

Chapter One

Marcus Fanning eased the door open just wide enough to see if the lane was clear. Then he kissed Amanda Hayes on the lips.

‘I’m so, so sorry.’ Amanda’s voice was a whisper. She was afraid if she said it louder it would turn into a sob.

‘No.’ Marcus kissed her again and squeezed her hand. ‘Don’t be sorry. I understand. And for what it’s worth, I think you’re right. It would be too big a risk coming with me. I should have considered that before I asked you.’

Amanda pressed her hand against his chest. ‘I *am* right. You know it would never work. You’ll be better off on your own. And it’s not as if you’ll be that far away anyway. What is it? Two hours on the train?’

‘Yeah. Two hours on a train,’ Marcus agreed. ‘So you know where I’ll be if you ever need me, right?’

‘Right.’

Then he was out in the cool summer night. The clear sky made it easier to see his way back along the lane to where he’d left his bicycle. He glanced back at the house. The door was already shut and the light was on in the bedroom. He knew he should be feeling something now he was leaving and probably would never see Amanda again. But there was no feeling at all.

There was a time when something like this would have bothered him a lot, squeezed his heart, made it heavy with disappointment. A couple of years ago, when he was a nicer man. But all that changed in the blink of an eye.

At 10am on the 10th October 1918, to be precise.

The Great War in Europe was rapidly turning against the Kaiser’s forces. The end was near. But one German submarine captain was determined to salvage some honour by attacking more Allied shipping. His target that morning was Royal Mail Ship Leinster sailing from Dublin in Ireland to Holyhead in Wales.

The horrendous thud from the first torpedo froze everyone to the spot. But not for long. The roar of tearing metal and the crash of shrapnel hitting the bulkheads shocked people into action. Then the screaming began.

Marcus Fanning was a steward in the First Class section. He wasn’t supposed to be on duty that morning but the weather was rough and the lad he shared a mess with was crippled with seasickness. So Marcus took his place. And he was never sure if it was a blessing or the worst mistake of his life, because if he hadn’t been carrying a tray of drinks along the 1st Class passageway when the torpedo hit he would have been trapped down below in his cabin with no hope of escape.

He dropped the tray and bolted for the stairs. But then he heard hysterical screaming and hammering on a cabin door. He could have kept on running. But it wasn’t his nature. He turned back. And the consequences were horrendous. A ball of flame burst through the bulkhead and rolled over him. His clothes were already on fire when he slammed into the cabin door.

But the door wouldn’t open because six people were jammed behind it, all pulling on it at the same time. Marcus was blinded by the intense pain that stung every inch of his body and sheer agony made him charge the door again. This time he hit it so hard he caused a breach and the door was whipped open. Then Marcus was shoved out of the way as three men and three women barged past him.

A massive spray of water came pouring through a crack in the ship’s side and washed over Marcus, knocking him upside down and smothering the flames. Then fear and adrenalin took

over. He scrambled to his feet and staggered back along the passageway towards the stairs, practically running along the wall because the ship was listing so badly now.

The upper deck was in chaos. People were running in all directions, banging into each other and losing their footing as waves rolled over the side and battered them. Many were thrown across the deck and out over the side into the raging sea. Marcus hung onto the lip of the door and looked for a lifeboat. There was one about twenty feet away.

Then someone grabbed his arm and pulled him back. 'Steward, grab this. Quickly, you buffoon. Grab this.'

A man in an expensive overcoat was dragging a full size trunk behind him. 'Come on, you idiot,' he howled. 'I have to get this to a lifeboat. Grab hold of it, man. What's the matter with you?'

Marcus pulled away so hard the man lost his balance and fell back on top of the trunk. And when the trunk started sliding towards the guardrail the man refused to let go. His legs were kicking like a mad tap dancer as they tried to get a grip on the wet decking. It didn't work. The trunk pulled him over the side.

Then the second torpedo hit and was followed closely by a third. The ship lurched heavily and Marcus let go of the door and slid towards the last lifeboat that was already being lowered into the water.

When Nora came to see him on hospital a few days later he caught the look in her eyes and something inside him died. She tried to hide it but it was too late. She didn't stay long. As she backed away towards the door she promised to bring the children to see him when things were looking a bit better. He knew what she meant. She didn't want them traumatised by their father's horrific burns.

Reporters turned up in droves looking for a story. Marcus told the lad from the Kerryman how, despite his clothes being on fire, he helped get six people out. Then suddenly he was on the front page of all the national papers because one of the women he'd saved from the cabin was a famous actress. And she was now using Marcus as a prop in the story of her own miraculous escape.

The shipping company latched onto it too and used it as a public relations exercise. They made a great fuss of Marcus, presenting him with a silver cigarette case with the ship's crest on it. He was also awarded the Albert Medal for bravery.

But of course he couldn't come back to work, the chief steward told him quietly. Not as a steward anyway. Not in his ...well, *you know?* But if there was anything he needed ...

