeed, yes. That is the true horizon. What is above it is a mirage, if you like. And it is in that hazy mirage that scientists believe keeps the iceberg hidden from view until we are within a mile of it. That false skyline will also deceive ships in the area, which might have come to our rescue.’

‘Oh, I see.’ Trudy’s face was suddenly a picture of consternation as theory became truth to her. ‘So, there is no mistake. It is really going to happen.’

‘Yes. But you will not be here to see it. You will already be in your new home,’ Karl reminded her gently.

Lizzie squeezed Karl’s arm where she gripped it. His warm presence was so reassuring. All she had to do was look at him or draw him close and all her worries and concerns were lifted. Tonight she’d begin her new life. Tonight she’d go to her new home with the man she’d come to love more than life itself.

She still remembered their lovemaking as some sweet, perfect dream-come-true. All her concerns that Peabody’s assault would spoil their union, or that her own fears about the act itself would ruin the moment, had been pushed aside by Karl’s gentle pragmatism. His almost clinical approach to that first act had been amusing – and reassuring. The passion had come, but it had not made the inexperienced Karl clumsy or insensitive to her needs. He remained the perfect, considerate lover throughout. And now she held no fears about the marital bed she would share with him. It would always be good between them.

‘Your thoughts?’ he asked her as they walked on.

‘Just thinking about our new home.’

‘The ocean is rarely still at home, not like this. It rages at the cliffs like an army trying to scale a castle wall. And you can watch the storms come in from far out to sea. It is wild and elemental and very, very beautiful.’

‘It sounds wonderful. Everything about your world sounds wonderful.’

‘It will be even more so with you in it.’

She smiled up at him, marvelling at the young, handsome face that hid the truly old man he was. Instead of being concerned by his age, she liked it. He had a wealth of life experience and was very much in control. No young man could ever have his quiet confidence and authority.

As the temperature dropped further and ice drifts started to appear in the water around them, Lizzie felt her fears begin to rise again. Why was the Captain

speeding ahead when there was so obviously ice in the waters around them? Surely any sane man would have slowed down when obstacles, even small ones as they were seeing now, appeared.

‘I cannot understand what possesses the Captain to steam ahead through this,’ she muttered.

‘Ice flows are normal for this time of the year. You have to remember that Captain Smith has been sailing these waters a long time and has become complacent. The drifts are bigger and further south than normal, but he ignores that fact. And it is the White Star Line’s representative, Bruce Ismay, who is encouraging him to break the record for the crossing; hence, the speed through these treacherous waters. So many factors contributed to this fateful night.’

Shivering from the horror of it all, Lizzie buried her head against Karl’s coat. He tightened his arm around her and dropped a discrete kiss onto her forehead. Then he addressed the group with forced joviality.

‘Come on ladies, I think we would be better off inside out of this cold. A hot beverage would be useful at this juncture.’

They made their way to the sitting room for a late evening tea. Every so often, one or the other of their group would hurry off to the water closets. Whether it was nerves or babies causing the pilgrimages she didn’t know, but she made her own trip once or twice to allay her fears. She knew that when the time came for them to go down to D Deck and the Dining Saloon there would be no more time for bathroom breaks. Better to be safe than sorry.

Finally, as the lights were being dimmed around the sitting room, Karl helped her to her feet.

‘Ready ladies? We will meet Lucy downstairs in a few minutes.’

Lizzie noticed the fear and excitement in the eyes of the other women. Even so, to a one, they nodded and rose to follow him. Such was the faith he inspired.

They took the stairs rather than try to cram into the lift. And even taking them slowly, they soon found themselves outside the doors to the Dining Saloon just after eleven o’clock by Karl’s pocket watch.

‘I don’t think...’ Trudy began, her hands shaking as she gripped them anxiously in front of her. ‘Maybe I better go back to Oliver. He will be wondering where I have gone...’

Lizzie took the nervous woman’s hands in hers and met her eye. ‘Trudy, it is all right. Oliver will make his own way, you know that. And you will make yours. In a few minutes, we will be peeling off these coats because it will be so

hot. And there will be flowers and sunshine and a whole new world to explore. Won't there, Karl?'

'Yes,' Karl said gently, placing an arm around Trudy's trembling shoulders. 'New Atlantis is warm and sunny all year round. The only rain is the storms that come in off the ocean every week or so and pass in a few hours. You will live in a city of classical beauty where the flowers are so bright and fragrant that you will think you are in paradise.'

His words weaved their magic and by the time Lucy appeared with the keys to the darkened saloon, Trudy was calm and optimistic once more.

'When will the children be here?' Lucy asked Karl as she locked the door after them.

'Soon, very soon. They will come up through the kitchen.'

The saloon was eerily dark and quiet, so unlike the place they were all familiar with having shared their meals here three times a day for five days. They carefully made their way down between the tables that faced the kitchen, and the long tables that ran at right angles out to the ship's sides, rather like a fish skeleton. Each table was cleared of cloths and utensils and looked oddly naked in the dim light from the few soft-glowing lamps along the bulkhead.

They heard movement in the galley ahead and for a moment, Lizzie thought they had been discovered by staff. They all froze and waited in terrified silence. Then, through the swinging doors a man in rough, workman's clothing entered. He took one look at their little group and grinned.

'All okay, Karl?' The American man asked with a grin.

'Yes, we are all here, Luke. Any problems your end?'

'Nope. Not even the Chief Steward to worry about. The kids will be here in a few minutes and the first class will be coming through their Dining Saloon any minute now too. Take a seat, ladies. It doesn't matter if you disturb the table arrangements. Once we're gone, there'll never be anyone to know the difference.'

Lizzie felt a cold shudder run through her. That bare implication of the events to come was more terrifying than anything else so far. She dropped into the nearest chair and clung to its arms until her fingers hurt.

Following her lead, the other women sat down too. Karl remained standing and went to the door to have a quiet word with the man called Luke. Then he came back and smiled at them. Although tense, he didn't appear overly concerned. Lizzie concluded that Luke hadn't shared any bad news with him in those whispered moments.

They sat in the silent darkness and waited.

Pia

With her heart in her mouth, Pia knocked softly on the door to the Ahlberg's cabin on F Deck. She was terrified she would be spotted by one of the stewards and shooed away back to her own cabin. They were sticklers about lights-out on this ship, particularly where women were concerned. It was as if they thought the fairer sex would get themselves into trouble if they were caught out too late at night. That might be the case down at the forward end of the ship once the men had a few drinks at the bar in the third class Open Space, but back here they were as safe as they could be anywhere.

The cabin door creaked open just a crack and a boy's face appeared. She gestured with her head for him to come and he nodded, opening the door wide enough for a stream of little bodies to file out. The last through was Tiggy, and Pia picked the toddler up and cuddled her close. She had become very fond of the little girl in the last few days and the feeling was mutual. Tiggy clung to her possessively and giggled.

'We're going on a "venture,"' the child said in a stage whisper, her golden plaits wrapped around her head like a hallo.

'Yes we are! Quietly now children, follow me.' She took the lead with Tiggy in her arms and the four-year-old's hand gripped tightly in hers while the three older children followed on behind. They were as quiet and as good as gold, and she made it up the stairs to E Deck and along the corridor to where Jac was standing Point without discovery. She could see a group of children moving ahead of them now with Cara in charge. They disappeared around the corner and out of sight.

'Okay?' Jac asked softly. Pia simply nodded and hurried on with her charges.

Further along Scotland Road, she saw the young Australian steward waiting at the bottom of the kitchen stairs. He grinned, gave them a bow as if they were honoured guests and ushered them upward.

Pia hurried up the stairs with her gaggle of chicks behind her. At the top of the stairs, she was greeted by more people and a lot of quiet whisperings. A woman reached out and took Tiggy from her arms. After a gentle word to the child that it was all right and that she would be back soon, Pia let the uniformed woman with

the kind face take charge of her brood. That must be Lucy, the stewardess from second, she thought, as she hurried back down the stairs.

Half-way down, she passed Eilish with her own brood coming up. They smiled and nodded as they hurried on.

By the time she had gathered the last of her charges and made her way back to the Dining Saloon, she was in a state of high anxiety. Everything was going like clockwork. That was the trouble. It was all going too well. Surely, they couldn't have it run so smoothly?

However, she didn't query their good fortune. She simply made her way through the crowded room until she found her little group. They were sitting obediently on the floor around Bart as he told them stories about what was going to happen next, repeating his message over and over in different languages.

'And a bright light will come on and that's the door, and we will go through the doorway. It will be very noisy and bright for a minute, but then we will be in a magical cave with lots of nice people who will take us to the party.'

Once Pia was assured her children were settled and ready, she went to look for Marco. She couldn't see him anywhere in the shadowed room. Surely, with his height, she would have been able to identify him in the crowd if he were there. But, though she could see Julio helping Jane and Karl with the ladies from second, she could not see Marco or the first class passengers.

Max

Max walked around the deck as the time for extraction approached. He saw the ice drifts floating innocently by and felt the chill in the air. It seemed perfect conditions for larger icebergs, but though he strained his eyes out across the tranquil ocean, he could see nothing big enough to cause concern. But there would be, he knew. In less than an hour, an iceberg would suddenly appear in front of the ship and they would be unable to avoid the collision.

