

ONE

Cabin Boys

August 1954

“Seasickness,” said Dave sympathetically as he stood there and looked at me. “They say it’s worst feeling in the world.”

It was day two of my maiden voyage to New York on the Cunard ship, RMS Media. The first time I’d ever been away from Liverpool. Unless you want to count a day trip with the school across the Mersey to New Brighton, that is.

According to Les, our Head Steward who’d been on the Atlantic run for over thirty years, the weather wasn’t even that bad. A bit of a blow and a middling sort of choppy swell as the shallow Irish Sea gave way to the Atlantic Ocean.

Nothing to write home about.

But as I lay there on one of several bunks in a small stewards’ cabin known as a ‘glory hole’, low down in the bowels of the ship, I just wanted to die.

Dave was my best mate. Like a brother almost. More than seventeen years we’d known each other. Since we were both nippers. He’d always lived a few doors away in St Bride Street, very close to the centre of Liverpool. One day the two of us had caught the bus down to the Pier Head and signed on together at the Cunard Building on Liverpool’s historic waterfront.

So we were now shipmates.

Sir Samuel Cunard, originally from Halifax in Nova Scotia, had made his Cunard Line the very best in the transatlantic shipping business and the Cunard Building had been designed to impress his customers. Passengers who assembled in the grand lobby on the ground floor prior to embarkation found themselves surrounded by expensive Italian marble as they relaxed on the very finest leather seats and awaited the call to proceed to their ship. As they looked around at the magnificent interior

décor, and observed the quiet efficiency with which the staff approached their various tasks, they knew that they were in good hands.

Dave and I, of course, hadn't seen any of this finery. We'd reported to the Cunard Building for duty the day before we'd sailed. And as crew members who'd just completed our basic training we were instructed to make our way down a set of stone steps from Water Street into the basement of the building where a grey-suited clerk sat at a functional, wooden desk. On his desk he had a ledger, and we joined the queue of men who were waiting to receive their orders.

He dealt with each of us very quickly.

"Name?"

"Stephen Crane, sir."

He ran his finger down a list of names in the ledger.

"Date of birth?"

"4th of August, 1936, sir."

"Cabin Boy. Report to RMS Media."

Dave followed me to the desk, and he too was told to report to the Media. We were very relieved. Until then we hadn't been sure that we'd end up on the same ship. And our plan was to see the world. Together.

That was three days ago. It was the beginning of what we hoped would be a great adventure.

As I did my best to forget about the constant motion of the ship Dave gave me a grin. Happy as Larry he was. I moaned at him while trying to stop myself from retching yet again.

Going to sea with Cunard had been my dream. And now it was turning into a nightmare.

"It's not bloody fair," I said. "You're as right as rain and I'm feelin' like death."

Dave shrugged his shoulders.

"Luck of the draw I guess, Steve. Les says it's pretty normal for first-timers to suffer for a few days. Until they get their sea legs. After that they're usually fine. Though he did say that Nelson, you know, the admiral who won the Battle of Trafalgar then got himself shot and insisted on one last kiss from his mate, Hardy. Apparently he never got used to it. Sick as a dog he was for the first couple of days. Every time he put to sea. Every single time. Probably made him a right bastard to fight against."

Dave's relentless good humour was making me worse. But I felt too ill to say anything as he continued talking.

"It does make you wonder why he carried on, though, doesn't it." Dave shook his head in bewilderment. "I think I'd have jacked it in and found somethin' else to do with my life. Takes all sorts, I suppose."

He made as if to stop. But then he didn't.

"Les says we're lucky really. This ship used to be all over the place before someone came up with the idea of stabilisers. Cunard had them fitted a couple of years ago. Denny Browns they're called. The Media was the first of the transatlantic ships to have 'em. Before that a lot of the passengers weren't

able to show their faces in the restaurant for the first couple of days. Which is a shame 'cos they'd be missin' out on all the delicious food."

He paused for a moment and started to rummage around inside his white jacket.

"Talkin' of which . . ."

With a flourish he produced a slightly battered, cheese and tomato sandwich from one of the pockets.

"They say you feel worse on an empty stomach, Steve. I swiped a couple of these sarnies off the buffet when no-one was looking. I've eaten one already. But we can split this if you like. It's a bit squashed but it tastes great."

