

The SS Bella Luna

A lost at sea novel

By Simon Charles Young

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'At least the bar won't run out of ice.'

Prologue

The tenth floor of the Empire State Building

New York

Office of Walter P Douglas, President of the Douglas Shipping Line

1960

Walter adjusted his cufflinks as the two journalists stepped into his office. He was confident, yes, but also wary. Interviews had a way of dredging up the past. As two journalists were ushered into his office by his secretary, he was pensive. It was 9 am, and he was looking forward to this interview but hoped they would focus on his positive accomplishments rather than the occasional dark days of his company's past.

But these are just reporters wanting a story, he thought. I'm not going anywhere.

Last week, he received a prestigious lifetime achievement award from Shipping Magazine and was featured in numerous newspapers as a result. The two journalists entering his office were here to formally interview him about the opportunity to buy the rights to publish his biography and memoirs in weekly episodes of the New York Times. They had offered a handsome sum, and he wanted this meeting to test the water about what it would entail and how long it would take. He was quite sure he had already made up his mind to agree.

His office was on the tenth floor of The Empire State Building on the west side of Fifth Avenue in New York. After he made his first million in 1952, he had the entire floor, all twenty offices, refitted and modernised. The expensive air conditioning was worth every cent since it was a tarmac-melting day outside. His offices were the envy of many other directors and company presidents in the area. Around the eggshell blue walls and high white ceilings were photographs and paintings of his

numerous ships. Plastic models also sat in tastefully designed glass cases. He additionally had an impressive glass-doored wooden cabinet on the far side of his office, past the settees, stuffed with numerous maritime treasures as well as cannon balls, rope knotwork, compasses, sextants and more.

As his guests approached, he stood up, pushing his sumptuous burgundy leather chair back on its coasters, making his way around the walnut desk. He extended a hand, flashing his two guests a warm smile, 'Good morning, good morning. Thank you for being punctual. My secretary did tell me your names, but my memory isn't what it used to be.' His voice was fast, authoritative and clipped like a soft bark. He let the statement hang between them, hoping they would fill in the gap.

'A pleasure to meet you, sir. I'm Marcus Palmer, and this is my colleague Miss Mary Mason.'

Walter liked the look of them. He shook their hands vigorously before ushering them to the two chairs opposite his desk. He paid close attention to Marcus. He was a tall, slim, clean-shaven gentleman in a natty, cream, pinstriped suit. He watched carefully as Marcus took off his fedora and smoothed down his hair. Then he cast his gaze to Mary. She cut a dashing figure in a black figure-hugging three-piece business suit, and he watched as she began to unpack a video camera and tripod from a black suitcase. Her black hair elegantly curled up toward her neck just above the collar of her suit.

'I've asked us not to be disturbed until midday,' Walter continued, 'that's when I'll have the buffet delivered. Until then, you have my undivided attention. Please help yourselves to tea, coffee, juice or water from the sideboard.' Walter took a sip from his glass of water, indicating that he was in no need.

'Thank you,' Marcus replied. 'We've brought our movie recorder, with plenty of film. Is it okay if Mary sets it up here?'

'Be my guest.' Walter recognised it as a Brownie Kodak camera since he had one himself. 'Prepared lots of questions, have you?' he said, steepling his fingers.

'Plenty,' Mary replied, placing her notepad and pen on her lap, waiting for Marcus to give her the thumbs-up once he had started to record. 'For the record, can you please tell us who you are?'

'My name,' Walter began in a stern, authoritative voice, leaning back in his chair, 'is Walter P Douglas, son of the late, great, Lucius P Douglas. I'm sixty years old and the owner of The Douglas Cargo Shipping Line and the Douglas Cruise Line. How was that?' His two guests nodded and smiled back. He then gave them the highlights, his rise through the ranks, the marriages, the mergers, but he knew what they were really here for. The ship. The one that never came back. The SS Bella Luna.

Then Mary asked, 'Can you give us a brief taster of what we can expect from your biography, sir?'

Walter took a deep breath before launching into a long retelling of his life. Despite a few interruptions from Marcus and Mary, telling him that he did not have to go into such detail yet, he

ignored them and carried on, regardless, as if liking the sound of his voice rising to fill the enormous ceiling space above. He regaled them once again of times from his youth, working with his father, his first two marriages and up to his mid-forties.

Around ten o'clock, he rose from his chair once more, moved around it, and removed his jacket. He gave his black braces a brief stretch, then reached into the middle drawer of his desk to retrieve his cigarettes and lighter. After lighting one, he offered it to his guests, who both accepted. He slid a heavy glass ashtray, which was in the shape of a wide row boat, toward them while refreshing his glass from the sideboard.

'Sir, may I ask,' said Marcus, 'I believe your company has one of the finest safety records in maritime shipping with only one lost vessel from your fleet of forty. Is that correct?'

'Only lost one ship, ever. Just the one.' Walter inhaled deeply on his cigarette, his stress levels rising. 'Please help yourselves to more if you wish,' he stated, waving a hand to the packet.

'Can you please tell us about it?' Mary asked. 'It would, perhaps, make a good cliff hanger for the end of our article before we begin to release your memoirs and biography. Why did you put passengers and entertainment on a cargo ship?'

'Sure. You want the ghost ship story, huh?' In all honesty, Walter felt uneasy about this chapter of his life. He stubbed out his cigarette with unnecessary force, then reached for another, but thought better of it. His shoulders sank, and his voice softened. He held up a hand, asking for a moment to recall his thoughts. He knew the camera was recording, but he wanted to come across as empathetic, peaceful and above all a man who did all he could to save the lives of his crew, guests, staff, and the ship.

'That route had only just become a semi-legit shipping option thanks to melting ice. It was still super risky, almost a "hold-your-breath-through-every-narrow-channel" kind of risky. The Canadian government was keen to assert sovereignty over it, and few commercial vessels were brave or dumb enough to try. So a shipping company using it would be seen as pioneering, possibly reckless, maybe even headline-grabbing. Mixing Cargo with Passengers? Not common, but not impossible. Think *luxury freight*, like the old RMS *Carpathia* or some of the hybrid liners from the early 20th century. By the '50s, most transatlantic passenger traffic had shifted to planes or purpose-built liners, but for isolated or remote routes? Yeah, we absolutely crammed wealthy oddballs, adventurous journalists, and eccentric clients into converted staterooms. It would not be for the masses, more for rich explorers, eccentric millionaires, diplomats, and thrill-seekers. I pitched it as a bold new route for Canada's and my company's future, a floating symbol of progress and trade. Even the government partially sponsored it as a national demonstration of sovereignty and confidence in the Arctic. If you're offering passengers this dangerous, frozen voyage, you're gonna need something more than whale-

watching and frostbite to keep them happy. A charming, glamorous cabaret act? Ha, perfect. According to the reports I received, the guests and crew loved them. Even now, I can perfectly recall the morning I met the only man that'd survived the numbing cold of months at sea in the Arctic Circle, adrift without power in the horrors of the Northwest Passage. That man had been lost at sea for months along with his wife and nine others. He was the only one who made it back. All but him, the lone survivor, perished. Thankfully, sixty-one people, mainly crew and passengers, were safe ashore before the ship broke its moorings and drifted away.