Too depressed and anxious to stay outside any longer, he made his way back inside, catching up with Finn and the Lunridges as he came in through the companionway on A Deck. With them, he finished the journey down to the reception area outside the restaurant, which was where they were to wait for Marco.

When Carter, Hugo and Jean Pierre joined them shortly after their arrival, Max checked his pocket watch. Just eleven o'clock. They waited patiently as the

last of those from the smoking room on the deck above wandered down the aft Grand Staircase heading for their staterooms, chatting as if they didn't have a care in the world. And for the moment, they didn't. However, in a very short time that situation would change.

As time crawled on, his patience came to an end. He noticed his hands were beginning to shake as he looked at the time once more. It was ten past eleven. Marco was late. What if the waiter decided not to come? How long should they wait for him?

After exchanging a troubled look with Carter, he was just about to suggest they move on when the door to the restaurant opened and Marco hurried toward them. He was still in his uniform and looked harried.

'I am sorry to delay you. The last patrons were slow to leave tonight.' With a silent nod and smile, the group turned and began to make their way along the wide, carpeted B Deck passageways toward the fore Grand Staircase. They kept Marco in the centre so he would not draw attention, and they chatted quietly as they passed any of the remaining passengers or crew who were still about.

At the fore Grand Staircase, Max noted the time on 'Honour and Glory,' the ornate angelic clock that rang out the hours, half hours and quarters religiously, day and night. Glancing up, he saw the glittering white dome overhead. It shone brighter than the sun and he was in awe of it every time he took these stairs. Soon it would shatter under the pressure of tons of water pressing in on it, flooding the staircase they now walked down. It did not bear thinking about!

There were a few people still moving around in the reception area outside the Dining Saloon, but the Saloon itself seemed to be in darkness beyond the ornate wood and glass doorway. As they approached, the door opened for them and Max stepped through it to see Hughes standing there in the darkness, a smile beneath his moustache on his otherwise tense face. As the last of their number entered, Hughes relocked the door behind them.

'Did you have any trouble getting the keys?' he asked Hughes quietly as they made their way between the tables toward the distant kitchen galley. They would be walking almost half the ship to get to the second class Dining Saloon that lay on the other side of the combined first and second class kitchens.

'No sir, the keys are kept on their own marked hooks and it was only a matter of selecting the correct one. I was not questioned.'

Max gave the man a congratulatory pat on the arm and followed as Carter led the way. He noticed that Marco was beginning to lag behind and he wondered if he should drop back and reassure the man. The waiter would be troubled by

what they were doing; probably far more than the rest of them who had been given time to come to terms with this endeavour.

When they reached the doors into the serving room and first class pantry, he looked up and saw jugs hanging in long rows overhead. He had never been in this part of the ship before and he doubted few passengers had.

He took a moment to admire the orderliness of it all. Every space above and below was utilised, storing items that would be used during meal times. The only exceptions were the serving dressers and work benches that stood shining clean and empty in the dimly lit enclosure.

What must this area be like when a busy crew hastened about their duties in perfect synchrony? All the while, the rich passengers sat at their luxurious tables in serene ignorance of the frantic work being carried out for their benefit so nearby.

Letting the others pass, he waited for Marco and then fell in beside him. ‘You handling it, old man?’

Marco looked at him with tense, dark eyes. ‘SÍ, Signor, I am handling it. The ship has not stopped yet.’

The way he said it told Max that Marco didn’t believe it ever would. So he still had to have it proven to him, did he? Well, seeing the Portal open as Max had seen it opened that day in Claridges would be enough to convince Marco.

Max patted the man on the back and said no more as they followed the others between the counters, through a series of doors and along a passageway until they reached the second class pantry. At that point, they could hear the sound of soft talking. A boy’s voice was the loudest, but he was still not speaking above a stage whisper. They hurried to join the hushed voices ahead.

The amount of people in the Dining Saloon was, at first, rather overwhelming, even when he was expecting it. He looked around for Eilish and, catching sight of her, left Marco’s side to go to her. Hurrying through the adults and some children who were milling in excited impatience, he reached his woman and wrapped her in his arms for a few precious seconds.

‘There you are. You were a bit late. I was getting worried,’ Eilish said against his chest. He ran his hand through her silky curls and allowed himself to enjoy the sensation before he spoke.

‘Marco couldn’t get away. Is everyone here?’

‘Yes. You are the last. It went remarkably well. I keep expecting something to go wrong at any moment.’

‘You planned this as completely as any military mission, there was no reason it should go wrong. Oh...’

They all felt it then, a slight jerk and shudder that went right through the ship. Then there was a subtle sound, like fabric being torn, which seemed to go on and on. When it finally stopped, so did the engines.

Part of him was shocked to the core. Even though he knew it would happen, believed Eilish and her team implicitly, the reality was still stupefying. From the hushed and fearful comments around him, he realised he wasn't the only one who was surprised by what had happened and its implications.

He heard Bart speaking louder now. ‘Ready? The door is going to open now. Don't be scared. Here it comes.’ He repeated the words several times in different languages. The boy was a wonder!

Suddenly, a brilliant light filled the saloon and Max could see quite clearly all the people around him for the first time. Their shocked expressions mirrored his own.

Eilish looked up at him and smiled ecstatically. ‘At last!’

Bart and the other adults were getting the children to their feet. Not one child was crying or seemed scared, unlike the adults, who seemed quite stunned and terrified. He heard a woman's voice call, ‘Marco!’ and turned just in time to see the young waiter dashing back through the swinging doors into the kitchen area. A fair-haired girl raced after him.

‘Damn!’ Eilish said under her breath, ‘I knew something would go wrong. I will need to go to Pia. Are you all right?’

‘Of course, I will wait for you.’

He watched Eilish hurry away after the tall, fair girl. Then he turned to watch the spectacle in front of him. Children were moving toward the light, two-by-two, holding hands and following a tall, blonde woman into the Portal. As they disappeared, more children moved up and prepared to move into the light.

The woman next to him, with a very young child clutched to her breast, whimpered, ‘I can't go wi'out me 'usband,’ in a broad, West Country accent.

‘Yes you can,’ he found himself saying. ‘Your children need you more than he does. He will have a better chance on his own. You know he will.’

The woman's big, terrified eyes looked up at him, searching his face for certainty. He gave it to her with his best barrister demeanour. After a moment, she nodded and moved forward with her group. She took hold of another child's hand and stepped up for her turn, displaying more courage than he knew she felt

at that moment. Then she was gone, and so were her children. And the next group approached the Portal, ready to go through.

By the time Eilish came back to his side just about all the children were gone. He didn't know how much time had passed but it felt like forever. And, yet, in the same instance it felt no more than moments ago that they had entered the extraction area.

'How is she?' Max asked Eilish as she came back to wrap her arms around his waist.

'Inconsolable. I had to stop her from running after him. She is waiting now in case he comes back. I have to see Jac. I will be right back.'

Eilish left his side again and moved to where a Nordic giant stood at the entrance to the Portal. He saw her talking to him intently with a lot of nods and glances in Pia's direction. Then Max himself moved forward toward the Portal with Carter, Hugo and the others from first class.

He let everyone else go before him while he waited for Eilish to reach his side. There was no way he was going into the light without her.

'He's going to wait until everyone has gone and then if she wants to stay he'll give her my PA. She can open the Portal herself when Marco comes back or for herself if he doesn't. He's gone for his assistant, Pia says. Damn stubborn man! Why are men willing to throw away love for duty every time?'

He pulled her in close and shook his head. 'Just the way we're made. Will we go now?'

She nodded reluctantly, still looking back to where Pia stood. He noticed that a beautiful red head had gone back to the fair-haired girl now and was holding her while she cried.

'Let's do it,' Eilish said finally and led him forward into the light.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Max

Spring 2337 New Atlantis, GAIAN CONFEDERACY

Even though Eilish had explained to him what to expect, the shock of the blinding light and the buzzing noise, which was so loud it threatened to burst his eardrums, was more than he could handle. He couldn't see anything, and only feeling Eilish's warm body pressed to his side made it bearable. The endless seconds passed and, finally, his foot came down on sandstone; the light was gone and he could see clearly the darkened cavern in which they now stood.

Eilish hustled him forward down a series of stone stairs onto a marble floor dimly lit by strings of embedded lights that undulated like waves across the floor and up the rocky walls. This was Start Point Cavern; he knew. This was the ancient temple of the Atlantean people that had been taken over by the advanced technology of the New Atlanteans for their time-travel experiments.

As Eilish ushered him forward with the rest of the crowd, he glanced back over his shoulder. He saw a massive, post-and-lintel doorway covered in ancient letters and symbols standing on the dais they had just stepped down from. The stone gateway was lit up and humming. This was what they had just passed through, then. He saw the red-haired woman with an olive-skinned man at her side step out of the light at that moment. She seemed very distraught and the man was trying to comfort her.

Then he had to turn back to see where he was going next.

There was a little queue waiting at the far end of the cavern and the children were no longer hushed. They were speaking in their various languages in excited voices, asking questions, pointing out the sights to each other in wonder.

And it was wonderful. He had never seen anything like it. Fanning out from the dais like spokes of a wheel were tables with strange devices on them that Eilish had called "computers." These devices were dark now, as the cavern was dark. Eilish had told him that normally the whole space was lit up like midday, and images played above all those boxes, displaying huge quantities of information for their human operators to decipher. He couldn't wait to see that.