I caught a whiff of the slightly warm cheese and an overwhelming wave of nausea hit me.

"For God's sake, Dave. Put it away and sod off. Please. You're just making me feel worse."

He turned away and opened the cabin door.

"Suit yourself, you miserable bugger. I get it that you're not feeling all that great, so I came down to try and cheer you up. Seein' as I'm obviously not helping I'll find out if the Doc can give you a jab or something. And if you don't make it we'll give you a decent burial. At sea I suppose it'll have to be."

As he stepped over the raised threshold into the corridor he quickly turned his head. He'd already taken a large bite out of the warm sandwich.

"Any last requests?" he said, taking another bite.

The sight of the half-eaten sandwich was the last straw. Another wave of nausea hit me and I began to throw up. Then Dave was gone.

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About half an hour a doctor turned up with his medical case. It was the ship's surgeon, from Germany, Dr Hans Richter. His face looked kind and I guessed he was probably in his fifties. He sat down on my bunk.

"Your friend Robertson, he tells me you're suffering from the sea sickness," he said, taking hold of my wrist. I thought he was about to count my pulse but instead he began to stroke the back of my hand. "Judging by your look I think he is right. You have been sailing before?"

I shook my head and immediately retched.

"No, no no," said Dr Richter, still stroking my hand. "Keep the head still. It is moving about enough already with the ship. Shaking isn't going to help. And you should not stay here. The best cure for sea sickness is out on deck. In the fresh air. Staying Inside when you are feeling sick is no good. The balance organ inside your ears is telling your brain that the ship is moving around. But inside a cabin your eyes are not giving your brain the same message. So it gets confused and you feel sick. Outside on the deck your eyes look at the horizon and see that your ears are right. The ship is moving. That makes sense to your brain? Yes?"

His theory might well have been spot on, but my brain wasn't in any state to even begin to understand it. And I was pretty sure that if I opened my mouth I'd throw up again. So I just nodded my head, moving it as little as possible.

"And you can go outside on the deck now?" asked the doctor.

“No. I’m sorry. Not the way I’m feeling at the moment.”

As soon as I spoke the nausea was almost overwhelming. But I managed to control it.

Dr Richter looked at me.

“Then I must give you an injection.”

He opened up his medical case and took out what seemed to be an unnecessarily large syringe before drawing up some fluid from a vial.

“The trousers. Down.”

It was an order. Which I obeyed. Then, without any warning, he stuck the needle into my backside.

A Krakatoa Cocktail he told me it was. And it hurt.

After completing the injection he started to rub my naked buttocks with his hands. It will help with the pain was what he said. Now, as you’ll have realised by now, I was still young. And quite naïve. But I wasn’t daft. What with the hand-stroking, and now my buttocks as well, I pretty quickly worked out that the good doctor’s activities probably didn’t have an awful lot to do with pain relief. But I didn’t care. All I wanted was something - anything - to get rid of the dreadful sickness. And if that meant letting him play around with my bottom. Well, I could live with that.

Happily my generosity and understanding were amply rewarded. The treatment worked and the nightmare was over. By next morning I was up and about, scurrying around the ship with errands and messages for my first class passengers.

If anything the waves got bigger as we headed out into the Atlantic, but Dr Richter’s treatment had done the trick. I later found out that the crew called him ‘Wandering Hands’.

It was a price I was more than happy to pay.

From then on, whenever the sea got really rough, I took the advice of ‘Wandering Hands’ and got myself out on deck as quickly as possible. And unlike poor Horatio, 1st Viscount Nelson, I never felt seasick again.

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The RMS Media had set sail from Huskisson Dock, not far from Liverpool’s Pier Head, on 7th August 1954. She was one of two smaller-sized ships which Cunard had commissioned to be built immediately after the war. Like their great ocean liners Queen Mary and Queen Elizabeth she was a product of the distinguished shipbuilders, John Brown, on Clydebank near Glasgow. So she boasted an illustrious heritage.

Our ship had made her inaugural voyage in the summer of 1947. She was what Cunard termed a combination passenger-cargo liner. And the prefix ‘RMS’ told the world that we were an official ‘Royal Mail Ship’, carrying letters and parcels as well as passengers and cargo. Across the Atlantic. To America.

