

*The following excerpt from Without Warning takes place after Athenia is torpedoed and has begun to sink with a pronounced list to its port side. Passengers are boarding lifeboats and departing from the ship.*

Rhoda

In the covered gallery along the port side of *Athenia's* Promenade deck, Rhoda Thomas waited with several other women for her turn to enter a lifeboat. She wasn't looking forward to the experience, which would involve her climbing down a rope ladder and into a small boat bobbing on the ocean's swells. It was exactly the scenario she had dreaded when Bosun Harvey explained it during the lifeboat drill her first day on the ship. At age 54, she wasn't sure she was agile enough to get onto the ladder or strong enough to climb all the way down. One by one, she watched the women and children in front of her receive instruction from a seaman standing by the railing, then climb over the side and disappear. When it was nearly her turn, Rhoda made her peace with God. She would gather all her strength and do the best she could. The rest would be up to Him.

Finally, the woman in front of her climbed over the side and Rhoda stepped up next to the railing. She felt a cold, damp night breeze on her cheeks and was grateful for the heavy coat she had worn up on deck to watch the sunset with Mrs. Townley. Rhoda looked down to see a woman nearing the bottom of the ladder where a lifeboat rode up and down on the waves, looking not much bigger than a bath toy. Every occupant's face was turned up toward her. Oh dear, she thought. She hadn't counted on an audience.

"I'm afraid she's a bit crowded," the seaman said. "Several people boarded on deck before they could lower her. So listen carefully when you get to the bottom of the ladder and do

what the chap in the boat tells you.” The stout seaman’s bright yellow lifejacket emphasized his bulk and reminded Rhoda that she hadn’t had time to gather her own lifejacket.

“It’s probably best if you don’t look down once you’re on the ladder,” he said. “And remember dear, do exactly as you’re told. Do you understand?”

Rhoda nodded, too frightened to speak.

“Right. Off you go, then,” he said, as if dispatching a child down a playground slide.

She negotiated the steps over the railing and onto the ladder without much difficulty. As soon as she started down, however, Rhoda discovered that the thick rope steps were slippery and the ropes that formed the sides of the ladder were rough and wet in her hands. Step by careful step, she slowly descended, hoping her pace wasn’t holding up those coming after her. It didn’t help matters that the ladder was hanging over *Athenia*’s port side, dangling away from the ship’s slanting hull because of its list. Forgetting the sailor’s advice, Rhoda glanced down and saw clearly that the ladder ended well short of the water. Yet there was no one else below her. The other woman had somehow made it into the lifeboat. Had they been as exhausted as she felt at that moment, she wondered? After several more steps, a loud voice called to her from the lifeboat somewhere behind and below her.

“Stop right there, luv.” Rhoda froze, fighting back her fears and listening intently for the next instruction. From the corner of her eye she saw the boat’s white hull surprisingly near as it rose on the large swell of an oily sea.

“Jump back now,” the voice commanded. Rhoda did exactly that. Instead of falling into the water, she fell into the arms of a burly seaman, whose breath smelled of mint and tobacco.

“What? No lifejacket?” he said, and for a moment Rhoda thought the man was going to send her back up the ladder. “Step over this bench toward the tiller there, luv. I’m afraid you’ll

have to stand for a while. But don't you worry. We'll take turns sitting." Rhoda moved toward the boat's stern to stand in the well between the boat's third and fourth cross-benches. On the last bench, she noticed a woman tending to a little girl who looked to be about 10 years old. The child had a bandage on her head and the woman looked concerned.

The barrel-chested seaman in charge directed the people at each end of the lifeboat to detach the falls from the bow and stern so they could be recovered by the crew on *Athenia's* deck. "You folks on the oars, pull away now."

"There's my mother on the ladder," a boy near the bow of the lifeboat called out.

"Please wait for mother," a little girl next to the boy cried. Rhoda turned to see the figure of a woman clinging to the ladder, looking over her shoulder at the departing boat.

"Sorry sonny, but we're overloaded as it is," the seaman said. "Don't worry. Another boat will be along for her directly."

The two children were not consoled by the seaman's remark. Rhoda's heart ached to hear their sobs at the sight of their mother growing smaller and smaller as the boat rowed away.

Ruth

Looking around at the other occupants in her new lifeboat, Ruth Etherington was surprised to see several men, particularly because she assumed it had been one of the first boats to be launched. Most of the men were seated at the oars and many of them appeared to be refugees, judging from their clothing. No sooner had she and Geoffrey found seating near the lifeboat's stern than the oarsmen began pulling away from the *Athenia*.

"Backwater, damn ye." The shouted order came from Able Seaman William Macintosh, the lean, weathered crewman in charge of the boat No. 8. A few men reversed their oars but

most of the refugees simply stopped rowing, as if uncertain what they had been asked to do. The boat, which still had a few empty spaces on its benches, drifted up and down the large swells near the huge steel wall of *Athenia's* hull.

“For God’s sake, man, pull away. Pull away,” a male passenger called from the bow.

“We’re stayin’ right here, if you don’t mind,” Macintosh said. “There’re plenty of people still on board and many a poor soul may need savin’ before we’re done.”

“But it’s dangerous,” the man protested. “If she rolls over we’ll be sucked right under. You’re jeopardizing the lives of everyone on this boat.”

“Now you listen to me,” Macintosh said, standing up from his spot at the tiller in the boat’s stern. “I’m in charge of this boat and you are all under martial law. So you’ll do what I say. We’re stayin’ right here until I say we leave. Is that clear?” Macintosh remained standing and Ruth, along with several other passengers, looked to the bow of the boat to see how the man would respond to this forceful challenge. After a long pause, she saw the man’s shoulders slump.

“Have it your way then,” he said.

Despite the tension caused by the confrontation, Ruth felt reassured. There could be no doubt who was in charge of Boat 8. Seaman Macintosh was committed to saving lives, and one of them might be her husband, who remained onboard *Athenia*.