

Chapter 5

Entering any high-ceilinged, marquetry-floored hall that stank of privilege brought on the same involuntary reaction – a surge of stomach bile and a defensive twitch of her lip. The small theatre of the Ancient & Venerable Explorers Club of London was no exception. When you'd grown up with bangers and mash as the best meal of the week, anything served off a silver trust-fund platter tasted a bit like cardboard.

Professor Grainne O'Toole hadn't the slightest interest in the presentation her benefactor had cajoled her into giving this evening. Regurgitating a first-year survey lecture to a bunch of doddering old dinosaurs wasn't her game. For the briefest of moments, she'd teased herself with the idea of dressing in a cellophane-tight, bright lipstick-red dress – snug enough to reveal the claddagh tattoo on her hip – figuring, at the very least, it would keep a few of

the geezers from nodding off.

As she stood at the lectern, all pushed up, all she could hope for was a little excitement, the expectoration of a little gin and tonic through a nostril or two. She got it when she rolled out the key point of her lecture.

“Christopher Columbus was very likely a Jew.”

A few balding heads popped up. ‘What did she just say?’

“It's well documented in both primary and secondary sources,” she continued to the stuffed chairs, “that the main goal of Columbus' voyages was to find gold. Not for the greater glory or coffers of his royal patron, Queen Isabella, but rather to fulfill a personal pledge to fund a new crusade to free Jerusalem.

“Many saw nothing particularly revealing in that purpose, given he was an Italian, a people heavily influenced by the Popes, who as everyone knew rarely turned down a good bloodbath in the sand. Even more so, he was from Genoa, a port that salivated at the very mention of the word crusade. The Genoese were well aware of how their economy soared when their heaven-seeking, saber-wielding Christian cousins came to town. It was simple economics, a matter of money – mouths to feed, ships to buy, knights to entertain.

“Yet as new findings surface and old texts are reviewed with fresher eyes, we're more and more faced with the question – who really was Christopher Columbus?

“No portrait of him exists. Was he even Italian? If so, why did centuries of experts never question that every piece of writing he left was in Spanish? Sure, we can buy that his formal reports and correspondence to the Spanish court would be in Castellana – but familial letters? There's not a ‘buon giorno, mama’ to be found! What's more, credible antiquities posit that Columbus couldn't speak a word of Italian. So, who was Christopher Columbus? A Frenchman, a Spaniard, a Dutchman...a Jew?”

Now she had their full attention.