A fast-moving lift arrived and the next load of children was led into it. With excited squeals, the lift took off upward again.

‘I thought Micky was “aving us on,” said a little boy who had appeared at Max’s side. ‘But it’s all true! What a ‘venture this is!’

‘Yes,’ Max said to the lad with the same excitement in own his voice. ‘This is quite an adventure indeed!’

Lizzie

When the lift came to a gentle stop and her stomach caught up with it, the doors opened to reveal a brightly lit morning. With Karl’s arm wrapped tightly around her, she stepped out of the enclosure with her friends and walked out into the sunshine.

‘Heavenly Father, we humbly thank Thee for Thy wondrous bounty set before us,’ Rose prayed beside her, her voice filled with awe and reverence.

‘Just as I promised you, ladies!’ Karl said with a triumphant little laugh, leading them over to the colourful tent set out on the immaculate, green lawn.

The air was warm on her skin and Lizzie turned her face up to greet the sun, her eyes closed to enjoy the sensation of the golden rays on her eyelids. She could smell the flowers on the air, wafts of rose, jasmine and fuchsia blending together in a bouquet of sensory delight.

‘Let us get these coats off. I am sweltering already,’ Karl said as he let her go, helped her out of her overcoat and then pulled off his own jacket. He took their discarded garments over to a bench and dropped them there.

All around them, she saw people following his lead. Coats, jackets and woollen scarves were being discarded into big piles or collected by the white gowned people who were now moving gracefully among them. These people looked like angels or ancient marble statues come to life.

‘Oh my!’ Lizzie gasped as she got a better look at one young man’s costume. He wore a short, white, Roman tunic, belted at the waist by a golden chain. Beneath it she could see bare, muscular legs. On his feet were sandals. His hair was shaved short all over except for a long lock of hair that fell forward over his forehead.

‘I forgot to tell you about the clothes.’ Karl sounded annoyed with himself at his omission. ‘I hope you are not too offended. We all adopt the classic robes of the ancient Atlanteans for comfort and efficiency. As you can see, the women’s gowns are somewhat longer, although not nearly as long as you are used to. And no one wears corsets or stays or much of anything except shorts under them.’

‘It feels like I’m on Mount Olympus with the Gods,’ said Felicity, her usual languid tone replaced with awe and pleasure.

‘I suppose it does. Come along, the locals will have refreshments laid out in the pavilion. Let’s get something before the children scoff the lot! I find I am quite famished.’ Karl gave a little laugh and led the way.

As they moved toward the pavilion, Lizzie caught sight of a dark-haired woman from the ship. It surprised her to see the tiny woman here because she hadn't known she was a Target. Lizzie couldn't remember seeing her at the extraction point either. Certainly she wasn't part of their little group of pregnant women.

Karl followed her gaze. ‘That is Giarn. She is one of the Researchers. From the looks of it, she is just about to make the Jump to the Titanic.’

‘But she will drown!’ Rose exclaimed in horror.

‘Hopefully not. The passenger whose name she will be taking is listed as having survived. She will bring back a first-hand record of the sinking so that those who need closure can see what they left behind. It will not be for everyone. However, for those who need it, it will be there. And there will be many of our people who will want to experience that whole journey from start to finish. Our VR rooms in the Knowledge Centre can give them our experiences once we have downloaded them from our memories.’

‘This little woman – Giarn did you call her? She hasn't been on the Titanic yet?’ asked Trudy slowly.

‘No. They would have scheduled her for after we got back to make sure our mission was successful.’

‘But I saw her. She was always wandering around the ship at all hours of the day and night. How can I have seen her if she has not gone there yet?’ Lizzie asked in bewilderment.

‘That is the wonder of time travel as well as its inherent danger. We can go back from here at any time and become part of those few short days in 1912. It may well be that, sometime in the future, another mission will be undertaken to rescue more of the victims – possibly the engineers. Our world will have to have altered substantially for that to happen. But ten years ago, I would have said that a Jump to save children would have been impossible.

‘Our society is evolving, slowly and reluctantly at times, but it is evolving. There may come a time when men such as those in the bowels of the ship will be needed here. It may be tomorrow; it may be a hundred years from today. But as

far as those on the Titanic are concerned – if they were meant to be rescued, they will be; some time.’

‘So, sometime in the future, Oliver might be rescued?’ Trudy asked tentatively.

‘Unlikely, I’m afraid. Oliver will never have the kind of mind required to adjust to all this,’ Karl admitted gently.

Lizzie watched the expressions flicker across Trudy’s face. There was relief, followed by sadness, and finally acceptance.

‘Maybe I should go back with Giarn. There is more I could do...’ Lucy said reluctantly, looking around her as if her stay in Heaven was about to come to an end.

‘That is impossible. Giarn will enter the timeline on the day the ship sets sail. If you went with her, there would be two Lucys on board that ship. Crossing our own time-line is very dangerous, and is forbidden. You did your part Lucy. Let it go and accept that now it is about you and your baby. I am afraid you are stuck here with us for the foreseeable future.’ Karl chuckled boyishly.

Lucy frowned for several long moments, and then it was as if she finally accepted her good fortune. With light-filled eyes, she beamed at Karl before turning to take in more of her new world.

For the period that it took them to stock their plates with fresh, colourful food, Lizzie and the others were silent. Then, once the edge of her hunger was relieved and they were all relaxing on blankets beside the canal, Lizzie’s mind turned back to the miraculous rescue.

‘I am so glad you came along,’ she said, curling up against Karl’s shirt-covered torso and resting her head on his shoulder, as if she’d always done it. She could feel the dampness of his skin under the warm bombardment of sunshine. Her nose felt burned already but she had no desire to move out of the sun. It was far too soothing.

‘Came along?’ He looked down at her quizzically.

‘That first morning when that oaf nearly knocked me over; what if we had not met? I might have missed all this, missed you... I cannot imagine...’ Her thoughts turned dark for a moment, remembering the disaster they had left behind them. It didn’t seem quite real. But then, neither did the world she saw around her now.

‘It was fated, my darling girl. How can you think there was chance involved at all? I had felt the pull of the Titanic since I was a boy hundreds of years ago; hundreds of years after that doomed Titan drowned. I had a connection to it then

as I have now. I was always meant to find you Lizzie, always meant to save you. It was our destiny.'

She looked up into his warm, hazel eyes that were staring at her with such love and adoration. 'Yes, I do believe you are right. Destiny. Four hundred years separated us, but we have found each other at last. It was our destiny.'

Pia

Sunday, 14 April 1912, TITANIC

It had all gone so smoothly. She knew it had been too easy. Somewhere in the back of her mind, she had known that happiness was not for her. It never had been. Hers was the solitary path, the lonely, isolated path, depending on no one, needing no one. For a little while, she'd forgotten that; had hoped for something more. But it had been a mirage her thirsty heart had created; it had never been real.

She stood in the alien light of the Portal as the last of their Targets passed through into their new home, watching the two swinging doors into the kitchen as if they held her salvation.

'Pia.' Jac said her name from close behind her. His voice was sad and serious. She knew he was going to tell her that she must come now or be left behind. And she knew she must do as he said, because to stay meant death.

Was she ready to die? She had lived so very long. Maybe it was time to die. New Atlantis held no joy for her any more.

'Are you coming, Pia?' Jac asked.

She shook her head without looking at him. For a moment, she heard nothing, as if he was thinking what to do next. Then he reached around her and thrust a PA into her hands.

'If he comes back with the boy, bring them both through. If he doesn't, come home, Pia. You have people who love you and will miss you. If he doesn't come, he isn't worth it.'

She found it vaguely interesting that Jac had slipped into the informal language of his mate in that moment. He only did that when Cara was around. What would make him drop his formal persona now? Not for her surely. To him, she was just one of his team. He had never spoken a casual word to her in all the time she had known him. This informality was kept for Cara alone.

She held the inactive PA in her hands. This, then, was not the one that had activated the Portal behind her. One of the others must have given him theirs. For her? Yes, for her. They were all worried about her and wanted her to have a choice; wanted her to come home. The realisation was like sunshine breaking through heavy cloud for a brief time.

She turned and smiled up at Jac, so far above her. 'Thank you. I will wait. I might come. There is time yet.'

'He may not be able to get back up here. Remember what the stewards will do to the restaurant staff. If he doesn't get back it may not be because he doesn't want to. He left you because he had a duty to that boy not because he didn't love you. It's what we're like, us men.' Jac gave a humourless grunt. 'It doesn't mean we love you any less.'

Pia saw him for the first time. Not the austere giant who had always daunted her, but the caring, conflicted man, ever caught between duty and love. What must it be like to walk that knife edge, weighing the good of the many against his personal wants or needs?

'I know.' She turned away from him then, not wanting to feel empathy for him. Not wanting to feel anything at all. Her eyes were riveted to the door once more. 'You better go, Jac. The Portal has been open a long time. Cara will be anxious. If... if I do not get back, tell the others I love them. You are all like family to me, especially after these last few days.'

'I will tell them. Please don't wait too long...'

She heard him walk away and as suddenly as the light had appeared it was gone, and so was the buzzing that accompanied it.