The *SS Bella Luna* was launched in 1914 as the *SS Euphoria*. She was 270 ft long, an ice-strengthened ship powered by a triple-expansion steam engine and had a speed of 12 knots. After my company acquired her from a Swedish company in 1949, we renamed her after my wife, Bella. We refitted her to carry fifty passengers as well as cargo, plus a crew of thirty-two. Hell, she dominated the trading routes between Alaska, Greenland, and north-east America. She was the fastest steamer out there, and she glided around icebergs. My wallet was never empty.'

He watched the two reporters scribbling in their notepads despite the camera still rolling. 'Our passengers were a mixed lot,' Walter continued, with a wide expanse of his arms as the smoke of his cigarette plumed in spirals from his hand. 'Everything from geologists, adventurers, to traders. Even Danish royalty on one occasion. She completed eighteen successful voyages along the north coast of Canada, visiting trading posts and tourist destinations, and even ventured as far south as Newfoundland on numerous occasions. She had her fair share of good and bad captains like every vessel. Ha, she even ran aground once in 1952 but was successfully refloated a few days later. In 1953, she had a mechanical malfunction and had to be towed home by tugboats.'

He took a moment to close his eyes and rubbed his temples before reaching out for his glass of water. He wanted a whiskey but promised his wife he would not drink while being interviewed. They both knew that when he got excited or angry, drinking only amplified his emotions.

He glanced at one of the ship models, and the light hit it in a way he had not seen before. The reflection on the glass seemed to be that of *Bella*. It jarred him.

'After she ran into trouble for the third time, well, she seemed to be getting cranky in her old age. People, including myself, weren't suspicious any more about renaming ships. Have you guys heard of that?' Having no response from the reporters, he continued. 'At the time, budgets were tight, so it was just a lick of paint and changing her name in the worldwide ledger. It was my head of logistics that came from a long line of mariners who approached me one day in the factory. He stated that her name had to be registered with the *Ledger of the Deep*. With Neptune. I laughed, asking him what the hell he meant. He explained that there was a ceremony that should be carried out. Alas, the ceremony was not performed. Like I said, just a lick of paint, a few lines in an office ledger, and off she went. It seems it was well known that most ships that have their name changed suffer a

horrible fate. Well known to all but me. And that was the case with the *SS Bella Luna*. Any Christian priest would have obliged, performed the blessing for a small donation, but we had deadlines. Then, as a result... we have dead people. A sad day for all. My share price dipped eight per cent.'

'Who was the survivor?' Mary asked, leaning forward as if to jump onto his desk.

'That would be the magician and illusionist James "Jimmy" Faden.' Walter hung his head briefly before lighting yet another cigarette.

'Was he a passenger or crew member?' Marcus asked.

'A bit of both. Being a performer on board, he was instructed in safety procedures and so on, since he would be someone the passengers would look to if disaster struck. He and his wife were a travelling act duo. He did the magic act. He was an illusionist and close-up magician, as far as I can recall. He also played the piano for his assistant Jean, who was his wife. She was the sultry, beautiful cabaret act when she wasn't getting sawn in half. Captain Clark made a note about them on one of his first written reports that was wired to my office after their first week at sea. They were popular and well-liked on the *Bella*. It's hard to imagine what his act was like or what he looked like at the start of the cruise. When I saw him, he truly looked like a hermit; long shaggy beard, wiry eyebrows and dark sunken eyes and cheeks. His beard had bits of food stuck in it, and his clothes were caked with sea salt and had been repaired, badly.'

'You'd never met either of them before?' Mary asked.

'Never. Before *Bella* set sail, I received a call from our booking director who said that the usual act had to cancel due to illness and he'd secured *The Fantastic Fadens* in their place. As I recall, they were both absolutely what my ships needed to entertain the people aboard.'

'And what happened to Jimmy after you rescued him?'

Chapter 1

Jimmy and Jean's Flat

East Newfoundland, Canada.

Two years earlier

1958

'Broke with a capital B, darl,' Jean said softly, not lifting her eyes from the overflowing glass ashtray in the middle of the kitchen table. She was crying over her morning coffee after having just opened the mail that had been piling up over the last few days.

'I know, I know, Jay,' Jimmy replied from the living room as he slowly ironed his black jeans. 'Hey, we've got a few hundred dollars each, right?

'But that's for rent and food, and our contract expires next week. I've searched so hard for new venues around town and —'

'So, let's quit the trashy joints around here and disappear for a year or two. Somewhere exotic. The landlady and anyone else we owe money to can wait. Just give me time to think and I'll have us a gig in no time, far away from here. First things first, I'll call our agent.'

'We owe him fifty dollars for the last month's takings.' She watched Jimmy slowly put on his jeans and shoes, followed by his black suit jacket. He pulled his orange shirt cuffs down past his hands and folded them back over the jacket sleeve before flinging a purple scarf and black overcoat over his shoulders. He blew her a kiss from the door as he departed, heading out into the rain to call Bruno, their booking agent, from a payphone. She smiled at him and winked.

They had been childhood sweethearts and had performed together since leaving high school. Small shows at parties at first, then town halls, then they hit the big time, but not big enough to cover the ever-growing cost of living. Now in their late thirties, it was getting harder to stay fresh and compete with the competition.

She would have gladly given what she had to help with the bills, but Jimmy was too proud for that. She loved him passionately, although his brown walrus moustache did tickle. The money she had was her earnings from the past three weeks. They were popular in the city, but their magic act, although complex and thrilling, was becoming stale to the pair of them, but thankfully, not the audience. They both loved the thrill of the audience loving them.

