# PERIL ON THE ATLANTIC

A. M. HOWELL

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For my dad, who loved the sea.

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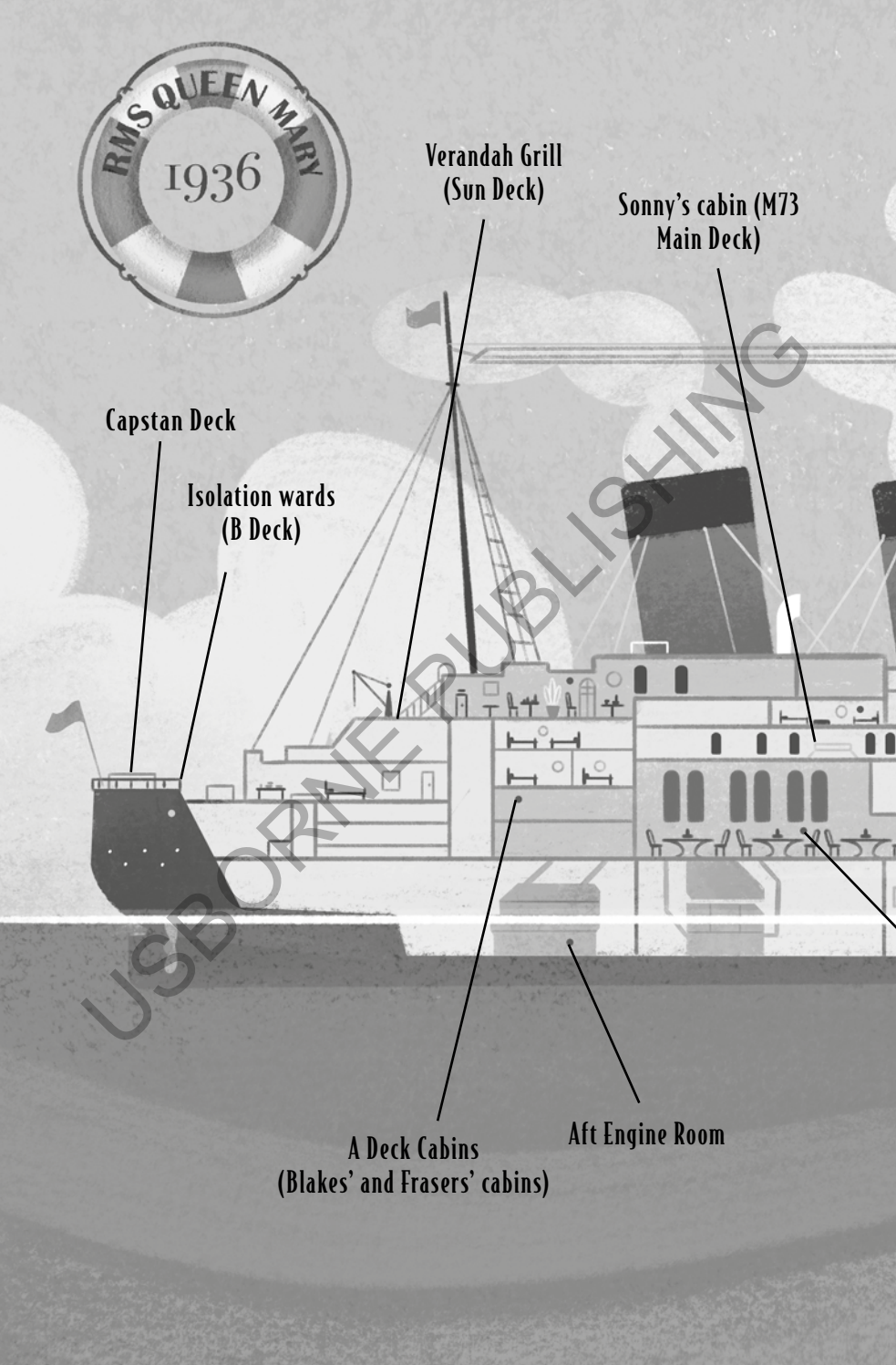