For a split second, she felt the overwhelming terror of being left alone again. Her people gone, four hundred years and more into the future, and she was here, alone.

The terror gave way to acceptance and she sat down on a nearby chair and fiddled with the PA. Would it be found amongst the wreckage in the 1980s? Would they wonder about it? No, there was no record of such a gadget being found. It probably ended up buried somewhere away from the wreck. She knew her body would have dissolved long before the submarines came to explore the depths of the icy Atlantic for the legendary Ship of Dreams.

And that's all they were – just dreams, for her and for all those who would not survive this night. She felt the tears trickling down her burning cheeks but made no move to brush them away. What was the point? There was no one here to see her.

Marco

He ran, faster than he'd ever run before. Plunging down the galley staircase to Scotland Road and along to their cabins where he prayed Paulo would be. When he threw open the door, his heart sank to his feet. No one there. They were all still all in the restaurant, even now.

He turned to run back to the staircase that would take him directly to B Deck and the restaurant. However, as he reached it, several of the staff were coming down, laughing and joking about the ice someone was handing around up on the deck. One of them was Paulo, and when the young man saw his face he was immediately alarmed.

'What is it? Where did you go? Someone said you went out the front way.'

'Come,' Marco gasped, grabbing the boy by the collar and dragging him along Scotland Road toward mid-ship and the staircase that would take them up to the Portal; if it were still there; if he hadn't thrown away this chance at survival.

But he couldn't have left. Once he saw that it was all real. Everything that Pia had told him was real. He couldn't leave Paulo. For once in his life he needed to put someone else first. The boy deserved to live. If he could get him up there in time he would make them take Paulo in his place. Even though his spot was only his because of Pia, his sweet, beautiful Pia, he would make them take Paulo in his place because the boy deserved to live. He deserved a chance.

'Where are you... hey Marco, are you crazy! Let me go,' Paulo cried, struggling to escape the fist that clutched his coat and dragged him along the passageway.

Marco could hear the voices of the other staff calling after them, making fun of them. Rude, crude comments about what they were to each other.

'Shut up, Paulo, and come with me. We're late. We may have missed your chance. I didn't believe it, you see. I didn't believe it until I saw it with my own eyes.'

'Saw what? For god's sake, let me loose! You're going to tear my jacket!'

'Shut up and run like your life depends on it, because it does, damn you, it does!' With that he gave the boy a big push and let him go. Paulo did as he was told, running ahead of him up the passage.

'Take the stairs at the engineer's mess.'

'But we aren't allow...'

‘Just do it!’

They ran, knocking anyone in their path out of their way. Gasping for breath, they reached the bottom of the stairs and began to take them two at a time upward to the kitchens one deck above.

‘Hey, you can’t go up there!’ They heard a voice shout behind them. But they were through the door at the top now and the yelling was muffled. Marco quickly glanced around for something to jam the door shut. He saw a door-stop on the bench. He slammed the chock under the door.

‘What are you doing? Are you mad? We’ll lose our jobs, Marco. I can’t afford to lose this job!’ The boy was almost in tears as he gasped for air.

‘You have lost it. We all have. The ship is sinking, Paulo; the ship is sinking. Come, now, if you want a hope of surviving!’

He pushed the boy ahead of him toward the second class pantry at the end of the corridor.

Even before he got to the double saloon doors, he knew it was too late. There was no bright light under them, no loud hum coming from the other side. They had all gone. He had lost Paulo’s chance for him.

Slowing to a walk, he trudged on hopelessly. He thought there would be time. He’d prayed there would be time. Paulo, ahead of him, noticed he’d slowed.

‘What? I thought we were in a rush...’

‘It’s too late,’ he said tiredly, dragging his feet forward until he reached Paulo. He swung the doors outward into the dark and empty Dining Saloon.

‘Marco?’

Pia’s voice had to be a dream. They had all gone. How could he hear her calling his name?

But as he stared in utter amazement he saw her running toward him out of the darkness. Tears were coursing down his face as he scooped her up and clung to her, sobbing. ‘I thought you’d gone. I thought you’d all gone.’

‘I could not go without you.’ She was sobbing, too, clinging to him just as tightly as he held her.

‘You have lost your chance to go home because of me?’ he cried, feeling the full force of what she was doing there. Not only was he responsible for Paulo’s life but now Pia’s? He truly was a bastardo. ‘I never wanted that. I never wanted that!’

She pulled away from him. ‘It is all right. I have a PA. We can go.’

He stared down at her, trying to make sense of her words. What was a PA? How could they still go? However, he trusted the confidence in her voice, knew

that it was somehow still possible for her to go; for them to go.

‘Take Paulo instead of me. Please. If you love me, take him instead of me. He deserves to live!’ He begged her.

She grinned at him through her tears and she began to press the small object in her hands.

‘I know it is too much to ask but please, if you can go home, take the boy with you,’ he said again, trying to convince her. He looked back at the bemused boy standing behind him. His face told him he thought Marco was mad.

Suddenly the light was back, blazing so brightly and buzzing so loudly that it made him cower away from it in panic. Paulo cried out in terror and Marco made a hasty grab for the boy to stop him from running away. In the distance, he could hear fast approaching footsteps. Whoever had seen them come into the kitchen had come after them. Any minute they would burst through the doors.

‘You are both coming. Come on, now. There’s no time!’ Pia’s face was beautiful in the strange, bright light.

‘Both?’ he asked, not sure he understood her. There was no room for the two of them. It could only be Paulo or him. How could it be both?

‘Both. Now. Those who are following you cannot be allowed to see the Portal. Quickly!’

Grabbing Paulo’s jacket, Marco hauled the boy toward the light. The lad struggled to get away, frightened of what he was seeing.

‘It’s all right, garzone, trust me,’ Marco said as he raced into the light with the boy clutched to his side. He felt, more than saw, Pia follow them in.

Spring 2337 New Atlantis, GAIAN CONFEDERACY

And then it was chaos, blinding, noisy chaos and the only thing that was real was the jacket he clutched in his fist. Just when he thought he would go mad from it all, they fell out onto a stone dais with Pia close behind them. Then the light and the noise were gone.

For a moment, he lay where he and Paulo fell, gasping for breath, heart still racing. The silence was as deafening as the noise had been only seconds before.

‘Thank God you made it!’ The red-haired girl called Jane rushed out of the darkness and threw her arms around Pia. They were suddenly both crying and laughing at the same time.

However, their joyful reunion was short lived as Jane turned to him and yelled, 'you selfish bastard!' If she hadn't been such a fragile looking woman he might have been afraid.

'Jane, no!' Pia cried.

Ignoring Pia, the young woman stood her ground, fury streaming off her in waves. 'Get up. I'm going to hit you hard for what you did back there. I nearly lost my friend because of you! Get up!'

Marco clambered unsteadily to his feet brushing his hair back out of his eyes. He watched the girl approach him in a fighter's stance.

'Do it!' he said, offering her his chin. 'I deserve it. I never meant for Pia to stay behind. I never wanted to risk her!'

Jane stopped to stare at him furiously. 'What did you expect her to do? She loves you and you left her!'

'Jane,' Pia pleaded, dragging at her friend's arm. 'Do not. It is over. We are all safe.'

'No. It isn't okay, Pia. This arrogant idiot had a chance of a lifetime with a woman far too good for him and he was willing to throw it all away. Throw you away, for god's sake! It's not okay.'

'Jane!' This was her husband Peter, who stepped up onto the bottom stair; his face was dark with censure.

'I went for Paulo. He deserved to take my place. I didn't believe it was real until I saw the light.'

'Your place?' Jane demanded, ignoring her angry husband.

'Yes. I knew that only one of us could go. He deserved my place. If I had realised it was real earlier, Pia would not have had to risk herself.'

'You think she would have gone without you? You really do deserve a beating. Goddamn it, man, she loves you! These people don't love lightly. You were Pia's only shot at love. You had no right to try to change things that you had no understanding of. Take your place? Honestly!'

Her husband was at her side now, placing his arm around her shoulder carefully as if he feared she would lash out at him.

'Come Querida, there is a party above ground and we are missing out. All's well that ends well.'

Jane tried to shrug out of his arms but it was only half hearted. Her temper was cooling now and, after a moment, she allowed her man to lead her away.

'You hurt her again and I'll beat the shit out of you, I promise you,' Jane said as a final warning as she was led down the dais stairs. In the heat of the moment

her accent sounded a lot like the steward called Jacko, Marco thought vaguely. It was not the English accent familiar to him; Jacko had said he was Australian.

The red-head's husband glanced Marco's way with a relieved laugh. 'And she can do it, too. My wife is the best fighter we have.'

'Not as good as Luke,' Jane conceded grumpily.

'Every bit as good as Luke. Better, on a good day, Querida. Come now, we deserve champagne. We did it! There is a celebration to be had!'

As Jane was led away, Marco looked across at Pia, who stood with her arms wrapped protectively around her body. She was shaking. Not sure if she had forgiven him or not, he stepped toward her tentatively, reaching out for her. After a moment's hesitation, she flew into his arms and began to sob in earnest.

'I thought I had lost you,' she sobbed against his chest, her whole body quaking under the intensity of her emotions.

'I am sorry, so sorry. I did not think I meant so much to you. I did not know.' He muttered endearments into her hair as he stroked her back.

