



A Bespoke Murder

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Allison & Busby Limited
12 Fitzroy Mews
London W1T 6DW
www.allisonandbusby.com

First published in Great Britain by Allison & Busby in 2011.
This paperback edition published by Allison & Busby in 2012.

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A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from
the British Library.

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

ISBN 978-0-7490-1144-4

Typeset in 11/16 pt Adobe Garamond Pro by
Allison & Busby Ltd.

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has been produced from trees that have been legally sourced
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Printed and bound by
CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon, CR0 4YY

*To Doug Emmott
friend, philosopher and tennis star
who bears no relation whatsoever to his namesake in this book*

CHAPTER ONE

They all knew the danger. When the *Lusitania* sailed from New York on 1st May 1915, passengers and crew alike understood the risk that they were taking. Spelt out with cold clarity by the German Embassy, the grim warning had been widely circulated.

Travellers intending to embark for the Atlantic voyage are reminded that a state of war exists between Germany and her allies and Great Britain and her allies; that the zone of war includes the waters adjacent to the British Isles; that, in accordance with formal notice given by the Imperial German Government, vessels flying the flag of Great Britain, or of any of her allies, are liable to destruction in those waters . . .

The threat did not deter 1,257 passengers from making the trip, though there was a measure of disquiet. The general feeling was that a ship capable of twenty-six knots was far too fast to be

caught by any of the German U-boats lurking in British waters. Besides, it was argued, the *Lusitania* was essentially a passenger liner and therefore not a legitimate target for the enemy. The further they sailed across the Atlantic, the stronger that argument seemed. They were safe.

Also aboard the *Lusitania* on her fateful crossing was Irene Bayard, one of the hundreds of crew members. Irene had an unshakable faith in the Cunard vessel, having worked on her as a stewardess since her maiden voyage from Liverpool in September 1907. She was fiercely proud of being associated with a ship that had established so many startling precedents. RMS *Lusitania* was the first British four-stacker, the first to exceed 30,000 gross tons and the first to cross the Atlantic in under five days, securing the prized Blue Riband, the unofficial award for the fastest crossing. As such, she was the first quadruple-screw speed record-breaker and her achievements had made her the first choice for many passengers. That was a source of great satisfaction to Irene.

She was undisturbed by warnings from the Imperial German Government. Employed to look after passengers in first class, Irene was far too busy to worry about any notional dangers. It was hard work but so full of interest that – even though she was now in her late thirties – she never felt the slightest fatigue. Among those whose every request she met with smiling efficiency were a famous dancer, a celebrated American fashion designer and an ancient lady with two spaniels and an unspecified connection to the higher reaches of the British aristocracy. Each day brought new surprises. It was why Irene found working on the *Lusitania* such a pleasure.

Ernie Gill was less happy in his work. Taking a last pull on his cigarette, he flicked it overboard before turning to Irene.

‘Who says that Americans are generous?’ he moaned.

‘I’ve always found them so,’ said Irene.

‘That’s because you’ve never had to cut their hair. I spend at least ten hours a day on my feet and what do I get for it? Most of them won’t even give me a proper thank you, let alone a decent tip.’

‘What about that Belgian you told me about?’

‘Ah, yes,’ conceded Gill, brightening, ‘that was different. Now he was a real gentleman. Back home, he’s some kind of diplomat. I mean, he must be worried sick about what happened to his country when the Germans trampled all over it, yet he still remembers that a barber deserves a reward. He slipped me a sovereign.’

‘He was obviously pleased with his haircut.’

‘So he should be, Irene. I know my trade.’

Gill was a tall, skinny man in his forties with a sallow complexion. Though he and Irene had become friends, she was wary of his sudden bursts of intensity. He had offered her two proposals of marriage and, when inebriated, propositions of a different nature but she had turned him down politely each time. Since the death of her first husband, Irene had resolved never to marry again, least of all to a lustful barber with a fondness for strong drink. She was quite happy to limit the relationship to the occasional pleasant chat.

It was afternoon on 7th May and the ship was steaming along with unassailable confidence. After a steady and uneventful voyage, anxiety aboard had more or less evaporated. They were only ten miles from Queenstown, their first port of call. Like many of the passengers, Irene had come out on deck when land was first sighted. The barber had joined her.

‘Not long to go now,’ she observed. ‘Since that fog lifted, the Irish coast is clearly visible.’

‘Don’t talk to me about the Irish,’ said Gill, sharply. ‘They’re even worse than the Yanks. I’ve had three Micks in my chair and not a penny in tips from any of them. That Irish composer whistled his latest song at me as if he was doing me a favour. The only favour I want,’ he added with a sniff, ‘is silver coins in the palm of my hand.’

‘Can’t you think about anything but money?’

He grinned slyly. ‘I think about *you* sometimes, Irene.’

‘That’s enough of that,’ she said, firmly.

‘A man can still hope.’

He ran a covetous eye over her shapely figure.

‘You know my decision, Ernie, and it’s final.’

She was about to explain why when she was interrupted by a shout from the young lookout on the bow. Having seen the telltale shape hurtling towards them through the water, he bellowed into his megaphone.

‘Torpedoes coming on the starboard side!’