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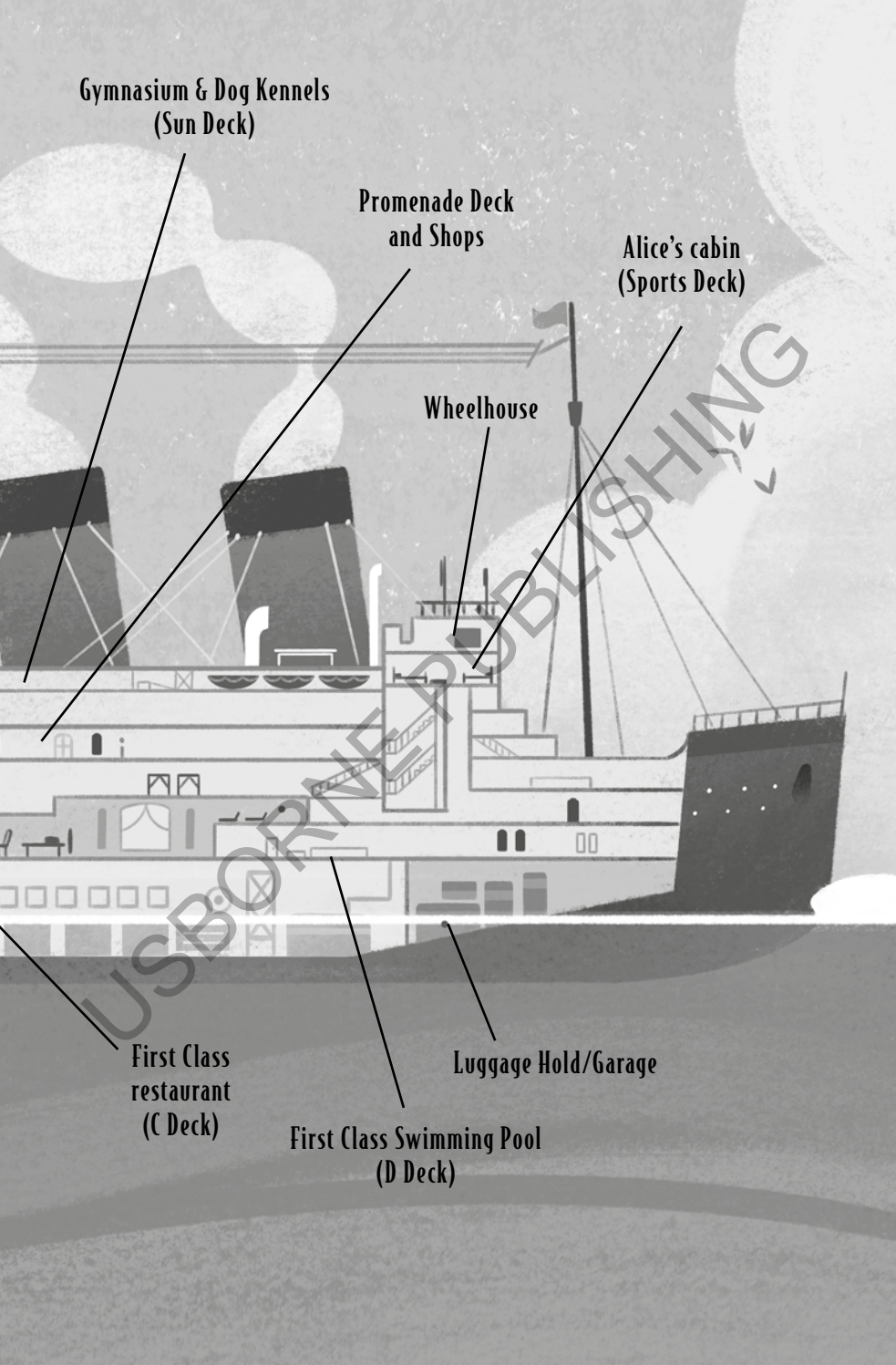