'Okay... it is okay now,' she said as she tried to bring herself under control. He tightened his arms around her a little more and nodded, not willing to trust his voice any more.

'Wh... where are we? Wh... what is this place?' Paulo asked in shaky Italian, all memory of English seemingly gone under the enormity of what he was experiencing.

'It is safety, garzone, safety. The Titanic has sunk and we have survived. And now our future is here. This place is called "New Atlantis."'

As Pia stepped back, Marco extended one arm and drew the boy up and against his other side. Then, as Pia guided the way from her position under his right arm, they made their way down the stairs and along the marble floor toward the far end of the Cavern.

From the darkness the tall, Nordic giant appeared.

'You are home safe, Pia. I am very, very glad,' he said gently.

Pia grinned at the man and nodded. 'We have one more than we counted on.'

'It is better than losing you, dear girl; far better than losing you. Young man, you have a great deal to answer for,' the giant said, as if he were an old man and Marco a child.

Then Marco realised that this man might not be his own age as he appeared to be. Maybe he was as old as Pia.

'Yes sir, I am very sorry,' he said respectfully, just in case.

‘Well, I may have been in the wrong for not bending on this one. Come along. There is a party going on and you are all invited. Gentlemen, it is mid-morning up at ground level on a warm spring day. Be prepared.’

‘Did he say...?’ Paulo started to ask in Italian.

‘Sì, Paulo. Warm spring morning. This is not a dream and you have not lost your mind. You have travelled through time and space to the future. Accept what your eyes are showing you. It is the only way,’ Marco told him in Italian.

‘Sì.’

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Eilish

She stood in the morning sunshine with her arm around Max watching the children playing and laughing. The adults from the ship and those from New Atlantis were also looking on in delight. Off to one side, she saw the youthful Luke standing with his arm around a joyous Faith. They watched as their son rough-housed with some boys on the lawn.

That boy could go from adult soldier to playful child in a matter of moments; somewhat like his adoptive father, Eilish realised with a start. She was so glad to see Luke so happy. Making the shift into a clone body had been his biggest adjustment yet, and he'd obviously made it with flying colours. Their whole society would benefit from that in the long term. Because she knew, without a doubt, that without Luke these large-scale missions would not work nearly as effectively.

She turned to see Karl and the girl called Lizzie walking across the lawn toward the moving pathway that would take them away from the centre of the city.

'Give me a minute,' she said to Max and slipped out from under his arm. Hurrying after the couple, she called out to them.

Karl stopped and turned back to her, waiting for Eilish to catch them up.

'Where are you going? There's a party going on,' she said breathlessly as she reached them.

'Lizzie is tired. It is after midnight by her internal clock. I am taking her home to bed. I want to show her my house by the sea. I have told her so much about it. It is past time she saw it for herself.'

'Oh, of course. We will catch up tomorrow then at the Retrieval Centre?'

'Yes. I will need to debrief as we all will. The virtual images of the Titanic will be quite a useful addition to our archives.'

Eilish noticed that along with contentment there was also sadness hanging over the couple.

'We could not stop it,' Eilish said, knowing the cause of their ennui. 'We did what we could.'

'I know. The rest are with their Maker now or will be Targeted in the future. Nevertheless, it still feels...' Karl shrugged eloquently, unable to find the words to describe what he felt.

‘I know. It still feels as if we only saved a small percentage of those who were lost. However, look at the woman beside you. Look at the children on the lawn. Isn't that worth celebrating?’

‘Most definitely. Even so, for me the celebration will come later when the tragedy fades a little. For now, I will go home with my soon-to-be wife and child and make my peace with it all.’

Eilish nodded sadly. ‘Yes, I imagine we will all be making peace with it in our own ways in the next few days and weeks. Nevertheless, you and I have so much more than the others to be grateful for.’ She smiled benignly at Lizzie before looking back at Karl. ‘To have found love is more than either of us would have thought possible.’

‘Indeed.’ Karl dropped a kiss on Lizzie’s head and rubbed her arm. ‘If anyone asks, just tell them where we have gone and why. I will see you soon. Good job. You Retrievers do a good job. If I did not know it before, I do now.’

Eilish grinned at his compliment.

Turning away, she headed back towards the party. Max had settled himself on the grass beside Carter and Hugo, a plate of food in his hands, watching Finn swing one of the children around in his arms. Several other tiny tots were begging for their turn. As she approached, Max grinned and held up the plate.

‘I piled on enough for both of us. This is almost as good as the restaurant on the ship. Carter says it is all prepared and processed so that it can be “reconstituted,” that was your word, yes?’ He looked at Carter, who gave a nod. ‘Reconstituted in only seconds. That is a miracle!’

‘Another miracle,’ said Hugo jovially, sipping at a long glass filled with something green and icy.

‘I imagine I will get bored with the miraculous after a while,’ Max commented dryly, holding out his hand for Eilish. ‘Although I will never get bored with this woman, gentlemen. She is far more miraculous to me than time travel, moving walkways or instant food.’

‘Oh, I will hold you to that when I show you the Knowledge Centre. It will “blow your mind,” as they used to say in the 1960s. Or was it the 1970s...’

‘Blow your mind? That seems appropriate, especially after walking through that Portal. I was sure I was going to have a seizure of some kind.’

Eilish lowered herself to the grass and rested her head on Max’s stomach. She stared up at the peerless blue sky above them and wondered if this was to be the happiest moment of her life. It certainly felt like it.

‘You get used to it,’ Carter replied with a laugh. ‘It actually only lasts for a few moments. It just feels longer because your cells are transposed across the Continuum. You need to get one of the experts to explain it to you one day.’

‘Hmm.’ Max sounded doubtful as he ran his fingers through her hair. Ah, now this was the best moment! She chuckled to herself. Somehow she wondered if she would be saying that for some time to come. Each moment would seem just that little bit better than the one before.

‘Love you,’ she murmured.

‘I love you, too.’

Karl

Pia stood in all her understated glory beside Marco on the patio of Rene and Livy’s villa overlooking the cliff and turquoise ocean. The sun was shining, the sky was deep, cerulean blue and the crowd of white-clothed wedding guests looked cool and light as they witnessed their sweetest member make her vows.

The house was just a few doors down from his own and Karl would have volunteered to have the impromptu wedding there, except that his place didn’t have a patio and was somewhat smaller. And with the amount of people here to celebrate, smaller would not have worked.

It had been two days of celebration. Two days since they’d returned from the Titanic to the open arms of a waiting city. Just as the New Atlanteans had welcomed those traumatised women and children from 1942 several years ago they now greeted these new survivors. But unlike that last welcome, this one had been a truly joyous occasion, largely due to the children who still saw it as part of a big party they had been invited to.

Yesterday the children and adults had begun to settle into their new home. They had been assigned to the Interim Centre, the specially set up quarters for the Nazi victims. It was felt that keeping them together and minimising their contact with high technology was the surest way of introducing them to their world gently and effectively. It had worked with the 1942 survivors and it would probably work with this group. Although, no one expected it to take very long for these people to adapt to their new surrounds.

Karl had seen Bart sneaking a few of the older children out of the Centre yesterday to see the Start Point Cavern. Watching the children walk amongst the high tech equipment as the Portal activated and deactivated was a marvel. They were all filled with excited questions and wonder.

No, the children would be fine. It would be the adults who would need time to come to terms with the lives they'd lost.

The sinking of the Titanic was still with them all, playing like a sad refrain in the background of their happy melody. Lizzie voiced the feelings for the adults well when she told Karl last night as they watched a wild storm come in off the sea through their bedroom window, that it felt wrong to have such happiness when so many others had suffered such terror, pain and death. And he supposed that such feelings were not so different from what the survivors of the LGP had felt, once they had new bodies and a fresh new world to build. It didn't seem quite fair.

But what did they know about the bigger picture, the balance in nature or God's plan? They didn't, and so fairness was only the child-like mind of Man trying to understand the mind of the Creator.

Of course, Lizzie and Max were not amongst those at the Interim Centre. Lizzie had gone straight home with Karl and enjoyed the wonder of his home and his bed. And from the tired, but satisfied look on Eilish's face, Karl could imagine that something similar had been going on at her small villa yesterday with Max.

Now, on day three, they stood together on this patio in the sunshine rejoicing in a different way. They celebrated the victory of love over adversity, symbolised by Pia's marriage to Marco. This joining of one more reawakened couple, one more set of soul-mates who had found each other across centuries, was nothing short of awe-inspiring.

Karl Brandenburg, a minister of the German Evangelical Church before the LGP and a Researcher who had spent many lifetimes in the Early Christian era, was here to officiate. Appearing to be a man in his late fifties with sunburned skin and bleached blonde hair, he wore only a gold stole as his vestments. He said that such simplicity was the way of it in the early church before the Holy Roman Empire got its hands on the ritual.

Simplicity had been the Christian message in those early years and Karl believed that simplicity was the way of the future for his faith. So he stood before them now in a white tunic no different to what they all wore, with his gold stole draped around his neck as he intoned the ritual words.