She watched the rain lashing the kitchen window, seeing the streetlights swaying from wires draped across the street. The sky was a dull grey, and the clouds hung low like a damp, heavy woollen blanket. *Yes, she thought, getting away from this place will be good for both of us.*

It was too early in the morning for her to be as positive as Jimmy. She was happy to sit by the radiator at the kitchen table in her blue nightie, slippers and black dressing gown. Her long pink hair felt lank today as it draped mournfully over her left shoulder down to her chest. But, as Jimmy often said, these moments motivated her to strive to write music and songs that inspire people through tales of struggle and love. She gave a half-smile, then absentmindedly picked up a coin from the table and began rolling it across her knuckles. Back and forth, back and forth. She felt that was all they seemed to do these days: to the performance hall for the show, then back to the flat for rest, food and rehearsals.

Their flat was part of a warehouse conversion, and it cost a fortune to heat for eight months of the year, but she'd be happy to be somewhere cosier. She wanted to rehearse, she wanted to practice her quick-change routines, her fumbles, fakes and her singing, but for now, coffee was king.

She quickly wrapped herself in a heavy wool blanket and deposited herself onto the orange sofa beneath the north-facing living room window. The slap of the rain on the panes was a luscious balm to her ever-changing thoughts. It relaxed her momentarily.

After slurping the last of her coffee, she curled up, the blanket tight under her chin, wrapped the dressing gown between her knees and the rest of the blanket between her feet. She closed her eyes, dismissing all thoughts of doubt for now. Peace for half an hour until Jimmy returned. It was a long walk to the nearest payphone, and, in that downpour, it would be horrendous.

She heard the front door latch click and wrestled the blanket from her bosom. It had been a restless sleep.

Jimmy marched in with a huge smile across his chirpy face. Despite being soaked, he looked elated. It lightened her mood also.

'Don't tell me, don't tell me,' she said, throwing off the blanket, pretending to read his mind while adopting an overly dramatic posture with the finger and thumb of her right hand on her temples and the other outstretched toward him. 'I'm sensing one, no, two bits of good news. Am I right?'

'Spot on, Jay,' he replied, flinging his damp coat onto the hook on the back of the door. 'First the small bit of news.' He strode toward her, holding out two clenched fists, knuckles face down, at arm's length. 'Show me more of those mind-reading skills. Left, or right?'

She pursed her lips and wriggled her nose briefly, 'Both.'

'Awesome. Well done.' He opened his left hand first, revealing an elegant gold gentleman's watch with a brown leather strap and gold buckle.

'Looks expensive,' she said, lifting it gently to examine it. 'And the other?'

He opened his right hand, revealing a scrunched-up bundle of three twenty-dollar notes.

'Wow, babe. You did well.'

Jimmy had taught her basic pickpocket skills over the years, but he was a master. She eagerly sat up on the settee but still pulled the blanket around her, 'We can get the watch to Murdoch later, but now, what's the big news?' She watched Jimmy's smile widen until it was nearly as wide as his moustache.

'In four days, a ship is leaving from our harbour, headed for Alaska. Bruno said there's an opening for our kind of act since the one the liner had booked has cancelled.'

'Really? That's great, but it doesn't sound exotic?'

'Babe, we'll be gone for about six months. There will be whales, sea lions, polar bears, frikkin sea monsters. All that stuff. Are you okay with that?'

She slowly placed the stolen watch and money on the arm of the sofa and began pacing the room while banqueting on a thumbnail. Her eyes darted around the flat as she blinked, comprehending. Thoughts of what to pack, what props and costumes to choose, and how much space they would have. Her eyes fell on her pale, upright wooden piano in the centre of the living room. The thought of performing her solo ballads to a new audience, coupled with the excitement of travel, warmed her. All thoughts slammed together and burst out of her as an almighty 'Yes.' She leapt forward, flinging her arms around his neck, kissing him fondly.

'Really? You're cool with it? Monsters and all?'

'More than cool.'

'Oh, Jay. I'm so happy. Bruno said he can be here tomorrow with the tickets if we want the gig. He said we get adjoining rooms. That way we'll have plenty of room for our props and, well, everything.'

'It also gives you a few more days to pick as many pockets as you can between now and then while I pack,' Jean shrieked. 'Take that sixty dollars and go and buy some more suitcases, but first, get back to that payphone and tell Bruno we're in. Oh God, I love you, darl.'

'I love us too,' he replied.

* * *

Jimmy and Jeans Flat
East Newfoundland, Canada.
Four days later

Two taxis arrived at Jimmy and Jeans' flat at 9 am. One for them, the other for their luggage. Jimmy noticed that Bruno, their agent, appeared sad to see them go but had assured Jimmy that he would

keep their piano and a few other items in storage until they returned. Jimmy had explained that they were running away from many debts but screwing over their agent was not among their plans.

Bruno had been their agent since they started their careers. He was now in his late sixties, but it did not show. He still had the swagger of a Chicago gangster and the nimble feet of a tap dancer.

Jimmy shook Bruno's hand and handed him an envelope with the money owed from their recent shows. 'We'll be back, and you'll get your usual cut,' Jimmy said as he slid into the taxi. 'You've always delivered for us, man. The shipping company are paying us a fortune. This is going to be a blast.'

'I'll see you in six months, Jimmy,' Bruno replied with a wink and a wave, 'and take care of Jean.'

It was minus five degrees on the street as the two taxis skidded and snaked their way to the harbour through the snow, and Jimmy and Jean were wrapped up for the icy weather ahead. Clutching each other's hands, their sense of excitement rose as they saw the lights of the harbour ahead.

'Bay twenty-two, here we are,' said the cab driver as they pulled up near the gangplank.

'Babe,' Jean said excitedly, 'the ship is huge.'

Jimmy had to agree. They had played to some big gigs in the past, but this was a whole new adventure. After unloading their luggage and paying both cabbies, they stood at the foot of the gangplank staring up at the *SS Bella Luna*. It had a greasy-looking black hull and one red funnel rose from its deck between two enormous wooden masts. Two rows of circular windows ran down the port side hull, but the upper three floors were as white as the snow on the ground.

'Well, babe, this is our new home for the next six months,' said Jean, clutching his arm tightly. 'Let's go and say hello.'

Jimmy waved to a sailor standing casually at the foot of the gangplank. He approached with a cheery smile.

'Good day,' said the man in perfect English. 'Are you travelling with us?'

'We're the on-board entertainment,' Jimmy replied, shaking the man's hand.

'Hey, nice to meet you two. I'm Sven, one of the engineers and occasional deckhand, but right now a meeter greeter. I only came down here for a smoke and have no idea where the porters are.'

Jimmy liked Sven immediately. The man was in his early twenties and looked like a young, fresh-faced sailor. After showing him their tickets, his kind thoughts of the man were further espoused when Sven began to collect their bags from the tarmac, helping them aboard.

