

Prologue

The Solent, 20th September 1911

A fresh southerly wind painted silvery-white streaks across deep blue waters. Captain Edward John Smith stood on the port wing of *Olympic*'s bridge, impatiently observing the progress of his ship as the West Bramble buoy slipped past to his left. Technically, he was not yet in command of the White Star liner, as this duty was in the temporary care of a Southampton river pilot: Captain William George Bowyer. This was Smith's fifth outing with *Olympic*, but merchant navy regulations demanded he hand over command to a qualified pilot during the tricky first stages upon leaving port at Southampton. Bowyer had thirty years experience of these waters, and the White Star Line was a regular employer of his services.

'All engines, full ahead.'

Within two minutes they had accelerated from eleven to sixteen knots, and were on course for the final, more straightforward, part of their journey towards the English Channel. Smith grimaced as he jiggled a gold sovereign inside his trouser pocket, a familiar gesture for the occasions that demanded him to remain a mere spectator. He felt reduced to the same level as the fifteen hundred passengers on board, a large number of them presently assembling for lunch in the first class dining rooms. Impatient to resume command, he wandered over to the starboard wing and watched the approach of a Royal Navy vessel, nearly three times smaller than his own, but one that appeared to be matching them for speed. HMS *Hawke* was not a handsome ship, and the backward-raked prow distinguished her old fashioned appearance as she continued to plough a parallel course just two hundred yards distant. *Hawke* was momentarily the faster, but then *Olympic* began to pull ahead, and Smith looked on with a mixture of admiration and distaste as the aged warship's prow slipped back to a point approximately half way along the liner's hull. At this proximity he could even distinguish the submerged barrel shape of *Hawke*'s ram projecting forward like the beak of a giant porpoise.

Captain Bowyer joined Smith on the wing of the bridge, and followed his gaze towards *Hawke*. At that very moment both men were alarmed to see the warship begin to swing her prow to port, with the armoured ram now pointing directly at them. No words were exchanged. Each recognised the threat for what it was, but neither could accept the reality.

The cruiser was losing ground to the accelerating *Olympic*, and it seemed possible the intention was to pass behind the liner's stern, but both men knew such a manoeuvre was too dangerous to execute safely so close and at speed. Bowyer ran back into the bridge, ready to give fresh orders to his helmsman.

Smith raised his voice. 'I don't believe he will get under our stern, Bowyer.'

The pilot called back over his shoulder. 'If she is going to strike sir, let me know in time so I can put the helm over to port. Is she going to strike?'

'Yes, she is going to strike us in the stern!'

Aboard HMS *Hawke* it was pandemonium: Blunt flew down the ladder between the bridge and the wheelhouse, desperate to avoid disaster.

'What are you doing man? Port, port, hard a-port! Stop port engine! Full astern starboard!'

'Helm jammed!' yelled the quartermaster at the wheel. Two seamen rushed to his aid as the warship continued its swing towards the liner's hull. Blunt stared up at the vertical mass towering above them, praying they would find empty water out of nowhere. But the increased strain on the gearing had caused it to lock completely. Blunt barely had time to use the engine room telegraph and order "full astern both" when the impact came.

Inch thick steel plating on *Olympic's* hull was no match for armour-coated concrete, and the antiquated ramming device of an elderly naval vessel was about to prove its resilience. Nearly eight thousand tonnes of steel drove into the side of *Olympic*. It was not a deep wound, only around eight feet, but the noise was deafening to those inside the warship's wheelhouse. Flecks of paint with fragments of metal, including rivets torn from steel plates, rained down on the *Hawke's* deck as the two vessels wrestled briefly together. *Olympic* was holed both above and below the waterline, while the Royal Navy ship finally wrenched herself free looking like a boxer whose nose has been flattened by a stronger opponent.

Victory for either side was yet to be declared.