Pia was glowing; a simple wreath of brightly coloured flowers on her brow and a silver threaded shawl around her shoulders over the floor-length gown both Jane and Livy had worn before her. At her side stood Marco, resplendent in his simple, white tunic, which brought out the darkness of his olive skin and the

whiteness of his smile. He was grinning so broadly, Karl had to wonder if his face would ache later on. Next to him stood Paulo, the boy who was not supposed to have been saved. He was best man and, if his manic grin was any indication, he was settling into his new life very well.

All around the happy couple were the well-wishers, mostly Retrievers, all present to witness this very special moment.

While the sea breeze brushed the long, straight wisps of Pia's hair back from her face and the sun lit up her skin, she turned to face the man she had met four hundred years ago and fallen in love with instantly.

'... I now pronounce you man and wife. You may kiss the bride.'

While the cheers and clapping erupted around them, Marco drew his bride gently into his arms, his dark eyes glowing. He kissed her as if she was the most precious thing in the world.

At Karl's side he felt Lizzie shift and turn. Sensitive to her every nuance, he turned to see what concerned her. She was staring off to the back of the gathering where Faith was gripping her stomach, bent double, as Luke tried to keep her upright. Even from where he stood close to the front of the group, he could hear Luke desperately whispering to her as she shook her head.

Unobtrusively, the couple began to back through the sliding glass doors into the living area of the villa. Karl began to ease his way through the guests to follow them.

This was not good. Citizens of New Atlantis rarely became ill. It was mainly accidents that kept the small Medical Centre busy. That and clone Integration.

But Faith looked seriously ill. Could she have a ruptured appendix?

Luke had his pretty, young wife laid out on the sofa by the time he reached them. Lizzie followed him out and stood at a distance, watching silently.

'I am all right, Luke. I just feel sick, that is all. I have been feeling like this for a few days. It passes,' Faith was saying in an exhausted voice, her pale face even paler than usual.

Karl drew out his Tablet and connected to the Medical Centre. He would have a Medic here within seconds and he told Luke as much.

As Faith continued to shake her head and say she was fine, the Medic arrived, teleporting into the living room not far from where Karl was standing. Karl could have done the examination himself, but it was the equipment the Medic brought with him that would give the best diagnosis.

He watched as Jason Otago, the medic, withdrew the patches through which information on Faith's condition would immediately be relayed to his Tablet.

Walking up behind the Maori, Karl watched over his shoulder as the familiar diagnostic graphs began appearing on the screen of the small device.

That couldn't be right. He looked more closely at several of the higher than normal readings. Jason turned to him in consternation. Wordlessly, Karl shook his head and took the machine from him.

'What is it?' Luke demanded anxiously, his voice loud enough to attract the attention of the other guests outside. They were starting to come in through the glass door now, curious about what was going on.

'Jason, keep them out there for a few moments will you? We do not need a lot of bodies in here getting in the way,' he said to the big medic hovering at his side.

Bart ducked in before Jason could coax the rest of the guests back onto the patio. He dashed over to his mother's side, his face a mask of terror. Not even in those terrible days after he'd been brought here from the Death Train had Karl seem Bart look so terrified. He dropped down beside Faith, who was still pleading for them all to stop making such a fuss over a bit of sickness.

Then her face turned green and Luke was rushing into the kitchen for a bowl. He got it back to her just in time. She retched agonisingly into it.

Karl looked back at the device in his hands and continued to gauge the readings.

'This cannot be,' he muttered under his breath, quickly asking the device to compare the results with those on file in the Medical Centre. They had readings for every complaint known to man stored in the archives.

'What is it?' Luke's voice had got higher and louder and he was bordering on violence. What did he say to them? It couldn't be true. Such a condition was unheard of in Old Timers.

However, from the way Luke was shaking and from the terror on Bart's face, he needed to tell them something now, even though it couldn't be right. The device couldn't be right.

'It is nothing serious,' he said slowly. 'Calm down Luke. Faith is perfectly all right.'

'All right? All right? She's spewing her guts up here, doc, nobody gets sick like this here. Damn you, what is it?' Luke sprang to his feet and for a moment Karl was concerned that the man meant to do him harm. But Luke simply tightened his fists at his sides and glared at him, nose to nose.

'It cannot be true. The machine is faulty. I will need to take her back to the Centre for more tests.' Karl stepped around Luke, shut down the device and

packed it into the Medic's kit. From the bag, he then withdrew an anti-convulsion patch and applied it to Faith's skin before removing the diagnostic patches.

'The nausea and sickness will pass in a moment,' he told Faith, patting her damp shoulder. She nodded tiredly and lay back against a cushion on the sofa.

'Doc, what can't be true?' Luke said in an ominous voice, his fists shaking at his side.

'I would rather wait until I can check the results on our equipment back at the centre,' Karl said firmly.

'No! Now, Doc! I want to know now! You say she's all right but that your device is wrong? Then how can you know she's okay? Spit it out buddy before I really get mad!'

'Oh, for heaven's sake, Luke, this is not helping. The indications are that Faith is pregnant. That is why the device must be malfunctioning. She cannot be pregnant!' Karl snapped angrily, his own discomfort manifesting in an emotion he could hardly recognise. He was never angry.

'Pregnant?' Faith whispered in stunned amazement, looking down at her flat stomach.

'Do not jump to any conclusions. As I said...'

'Pregnant?' Luke echoed, looking at Faith as if she had just grown another head.

'Morning sickness,' Karl muttered tersely.

'Morning sickness?' Bart echoed frowning. 'What's that?'

'It's what women get when they're going to have a baby,' Luke answered stiffly, his face now as green as Faith's had been only moment's ago.

Karl could hear several of the guests passing the word along. This was getting out of hand. The results weren't conclusive. If he didn't stop this now, there would be rumours all over the Confederacy before they were completely sure.

This was possibly the most momentous occurrence of the last two hundred years. The ramifications – if it were true – were mind boggling. Could a clone body sudden become fertile? Even if that were possible, Luke had not been in a clone body when he impregnated Faith. Passing through the Portal should have sterilised him. Wouldn't someone have picked up on that when he was recovering from his bullet wound? Or later, when he was being prepped for integration into his first clone?

He turned to the guests and raised his hands. 'Please, do not get too excited. It cannot be possible. You all know that. It is most likely a faulty diagnostic. Do

not start passing unfounded rumours that could cause untold damage if they are proven to be wrong. Give me a little time to check the results. I will get back to you shortly.'

With that, he looked at Jason who took out his teleporter. And while Karl and Luke helped Faith to her feet, the Maori activated the mechanism. Luke and Karl assisted Faith through the portal to the Medical Centre with the Medic and Bart close behind.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Pia

Pia stood at the back of the crowd, gripping Marco's hand so hard she was sure it must hurt. Even so, she couldn't make herself relax enough to let go. What the people around her were saying was impossible. How could Faith be pregnant?

'What is going on?' Marco asked beside her, making no attempt to escape her boa constrictor hold. Instead, he started massaging her back with long, soothing strokes with his free hand.

'They are saying that Faith is pregnant. That is Luke's wife. Did you meet her that first day we got here? Pretty woman with big, grey eyes and light brown hair. She's one of the nicest people you could ever meet. She was the one who came up with the plan to rescue the children from the Death Train. It was so unlike her to do that. I remember how uncharacteristically she behaved at the time. She was like a dog with a bone. Even when people told her that the train was no more than an unsubstantiated rumour or that to undertake a mass Retrieval of that size was beyond them, she just kept pushing.' She knew she was rambling, but it was better than thinking about what people around her were saying.

'So, she is pregnant. They are married, are they not?' Marco said in confusion.

'Not married like this, but they are Bonded. They had to be to adopt Bart. But she cannot be with child, Marco. I told you. We are all sterile here. Except for the women who come to us pregnant, there are no other fertile women or men in our world. I warned you of that.'

'We cannot have children? Yes, I remember you saying something, but I did not believe any of this back then. Especially not the fact you were a very old lady. I still do not quite believe that.'

'Well, believe it, because it is true. And none of us can have children. Or that has been the case for over two hundred years. Not since before the LGP. If this has happened... if she is pregnant... my God, that will mean everything changes.'

The guests started to move back into the living room and the wedding party began, although it was now edged with excitement and dread. Pia didn't care. If it were true, if Faith were pregnant, it meant that there was a possibility she might someday have a child of her own. As it was, she had plans to ask Marco

about adopting Tiggy. That little tot still pulled at her heart-strings and she'd spent a great deal of her time since returning, playing with the child in the Centre and fielding her innocent questions.

Marco and Paulo had stayed at the Interim Centre with the others for the last two nights while she had gone back to her unit. Both men were adjusting to their new life with enthusiasm. She had wanted to postpone the wedding until Marco really understood what he had been given. There were opportunities that would take time to filter. Not the least of them being the many attractive and exceptional women he could choose from. He was limiting himself by jumping into commitment too soon.

However, Marco had been adamant that he wanted to have the wedding immediately. And, even though she was still worried that her lack of enthusiasm in bed might bore him after a while, she reluctantly agreed.

So here they stood, with all her friends around her, married in a way that she had never expected, to a man she still couldn't believe wanted her. And she was happy – disconcertingly, unbelievably happy.

It was while they were cutting their wedding cake that the Tablets all over the room went off. Knife still held in Marco's hand, Pia reached for her Tablet and allowed the message to flow into her mind. It was from Karl. The message was as simple as it was sublime: 'Faith is pregnant and doing well.'