Having been given the keys to their rooms, they dumped their ten suitcases in the smaller of the two, then, after randomly discarding their coats and gloves on a vacant chair, they collapsed on the bed.

Jimmy rolled over and hugged Jean tightly, kissing her cheeks, neck and shoulder. 'Babe, I'm loving this already.'

She cast her gaze away from the ceiling and looked at him with complete sincerity, 'Darl... we are going to rob this place blind. You and I are going to fleece, steal, burgle, pickpocket, rob, rip off and dupe every guest and member of the crew.' She then gave him a brief, soft slap on the cheek. 'Including the captain.'

'I love it when you play rough, Jay.'

* * *

10:15 am

After unpacking, Jimmy and Jean left their room and headed across the deck to meet John, the Quartermaster. He was a slim, fast-spoken man with an immaculately shaved face and pristine uniform. 'Now,' John began in a soft German-sounding accent, 'being part of the crew, you are both permitted access to the kitchen, pursers office and the staff deck. All other areas, such as the cargo bay and bridge, are off-limits. Here are your keys. Later today, you will be instructed on fire drills, ship safety and other basic rules of living aboard. Is that clear?'

'No problem,' Jimmy and Jean replied together.

'Thank you, John,' Jean said as they parted company, 'Now it's time for us to meet everyone else.'

John gave a brief, informal salute, pointing them in the direction of the bar, dining room and stage hall.

Jimmy took a good look around as he entered. Assessing the layout. The bar did not have a name, it was just a wide expanse of curved wood with a few stools for people to congregate on. The dining area with its blue leather booths and white linen tables looped around the stage from the starboard side to the aft, where two stairways led up and down. But the stage next to it looked impressive. He ordered two rum and cokes, and they stayed at the bar, taking in the sights while people watching. Eyeing up possible marks while looking around, he liked the stage area. It was ample: twenty-five feet wide, and it had an upright piano off to the left. The spotlights were good, and there was plenty of room for Jean to move around when serenading the crowds. He was also thankful for the dual dark-blue curtains since they would allow them to set up some props without the audience seeing the fakery.

While making idle chit-chat with Helena, the barmaid, they found that *Bella Luna* had to make plenty of stops on the way to Alaska, picking up and dropping off both cargo and passengers. Twenty

stops were scheduled. They stayed at the bar and ordered another round of drinks, soaking up the atmosphere.

Helena was a chirpy, amiable girl in her early thirties and managed to add a certain swish with her hips when she moved, making him think she did not like the *Douglas Line* uniform too much and had added a few adjustments to the red waistcoat and trousers herself. Her hair was jet black and tied up in a bun.

‘Oh, there’s the captain,’ Helena said while handing them their drinks.

Jimmy rose from his barstool and extended a hand toward the captain.

‘Captain Benjamin Clark,’ said the captain in a thick Nordic accent. ‘Pleased to meet you. Sven and John told me you’d arrived and I’m very glad you could make it on such short notice.’

Captain Clark was just over six feet tall with a kind smile and eyes to match. He wore a navy-blue roll-neck jumper while blue and white braces held up his white trousers. He smoothed down his face-hugging black beard and removed his captain’s hat before shaking Jimmy’s and Jean’s hands. ‘What can I expect from my two new entertainers?’ he asked with a fiercely white smile while taking a small glass of rum from Helena. ‘The Fantastic Fadens, hey. What can you offer?’

‘I do the close-up magic, card tricks, illusions, and I also play the piano. Jean sings, and she’s also the queen of the quick-change routine. Additionally, she’s also the better-looking part of the magic act. We’re kind of famous in Newfoundland.’

‘Good to know. Now, we set sail in an hour. Our first stop will be Disko Bay in south-west Greenland.’

‘I’ve heard of it,’ said Jean.’

‘There we’ll pick up some more food, cargo and mail, plus drop off plenty of the same from our hold. Then up to Thule in the north-west for another brief stop before heading south once more and going west across the great Northwest Passage, over Canada to Alaska. I hope you’ve packed appropriately.’

‘No worries, captain,’ Jimmy replied, raising his glass.

‘You’re not expected to perform tonight, so just relax and mingle. Get to know the ship and your fellow crewmates.’ His voice then took on a more serious tone, ‘Don’t forget you need to familiarise yourselves with the layout of the ship, fire exits and other essential safety issues. That is essential. John the Quartermaster will no doubt help you in your briefing later.’ The captain laughed softly and gave Jimmy a reassuring wink. ‘I’m looking forward to your first show.’ He gave a slight bow and placed his hat back on his head before departing with his rum.

‘Nice chap,’ said Jean as she clinked her glass with Jimmy’s, giving him a knowing wink of her own.

* * *

11:20 am

The *SS Bella Luna* cast off to the delight of the passengers, who all waved to the people amassed at the harbour to see her off. Jimmy hugged Jean tightly, thankful for her warmth as they waved back to the disappearing crowd.

‘Time to relax,’ he said, taking her by the hand, leading her to the rear of the ship and down the stairs toward their cabin.

‘Should we rehearse tonight, darl?’ Jean asked casually.

‘No. I think today and tonight we need to get accustomed to life at sea. We’ll give them a cabaret act tomorrow night, then perhaps we can do the magic the night after. Don’t forget, it’s only fifty guests, so we can’t do all our routines for a week, then expect them to want the same thing every night for the next six months.

‘But darl,’ Jean replied, ‘what do you mean? I have hundreds of songs in my repertoire.’

‘Babe, I know, and yet I overheard one of the crew saying that they have a pretty good turnover of passengers on the route to Alaska, so we’ll have plenty of opportunities to do all of it over and over. In the meantime, I’ll continue to do my close-up magic at their tables, and we can mingle and pickpocket. But tonight, let’s go and put up some of our posters on the notice boards.’

‘Deal,’ Jean replied.

Chapter 2

The next night

Cabaret night

Word had spread that Jean would be performing, and the dining hall was packed with thirty passengers plus a few off-duty sailors.

Jimmy gave his black bowtie a tweak and adjusted his cufflinks. He was wearing his finest tuxedo, and Jean had just given him a final brushing before he walked onto the stage.

‘Ladies and Gentlemen,’ he announced, ‘thank you all for coming this evening. As you may have heard, I’m Jimmy Faden, one-half of *The Fantastic Fadens*. I hope you’ve seen our posters around the decks, so you know what you’re in for. Tonight, we’re going to ease you in gently with a few songs, then perhaps tomorrow night we’ll dazzle you with some daring illusions. What do you say to that?’

