

NINETY-SIX HOURS

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Christine Dawood is an organisational psychologist, family business leader, and philanthropist. After the unimaginable loss of her husband and son in the *Titan* submersible tragedy, she embarked on a journey of resilience and meaning-making.

Ninety-Six Hours is her first memoir, a love story across cultures, grief, and the search for light.

A portion of the proceeds from this book will go to The Suleman and Shahzada Dawood Foundation, a non-profit organisation which supports and promotes educational initiatives in the fields of Science, Technology, and Research.

NINETY-SIX HOURS

**A Wife and Mother's Desperate
Search for the Lost Titan Sub**

CHRISTINE DAWOOD



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**For Suleman and Shahzada,
two souls who changed my life for the better.**

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PROLOGUE

26 June 2023

Our bags are packed – again – all eight of them. It is just the two of us, the luggage outnumbering us by four to one. Our only goal for today is to escape. Not that I know exactly what I'm running towards, nobody is waiting for us at home.

We board the plane and the polite greetings from the staff feel like hollow formalities. I find my seat at the window, looking outside. In another life I might have taken the sunlight breaking through the clouds as a good omen. Now, I don't believe in omens anymore. I can't trust my instincts any longer. I am just frozen.

Take-off proves to be turbulent, triggering my anxiety. My grip on the armrests tightens with every bump and rattle. Everything that has happened ignites my fear of flying once again, and the flame threatens to burn me from inside.

I try to anchor myself, it doesn't help, contentment seems unreachable. *Why do I even try?* When panic threatens to fully overtake, I feel a

blanket being gently placed over me, accompanied by a soothing touch to my cheek. I don't dare open my eyes, but the simple act of care from a family member grounds me momentarily.

The plane shakes and I gasp for air once again, counting down the hours until landing. Outside all I can see is the ocean. *Gosh, am I sick of it.* If I never ever see marine water again in my life I will be grateful.

As I shift in my seat I knock against Shahzada's and Suleman's backpacks, which are lying on the empty seat beside me. They are now a symbol of their missing presence, a brutal reminder of what I lost.

We all lost.

When we eventually land in London, I brace myself. Was it only two weeks ago that we left as a family full of excitement? It feels like a lifetime ago. Reluctantly I gather my belongings, dreading the return to the house without them. What is there to come back to, without my two boys? It will no longer be a home. It will only be an empty shell.

Everybody around me collects their hand luggage and moves along the aisle, but I linger. I'm the last to leave the plane. With one final, deep breath, I step out onto British soil. It felt as if I was trudging through a deep blanket of fresh snow, the weight of the loss making every step feel like a journey through an endless winter.

We left London as a family of four. And we returned as a unit of two.

DAY ONE

09.00, 18 June 2023

North Atlantic Ocean

96 hours

At 9.04 a.m. local time, the command to lower the platform crackles through a VHF – Very High Frequency – handset. In less than five minutes they disappear beneath the surface, leaving a square of four bobbing safety buoys as the lone remnants of their descent. I blow Suleman and Shahzada a kiss goodbye and the sun's golden reflection fills the empty space. Excitement with a pinch of envy unfurls in my stomach, knowing they're about to see the most famous shipwreck in the world. It should have been me, a husband-and-wife experience, but my son was desperate to go with his father. How could I refuse?

Communication with the submersible is only possible by text message. So far so good. *Titan* commences its descent – comms and tracking as expected – and I bet Shahzada is fully awake now, moving ever closer to his longed-for encounter with the *Titanic*.

'Sweetojaan.' Earlier that morning I'd leaned over from the top bunk to look down at my sleeping husband. 'It's four-thirty. We have the briefing in an hour.'

A sleepy groan served as his response, and I shook my head.

'Jaan.' I sighed and snoozed my alarm. I might as well sleep a few more minutes myself. At 5 a.m. I tried again and this time he responded with his usual, 'Five more minutes.' He was not a morning person.

I rubbed my eyes, sat up and bumped my head on the ceiling. 'Bloody bunk bed.' We were here for an adventure, not for luxury accommodation.

'Chippo?' Shahzada's voice was heavy with sleep, using my nickname too. 'What's wrong?'

'Nothing.' I rubbed the top of my head, turned over and began to slide backwards like a caterpillar to the end of the bed. The metal ladder was attached to the bunk with two sharp, pointy brackets. They dug into my thigh and I cried out.

'Chippo? What's wrong? What are you doing?' At least he sounded awake now.

'I'm trying to get down from this damn bunk bed.' I crawled back up and pressed my fingers against my bruised skin. 'It bloody hurts.'

I wanted to scream but he was the one going for the dive, so I reasoned he deserved maximum rest. Sliding backwards again, without banging my head this time, I swung my leg over the frame and wiggled it to the top step of the ladder. Success! I was soon brushing my fingers over Shahzada's cheeks and nose, gently waking him. His long dark lashes fluttered open, and he blinked at me like a cat.

'Jaan, it's time,' I said, 'the briefing is in fifteen minutes.'