A hush fell over the room as everyone digested the news.

'What?' Marco asked, getting annoyed by the further intrusion into his wedding day. He'd heard the bleeps and seen the way everyone reached for their Tablets, but he hadn't heard the message. And of course, he just didn't get the importance of this news. How could he? Children were a given in his world. Taken for granted. Regretted. Terminated. Neglected. How could he possibly understand?

'It is confirmed. Faith is pregnant,' she told him with a stunned smile.

'Good. I am happy for her and Luke. Can we get back to your cake? This is your day and I wanted it to be perfect. And we need to leave soon.'

His indignation and impatience were endearing and she leaned up to drop a kiss on his beautiful lips.

'One day you will understand what is happening here. This makes our day even more special; I assure you.'

Marco grunted and looked at the stunned faces around him. Every face was transformed, lit from within by a flame of hope.

Maggie Tasmania, the artist, was jumping up and down and hugging her dark-skinned mate.

‘Luke will be over the moon!’ she crowed to him.

Pia smiled at her delight, even though she didn’t know Luke well enough to understand why this would be all that special to someone from 1942. However, maybe he “got” better than most Newcomers what infertility had meant to women like Faith.

And her.

What would it be like to carry a child in her belly like the women she brought back from the Titanic? Her last pregnancy had been so short she had barely acknowledged its reality. Then it was gone and so was her marriage to the teenage boy she thought she loved. Strangely, the pain of that time didn’t consume her as it once had. Finding Marco seemed to have healed that wound.

Two hundred plus years later and new life had become even more precious to their world than it had ever been. And now there was a possibility that, if one of their number could do this amazing thing, maybe others of them could too.

Eventually, Jac drew the celebration back to order and told them to finish cutting their cake. With much laughing and tears, the gathering took up where they had left off and, for Pia, the rest of the festivities passed in a pleasurable blur.

Later, after the well-wishers had seen them off and they had walked hand-in-hand down the cliff path to the small cluster of villas situated a few hundred metres inland, Pia felt her nerves begin to surface again.

Because of Marco’s insistence on marriage, she’d applied for and been allocated, one of these homes. The plan was for Paulo to live with them until he settled into his new life. However, for the next few days at least, he would remain at the Interim Centre while she and Marco had the place to themselves for their honeymoon.

Staring at their new home, a Roman style villa so much larger and lovelier than anywhere she’d ever lived before, it suddenly all seemed too much, too soon. And by the time Marco had carried her across the threshold, she was shaking uncontrollably, tears stinging her eyes.

‘What is it, Cara Mia?’ Marco's dark eyes became troubled.

‘Nothing. I am just nervous about... you know.’ She lied, feeling herself blush.

How could he possibly understand how overwhelmed she felt by all the wonderful things that had happened to her in the last week? It was as if she was

crashing under the weight of her joy. Panicking, as the tears poured from her eyes, she wondered if somehow she was losing touch with reality. She clutched Marco tighter, burying her head against his shoulder as she whimpered. Could one go mad from too much happiness?

Silently, he strode through the small house with Pia in his arms and when he reached the master bedroom, he slowly lowered her feet to the tiled floor. She loved the silky texture of their clothing as it brushed against their warm bodies. It fired her blood and some of her overwhelm began to recede.

‘You have told me that you have experience. Was that a lie, after all?’ He was teasing her in an attempt to help her past her worries. His warm brown eyes outlined by impossibly thick, black lashes searched her own, looking for something.

‘No. But I have never been... sex is not very... I am sure it will be very nice with you...’ She sputtered to a stop and cast her gaze away from his all-too-knowing expression.

He laughed joyously. “Nice” is not a word I would use. But let us see what else it might be, huh, my sweet, sweet Pia!’

Then he was releasing the catches on her gown as he claimed her mouth and she shivered as the white fabric slid down her body to pool at her feet. She was then naked, except for the stretch shorts they all wore as underwear and the crown of flowers on her head. His confident, gentle hands began to stroke her skin everywhere, as his lips urged hers to open and give him access to her mouth. She did his bidding, feeling a tingle of pleasure spreading out from somewhere deep inside her. That feeling intensified as he continued to touch her and kiss his way down her neck.

She reached shyly up and released the catches at the shoulder of his tunic. It fell to his waist where the belt held it in place. Marco left off his stroking to release the belt so the fabric could drop to the floor beside hers. His mouth never left her body.

‘I like these clothes. So easy to wear, so easy to remove,’ he mumbled against her neck.

She chuckled deep in her throat as he drew her closer. The feel of his naked flesh pressed against her bare breasts was electric. Without knowing what she did, she rubbed her skin against his, luxuriating in the feel. The little groan he let out told her he was feeling the pleasure too.

His strong hands wove into the long hair at the back of her head and drew her even closer. Wrapping her arms around his waist, she allowed herself the

pleasure of running her hands across his back, feeling the muscles flex beneath her hands.

‘Nice,’ he said with a smile, as he left her neck to scatter kisses along her shoulder and back before gently biting into the flesh at the crux of her neck. The bite electrified her and she arched her body as the flow of pleasure nearly swamped her senses.

‘Uhhh...’ Was all she managed in response. He chuckled again.

‘I have never seen my experience with women as having value.’ His words were mere breaths against her neck. ‘But finally, I think I have found its value if I can please you. Give yourself up to me, Cara Mia. Let go of your fears and reserve, let down your walls and trust me... can you do that, my sweet one?’ His words were like an aphrodisiac, and she let them loosen her tight control and soothe her concerns.

As she relaxed, he nodded against the skin of her shoulder. ‘Sí, Cara Mia, that’s it. Trust the feeling. Ride it.’

His confident, strong hands were moving down her body now, slipping under the edge of her shorts and drawing them down and off her so his fingers could bury themselves in the curls between her legs. Moaning softly, she let her head fall back, riding the sensation as he instructed.

The first intrusion of his fingers into her secret centre was shocking and she clenched her thighs together. ‘Shhh... sí, let me... let me touch you...’ His voice was a harsh whisper against her ear now and obediently she let go.

Her mind went back to the first time she lost her virginity. It had been a painful and embarrassing experience at the boathouse by the pier. It had been cold that night, and the clumsy, drunken fingers that thrust themselves into her warm centre had hurt her. But she had made no move to stop them. She had decided that she was long overdue to lose her virginity. Now was as good a time as any. And if the boy... what was his name? She couldn’t remember. If he was drunker than she wanted and if he smelled of the drugs he had been smoking, it didn’t matter. She just needed to get it over.

And with that thought came the same urge. Get it over. It would hurt, but then when Marco was satisfied he would lay with her in his arms and it would be nice. And Marco was neither drunk nor clumsy. It would be okay if she could just get it over.

She began to pull Marco’s shorts down his body so he, too, would be naked. His arousal was a pleasant shock, long and thick, the head bulging like an arrowhead at its tip. It jerked in her hands as she held it, as if it had a life of its

own. Marco moaned and bit down on her shoulder again, this time a little harder. How could pain like that be pleasurable? Her touch became harder as she moved over his thickness.

‘No... sweet Pia that is too much...’ he said with another groan. He drew her hands away and rested against her neck for several seconds. Then he was kissing her mouth again, thrusting his tongue deep and coaxing her own into an intimate dance. That pleasurable, scary feeling was building in her centre again and this time she fought to control it, fearing it would overwhelm her already ragged senses.

But Marco must have sensed what she was doing, because he drew back and looked into her eyes. His were burning orbs of melted chocolate, their lids half closed.

‘Trust me, if there is anything I am good at in this world it is this. Let me love you... it is all I have to offer in return for all you have given me.’ His words were gravelled and low, sensual in the extreme. But something in them troubled her.

She fought to clear her sluggish brain. What did he mean – given him? What did he need to repay her for? Horror started to form in the back of her mind. Had he married her to repay her for saving his life? For giving him this luxurious lifestyle?

‘You do not owe me anything,’ she said slowly, drawing away from him with caution.

His own mind seemed to be slow on the uptake, too, because he frowned in confusion. ‘Of course I do. I owe you everything.’

Her pulse was racing and she felt suddenly very sick. ‘Is that why you married me? To pay me back?’

His eyes flew open in shock as he realised what she meant. He started to shake his head. Then, very slowly he reached over and took her shoulders in his hands. He pushed her down so she was sitting on the edge of the bed. Then he dropped to his knees at her side and took her cold hands in his warm ones.

‘Where I come from – when a man feels he has gathered enough wealth or become someone of worth – he chooses a wife to love and bear his children. It is what he offers her in return for her love. I have no wealth and I am not someone of value. I am a waiter whose only selfless act nearly cost the life of the most precious being in the world to him.

‘No Pia, do not say anything. Let me finish,’ Marco said as she started to speak.

Then he let go of her hands so he could run his fingers through the unruly curls on his head. He looked nothing like a waiter anymore. A young Roman god naked in all his glory was a more fitting description of him, her bemused brain told her.

‘I spent my life as a wanderer, restlessly searching for something, anything, to make me feel whole; until I met you that morning in Southampton. As soon as I met you I knew I had found what I had been searching for. But having found it, what did I have to offer you? Nothing. I have no special talents, no admirable qualities, nothing but a pretty face and a great deal of sexual experience.

