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written by

Alex Scarrow

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CHAPTER 1

1912, Atlantic Ocean

'Anyone left here on deck E?' cried Liam O'Connor. His voice echoed down the narrow passageway, bouncing off the metal walls. 'Anyone down here?'

It was silent save for the muffled cries and clatter of hasty footsteps coming from the deck above and the deep mournful creak of the ship's hull, stressing and stretching as the bow end of the ship slowly dipped below the ocean's surface.

Liam braced himself against the gradually steepening angle of the floor, holding on to the doorframe of the cabin beside him. The chief steward's instructions had been clear – to ensure every cabin at this end of the deck was empty before coming up and joining him.

He wasn't sure he wanted to; the screaming and wailing of women and children that he could hear coming down the stairwell from above sounded shrill and terrifying. At least here on deck E, amid the second-class cabins, there was an eerie sense of peace. Not quite silent, though. Far away, he could hear a deep rumble and knew it was the sound of the freezing ocean cascading into the stricken ship, roaring through open bulkheads, gradually pulling her down.

'Last call!' he cried out again.

A few minutes ago he had roused a young mother and her daughter cowering in one of the cabins wearing their life jackets.

The woman was paralysed with fear, trembling on her bed with her daughter wrapped in her arms. Liam ushered them out and led them to the stairs to deck D. The little girl had quickly kissed his cheek and wished him luck as they parted on the stairwell, as if – unlike her confused mother – she understood they were all doomed.

He could feel the angle of the floor increasing beneath his unsteady feet. From the top of the passage he heard the crash of crockery tumbling from shelves in the steward's room.

She'll be going under soon.

Liam uttered a quick, whispered prayer and craned his neck into one last cabin. Empty.

A loud groan rippled through the floor; it vibrated like the song of a giant whale – he felt it more than heard it. His eyes were drawn to something flashing past the cabin's small porthole. He saw nothing but darkness, then the fleeting quicksilver flutter of bubbles racing past.

Deck E's below the water line.

'Sod this,' he muttered. 'I'm done here.'

He stepped back out into the passageway and saw at the end a ripple of water only an inch or two deep, gently lapping up along the carpeted floor towards him.

'Oh no.'

The lower end of the passage was his only way out.

You stayed too long, Liam, you fool. You stayed too long.

He realized now the girl and her mother had been his fateful warning to get out. He should have left with them.

The ice-cold water met his feet, trickled into his shoes and rolled effortlessly past him. He took several steps forward, wading deeper into the water, feeling its freezing embrace around his ankles, his shins, his knees. Up ahead, round the bend at the end of the passage, was the stairwell he should've been

climbing five minutes ago. He pressed forward, whimpering with agony as the icy water rose round his waist and soaked through his white steward's tunic. His breath puffed past chattering teeth in clouds of vapour as he struggled forward.

'Ah *J-Jayzzzusss* an' Holy Mary . . . I d-don't want to drown!' he hissed, his voice no longer the recently broken timbre of a sixteen-year-old, but the strangled whimper of a frightened child.

It was getting too deep to wade now. Ahead of him, where the passage turned right for the stairwell, the water had reached the wall lights, causing them to spark and flicker.

The stairwell's probably flooded.

He realized that round the corner the water had to be lapping the ceiling and at least one flight of the stairs would be completely submerged by now. His only way out would be to hold his breath and hope it would last long enough for him to fumble his way up that first flight to the landing.

'Ah *J-J-Jay*-zus!' His blue lips trembled at the thought of floundering in the darkness, beneath the surface – losing his way, feeling the growing desperation and then finally sucking churning seawater into his lungs.

It was then he heard it – the sound of movement from behind him.

CHAPTER 2

1912, Atlantic Ocean

He turned to look up the passageway and saw a man standing ankle-deep in the water, holding on to a wall rail to prevent himself tumbling down the passage towards him.

'Liam O'Connor!'

'We're s-stuck!' Liam replied. 'There's no . . . there's no way out!' His voice sounded shrill.

'Liam O'Connor,' the man said again, his voice calm.

'*What?*'

'I know who you are, lad.'

'Whuh? . . . We need to –'

The man smiled. 'Listen, Liam.' He looked at his watch. 'You have just under two minutes left to live.' The man looked around at the vanilla-coloured metal bulkheads of deck E. 'This ship's spine will snap in about ninety seconds. She'll break two thirds of the way along. The bow end, the larger section, the bit you and I are in, will sink first – like a stone. The stern will bob for another minute and follow us down, one and a half miles to the bottom of the ocean.'

'Ah, p-please no. No, no, no,' Liam whimpered, realizing that he was crying.

'As we sink, the water pressure will quickly mount. The hull will buckle under it. The air pressure will burst your eardrums.

The rivets in these walls,' he said, running his hand over a row of them, 'will fire out of the bulkheads like bullets. This passage will instantly fill with water and you'll be crushed before you can drown. That's at least a small mercy.'

'Oh *Jay*-zus, no . . . H-help us.'

'You'll die, Liam.' The man smiled again. 'And that makes you *perfect*.'

'P-perfect?'

The man took several steps forward, wading waist-deep into the water towards Liam.

'Tell me, do you want to live?'

'*What?* . . . Is th-there another w-way out?'

The lights in the passageway flickered out in unison. Then a moment later came back on.

'Sixty seconds until she buckles, Liam. Not long now.'

'Is th-there another w-way out of –?'

'If you come with me, Liam,' he said, holding out a hand, 'there is another way. You'll live an invisible life. You'll exist as a phantom, never quite in this world of ours. Never able to make new friends, never able to find love.' The man softened that with a sympathetic smile. 'You'll learn about *things* that . . . well . . . that can ultimately lead to madness if you let it mess with your mind. Some people choose death.'

'I w-want to live!'

'I must warn you . . . I'm not offering you your *life*, Liam. I'm offering you a way out, that's all.'

Liam grabbed hold of the candelabra of a flickering wall light and pulled himself backwards up the slanting passage, his feet finding the floor once more. A shuddering groan rippled around them – deafening.

'She's dying, Liam. The *Titanic*'s back is going to break in just

a few seconds. If you believe in God, you might wish to join him now. If you stay here, I assure you, it'll all be over very quickly for you.'

Drowning. It was Liam's worst nightmare – for as far back as he could remember. He'd never learned to swim because of his terrible fear of water.

Liam looked up at the man, looking at his face for the first time: deep sad eyes surrounded by wrinkles of age. And then a thought occurred to him.

'Are you . . . are y-you an a-angel?'

He smiled. 'No. I'm just an old man.' His hand remained steady, outstretched towards Liam. 'I'd understand if you chose to stay and die. Not everyone decides they want to come.'

Liam felt a shudder. The floor beneath his feet convulsed and the air around them was filled with the shriek of tearing sheet metal, the pop of unbuckling seams, as deck after deck above them began to give way one after the other.

'Here it is, Liam. We've arrived at decision time.'

Liam pulled himself forward, up out of the water, desperately reaching out for the old man's proffered hand. If there was time, if his mind wasn't in a free fall of panic, he might have wondered who this man was, and how exactly he intended to save them both. Instead, right now, he could think only one thing.

I don't want to die. I don't want to die.

The lights suddenly winked out, leaving them in complete darkness.

Liam flailed with his arm blindly. 'Where's your hand? Please! I don't want to drown!'

His fingers brushed the old man's. The old man caught it and held on.

'Say goodbye to your life, Liam,' he shouted above the thunderous din of the ship splitting in two.

The last sensation that Liam was aware of was the vibrating metal floor of the passageway beneath his feet giving way, and falling . . . falling through darkness.