On board we had a total of two hundred and thirty-one passengers. All ‘First Class’.

Making the ship ‘First Class Only’, while also carrying cargo, was part of Cunard’s strategy to remain competitive in the battle with jet aircraft. The company could see that passenger jets were beginning

to take over from ships as the preferred method of transatlantic travel. And as the speed and range of the aeroplanes increased the competition would only get stronger.

Crossing the ocean at a leisurely pace on a relatively small, and exclusive, Cunard liner was being promoted as the most relaxed way to travel between Europe and America. It was the way the rich and wealthy made the crossing. The aim was to attract a clientele who had plenty of money. And plenty of time to spend it.

The new jets offered speed. Cunard's offering was the opportunity to spend eight or nine days at sea in pampered luxury with like-minded people. Unlike the airlines there was no limit to the amount of baggage which could be carried. Five, or even ten, large, and very expensive, Louis Vuitton trunks was by no means unusual.

The job of every one of the ship's crew was to keep our guests happy. To make sure they received the highest possible level of service. The sort of service they were used to at home. And which they expected.

The pay wasn't that great so we treated them like royalty. Our earnest hope was for very generous tips which would allow us to splash out when we reached our destination.

Dave and I were now Cunard Yanks.

Fellow Scousers who'd been serving on RMS Media for a while assured us that if we worked hard and kept our noses clean we'd be well looked after by our wealthy passengers. Then, with a bit of luck, we'd have money to burn. In New York.

Who could argue with that?

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In the early hours of the morning, nine days after leaving Liverpool, I stood alongside Dave on the top deck of the ship. None of our passengers were yet awake, and it would be an hour or two before we had to report for duty.

A few, scattered clouds in the eastern sky behind our vessel slowly and almost imperceptibly began to take on a reddish-orange hue. The sun was not yet visible but before long it would appear as a bright yellow dot on the distant horizon. Our eager eyes scanned the dark-blue, almost black, water of the ocean around us as the bow of our ship carved out a white-crested wave which appeared luminescent as it spread out to each side, gradually getting wider until it merged once again with the gentle swell. And to our stern the violent turmoil created by the thrust of powerful twin propellers left a wide, straight line which marked our passage.

Dave and I were watching for a light. A flashing light that would tell us we were approaching America.

The Ambrose Lightship marked the deeply-dredged channel which led from the Atlantic Ocean into the broad mouth of Lower New York Bay where our ship would pass between Coney Island and Sandy Hook, New Jersey. Numerous sand bars and shoals made the bay treacherous for vessels. But since 1908 the floating lighthouse known as Ambrose, along with a later radio beacon, had guided ships safely into New York Harbour.

More than five million immigrants seeking a better life in the New World had already been welcomed by her light.

"There it is, Steve!"

Dave called out excitedly, pointing about thirty five degrees to starboard to where something pale and white seemed to be flickering.

At first I wasn't sure. But as I continued to stare out across the ocean the flickering gradually became brighter and more obvious.

"I think I can just make out what looks like a ship," said Dave, continuing to point with his right arm and leaning out over the white-painted rail on the edge of the deck.

He was making me nervous. I grabbed the sleeve of his jacket.

"For God's sake be careful, Dave. It's a long way down if you lose your footing."

"Leave me, I'm fine. Just look. Out there. Below the white light."

I screwed up my eyes. Then I too saw it too. The shape of a hull. Dave was right. It had to be the Ambrose.

My heart was beating fast. We were close to New York. The skyscrapers and the bright lights of the city that never sleeps would soon come into view over the horizon, and we would make our way slowly up the Hudson River to our berth on Manhattan Island.

Cunard Pier 92, on the north side of which we would be docking, jutted out into the river alongside 12th Avenue. It was a few yards from the western ends of 51st and 52nd Streets, and a leisurely fifteen or twenty minute walk from Broadway and Times Square.

For six days, until it was time to set sail once again and return to Liverpool, our ship would be tied up close to the centre of the most exciting city in the world.

We were going to make the most of it.