The crowd looked enthusiastic, and a few applauded and raised their glasses.

‘Now let’s get the cabaret going. Ladies and gentlemen, the sultry, the unforgettable, Jean Faden,’

He turned to where Jean waited behind a curtain and began to applaud, and the guests joined in. After taking his seat at the piano, he began to play. Holding them in suspense. It had the desired effect on the crowd, and he saw their eyes widen expectantly. After the first few bars, Jean began to sing before emerging from behind the curtain without a microphone. The acoustics were perfect in the room, and her sumptuous voice resonated through all present.

Almost everyone applauded as she emerged in a dazzling figure-hugging dark blue dress that was a contrast to her bright pink hair. There were a few gasps of awe as she sashayed her way around the room, being sure to make longer eye contact with any man who appeared to be by himself.

Jimmy often found it a treat when she singled out the slightly older gent, past his prime and a bit ragged around the edges. She never failed to make it appear just a little bit cheeky. Especially when, on this occasion, she swiped a cigarette from one octogenarian’s fingers, took a long drag and handed it back with a perfect circle of crimson lipstick around the filter. She winked at him and carried on serenading the guests.

They performed six songs in all, and the crowd loved everyone. Jimmy also thought he saw the captain make a brief appearance toward the end. After the show, a young woman with dark brown eyes and long brown hair caught the attention of Jean. She seemed to be applauding longer and louder than most, so Jean waved her over to sit with them at the piano.

‘Oh my God, that was so amazing,’ the young woman said, shaking Jean and Jimmy’s hands. ‘That rendition of Patsy Cline was so perfect. I thought she was actually here.’

‘Thank you,’ Jean replied.

Jimmy could hear the warmth in her response.

‘What’s your name?’ Jean asked.

‘Dominika. Dominika Bzdek. I’m Polish and just got an assignment for National Geographic to film and photograph the natives, whales, seals and wolves around the Northwest Passage now that it’s ice-free. I can’t wait to see Greenland, Canada and Alaska. I hope to see some polar bears as well. But if you two can perform like that for the whole trip, that and the vodka will keep me so entertained. I adore your singing.’

Jimmy was momentarily shocked into silence, but Jean rallied well.

‘You sound so enthusiastic, and congratulations on your assignment. Have you been up here before?’

‘No, I live in Montreal, so this is a real adventure for me. And where are you two from?’

‘Newfoundland. We’re rather famous there for our illusionist acts and other magic.’

‘Magic? Like what? I glanced at your posters and –’

‘Well,’ Jean replied sheepishly, ‘Tomorrow night you get to see me get sawn in half and I’m going to levitate four feet off the ground. Does that sound like a laugh?’

Dominika slapped a hand over her mouth, trying to hide her excitement. ‘I have to see that,’ she eventually said, ‘but in the meantime, can I please take your pictures? And one with me in them too?’

Jimmy rose from his chair and took Dominika’s hand, ‘It would be our pleasure.’

As Dominika sprinted off to get her camera, Jean turned to Jimmy, saying, ‘Now that’s a fan that we don’t steal from, darling. Agreed?’

Jimmy nodded and smiled, ‘She’s gonna help make us famous.’

‘Ladies and gentlemen,’ Captain Clark announced over the ship's tannoy, ‘The Labrador Sea has been kind to us, giving us a strong tailwind, so we shall arrive in Disko Bay at first light tomorrow. There will be no need to set your alarm clocks as I’ll be blasting the ships' horns as we approach the docks. It’s kind of a tradition, we must let the villagers know we’re here. Everyone is welcome to come ashore and spend the day enjoying the shops, markets, bars and local hospitality while we drop off a few passengers and take on more cargo and supplies. After that, it’s on toward the Davis Strait, then the Baffin Bay, then the village of Thule, or Qaanaaq as some of you may know it.’

Jimmy looked around at the smiling passengers, feeling as elated as the enthusiasm in Captain Clark’s voice.

‘Thule will be our last stop in Greenland,’ the captain continued, ‘Then we’re going south, then through northern Canada and westward to Alaska. Now, ladies and gentlemen, I have a treat for you.

If you would all carefully, *slowly* and quietly go to the port and starboard sides of the ship and look into the water. You will see something amazing.'

The guests gasped, but the captain held them with the following sentence.

'And when you come back. We'll have another surprise for you. Now please, enjoy.'

Jean took Jimmy's hand as they both grabbed their coats from backstage, put them on and followed a crowd to the port side.

Dominika caught up with them as they funnelled through the corridor. 'Race ya,' she shouted, sprinting past with her camera.

Emerging on the port side, the three of them seemed to be in total darkness.

'What the —' Jimmy began.

In a flash, dozens of spotlights came on from above the top deck, illuminating the waters around them.

'Whales,' shouted Jean, thrusting a pointed finger over Dominika's shoulder.

The engines of the ship cut out with gentle subsidence, but no one panicked since the crew were silent also and the ship continued. Everyone was mesmerised by the sight of the leviathans majestically breaching the surface for a breath or simply barrelling alongside.

'Oh, darl, just look at them,' said Jean, 'I wish we'd brought our camera from our room.'

'Yeah, Jay. Good point. We're staff. He should have told us.'

'I've got mine,' said Dominika with a wink.

Just as she turned to take a photo, they were sprayed with a plume from a nearby whale's blowhole. It stank. But the three of them laughed it off.

Twenty minutes later, Jean put her arms around Jimmy and Dominika, 'It's too cold to stay out much longer, darl. Let's go warm up at the bar.'

'Great,' Dominika replied, 'First round is on me, and I still have to get pictures of us together.'

'You girls go ahead,' Jimmy replied, 'I have to get something from our room first.' He kissed Jean on the cheek while whispering in her ear, 'I'll get a present for Dominika, plus pick a pocket or two on the way.'

Jean took Dominika's hand and blew Jimmy a kiss as they departed.

The outside deck was still milling with passengers, but the heavy coats people wore impeded any attempt he could have of lifting wallets or watches, so he returned to their room, dropped off his winter jacket and collected a rolled-up marketing poster for him and Jean to sign for Dominika.

After leaving the cabin, he took the long route back to the bar via the internal passageways of the ship. Along the way, he met a few guests whom he had seen during the performance. Many came up to congratulate him, and he engaged them in polite conversation while using the poster as

misdirection, getting the unsuspecting passengers to hold it up. The occasional gentle roll of the ship allowed him to gently bump into them. It was too early in the cruise to relieve people of everything, so only a small withdrawal was made before putting the wallets back. And, after each successful lift, he invited the marks to join him and Jean at the bar for a drink.

