

Finistère

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FINISTÈRE

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Chapter One

Matthew Cameron stood by his mother, peering down into water; down, down, down over the little humps of rivetheads, the brass-rimmed portholes, down, down to the red line circling the hull of the ship, to the rich, restless water, oil-surfaced, slapping the steel of the ship and the wooden pier with old grapefruit and orange rinds, wood, paper and miscellaneous, unidentifiable objects. He took a last look at the faces among the group on the dock, waving and shouting, some of them almost looking at him, but even the faces he knew – the faces of his mother's friends – were not looking at him but at his mother as she stood, towering and distant by his side. She seemed parted from him, unavailable, as if she herself were with her friends on the pier, and out of reach.

We are going to France, she had said to him, and then added: *Paris, France*, looking at him to see what effect this would have, as if something in her eyes would carry him across the open atlas she held in her lap to the green blotch on the map which was France, *a country where*, her voice had gone on, *they speak only French*. To encourage him (for his answering look had been blank and uncomprehending), she had said it was where Napoleon and the Three Musketeers lived, *you know, dear*, but of course they were dead now. He had looked at the map, half expecting it to come to life but it brought nothing to his mind except the phrases from his eighth-grade geography: *France is bordered on the north by Belgium*, or a caption beneath the photograph: *Shepherds in the picturesque Basque region of the South*. To please her, he had taken the atlas and stared at it, shaking his head until his eyes

had fastened on the word *Atlantic*, and the wide blue space leaped into reality. “You mean where Lindy flew to? Across the *Atlantic!*” He had barely heard the answering “yes.” His mind was filled again with the wonderful impossibility of that moment, only a few weeks before. “LINDBERGH FLIES ATLANTIC” – he could still see the headlines, the pictures, the excitement on people’s faces. For a long time he had sat there rigid, the atlas in his hands transformed into the controls of that plane, the sound of the motor roaring in his ears, the sudden appearance of the wild, grey windswept ocean beneath him....

He moved slowly away from his mother’s side, away from her unawareness of him. He murmured the name of this ship, and even the thought of Lindbergh was pushed out of his mind by the actuality of the deck beneath his feet. To be on a boat, a fifty-thousand ton boat, was already too much. He kept as close as possible to the railing, walking around the legs and hips and backs and arms, avoiding the uniformed stewards and the passengers rushing here and there. He was small for his twelve years (almost thirteen, he would have admitted) and nowhere was this handicap borne in on him so surely as in a crowd. Because he was also precocious and ahead of his age in school, he seemed always to have lived at a lower level than his classmates. He had spent his life looking up, like an intelligent dwarf. Here, in this crowd on the deck, he felt himself at the mercy of the treacherous limbs of people whose chests he faced and whose heads towered above him. When he passed a small boy – the only child he had yet seen on the ship – he drew himself up, pausing momentarily, and glowered down at him. The little boy stared back, wide-eyed. It helped a little.

He made his way along the long deck to the rear of the ship, informing himself that he was going *aft*, towards the *stern*, knowing that below him under the water he might perhaps see the propellers, or as the Cunard Line booklet said, the *screws*. He wondered briefly whether he was on the starboard or port side of the ship, and glanced at his hands as if they might reveal the secret of seaborne right or left,

but there was no answer in them. He went down the companionway to the deck below and stopped when he came to the very end of the ship. He pressed his head against the iron bars under the wooden railing and looked down but he could not see anything except water. The screws were invisible, hidden under the stern that projected, like a great porch with a round bottom, out from the hull. He turned around and looked up, his head against the high wooden rail, up to the top of the steel mast with the flag flying. Although there were rope ladders leading up to nothing near the top of the mast he knew they were fakes, he had read the booklet thoroughly. The masts, at least the forward mast, were of hollow steel, with an inside ladder.

He looked up at the funnels, all three of them, leaning towards him. They were big enough for a train to pass through. His fingers gathered themselves into small fists and he pressed his hands against his chest. It was really true, he knew now; he was really on this boat, he was going to stay on it, he was going to Europe – although that didn't matter so much, it was the boat. If only it could have been the *Mauretania*! Well at least this *Berengaria* was bigger and it was named for some queen, too. The *Mauretania*, though, had four smokestacks and it was the fastest ocean liner in the world. The Greyhound of the Seas; the holder of the Blue Ribbon of the Atlantic. The sister ship of the *Lusitania* that the Germans had sunk during the war. Maybe they'd come back on the *Mauretania*.