TWO

New York City

The line for U.S. Immigration was long. It wound backwards and forwards, guided by a series of ropes, inside a large, metal-roofed shed which stood on the Pier, right alongside the ship. As we shuffled slowly forwards we could see we were being shepherded towards a row of glass booths occupied by serious-looking, uniformed men. All was quiet. The eerie silence was broken only by the sound, every few minutes, of an inked stamp being brought down upon a passport or other official document.

I looked at Dave. He didn't give me even a hint of a smile. I knew exactly how he was feeling.

"Watch yourselves, lads," Les had said to us as we were leaving the ship. He had many years of experience of entering the United States. "U.S. Immigration Officers won't put up with any nonsense. Just behave yourselves and answer their questions and you'll be fine. No jokes. Understood?"

Les was right. This was serious. We didn't have any nonsense planned. But being Scousers neither of us could be entirely sure what might suddenly pop into our heads. Or out of our mouths.

Dave went up to the booth first.

I watched as his documents were carefully studied. Then came a series of questions which I couldn't hear but which seemed to go on for ever. He stood there, looking anxious. After giving him one final look the officer picked up his passport and stamped it. Dave was through.

It was my turn.

As I approached the booth I could see that the uniformed officer, whose blond hair was cut very short, military style, was chewing lazily on a piece of gum. With his clean-shaven, good looks and smartly-pressed uniform he could not be anything other than an American.

He looked me up and down while flicking through the stiff pages of my very recently acquired passport.

"Good morning, sir. Brand new passport. Your first visit to the United States?"

I nodded my head.

The officer said nothing. He looked at me and continued to chew his gum. Then he pushed it into his left cheek with his tongue.

“You need to answer my question, sir. Your first visit to the United States? Yes or no?”

“Sorry. Yes.”

“Just ashore for the day, sir?”

I nodded.

The officer’s eyes narrowed and he gave me a frown.

“Bit of a slow learner, aren’t you, sir. Nodding your head doesn’t count. I said just ashore for the day?”

“Sorry. Just for the day? Yes. My friend and I. We’ve got to be back on board by five. We’re on duty tonight.”

He picked up the immigration questionnaire which I’d filled out on the ship before proceeding ashore.

“You’ve answered all these questions truthfully and accurately, sir?”

“Yes”

He scanned the form with his eyes.

“You’ve never been convicted of a crime?”

“A crime? No, never.”

“And you’ve never used illegal drugs?”

“Yes.”

He frowned again.

“To be clear, sir. You’ve never used illegal drugs?”

“Yes. That’s right. I’ve never used illegal drugs.”

The officer sighed.

“You’re not making it easy for me, sir. But since it’s your first time here I’ll take it that you might just be a little nervous.”

He picked up one of his stamps and planted it, very firmly, upon the blank page opposite the imposing red and blue, U.S. Visa in my brand-new passport.

“Welcome to the United States of America, sir. I suggest you act smart while you’re ashore.” He paused for a moment and looked at me a little pityingly. “Well, as smart as you’re capable of, anyway, sir. Just keep your wits about you.”

He paused again and leaned forwards, closer to me, speaking in a confidential half-whisper.

“You see, sir, not all of the folks here in New York City are as easy-going as my good self. Some of them, if they think you might not be quite as sharp as they are and not very familiar with things. Well they might just try to take advantage of you. You remember that.”

“Thank you, officer. I will. Is that it?”

“Yes, sir. That’s it. Remember. Act sharp. And have yourself a good day.”

I picked up my passport and slipped quickly it into my back trouser pocket. Dave was waiting by the entrance to Customs.

“What was all that about? You were with him for ages.”

“It was okay. But I kept nodding my head instead of answering his questions. That seemed to irritate him a bit. Then I might’ve said yes when I meant no about using drugs. In the end I think he just decided I was a bit soft.”

Dave grinned at me. “Not a bad judge, then.”

I made a face at him.

“Anyway,” I said. “We’re in. That’s the important thing.”

As we walked through the Customs Shed, following a series of arrows painted on the floor, there were no staff to be seen but the route took us past a series of long tables, a couple of which had empty suitcases lying open upon them. There were some darkened windows behind the tables and I found myself thinking someone must be watching. It made me feel uncomfortable. So I kept my eyes fixed firmly on a doorway marked ‘EXIT’, doing my best to look relaxed. Which wasn’t easy. Even though I knew I had nothing to hide.