Returning to the bar, he saw Jean and Dominika enthusiastically chatting over cocktails. Their coats were hanging on hooks between them at the bar.

‘Ladies,’ he said with open arms, ‘I met a few other fans on the way who may join us shortly, but before that, I have something for you, Dominika.’

Her eyes widened as he handed over the rolled-up poster before approaching Helena for a pen. ‘Jean and I will sign it for you to keep as a memento of our time together.’

‘Thank you so much,’ she replied.

‘And thank you for the drink,’ he replied, taking the proffered cocktail.

They made their way to a vacant booth and were glad of the warm air wafting around their ankles from vents in the walls.

‘Darl,’ Jean asked while giving Jimmy a gentle dig in the ribs, ‘should we ask Dominika to be our official photographer for the journey?’

Dominika gasped.

‘Sure, why not?’

‘Really? This is all so quick. I thought this was going to be a long, dull journey with only occasional excitement when working on my assignment, you know, photographing the wildlife.’

Jean gripped Jimmy’s arm, resting her head on his shoulder, ‘Well?’

‘Yes, I’d love to. And please, call me D.’

Jimmy leaned to one side and dipped a hand into a trouser pocket, ‘Here’s a down payment of fifteen dollars. That should go a long way toward some extra film.’

‘And food and drink,’ she said, taking the money and finishing her drink. ‘I’ll get us another round. Same again?’

Jimmy would have said no since she bought the first, but he could tell it gave her joy. ‘Yes, please,’ he replied.

‘What a charming girl,’ Jean said as Dominika skipped away to the other end of the bar. ‘I hope that’s not our money she’s using.’

‘Not a chance,’ he replied, kissing Jean on the top of her head.

* * *

8 am the next day

The SS Bella Luna's horn tore through the stillness, low and long, a sound that did not belong to the ice or the silence.

Jimmy sat up, feeling refreshed but with little recollection of last night.

'Morning, darl,' Jean said. She was completely covered by the blankets, but her hand emerged, seeking him out.

He raised her hand, giving it a brief kiss. The porthole window above Jean did not reveal much, so after a long stretch, he popped his head out of the door to see what Disko Bay looked like through the larger windows of the corridor. The riot of colours that hit his retinas was not what he expected. Dozens of homes dotted the hillsides in a variety of yellows, blues, greens and pinks in stark contrast to the dark water of the ocean that carried hundreds of ominous-looking semi-submerged chunks of ice.

'Impressive,' he said, closing the door and heading back to the warmth of his bed. 'Looks like we're about a mile from shore.'

'What time is it?'

'Time for coffee, I think.'

'Good. My head needs it. Be a darl and fetch us some.'

He flung off the sheets once more, dressing quickly. He returned fifteen minutes later with a tray of coffee, orange juice and buttered toast, which they both demolished within minutes before getting properly ready for the day ahead.

* * *

Descending the wood and iron gangplank to the stone dock, they both saw the starboard side cargo bay doors had been lowered, allowing crates, bags, and boxes to be loaded aboard by a dozen crewmen into the cavernous hold.

After a glance over her shoulder, Jean whispered, 'No stealing from the locals, okay.'

'It never crossed my mind, Jay.' Jimmy replied with complete honesty.

At the bottom of the gangway, a crewman reminded them that they were set to sail at 4 pm.

The town they encountered was a world away from the shoulder-bumping, horn-blasting chaos of their hometown. There was so much room and many locals had set up stalls outside their homes to sell wooden and ivory carvings as well as cakes and sweets.

They meandered slowly, taking their time, nodding and smiling to some of the locals, although they couldn't understand a word they said.

'There seem to be more huskies than people here,' said a voice from behind them.

They turned to see Dominika taking their photograph.

'Thanks to you two, I bought ten more rolls of film, and I'm waiting for yesterday's photos to be developed,' she said.

'Been here long?' Jimmy asked.

'Over an hour now. I'm starving.'

Jean and Dominika linked arms, and the three of them continued uphill to the town square, looking for a place to eat.

The centre of the town was a little more built up but not as commercial as their home. A large tent-covered marketplace dominated the centre, where meat and pelts were readily available as well as a few imported items, yet none of them seemed practical or necessary to buy.

Their brunch was simple, but at least they served beer at this early hour, which warmed them but not as much as the imported schnapps chasers.

'I hope you don't mind, D,' Jean said softly, 'but me and my darl need to get back to the *Bella* to rehearse for tonight.'

'I'll see you later,' Dominika replied while dabbing her lips on a napkin, 'I intended to stay around for another hour to take more snaps anyway. One of the locals said he knows where there are Arctic foxes for me to see.'

They bid her farewell and meandered back, joining a few new passengers along the way, yet Jimmy had a nagging doubt in the back of his mind. He didn't want to alarm Jean, but something made him feel that they were being watched.

* * *

On the way to Thule

Heading north through Baffin Bay

9 pm

The Fantastic Fadens bowed for a third time as the tumultuous applause died down.

That was a spectacular show, even by our standards, Jimmy thought.

With such a captive and close audience, the pressure had been higher than ever to get each trick and effect just that little bit more perfect than if they had been performing on their usual stage, where they were thirty feet away from the front row.

The levitation worked perfectly as did sawing Jean in half although finishing up with a simple cups and balls trick, he felt it was a bit of an anti-climax but after involving different members of the audience and, in the final reveal, having two balls appear beneath each cup and of six different colours, they were mesmerised.

After waving goodnight to the audience, the curtain closed in front of them, and they dashed backstage to change and pack up for the night. Emerging from the side door, they were stumped to see a dozen members of the audience around the bar, each holding one of their posters, asking for them to be signed.

Dominika waved and smiled from the far side of the dining room as she pointed to three cocktails on the table in front of her.

After shaking hands and signing posters, they joined Dominika and both slouched back in their chairs, letting out a sigh of relief.

‘That was very unexpected, my friend,’ Jimmy said to Dominika.

‘Not as surprising as seeing Jean levitate,’ she replied.

While enjoying their refreshments, Jimmy saw Sven, in his civvies, chatting to a man at the bar and occasionally both men glanced his way. Jimmy raised an eyebrow and motioned for Sven to come over. ‘What’s up?’ he asked as the sailor approached.

‘Well, sir, some of the crew and I have the night off, and we were going to play cards, err, for money. The gentleman at the bar was asking if both you and he could also join the game.’

Jimmy gave Jean a happy smile while she gave a sly, knowing smile in return.

‘Love too. What time?’ he replied to Sven.

‘Ten thirty next to the staff kitchen on B deck.’