Then they were gone. And any flicker of hope Marcus had for the future went with them. He'd never felt so alone in his whole life. The world looked extremely bleak from where he was sitting, propped up in a hospital bed.

By the time he was transferred to Tralee's St Catherine's Hospital the war in Europe was over. He wrote to Nora telling her where he was, and she wrote back to say she'd taken the children and gone back home to her mother. And she wanted Marcus to sell the house because she needed money to support them.

He did. But she wasn't happy about what he got for it. She was suspicious. Was he cheating her out of her fair share? But she refused to come and talk to him about it.

One day someone let slip that a local farmer was showing an interest in Nora. And apparently she was overheard saying that if Marcus was to hurry up and die she could get on with her life.

That was when he hit the lowest point. There was nothing to live for anymore. He considered ending it all. He even gathered as much toxic medication as he could get hold of. But when the moment came his Catholic beliefs wouldn't let him do it.

Anyway, he didn't want to let Nurse Amanda down. She was the one person who gave him any sort of comfort. She understood what he was going through because of her own accident

with a kettle of boiling water when she was a child. Her neck and left arm were a constant reminder.

Nurse Amanda supported him through the months of loneliness and hopelessness. And when he was eventually discharged and moved into a hostel in Tralee they kept in touch.

Amanda was married to a policeman, Constable Eugene Hayes. And from what Marcus could make out he was as cold and dogmatic with his family as he was with the criminals. Sometimes Amanda thought she was just a social project to him, an opportunity for Eugene to wave his own virtue at the world. But he did give her a lovely home and three beautiful children.

Eugene preferred to work the night shift. He felt more confident in the shadows. So a couple of nights a week Marcus parked his bicycle in the lane and walked the last quarter of a mile to her house where he waited for the signal that the children were asleep in bed.

One day Marcus got a letter from the famous actress whose life he's saved. Her book was in the shops and selling well, and she wanted to reward him for his involvement. She offered him a job as her butler.

His immediate reaction was rage. He knew what she was doing. She was making this all about her. She was going to show Marcus off to the world and bask in the applause, bathe in the glow of her perceived compassion. And increase the sales of her book. Marcus would be wheeled out at every occasion as a token of her vast kindness. He'd be used for the moment then stowed away again until the next opportunity to raise her profile.

But when Marcus calmed down he knew he wouldn't get a chance like this again. He was already surviving on charity. Unless he wanted to spend his life in a hostel living on a pittance he had to swallow his pride and grab this opportunity.

So he wrote back to say he'd be delighted to accept her kind offer.

And tonight he asked Amanda to go with him. But Amanda was a realist. She was married. He was married. The world of entertainment might be drenched in hypocrisy but there was no way the famous actress would allow them to co-habit in her house. Not in a Catholic country. It would be impossible to keep it out of the prying eyes of the journalists eager for an exclusive. The scandal would tear her to shreds.

So Marcus was catching the train on his own.

He buttoned his jacket and patted the side of his face where the chill night air agitated the scarred tissue, and he slung the canvas satchel over his shoulder. He wasn't sure how much money was in the satchel, but he knew he couldn't go back to his hostel ever again. Harry the Hat would have noticed it was missing by now.

Harry the Hat was a notorious pickpocket. His room was constantly being raided by the RIC, but they could never find his stash.

One day Marcus discovered Harry sprawled on the ground in the back yard of the hostel. He said he'd slipped on a patch of wet grass. He'd sprained his wrist and cracked some ribs, but he was reluctant to let Marcus help him. Marcus suspected Harry had fallen off the wall that surrounded the yard. So he waited until Harry hobbled away towards Walsh's pub over in Rock Street where he usually spent the afternoon, and he climbed up on the wall to see what was so interesting.

The wall was directly under Harry's room. The window was locked down by old paint and rotting wood and the cracked glass was caked in grime. But when Marcus shuffled towards it he spotted Harry's secret hiding place straight away. From inside the room the RIC wouldn't have noticed the windowsill outside was loose.

Marcus prised it off and reached inside. And he pulled out a canvas satchel.

He couldn't believe Harry was living in a slum hostel when he had all this money stashed away. Why? But more importantly, how could Marcus relieve Harry of some of it without him noticing? He put it back and bided his time.

And tonight was his time. Marcus took it all. He just grabbed the satchel and ran. Initially he was going to share it with Amanda but that didn't work out as planned.

He took his time walking back along the lane. There was still a few hours to kill before he caught the train to Waterford. He found his bicycle and headed back to town.

He didn't see what hit him. The bicycle buckled under him and his face slammed into the road. A bright flash of pain and the stab of the handlebars hitting his shoulder. He rolled over and tried to untangle himself from the wreckage but something heavy was pressing down on him.

He managed to turn his head just enough to glimpse something coming towards him in a shiny blur. The blow caught him between the eyes and everything went black.

[A Crack In The Ice](#)

Thank you for reading this. I hope you enjoyed it as much as I enjoyed writing it.

[Brendan](#)