He turned again and looked under the rail down at the water. Perhaps if he climbed up and leaned over he could see them. He gripped the wide wooden railing with both hands, it was too wide to hold easily, and pulled himself up on the iron bars, climbing them as if they had been the rungs of a ladder. By leaning over as far as he could, he looked down under the projecting stern, past the great letters reading *Berengaria, Liverpool*, and down to the rudder. Through the murky, greasy water something was moving, caught for an instant in the bright June sunlight. The screws – one on the left and another on the right – turned slowly, cutting through the

water, gradually increasing in speed.

He looked up and around, no one was watching him, although there was a man standing about ten feet away, leaning on the rail, looking at the Jersey shore. He looked back into the water. They were moving faster now, catching the sun, flickering and shining up at him. But he could only see two of them. The other two projected at the sides, he knew, where the hull of the ship slanted and curved inward.

Suddenly, without any warning, his body was filled with a violent blast of sound, so enormous that every nerve in him became rigid and trembled with it, forcing him over the railing, pushing him from behind, down and down, his hands reaching frantically for the wide gutter, his eyes fastened on the brown cigarette butt and the rust, the crinkling of once-white paint. As if his eyes were travelling of their own accord, rushing ahead of his body, he could see himself being caught up in the tons of yellow metal whirling below him, being sucked in and cut relentlessly to pieces ... he closed his eyes and screamed but the sound stayed inside him, obliterated by the deafening roar of the whistle.

When he opened his eyes, he was shocked to find himself on the deck, held tightly in the hands of the man who had been standing near him at the rail. The man looked and looked at him, into and through him, before he spoke. Then he smiled and said: "That was close, son," and the smile grew bigger on his face. He relaxed his grip. "Where are your parents? Where's your father?"

Something pounded back into Matthew, he could feel it in his chest, but it was difficult for him to speak and when he did the words came out of their own accord: "My father's divorced," he said, and then his face reddened. For some reason he knew he shouldn't have said that. For some reason ... but he did not quite know why. What he did know was that it was not really true, that the reason he was going to Paris with his mother was so that she could get a divorce from his father. He had looked away from the man in his confusion and

now he looked back squarely into his face, the inadvertent lie forming on a small, hard pain in his chest. "Not really," he said quickly, his eyes flickering at the man, "my mother's going to Paris to get a divorce from my father."

The man looked at him without saying anything and the steady, unblinking eyes embarrassed Matthew. He straightened his shoulders and forced himself to smile. "Thank you very much," he said with dignity. "You saved my life." He shook the man's hand formally and started away from him, adding over his shoulder: "My mother's right up there."

The man continued to watch him and Matthew turned to look back. The man waved his hand at him and turned again to the rail, the water, and the Jersey shore.



When he found his mother, she had left her place by the railing and was walking agitatedly down the deck away from him. He caught the sleeve of her coat and tugged on it sharply.

"Matthew!" she exclaimed breathlessly, a frightened look in her eyes. "Darling! Thank heaven! Where have you been? You mustn't run away like that!"

She knelt beside him on the deck, her arms around his waist, oblivious of the passengers, a few of whom had turned to watch them. In that moment, the alarm which was in their faces for different reasons made them look very much alike, but the likeness was an illusion of expression. Although Matthew's hair had been very light as a young child, it was already turning darker, and the shape of his head, bulging out at the back, with a high smooth forehead, was very different from hers. Whatever differences there were between them, they were undeniably mother and son, but it was the look in their eyes that proclaimed it. Catherine kissed him on the cheek. The attention embarrassed him and yet he could not pull himself away, wishing only

that she would let him go. Her distress seemed out of place, almost false; she was too well-dressed, too expensively put together for any strong emotion. The insecurity in her face was incongruous with the flowers on the jacket of her suit, the high polish of her fingernails.