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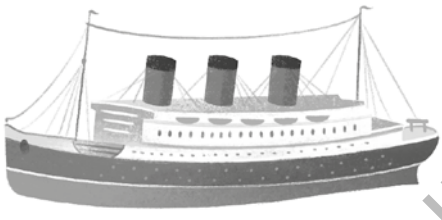
# Chapter 1



# QUEEN MARY

A buzz of anticipation and excitement made Alice's fingers tingle, as she stepped away from the station platform and onto the dock. Grey smoke puffed lazily from the red and black-tipped funnels of the *Queen Mary* into the hot July air, like three simmering pots preparing to boil. She sucked in a breath of awe. It was the largest vessel she had ever seen, its riveted hull so tall it blotted out the sun. Her father had said that, if the ship was placed vertically from bow to stern, it would even be taller than the Eiffel Tower in Paris!

Looking around, Alice saw that the other passengers

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from the train she had travelled on to Southampton docks had already hurried off to the baggage hall, leaving her alone. She glanced at her watch. Her father had promised to meet her from the train and he was late. As she looked for him, the clamour of noise was like a discordant band as motor cars expelled expectant passengers, and giant cranes with claw-like feet sent packages cocooned in rope nets into the ship's cavernous hold.

Alice's jaw dropped in awe at the sight of a fancy black car trussed up with straps as it was swung high above her head and onto the vessel. This was a world away from the quiet Suffolk boarding school she had left that morning and she felt pleasantly giddy – to think she would soon be steaming across the Atlantic Ocean to New York!

Tightening her grip on her brown suitcase, Alice noticed it looked positively ancient in comparison to the smart leather trunks and cases being loaded onto trolleys by scurrying porters dressed in white jackets and black bow ties. A brisk nudge in the ribs caused her to stumble and loosen her grip on her suitcase. It landed on the ground with a thump. Feeling a jolt of annoyance, she bent to pick it up, but the person who had bumped into her got there first.

A harassed-looking young man in a starched cream uniform dusted down Alice's case and returned it to her.

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"I'm sorry. I wasn't looking where I was going," he said anxiously. His name badge was pinned to his jacket at an odd angle, as if placed there in a hurry. *Joseph Wilks. Cabin Steward.* Alice noticed the steward's hands were trembling. He saw Alice looking and pushed them into his trouser pockets. "I hope there's nothing breakable in there," he continued.

Alice's throat pinched momentarily as she considered one very precious item inside her case. It was not breakable, but she thought the steward would not understand its importance. "No, it's fine. Please don't worry," she said.

The steward seemed distracted, his eyes darting around the dock. "I'm sorry again. I hope you enjoy your voyage, miss." He pressed on towards the crew gangway, his shoulders hunched as he wound his way round a porter's trolley stacked with five cages of twittering canaries.

Alice grinned at the sight of the birds and drew closer to get a better look. One bird was an almost luminous shade of yellow and its tiny voice strained valiantly to compete with the surrounding noise.

"Do watch out!" barked a man in a dark suit and spotless white gloves who was walking alongside the trolley. "The baroness will not tolerate any bumps or knocks to her precious birds."

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Alice shrank back and watched as the cages were steered towards the first-class passenger gangway and carefully carried aboard. There was the pop and flare of a flashbulb as a ship's photographer recorded the moment. He glanced at Alice and walked over as he fiddled with his camera. "People take all sorts on board with them these days. On the last voyage a lord and lady took sixty pieces of luggage for a two-week trip to America. I could have fitted the contents of my house in their bags twice over!" Shaking his head in disbelief, he began to move through the throngs of passengers, searching out another photographic opportunity.

At the thought of mingling with baronesses, lords and ladies on the ship, Alice felt a new elation. The glamour of it all! She had longed to travel by sea her whole life, and while her aunt's accident meant this voyage had come about in an unfortunate way, she was determined to make the best of things. She stood on tiptoe and looked again for her father. He was always punctual when he came to visit her at boarding school during his snatched days of shore leave. What was keeping him?