Suddenly there was an urgent shout from behind us.

“You two. Stop. Both of you.”

We turned round to see a uniformed officer hurrying our way.

“Does this belong to one of you?” he said as he approached us. In his hand he was holding what looked like a British passport. “Your full names, please.”

It was Dave who spoke first.

“David Cuthbert Robertson.”

The officer looked at the name on the passport. Then at me.

“And you?”

“Er, Crane. Stephen Crane. Stephen with a ‘ph’ not a ‘v’”

The officer gave a sigh and handed the document to me.

“You dropped your passport, sir. It was on the floor by my colleague’s desk. If it’d been in the street outside I don’t think you’d have seen it again. Not here in New York City.”

“I’m sure I put it in my back pocket.”

The officer shrugged his shoulders.

“Then I suggest your back pocket may not be the best place. You need a jacket with an inside pocket, sir. Ideally with a zip on it. Have a nice day.”

“Idiot,” said Dave as the officer was walking away. He stopped and turned back towards us.

Dave pointed at me. "Him," he said. "He's the idiot."

The officer nodded his head. I think he was probably agreeing with Dave.

"You can't get back on the ship without a passport," said Dave, turning back to me. "You'd have been stuck ashore."

"Fair enough. But I've got it back. So it's fine."

"Yeah. But what if you hadn't?"

"What if? What if? There's loads of what ifs in life. I've got it back. So it's not a problem."

Dave shook his head.

"You were lucky."

"Okay. I was lucky. It could just as easily been you, David Cuthbert."

I started laughing almost before I'd finished saying his second name. I couldn't help it.

"David Cuthbert Robertson," I said, still laughing. "What's that all about? You always told me your second name was Colin."

"It is. Cuthbert just happens to be what's on my birth certificate. So they said that's what had to go on my passport. But I've changed it. Okay? As far as you're concerned my second name's Colin. And if you ever call me anything else I'll batter you."

I grinned at him.

"I mean it, Steve." I could see by Dave's eyes that he did. "It was my grand-dad's name. Which was fine fifty years ago. But not now. So I really will batter you if you so much as mention it to anyone."

"Okay," I said. "I've forgotten already. We're in New York. Let's hit the sights!"

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"My God, I feel weird," said Dave. "I keep wanting to jump."

"Well don't. We're a thousand feet above Fifth Avenue. You'd have an awful long time to regret it on the way down."

We were standing on the open-air observation deck of the iconic Empire State Building, the tallest building in the world. The elevator had whisked us up eighty-six floors in not much more than a minute and the view was unbelievable. There was another public area on the 102nd floor but it was completely enclosed behind plate-glass windows. Les, who'd been to both viewing points, had said the open-air one was better.

"You get a better feel for how high up you are, being outside," he'd said. And he was right.

The tickets weren't cheap. But we'd probably never do it again. And the tips had been good.

The deck wrapped itself all the way round the building offering a 360 degree panorama of the city. A set of tall, metal railings, with inward-curving spikes, had been very securely embedded into the stone parapet. I guessed it was to stop people like Dave discovering too late that flying was for the birds.

A few coin-operated telescopes on little steel platforms with steps leading up to them were available for anyone who fancied a close-up view of the city which lay below us.

“Did you see the picture of Edmund Hillary on the corridor leading to the elevators?” I said to Dave. “Down on the ground floor. You know. The bee-keeper chap from New Zealand who got to the top of Everest last year. Him and a Sherpa called Tenzing. Just before the Queen’s coronation.”

Dave shrugged his shoulders.

“What about it?”

“The label on the picture said he was up here with his wife. Earlier this year. He was leaning against one of the telescopes and pointing out the Chrysler Building in the background. He told a reporter it was like being on top of a man-made Everest. A good quote for the papers even if he didn’t really mean it.”

“I can’t understand why anyone’d want to climb a mountain,” said Dave. “Even Everest. It’s great seeing New York spread out below us. And I’m really glad we came up here. But I definitely wouldn’t have bothered if we’d had to use the stairs. Come on, then. Let’s see the rest of it.”