A couple standing nearby was watching them. He hugged her tightly and warmly, and then kissed her, looking back proudly at the man and the woman. The fear disappeared from Catherine's face, leaving only the beauty and the polish, and she stood up and took his hand in hers. She did not hold it, but grasped and regrasped its smallness with her soft fingers, twisting it gently, making sure that it was his. They walked along the deck together and she smiled down at him. It was as if nothing had happened. Then he remembered.

“What exactly is a divorce, mother?”

They turned into the narrow hallway of the deck, stepping over the high metal projection – the doors were built that way, he knew, to keep the water out – and his mother's step faltered. She did not answer him right away, but only smiled – a little sadly he thought. It was not until they were in their cabin and she had taken off her hat and seated herself on the edge of one of the two beds, taking his hand once more in hers, that she spoke to him. She had been through all this before, but children were fantastic creatures, utterly incomprehensible. Probably all her explanations had been in vain, she patted the bed beside her. “Sit here, darling,” she said. “I'll try to explain.”

He waited patiently next to her, wanting to give her time, sorry to have asked the question. He toyed with the idea of telling her about the man who had saved his life, how he had almost fallen into the water, into the churning propellers, and then decided against it. She would only exclaim and hug him and kiss him again.

“When people get married,” she began slowly, “they go to a minister or an official and they sign a paper,” she looked down at him, hesitating, “a kind of a contract ... an agreement. They ... they love each other, they want to live together, to ... to have children.”

“I know about marriage,” he said.

She nodded. "Of course you do, darling."

"But what about...?"

"Yes. I'll try to explain." She looked away but her hand gripped his more tightly. "A divorce is just the opposite of marriage. It's when you agree not to live together any more. You find that you don't feel the same way about each other, you..."

"What?"

He watched the conflict in her eyes and she patted his hand. "I wasn't going to tell you this," she said, "but you'll learn it someday and I suppose it is best that you hear it from me. Your father wants to marry someone else," she continued, "another woman. It isn't just that we don't love each other any more, it's that he loves someone else."

"You mean he doesn't love you any more?"

"That's right, dear. He can't help it. Things like that happen."

"Do you love him?"

"Well..." her shoulders stiffened and she looked away again. "Under the circumstances, I suppose I don't."

He looked down at his shoes and swung his feet back and forth. "Does he love me?" he asked suddenly.

"Of course he does!"

"But he's not going to see me any more, is he?"

She hesitated. "Not for a while, Matthew. Of course, if you want to see him..."

He shook his head firmly. "If he doesn't love you, I don't ever want to see him again. I hate him!"

"You mustn't say that! You mustn't even think it! He's your father!"

He was surprised. He had not expected her answer, but it was all right when he looked at her. He could tell that she was pleased, even if she didn't say so, even if she did tell him he mustn't say it or think it, because she was looking away from him at her own reflection in the mirror, and at the image of himself beside her and there was a

smile on her face. Matthew felt as if the look they exchanged in the glass was a secret between them, that they could not have looked at each other directly in just that way.

Her reflection changed from pleasure to concern. “You aren’t going to miss America, are you dear?”

Miss it? Up to now he had thought only of going, his feelings and his mind had gone ahead of the boat at the dock, out on the sea, aiming towards France. It had not occurred to him that he was departing from anything.

“No,” he said slowly, wondering if he would or not.

“Remember that Scott is in Paris. Won’t it be fun seeing Scott again?”

He had forgotten Scott Fletcher and now he tried to form a picture of him in his mind. He smiled. “Oh, yes,” he said, and put his arm around her. “And we’ll be together,” he said, “won’t we?”

“Of course, darling.”

“I’ll never stop loving you, mother,” he said firmly. “I promise I won’t. We’ll be together always, and when I’m grown up, I’ll take care of you. Really I will.”

Her eyes lingered on the mirror and then moved slightly to fix themselves on his reflection. “Darling...” she began, but even as she spoke, he pulled himself away from her and ran to the window to stand on tiptoe. “We’re moving!” he called, without turning to his mother, and she stood up, her lips still parted. He faced her, turning quickly: “Let’s go out on deck ... we’re moving!”