

Prologue

OCTOBER 1885

SHIPS HAD ALWAYS BEEN a trial for Jessica. Some feared being wrecked; she simply loathed the motion, and the seasickness. Though the steamer *Nereid* was a decent-enough vessel, it tossed and swayed as much as any sailing ship. An afternoon spent sound asleep in her cabin had relieved a little of her nausea, but she still felt like a dose of 'flu. At least it had been a good excuse to avoid the unwanted attentions of the bothersome Mr Strange for a few hours.

Out in the corridor, the gaslights glared too brightly as she plodded along towards the companionway leading up to the deck. A bit of fresh sea air before dinner might be just the thing. She leant on the wall-rail for support, her palm coming away coated in fine, dark dust. Soot, from the funnels? Perhaps someone had left a hatch open and a draught had brought it in. The air here smelt close, stifling. Musty. She put a hand to her stomach. Perhaps tea, instead of dinner.

Her eyes were scratchy from sleep, or the dust, and she stopped on her way up the stairs to rub them. Cold, salty air caught in her throat as she pushed the companionway door open against the gale and stepped out onto the deck, blinking away the wind-tears. She paused there to let her eyes adjust to the near twilight.

Several people were gathered at the stern railings, about thirty feet distant, seeming to admire the view of endless slatey-grey ocean rippling away to the horizon. About to call out a greeting to them — she recognized one man as the steward, Mr Gibson — something stopped her. Something out of place.

“Go!” shouted one of them in a muffled voice to the third man, the one nearest the rail. It was not just the wind fooling with her eyes. The speaker really was wearing a mask, and clutching a suitcase with a pipe attached.

The third man twisted desperately about, his chest rising and falling in short, shuddering gasps of panic. He locked eyes with Jessica for an instant. She recognized him now. Lieutenant Arkwright. The man who had lost his temper with Mr Strange, just before they stopped in at Boston harbour. The masked man pointed a length of tubing at Arkwright and it blew a stream of what looked like smoke into his face, making Arkwright cough violently.

“Go,” the masked man ordered again.

Slowly, mechanically, Arkwright climbed over the railing, looking less terrified, more like a sleepwalker, eyes half-lidded. Only now did Jessica begin to grasp what was happening. Arkwright shook in the wind as he hung out from the stern, clinging to the barrier, staring down into the churning waters where the ship’s screws spun.

“Stop!” cried Jessica.

The three men turned to her, but the one in the mask said something and pointed into the ship’s wake. Arkwright looked past him at Jessica for a long second before he let go of the railing and dropped into the sea.

Jessica took a step forward and started to shout but found she couldn’t. Instead she turned and lurched across the rolling, windswept deck for the ship’s bridge. Someone there would help. The ship’s officers, they would stop this ... whatever was happening. This madness. In her horror, she fumbled with the handle of the bridge door, as in a nightmare, unable to get it open. Locked? Through the round window she could see the captain and other officers standing by their stations, and pounded on the door to get their attention.

“Help! Please help! A man ... a man has fallen overboard!” Though they looked at her, the officers made no move to open the door. Each stared with the empty eyes that

SPOREVILLE

Arkwright had had just before he ... As one, they returned to their work as if she had merely been the wind howling at the door. She beat harder and screamed, but no-one took any further notice. Jessica felt a cold, paralysing despair as she realized they were all like Arkwright, indifferent to everything. Even to their own deaths.

“What is happening?” she muttered. She was still in her stateroom, surely, asleep. Dreaming. That must be it. And no-one had leapt from the ship. Or was it real, the crew and everyone sleepwalking into disaster? Was the *Nereid* to be another *Mary Celeste*? She looked again into the bridge, wondering if the captain would even turn aside if there were rocks ahead.

The man in the mask was approaching, close behind. Dream or not, Jessica dashed to the other companionway leading below decks, falling painfully down half the stairs in her mad rush. No dream-fall hurt so much as that. She scrambled to her feet, continuing to race for her cabin. Again, she fumbled with the handle, clumsy with fear. The masked figure appeared at the top of the stairs, saying something in its low, mumbling voice. Her cabin door opened and once inside she slammed it shut, locked it, and panted, pressing her back against the door.

Footsteps, calm and even, came closer until they stopped behind her.

“Ah’m sorry to have to do this, mah dear,” the muffled voice said, “but it’ll all be over in a few minutes.”

Jessica’s eyes ran wildly over the little cabin for an escape, but there was none. Her gaze dropped hopelessly to the floor. Smoky powder was blowing past her shoes, coming in through a crack beneath the door.