‘See you then.’ Jimmy then caught the eye of the man at the bar and raised his glass, and nodded his acceptance and thanks, to which the man reciprocated.

The passenger at the bar was clean-shaven, jet black short hair and sported a tidy black suit and dark red shirt, open at the collar and no tie. In some respects, he could pass as a magician from a distance.

Dominika leaned in closely between them, asking, ‘I guess you’re good at cards?’

Jean stifled a laugh, putting her hand briefly over her mouth.

Jimmy, without a word, produced a pack of cards from his jacket and, keeping them out of sight of the man at the bar, asked Dominika to pick a card but not to look at it yet.

She selected one at random and clutched it to her chest.

Jimmy held the remaining cards to his forehead and counted to ten quickly, ‘Three of clubs.’

She peeked at her card and yelped in shock. She then showed the exact card to Jimmy.

Out of the corner of his eye, he noticed the man at the bar had not spotted it or reacted. 'Now place your card back into the deck,' he whispered.

Dominika gulped her drink and waited, watching Jimmy shuffle the cards with one hand.

He fanned out the cards once more and offered them to her. 'Now, take out one card at random, look at it and remember it, then place it back into the deck at a different location.'

She did so.

He theatrically waved a hand over the deck and then held it high above the table before swiping it past Jean, tapping her glass with the pack and slid it back into his pocket. 'Now ask Jean what card you selected.'

Dominika sheepishly turned to Jean, 'Well, what card did I select?'

Jean lifted her glass from its coaster and pulled out the Kind of Spades from underneath, showing it face up.

Dominika recoiled in horror, 'That's not possible. You're, you're over there and your glass never moved. Nor your hands.'

'Tomorrow I'll show you how it's done,' Jimmy said, 'but now I must refill my drink.'

Three more cocktails and a few autographs later, Jimmy rose from his chair, kissed Jean on the head and headed to the bar to meet the passenger who had invited him to play. 'Wish me luck, ladies.'

'Looking forward to the game?' the man at the bar enquired as Jimmy approached. 'I'm Rick, Rick Miller.'

'Greetings and salutations,' Jimmy replied, feeling rather superior from his last trick and the alcohol sloshing through him. 'Your glass is nearly empty. Can I buy you a drink?'

'Sure.'

Up close, Rick appeared to be in his mid-forties, well-to-do, tanned and well-manicured. 'Did you enjoy the show?'

'Tremendously.'

Rick had a curious accent to Jimmy. He couldn't quite place it, 'Where are you from, Rick?'

'Barcelona, Spain.'

'That explains the tan. Shall we be on our way?' Jimmy asked as Helena brought their drinks.

'How much cash do you have to gamble with?' Rick asked, sliding off the barstool.

'I'm not saying yet. I have no idea how much the stakes are. C'mon, let's go.'

Jimmy followed Rick down two flights of stairs, and they entered a smoky, well-lit room. Six off-duty sailors sat around a circular table with a green tablecloth draped over it. Two vacant chairs were next to each other at the near end. They both sat while giving friendly hellos to the men.

‘Okay, gentlemen, tonight’s game is Blackjack, the stakes are two dollars to start with, and we’ll see where we go from there,’ said Sven, acting as dealer. ‘The man behind me is Felix. He is the banker and will also provide whisky or beer, so if you want to get change or a top-up, now’s the time.’

Jimmy exchanged a twenty for ten two-dollar bills and settled in for the first deal.

It was nearing 1 am when he called it a night. He was thirty dollars up and hadn’t cheated at all. But he was not winning as much as some. The banter in the room had been relaxed from the start. Yet he kept thinking that Rick was taking it far too seriously. He also noticed that the man had nursed his only drink all night.

‘That’s it for me, chaps,’ Jimmy said with a slight sway in his step. ‘Thanks for the greens and the booze. Let’s do this again soon.’

They bid him farewell, and he rocked his way back to his room while using both walls for support as if his shoes had rounded soles.

Jean was fast asleep as he entered, and with as much decorum as he could muster, he undressed and snuck under the sheets, letting the ocean rock him to sleep.

An hour later, he heard someone turning the door handle to their room. Through his hazy thoughts, he decided it was wise to stay silent to see what happened, thinking that it might be Rick or a lost, drunk passenger. Nothing happened for a while until he heard footsteps approaching, then saw a small white envelope sliding under the door. As the footsteps departed, he finally found the courage to approach. The envelope wasn’t sealed. He slid out a folded piece of paper. From the moonlight through the window, he read: *I need your help. Rick.*

Jimmy knew he was in no fit state to help anyone, and if the man was in mortal danger, he certainly wouldn’t have time to write a letter.

The beautiful sleep pillow beckoned for his return.

* * *

10 am

Jimmy showed Jean the note over breakfast in the dining room and explained what he knew about Rick. Jean was as stumped as he was while Rick was conspicuous by his absence.

‘How much did he lose last night?’ she asked.

‘Not much to start with, but he was quite well up after the first hour.’

‘Then what could it be? Maybe he went nuts after you left?’

‘I have no idea, but I’m sure he’ll track me, or us, down at some point today. I’ll leave a message with Helena saying that we’ll be in our room if he’s asking for us.’

Jean didn't reply, instead opting to cradle her coffee mug with both hands and peer around the room over the top of it.

'If Dominika wanted help, I'd be happy to oblige, but something doesn't feel right.'

'Hey,' Jean said as quietly as possible and without lowering her mug, 'you don't think Dominika and Rick are a couple of hustlers, do you?'

Jimmy's fork and scrambled eggs stopped halfway from his plate, 'Hmmm.'

'I'm just looking around, people watching, and I can see two people I haven't seen before over there in the corner. Maybe they got on at Disko Bay.'

Jimmy didn't turn around but waited for Jean to complete her assessment.

'A man and a woman. He's got his back to the wall and is reading a newspaper. She's short like Dominika, but the hair is a different shade. Remember, I didn't see Rick last night. Only the back of him when the two of you walked off.'

'I'll get us some more orange juice,' Jimmy said, rising to the sideboard. 'Keep watching.'

He dropped his napkin on the table and turned away from the couple, only glancing in their direction upon his return. 'You might be onto something there, Jay,' he said once back at the table. 'Figure-wise, they both match, and the man could be wearing a false beard and wig. He also has dark skin like Rick. Can you remember what room Dominika is in?'

'No. Can you remember what room Rick is in?'

'No. I say we wait,' Jimmy added. 'They're not here, and breakfast finishes in twenty minutes.'

'Sit them out? To see who leaves first? I like it.'

