



***Promise Me This* by Cathy Gohlke**

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Chapter One

The great ship returned late from her sea trials beyond the shores of Carrickfergus, needing only her sea papers, a last-minute load of supplies, and the Belfast mail before racing to Southampton.

But in that rush to ferry supplies, a dockworker's hand was crushed beneath two heavy crates carelessly dropped. The fury and swearing that followed reddened the neck of the toughest man aboard the sturdy supply boat.

Michael Dunnagan's eyes and ears spread wide with all the fascination of his fifteen years.

"You there! Lad! Do you want to make a shilling?"

Michael, who'd stolen the last two hours of the day from his sweep's work to run home and scrub before seeing *Titanic* off, turned at the gruff offer, certain he'd not heard with both ears.

"Are you deaf, lad? Do you want to make a shilling, I say!" the mate aboard the supply craft called again.

"I do, sir! I do!" Michael vowed, propelled by wonder and a fear the man might change his mind.

"Give us a hand, then. My man's smashed his paw, and we've got to get these supplies aboard *Titanic*. She's late from her trials and wants to be under way!"

Michael could not move his feet from the splintered dock. For months he'd slipped from work to steal glimpses of the lady's growing. He'd spied three years ago as her magnificent keel was laid and had checked week by week as ribs grew into skeleton, as metal plates formed sinew and muscle to strengthen her frame, as decks and funnels fleshed her out. He'd speculated on her finishing, the sure beauty and mystery of her insides. He had cheered, with most of Belfast, as

she'd been gently pulled from her berth that morning by tugboats so small with names so mighty that the contrast was laughable.

To stand on the dock and see her sitting low in the water, her sleek lines lit by electric lights against the cold spring twilight, was a wonder of its own. The idea of stepping onto her polished deck—and being paid to do it—was joyous beyond anything in Michael's ken.

But his uncle Tom was aboard *Titanic* in the stoker hole, shoveling coal for her mighty engines. Michael had snuck to the docks to celebrate the parting from his uncle's angry fists and lashing belt as much as he'd come to see *Titanic* herself. He'd never dared to defend himself against the hateful man twice his size, but Michael surely meant to spit a final good-bye.

"Are you coming or not?" the dockhand barked.

"Aye!" Michael dared the risk and jumped aboard the supply boat, trying for the nimble footing of a sailor rather than the clunky feet of a sweep. Orders were shouted from every direction. Fancy chairs, crates of food, and kitchen supplies were stowed in every conceivable space. Mailbags flew from hands on dock to hands on deck. As soon as the lines were tossed aboard, the supply craft fairly flew through the harbor.

Staff of Harland and Wolff—the ship's designers and builders—firemen, and yard workers not sailing to Southampton stood on *Titanic's* deck, ready to be lightered ashore. The supply boat pulled alongside her.

Michael bent his head, just in case Uncle Tom was among those sent ashore, though he figured it unlikely. He hefted the low end of a kitchen crate and followed it aboard *Titanic*, repeating in his mind the two words of the only prayer he remembered: *Sweet Jesus. Sweet Jesus. Sweet Jesus.*

"Don't be leaving them there!" An authoritarian sort in blue uniform bellowed at the load of chairs set squarely on the deck. "Bring those along to the first-class reception room!"

Michael dropped the kitchen crate where he stood. Sweeping a wicker chair clumsily beneath each arm, he followed the corridor-winding trail blazed by the man ahead of him.

He clamped his mouth to keep it from trailing his toes. Golden oak, carved and scrolled, waxed to a high sheen, swept past him. Fancy patterned carpeting in colors he would have wagered grew only in flowers along the River Shannon made him whistle low. Mahogany steps, grand beyond words, swept up, up to he didn't know where.

He caught his breath at the domed skylight above it all.

Lights, so high he had to crane his neck to see, and spread wider than a man could stretch, looked for all the world to Michael like layers of icicles and stars, twinkling, dangling one set upon the other.

But Michael gasped as his eyes traveled downward again. He turned away from the center railing, feeling heat creep up his neck. Why the masters of *Titanic* wanted a statue of a winged and naked child to hold a lamp was more than he could imagine.

“Oy! Mind what you’re about, lad!” A deckhand wheeled a skid of crates, barely missing Michael’s back. “If we scrape these bulkheads, we’re done for. I’ll not be wanting my pay docked because a gutter rat can’t keep his head.”

“I’ll mind, sir. I will, sir.” Michael took no offense. He considered himself a class of vermin somewhat lower than a gutter rat. He swallowed and thought, *But the luckiest vermin that ever lived!*

“Set them round here,” the fussy man ordered. Immediately the first-class reception room was filled with men and chairs and confounding directions. A disagreement over the placement of chairs broke out between two argumentative types in crisp uniforms.

The man who’d followed close on Michael’s heels stepped back, muttering beneath his breath, “Young bucks busting their britches.” A minute passed before he shook his head and spoke from the side of his mouth. “Come, me boyo. We’ll fetch another load. Blathering still, they’ll be.”

But as they turned, the men in uniform forged an agreement and called for Michael to rearrange the chairs. Michael stepped lively, moved each one willingly, deliberately, and moved a couple again, only to stay longer in the wondrous room.

But as quickly as the cavernous room had filled, it emptied. The last of the uniformed men was summoned to the dining room next door, and Michael stood alone in the vast hall.

He started for the passageway, then stopped. He knew he should return to the deck with the other hands and finish loading supplies. But what if he didn’t? What if he just sat down and took his ease? What if he dared stay in the fine room until *Titanic* reached Southampton? What if he then walked off the ship—simply walked into England?

Michael’s brow creased in consternation. He sucked in his breath, nearly giddy at the notion: to leave Belfast and Ireland for good and all, never again to feel Uncle Tom’s belt or buckle lashed across his face or shoulders.

And there was Jack Deegan to consider. When Deegan had injured his back aboard his last ship, he'd struck a bargain with Uncle Tom. Deegan had eagerly traded his discharge book—a stoker's ticket aboard one of the big liners—for Uncle Tom's flat and Michael's sweep wages for twelve months. As cruel as his uncle had always been, experience made Michael fear being left alone with Jack Deegan even more.

To walk away from Uncle Tom, from Jack Deegan, from the memory of these miserable six years past, and even from the guilt and shame of failing Megan Marie—it was a dream, complex and startling. And it flashed through Michael's mind in a moment.

He swallowed. Uncle Tom would be in the stoker hole or firemen's quarters while aboard ship. Once in Southampton he would surely spend his shore leave at the pubs. Michael could avoid him for this short voyage.

"Sweet Jesus," Michael whispered again, his heart drumming a beat until it pounded the walls of his chest. He had begged for years, never believing his prayers had been heard or would be answered.

Michael waited half a minute. When no one came, he crept cautiously across the room, far from the main entry, and slid, the back side of a whisper, beneath the table nearest the wall.

What's the worst they could do to me? he wondered. Send me back? Throw me to the sharks? He winced. It was a fair trade.

Minutes passed and still no one came. Shrill whistle blasts signaled *Titanic's* departure from the harbor. Michael wondered if the mate who'd hired him had missed him, or if he'd counted himself lucky to be saved the bargained shilling. He wondered if Uncle Tom or Jack Deegan would figure out what he'd done, hunt him down, and drag him back. He wondered if it was possible the Sweet Jesus listened to the prayers of creatures lower than gutter rats after all.

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