We made our way slowly around the deck, taking in the spectacular views of the city. To the west was the Hudson River. Our ship, easy to spot thanks to the red and black Cunard livery on its single funnel, looked so small. It could have been a child’s toy. It was difficult to believe it had carried us safely all the way across the Atlantic.

Five miles away to the south, beyond where the Hudson joined the inner New York Bay, we were able to make out the Statue of Liberty. It had looked so impressive when we had sailed past it just a few hours earlier. Now, from our high and distant viewpoint, just like our ship it looked tiny.

Moving round to the other side of the deck we could see the East River, spanned by the Brooklyn Bridge which carried thousands of commuters to and from the skyscrapers of Lower Manhattan at the beginning and end of each working day.

To the north was Central Park, a large, oblong expanse of green. It gave the residents of the densely-populated city some very welcome and precious space for relaxation and recreation.

“See Central Park,” said Dave, pointing towards the distant, straight-edged shape with a lake at its centre. “They say the guy who designed it got the idea from Birkenhead Park. Across the Mersey from Liverpool. He visited it and decided New York needed something similar. Of course, because it’s America, they made it a lot bigger.”

“I’ve never been there,” I said.

“Where?”

“Birkenhead Park.”

“Me neither.”

“We should jump on a ferry across the Mersey and take a look at it sometime.”

“You’re on,” said Dave. “If this is just a copy we should definitely see the original.”

He looked at his watch.

“It’s nearly two o’clock. Let’s give it ten more minutes. Then we need to head off if we want to grab ourselves a drink before going back to the ship.”

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The Market Diner, close to the Cunard Piers, was packed. The low building, with a line of windows looking out onto the street and its name in neon lights up on the roof, couldn't be missed. Half of the interior was laid out as a diner while the other half, the main attraction for thirsty seafarers, was meant for drinking. A long, curved bar ran down the centre of the room and many of our shipmates had made a beeline for it as soon as they were allowed ashore. As far as they were concerned they'd seen all there was to see in New York. They'd be spending their time ashore eating and drinking until it was time to set sail again for Liverpool.

Sitting on a stool alongside the bar, talking to a smartly dressed, Italian-looking man with neatly-styled, dark hair, we could see our Head Steward, Les. The man with him was wearing a navy-blue jacket over a light-blue shirt with a soft, button-down collar. A white pocket handkerchief was tucked neatly into his breast pocket.

Les gave us a wave and shouted above the noise.

"Hey, boys. Come over and meet my friend, Joe."

Dave and I made our way towards Les, squeezing past groups of rowdy drinkers in the crowded bar. His companion stood up as we reached them and held out a hand in greeting.

"Joe Zellin," he said as we shook hands. "Les and I go back a long way."

Les put an arm round my shoulder and turned towards Joe. "The name of this fine young man is Steve. Stephen Crane. And his companion, who is an equally fine young man, is Dave. David Robertson."

'David Cuthbert' I thought to myself. But I didn't say anything.

Les surveyed the crowd.

"Joe owns this place, boys. The finest, and busiest, diner and bar in the whole of New York City."

"We do our best," said Joe, laughing. "And if Les approves, I'm happy. What would you like? On the house as it's your first visit."

Dave and I looked at each other.

"Coca Cola?" said Dave.

"Okay," I said. "That's fine with me."

Joe turned and lifted his hand. One of the bartenders reacted immediately and hurried towards him.

"Yes, boss?"

"Two Cokes and two cans of Hamm's, Danny."

The man scurried away and quickly returned with our drinks. The Coca Colas, along with the blue, gold and white cans of beer, were ice-cold and straight from the refrigerator. The word, Hamm's, was written on the side of each in a swirling, red typeface.

Joe passed our Cokes to us and picked up his beer.

"The Theodore Hamm Brewing Company," he said as he pulled on the tab and opened his drink. "Based in St Paul, Minnesota. They were one of the first breweries to get themselves organised and start up production after prohibition."

He lifted the can to his mouth and took a generous swig, nodding approvingly.

“They like their beer, those folks up there in Minnesota. And they sure know how to make it. It’s a shame for you two boys that here in New York City you can’t legally enjoy it until you reach the grand old age of twenty-one.”

No problem, Joe,” I said. “We can wait. Coke’s good.”