Before anyone could react to the news, the ship was struck with such violence that it was rocked from stem to stern. The explosion was deafening. Panic set in immediately. Passengers screamed, shouted and ran in all directions. Electricity had been knocked out, leaving cabins and public rooms in comparative darkness. Worst of all was the fact that the ship began to list dramatically, making several people lose their balance and fall over. On a command from Captain Turner, an SOS message was sent by the wireless operator but there was no chance of a rescue ship reaching them in time. The *Lusitania* was holed below the

water. She was sinking fast. A second explosion caused her to keel over even more. In some parts of the ship, panic gave way to hysteria. This, they all feared, was it.

‘Blimey!’ cried Gill. ‘The Huns have got us.’

‘Think of the passengers,’ urged Irene. ‘Get them to put on their life jackets and move to the boat deck.’

‘We’re going down, Irene. It’s every man for himself.’

‘We have to do our duty.’

But he was no longer listening. Gill had charged off to collect what he could from his quarters. Irene snapped into action. Rushing to the nearest supply of life jackets, she put one on and grabbed several others so that she could hand them out to people she met on the way. When she got to the boat deck, she found it in complete disarray. There were twenty-two standard lifeboats but the ship was now at such a crazy angle that it was impossible to launch several of them. The other problem was that the ship was still maintaining an appreciable speed, making it difficult to control any lowering. Of the lifeboats that were actually launched, some met with instant disaster, tipping over and spilling their passengers into the sea or hitting the water with such a shuddering impact that people were hurled uncaringly over the side.

Irene did what she could, helping to fasten life jackets, spread reassurance and assist people into any boats that looked as if they might be lowered without mishap. She was pleased to see that Ernie Gill had also decided to do his duty now that he’d retrieved his few valuables. The noise was ear-splitting and the confusion almost overwhelming. The constant boom of the engines was amplified by the rhythmical gushing of the waves

and the stentorian yells of the sailors handling the falls, the ropes that lowered the boats from the davits. Yet a strange calm was slowly starting to spread, born of bravery and an acceptance of the inevitable. People were making allowances for the most vulnerable, yielding up their places in a boat to the old and infirm. Frightened children were herded together and strapped into life jackets. Pet animals were gathered up and cuddled by their owners. Irene saw countless examples of courage and kindness from crew members as they went through survival drills they'd practised for such an emergency.

In addition to the lifeboats, there were twenty-six collapsible boats and they would play an important part in saving lives, but it was clear from the start that casualties would be extremely high. Several people had already perished, dashed against the side of the ship or killed by a falling lifeboat. Others had drowned in the cold unforgiving water. Seated in one of the last lifeboats, the titled old lady with the two spaniels was knocked overboard when a man who leapt from an upper deck landed directly on top of her. Yapping piteously, the dogs swam madly in small circles but their owner was already dead and they were doomed to join her in a watery grave.

Having gradually slowed, the *Lusitania* rolled over even more and was patently close to her end. In less than twenty minutes since she was hit, one of the largest and finest vessels ever to be built in a British shipyard began to founder. It was time to go.

'Jump, Irene!' shouted Gill, taking her by the arm.

'I'm needed here, Ernie,' she said.

'There's nothing else we can do. She's going down.'

Irene felt the deck lurch. 'You may be right.'

‘Jump while you can or you’ll be sucked down.’ He pulled her to the rail. ‘Try not to hit anyone.’

It was a tall order. Hundreds of heads were bobbing about in the sea and some of the collapsible boats were directly below Irene. She could see no inviting space. After snatching a farewell kiss from her, Gill jumped over the side while pinching his nose between a thumb and forefinger. Dozens of other people were abandoning the ship as well. Irene offered up a silent prayer for her salvation then joined the general exodus. As she fell through the air, she was overcome by a sense of righteous indignation at the enemy for daring to attack her beloved *Lusitania*. It was sacrilege.

She hit the sea hard and sank beneath the green waves before coming to the surface again and expelling a mouthful of salt water. All around her were people desperately trying to make their way past those who had already given up the fight. When a corpse floated helplessly against her, Irene saw that it was one of the mess stewards, his eyes gazing sightlessly up at the sky. She remembered what Gill had said. As she finally went down, he warned, the *Lusitania* would take anyone nearby deep into the vortex she had created. It would be a hideous way to die. That thought spurred Irene on to swim away as hard as she could, heading towards a collapsible boat she could see. Because it was being rowed away from her, however, Irene never reached the boat and its vague promise of safety. Instead, she kept flailing away with both arms until she barely had the strength to lift them. Her head was pounding, her lungs were on fire and her legs were no longer obeying her. All that she could do was to tread water.

A collective shout of horror went up and Irene turned to take a last glimpse of the ship on which she'd spent so many happy years. One end suddenly dipped in defeat, the other rose high, then the *Lusitania* dived below like a gigantic iron whale, sucking everyone within reach in her wake. Irene was still staring at the massive circle of foam when she collided with a wooden object and automatically grasped it. She was holding on to a large chair that gave her extra buoyancy. It had not arrived by accident. Using his other arm to swim, Ernie Gill had guided it over to her so that both of them had something to cling to. Shivering with cold, Irene was unable to express her thanks in words. Gill, however, was shaking with fury and the expletives came out of him like steam escaping from a kettle.

'Bleeding Huns!' he exclaimed. 'I'll fucking *kill* the bastards!'