‘But despite my shortcomings, you loved me. More than I thought it was possible for someone to love me. When your people told me how rare it is for someone like you to love, it made even less sense to me that I should be the object of your affections. When you refused to go without me, risked your life for me... I felt overwhelmed. I am still overwhelmed. And so unworthy.

‘You could have been a guttersnipe with less than nothing and I would still feel you gave me more than I could repay by loving me. But you aren't a guttersnipe. You are a beautiful, capable woman of this amazing world, who gave me my life and the life of my friend. And you have opened doors for me I never knew existed.

‘And it is too much. You, your love, all this... it is too much. I am terrified I will wake up tomorrow and you will have moved on as I moved on from so many lovers in my past. If you leave me, I do not think I could...’ He stopped speaking as his emotions threatened to overwhelm him.

When she made to reach for him he stayed her hands. ‘No,’ he croaked. ‘There is more. I do not know if I will ever have the courage to say these things to you again. So I will say them now. I will finish them now.’

He lifted his head so his dark, intense eyes could meet her gaze. ‘That was why I wanted to marry you so quickly. So I could bind you to me so you would never leave. And that was selfish of me. But I did it because I love you. I love you with every breath in my body, with all of my heart and mind and soul. I have nothing but that love and my skills in the bedroom to offer you in return for loving me. It is so little. So very little...

‘So now that you know it all. I will understand if you...’ His voice faltered and he looked away out the window at the sunny, green hillside.

Pia felt awash with conflicting emotion. That she had so misunderstood what drove him because of her own insecurities was heartbreaking. How could she have known? No one had ever loved her like this before, and that he felt as

unworthy as she did to be loved was unbearable. She felt the tears burning a track down each of her cheeks, threatening to overwhelm her. She choked them back.

With shaky hands she reached out and touched his glossy curls, letting her fingers comb through the strands until she was ready to face him. Then she used them to draw his face back to hers.

‘Marco, I have never felt like this. It is as if I have been numb my whole life, not just since the LGP; long before that. You have made me feel again, and it is terrifying and wonderful all at once. I love you for the man you are, and I do not think that I have reached the depths of love you inspire in me yet. The more I know you, the more I feel for you. And as for what you do not have – well, even if you had been as rich as Croesus back there in 1912, when you came here you would have lost it all. Wealth means nothing to us here.

‘What does matter is what you have given me. Love is the greatest gift a woman could ever want or need and you have given me yourself and your love. And you have given me back my soul.

‘Make love with me now, Marco. Teach me... I will trust you with my heart, and my body and my newly recovered soul if you will trust me with yours. And I will love you forever, marriage or no marriage. And for us, that is a very long time.’ She smiled through her tears at her last little joke.

Then, he was sweeping her up and raining little, desperate, choking kisses all over her face and neck. And Pia was wrapping her arms around his shoulders and pulling him in close, revelling in the sweetness, revelling in the fire burning at her core, revelling in her own overloaded senses as he took her higher and higher.

And none of what they did to each other was about skills. It was all about worshipping the other with their bodies. Giving pleasure, as they took it; wholeheartedly, blissfully and completely.

When his lips found one of her sensitised nipples and his mouth closed over it, sucked it deep, she cried out with the shock and pleasure of it.

‘Nice?’ he growled at her when he let her go, remembering her assurance that what they did together would be “nice.” But it was more than nice and he knew she knew it.

‘Ohhhhh...’ was all she could manage. Her hands were shaking as they pulled him closer, but this time it was not with fear, it was with frenzy. And when his fingers found their way into her soft, moist petals, she felt her control give way.

She let go; trusting him, loving him and aching for him as he took her over the edge into that first mindless moment of ecstasy.

Then, while she was floating back to earth he was opening her body and pressing into her tight sheath. And she barely felt the twinge of pain as he broke through her maidenhead and sank home.

‘Oh, Pia...’ he breathed, his voice choked with emotion. ‘I love you so...’

And then he was moving, slowly and gently at first, as he stretched her body to accommodate his size. Then, as the fit became perfect and slick, he began to thrust into her desperately.

‘Cazzo!’ Marco cried as she began to move under him, unconsciously matching his thrusts so that their joining was deep and rhythmic.

‘Gesù Cristo!’ The low, guttural exclamation was uttered as he arched up, burying himself still deeper inside her.

His thrusts became more frenzied, pounding into her flesh in deep, hard stabs that had her gasping with heightened sensation, caught between pleasure and pain. But she didn’t want him to stop. The last thing she wanted was for him to stop. She tipped her hips up to meet his next thrust so that she felt it right to her womb. And then the reverb started, spreading out from the deepest place within her until her whole body shook with it and she spasmed, screaming, as she flew off into the abyss.

Somewhere a long way away, she heard him cry out her name and felt him convulse inside her. But that was too far away. And all she could do was feel with every cell in her body. Feel with such intensity that it left her raw and shaken as she wept in deep, gulping sobs as their bodies shuddered together and became still.

‘Dear god,’ she whispered in shock through her tears when the last of the little explosions had finished. ‘I did not know.’

‘Hmm?’ He lay against her, his skin sweaty and so hot. She loved the weight of him pressing her down into the bed, pressing into the cradle of her pelvis.

When she didn’t explain, he lifted his head. ‘Did not know what?’

She buried her head against his chest to hide from his knowing eyes.

‘Pia?’

‘That I could do that. During sex. I have never even had an orgasm before. I did not think I could.’

He grunted and then chuckled, nuzzling her neck. ‘Of course you could. Your other lover was not much good, I think.’

‘Lovers. And no, I think you are right. I never thought... well it was amazing.’

‘Yes,’ he said fiercely. ‘It was. I have never known it to be like that before, either. My skills were sadly lacking, but loving you must have made the difference. I do not know.’

She looked up and grinned with delight. ‘It was good for you too?’

With an exasperated grunt he nipped at her shoulder. ‘Not good, better than good. Better than great. You, my darling girl, were amazing, sí?’

‘Sí.’ A little bud of pride began to open inside her. She was amazing. The man who had known so many other lovers thought she was amazing. And it felt like the truth because she felt amazing. She felt beautiful and sexy and special. And it was all because of this incredible man she had found on a sinking ship.

‘I do love you, my husband. More than you can possibly know.’

‘Oh, I do know, now. I still feel... like an idiota for thinking you would simply take Paulo in my place, or worse, that you might have died waiting for me to return.’ He shuddered and buried his head in the crook of her shoulder kissing her there over and over as if to make up for his mistake.

‘No one has ever loved you enough, I think.’ She smiled and snuggled in closer, even though his hot, sweaty body was now sticky and too heavy for proper breathing.

‘I never thought I deserved to be loved. Not like this. Not for who I am. It has always been about sex; about being wanted for my looks and charm and because I could please a woman in bed. It was never about me. I still do not know what is special about me, that you would choose to risk your precious life for me.’

She smiled again, thinking that he sounded a lot like her. Maybe being special was all about what another person saw. Maybe no one ever saw themselves as special.

‘We have come a long way, you and I,’ she said softly. ‘And I expect we have a long way still to go. But as long as we are together it is worth the journey.’

‘What would you like to do with your new life now that you have it?’ she asked, after a comfortable silence had fallen between them and Marco had slid to the side of her so she could breathe again.

‘I do not know,’ he said as he stroked damp hair back from her face. ‘I have never had the opportunity to choose. I would like to see more of the world. Places in history. I would like to travel through time. Is that possible?’

She shrugged and nodded. ‘It is possible. You will need to do a lot of study first, if you want to be a Researcher. Retrievers – people like me – do not require that level of knowledge but Researchers are experts in their fields. They have to

know how to gather and evaluate information from their source. You cannot take a holiday in the past. We visit it for work only.'

Marco frowned. 'Then I probably will not be able to do this. I am not a scholar. I am an ignorant waiter.'

'How many languages do you speak fluently?' she asked.

'Four. And two more I can get by in. Why?'

'You have to have a good mind to be able to understand and remember languages. It might take a bit of time for you to become a scholar but you now have all the time in the world. And while you are studying you can take virtual tours of places other Jumpers have been. It is almost as good as being there. When Giarn debriefs you can actually experience the Titanic sinking if you want.'

'How is that possible?' he demanded in amazement.

'My beloved, so much is possible here. You have no idea. And you have as many years as you need or want to explore what is possible.'

'Thank you.'

She didn't ask for what. She already knew how long that list was for him, and her list was almost as long. But the gratitude they both felt was only partly due to the other. Ultimately, it was meant for whatever hand guided their fate and had brought them together in this perfect world. As the joyful tears welled up and threatened to overtake her once more, she answered for that guiding hand.

'You are very welcome...'

Their lips met again in a long, languid kiss as the midday sun beyond the open window bathed their bodies in light.

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

It was a difficult decision to make permafrees this ebook that took so much time and energy to write. On one hand, I don't want my work devalued, on the other, having new readers discover and enjoy my wonderful world of New Atlantis is important to me.

If you have enjoyed this book and meeting the gang from New Atlantis, why not read their individual love stories in the rest of the New Atlantis series. You

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Lastly, other readers (and me too) enjoy reading your reviews. Please consider reviewing this book on Goodreads, Smashwords or anywhere you know people looking for good romances might go. You will be helping to value my efforts in a concrete way.

Thanks

x Nhys

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