“Did you manage to get up to the top of the Empire State, lads?”

“We certainly did,” I said. “A bit expensive. But well worth it. And thanks for the tip about the view from the outside deck. It was great. Dave was telling me it’s something his grand-dad always wanted to do. What did you say his name was, Dave?”

I knew I was skating on very thin ice, but I couldn’t help myself. Fortunately, as Dave gave me a look which I took to be a very final warning, Joe put his drink down on the bar. He had a question for us.

“Were the pictures of the airplane which flew into the Empire State Building still on display?”

Dave’s face had changed. Joe’s unexpected question had made him forget all about his grandfather.

“A plane flew into the Empire State Building?” he said. “I never knew anything about that” He looked at me again. “I don’t think there were any pictures on display.”

I shook my head.

“No. Definitely not.”

“It was just over nine years ago,” said Joe. “July 28th, 1945. Just before ten in the morning. On a Saturday. It was my daughter’s birthday which is why I remember the date. Usually on a Saturday I’d have been down here getting things ready for the lunchtime crowd. But we were all at my mother’s apartment. On East 49th and Third. The whole family. Having a birthday breakfast. We had some music playing on the radio. And then over it we could hear the sound of an airplane engine. Very loud. There was a lot of mist around but we looked out and there was a plane, flying real low.” Joe shook his head. “We couldn’t believe our eyes. It just missed the Chrysler Building three blocks south. And it looked like it was going to hit the offices by Grand Central but it swerved away at the last minute and we lost sight of it. Then there was this huge explosion. Everywhere was shaking. Like the city was being bombed. I thought we were being attacked because we were still at war with Japan. What we didn’t know back then, of course, was that we’d just built an atomic bomb and successfully tested it in New Mexico. And the war would soon be over.”

He paused for a swig of Hamm’s.

“Anyway, thinking we might be in danger, we hung around in the apartment for maybe ten or fifteen minutes. Then I rang one of my managers down at the diner here to see what was happening. It was him who told me the plane we saw had hit the Empire State Building. High up, just below the observation deck. I told him I was on my way over. And as I was crossing Fifth I could see the smoke. There was what looked like the tail of an airplane, sticking out of the Empire state Building on the north side. The streets were all crowded with people trying to see what had happened. It turned out it was one of our military planes. A B25 Mitchell bomber. It had flown into the building at 79th floor level. Just below where you guys were standing. And the fuel tanks had exploded. So it had set off a big fire.”

Joe scratched his head. There were tears in his eyes.

"I don't talk about it much," he said. "If I close my eyes I can still see that plane. As I said, there were some pictures on display last month. For the ninth anniversary I guess. But maybe they didn't want to leave them up too long. Just like me, people still get upset. One of the plane's engines shot right through the building and landed on the roof of a nearby penthouse studio, starting a another fire which completely destroyed it. The other engine and part of the landing gear ended up by one of the elevators. The elevator operator, a lady called Betty Lou Oliver, was badly burnt. After the first aid team had stabilised her they put her in one of the other elevators to take her to hospital. What they didn't know was that the supporting cables had been damaged when the plane hit. And when the elevator car started to move it plunged all the way down to the basement."

"My God," said Dave. "Poor woman. What a way to go. And after surviving the initial crash too."

Joe looked at us and shook his head.

"You two are probably going to think I'm making this up. But she survived the fall in the elevator. Seventy-five floors she went down. They say it was the cables bunching up under the elevator car which acted like a sort of spring. And maybe a cushion of pressurised air built up as it fell. I don't think anybody knows for sure. But whatever the reason nobody has ever fallen further than Betty Lou Oliver in an elevator car and survived. She was pulled out with just a broken pelvis, a broken back, and a broken neck."

"Poor thing", I said. "But at least she was alive."

"Fourteen people died that morning," said Joe. "Three in the airplane and eleven in the building. It's a miracle it wasn't many more. But this is New York. The city that never sleeps. And never stops. Remember I said it happened on a Saturday morning?"

Dave and I nodded our heads.

"Now I'm not necessarily saying I think it was right," said Joe. "Maybe they should've been a bit more respectful of the dead. But first thing on the Monday. Less than forty-eight hours after the accident. The Empire State Building was open again for business."