The restaurant began to empty, and eventually, it was just the four of them left. To Jimmy, it felt like a battle of wills. 'Shall I go and introduce myself?' he asked.

'Too late, they're leaving. We won. They're leaving via the front door and are heading for the stairs, up to the top deck. Hang on, he's left the paper behind. Go. Grab it.'

Jimmy sauntered over to the table, swiped it and nonchalantly returned, placing it on the table.

'Darl, it's a Spanish newspaper.'

* * *

11 am

After leaving separate messages for both Dominika and Rick at the bar, they returned to their cabin.

‘Wouldn’t that be something?’ Jean said while deftly rolling two coins across her knuckles. She sat cross-legged on the bed with her eyes closed. ‘Imagine it. Two couples on a ship trying to, well, compete. We’re not con artists, but they might be trying to scam people into parting with their money –’

‘Yeah, for a good cause or something. And I gave Dominika fifteen dollars right off the bat. Jay, go for a stroll. See if you can find them. I’ll wait here to see if Rick turns up.’

He spent his time checking the props for the next performance, where he was going to thrust a red rose through Jean’s back and out of her stomach. Then he checked their safe and counted their money. An hour passed, then two. He wanted to venture out, but part of him wanted to stay in case Jean needed to find him in a hurry. He also wanted to speak to Sven, Helena or any other member of the crew that could help shed some light on who they were. Although being members of the crew, in a way, they were not privy to the names and associated room numbers unless it was an emergency, so he could not ask directly. He lay on the bed, staring at the ceiling, analysing his memory of the two people. If their hair and beard were indeed fake, then they were good ones. The Spanish paper was the clincher. It was nearing half-past one when Jean returned.

‘No sign of the couple or Rick or Dominika. It’s odd, darl.’

‘No news from me either. I don’t like it. Did you check with Helena?’

‘Both messages were still unclaimed, and she doesn’t recognise the two newbies.’

‘Shit. Let’s go and grab some lunch and do some more people watching. I’ll also put a brown sheet of paper on the carpet just inside the door. If anyone steps over the mark, they’ll leave an imprint and creases they can’t flatten out.’

‘And how about some invisible string across the door?’

‘Good idea.’

Lunch passed uneventfully and as they passed their cabin door, finding nothing disturbed, they began to relax a little and decided to spend some time on deck taking photos while watching seals basking on the ice floes. Despite the sun burning in a cloudless sky, it was still bitterly cold up top, and they engaged a few other passengers in pleasant chit-chat over a beer.

They ventured back to their cabin at three o’clock only to find Rick knocking on their door.

‘Hey, what’s up?’ Jimmy called down the corridor.

Rick turned, his face ashen yet full of purpose, ‘Thank heavens you’re back,’ he stammered. ‘I guess you got my note?’

‘Yeah, what’s the problem?’

‘Can we talk inside?’

‘How long will it take?’

'I have a proposition for you. Perhaps twenty minutes.'

Once inside, Jimmy took a bottle of wine from the bedside table and three glasses. 'Take a seat,' he said, waving Rick to the chair at the dressing table.

'After you left the card game, I stayed on for another hour, chatting to the drunken players. Their lips were loose with talk of women, contraband and above all gold. Treasure, to be exact.'

Here we go, thought Jimmy. 'You said you needed help –'

'Stop interrupting,' Rick snapped back. 'I believe it's treasure, since it is going to a museum in Alaska. It's a long way to Alaska, and we can find it in the hold when most of the ship and crew are asleep.'

'We're not thieves,' Jean protested, standing up, snatching the bottle from Jimmy for a top-up.

'Oh yes, you bloody well are.' Rick let the words hang, his eyes shifting from each of them.

Jimmy stood up also, his wide shoulders blocking out the light from the porthole window, his fists clenched, 'Say that again and I'll –'

'Now, I saw you picking pockets last night and the night before. I could grass you up.'

Jimmy huffed as his fists tightened, 'Or?'

'Or we can find out what it is and split it.'

'This is insane,' said Jean.

'How are we supposed to find it?' Jimmy scoffed, 'I have keys to only a third of the ship –'

'You can pick locks, can't you? We need each other as alibis if things go wrong. Besides –'

'Hang on,' said Jean, interrupting, 'what if the treasure is just one item, like a statue?'

'So, you're interested then.' Rick said it more of a statement than a question.

'We didn't say that you arse,' Jean snapped back.

'If it's a single item, then we do what you and Jimmy do best. We saw it in half.'

'Do you know what the box looks like?' Jean asked.

'No. But there are only a few boxes and crates destined for Alaska in the hold. And on a ship like this, all cargo has its own bay. It should be easy to find.'

'No deal, Rick. We got a good thing going here and you and your accomplice can fuck off.'

Rick's eyebrows grew closer together, knotting themselves up like confused caterpillars, 'What accomplice?'

'We know who it is,' said Jean.

Rick stood up in a flash and pulled a pistol from his jacket pocket, 'This is the only accomplice I have on board,' he said flatly, levelling it at Jimmy's gut.

'I was wondering what the bump was in your pocket,' said Jimmy, keeping calm while ushering Jean behind him. 'I guess you're a desperate man. Wanted by the law? Running away to Alaska from Spanish creditors? Who knows?'

'I'm not afraid to use this. You wouldn't be the first.'

'Rick, don't be a dumb idiot. If you fire in here, the whole ship will hear it. Now, you may be two up on us and none of us wants to be poor or dead, so how about some proof?'

'Huh? How am I supposed to get proof? It was drunken hearsay, or should I say drunken chatter. All I know is that I was sober last night, and I know what I heard.'

Buying time, Jimmy sat down and gently pulled Jean's arm to sit on the bed next to him as he waved for Rick to put the gun away. 'I want you to do something for us, Rick. We want you to, how should I say this... if you can't get proof, get something, anything more than sticking a gun in our faces and saying, "do it," do you see what I mean? Shit, man, we require cash as much as anyone and finding treasure would be awesome but I'm not breaking into the cargo hold just because you heard something. Besides, it could be a wind-up. You know what sailors can be like.'

Rick slowly put the gun back in his pocket and rose to leave. 'I'll do what I can, but only because I need you.'

'You haven't thought this through one bit, have you?' said Jean. 'Did you sleep last night?'

'I stayed awake until 6 am. Contemplating.'

Jimmy and Jean exchanged a glance, thinking of the day's events.

'Your best bet is to get one of the crew to give you a tour and ask to see the cargo bay,' Jimmy added.

'You think that will work?'

'Go and find out, you fucking desperado.'