Long queues had formed at the gangways and Alice's eyes roamed over the orchestra of waving hands and extravagantly blown kisses, as ladies in fashionable wide-

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legged slacks and gentlemen in rakish straw hats embarked. Licking a finger and rubbing at a spot of dirt on her skirt and tucking in her blouse, her view was suddenly obscured by a young porter pushing a trolley stacked haphazardly with luggage. His cheeks strained with exertion as his slight frame struggled to steer a path through the bustle of passengers. Alice swallowed a gasp of horror as a large suitcase wobbled precariously close to a family absorbed in a tearful farewell.

"I say…wait a moment," she called as she hurried after him, her own case bumping against her bare legs.

While the porter turned and saw Alice gesturing at the wobbling suitcase, a noisy seagull wheeled and screeched above their heads as if also alerting him to the precarious situation. The porter's eyes widened and he set about rearranging the luggage at once. Adjusting his bow tie and wiping his brow, he nodded at Alice. "Thanks for the warning, miss."

The skin at the corners of the boy's brown eyes was creased, which made Alice think he smiled a good deal, but at that moment he looked along the dock nervously. "I'm not used to pushing these trolleys. I'm a bellboy working on the ship's passenger lifts, you see. They needed extra help dockside today, but they didn't tell me I'd need the

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muscles of Tarzan to do the job," he said, throwing a look of regret at his spindly arms.

"Charlie! Hurry up with that luggage," yelled a puce-faced man standing further along the dock by several empty pallets.

"Oh dear. He doesn't seem happy," said Alice. The man now had his hands on his hips and was glaring at Charlie.

Charlie grimaced. "I'd best get the job finished." He set off again determinedly with the trolley, but the luggage creaked in protest and listed to the side once more.

Alice felt a twinge of concern. She really ought to wait for her father, but she did not want Charlie to get into trouble. She hurried to catch him up. "Let me help. If I walk alongside you, I can help keep an eye on things."

Charlie glanced at the man, who was now occupied with unloading cases from another trolley. He shook his head and glanced at Alice's suitcase. "That's a kind offer. But if he saw a passenger helping me—"

"Well…my father works on board, so I'm not really a passenger," interrupted Alice brightly.

Charlie thought for a few seconds, then his cheeks cracked into a grin. "All right then. I am getting behind." The trolley wheels creaked as he set off with it again, this time with Alice walking alongside.

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Alice felt a stab of satisfaction at making her own decisions for once, with no teachers telling her what to do or how to behave.

"You're on board the ship with your father for the summer holidays then?" called Charlie.

"Yes," said Alice, feeling a trickle of perspiration inch down her back as she hurried to keep up. A smart tan suitcase wobbled, and Charlie stopped so she could wedge it back into place. She saw him throw an anxious glance at his wristwatch. "How about if we both push the trolley?" she suggested. "It might help balance the luggage and be faster too."

"Only if you're sure," said Charlie.

"I'm quite sure," said Alice with a grin.

"What does your father do?" asked Charlie, as they set off once more. "Let me guess…he's a doctor, or maybe an engineer? No, he's with the Henry Hall Dance Band. Does he play the drums?"

Pushing the trolley with one hand and clutching her suitcase in the other, Alice giggled as Charlie continued to guess her father's profession, but her laughter was stilled by a sudden shout from behind.

"Alice Townsend. What in heaven's name?"

Charlie glanced over his shoulder. "Uh-oh," he said

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under his breath, grinding to a halt.

Alice turned to see her father standing a short distance away in his black uniform, his eyes wide in disbelief. She felt a wobble of uncertainty as he strode towards them. The four gold stripes on his lapels and jacket cuffs glinted like a warning.

"Staff Captain Townsend is your father?" gulped Charlie, the colour draining from his cheeks. "But he's in charge of all the crew and the second most important person on the whole ship!"

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