He nodded, and I kissed him. I felt his smile beneath my lips, and as I broke the kiss he snaked his arm round my waist and slapped my behind. Typical. I shook my head and got his official boiler suit and base layers out of the suit cover, handing them to him. Around our unpacked bags we got ready quietly, then Suleman knocked on the door. He was dressed and ready to go up. He pecked me on the cheek, then pushed past me.

'Father, let's go.'

'Almost done,' Shahzada said, and I left the two of them alone and went to check on Alina.

We got lost multiple times through the maze of narrow corridors on our way up to the former helicopter hangar, where the final briefing before the dive was held. Kyle Bingham, OceanGate's mission leader who'd be staying aboard *Polar Prince*, the vessel we were on now, went through the attendance list, calling out *Titan*'s crew for the day, who could also be identified by their matching overalls, branded with the OceanGate logo.

'*Titan* Pilot – Stockton.'

Stockton Rush raised his hand. Confident, American, the CEO of OceanGate and the brains behind the *Titan*, he was a fit-looking man with greying hair and a cocky smile.

'Co-pilot – PH.'

'Here.'

Paul-Henri Nargeolet, known as PH and also referred to as 'Mr Titanic', announced his presence with a nod. He was a seventy-seven-year-old veteran of thirty-seven successful dives on the wreck. There was hardly a more qualified expert alive than him.

Shahzada and I exchanged a glance, admiration glowing in his eyes. As part of our interest in the *Titanic*, in 2012 we'd visited the centenary exhibition when it came to Singapore, where we were living at the time. The exhibition featured nearly three hundred genuine artefacts from the wreck, many of them salvaged by PH himself.

On the roll, Kyle called the next category, 'mission specialist'.

This terminology was borrowed from NASA, and given to the tourists who paid for the dive to see the *Titanic*.

'Hamish.'

Hamish Harding, a British businessman in his fifties, an experienced adventurer and a member of the Explorer's Club, raised his hand and smiled at my husband. Those two had had a great chat last night, according to Shahzada.

‘Shahzada.’

My husband affirmed his presence with a giddy smile.

‘Suleman.’

He blushed in his awkward self-conscious teenage way when too many eyes were on him. His sister nudged him, and he nodded at the others. Kyle then quickly moved on to the checklist of chores that needed to be completed: Zodiac inflatables ready, gear intact, divers prepared, and within half an hour the briefing was done.

The mission specialists were expected to join the pilot and co-pilot in the media room, to be weighed by the team, and when I joined them there was plenty of banter and laughter. The easy energy was delightful to witness. The five men teased each other about their numbers on the scales before the weights were noted down, including waterproof backpacks. The next stop for the mission specialists was a container on the outer deck to collect their hard hats, swim vests, orange waterproof safety jackets and waterproof trousers.

‘I’m sweating like a pig,’ Shahzada complained good-naturedly, as the four of us, along with Hamish, made our way to the stern of the ship. Waiting to be called, we watched the activity over on the platform – Suleman stood with his sister further away, while Shahzada and Hamish huddled together between some thick ropes. I leaned back against a railing, facing them. We passed the time by discussing different modes of transport and their pros and cons.

‘I’d never go on a helicopter,’ Hamish said, and when I asked him why not he gave me a look reminiscent of my teenagers when the answer was obvious. I couldn’t help but smile.

‘Because they’re not safe,’ Hamish explained. ‘I lost quite a few of my acquaintances in helicopter crashes and –’

My stomach churned and I stopped listening. I didn’t want to talk about crashes and accidents, so I turned and watched the team on the platform preparing *Titan*. The divers were nowhere to be seen, likely already underwater, performing their given tasks.

Laughter from behind me made me turn back. Hamish and Shahzada, bonded by their love for adventure and life, were sharing stories inspired by this extraordinary experience. Hamish had been down to the Mariana Trench, and when Suleman asked him how that was his eyes lit up as he recounted his thirteen-hour dive, without toilet facilities, and the specialised training he received.

Suleman remained quiet and contemplative. Concerned, I asked him if he was OK.

'I'm fine, just can't believe we're going to do this.' He looked over my shoulder towards *Titan*.

'It is pretty crazy, isn't it?' I said.

'Hmm.'

I snuggled up to him and leaned my head on his shoulder, always amazed at how tall he'd grown, the baby I once carried around so easily, now half a head taller than me, and, in many ways, wiser too. We always thought of him as an old soul, born to teach us about life rather than the other way around. He was going to be a wonderful man one day, but for now, he was still my baby. 'You're in a contemplative mood right now,' I noticed. But we got interrupted by somebody calling out for the mission specialists.

We made our way to the stairs. We hugged one final time before Shahzada and Suleman descended to the lower deck. Alina and I stayed where we were, and watched them board the *Zodiac*.

Suleman embarked first, with the confidence and agility you expect from a young adult. Shahzada took a little longer, probably making jokes about his clumsiness – judging by the laughter of the other passengers.

Settled in the *Zodiac*, my boys held on to the safety ropes and looked up to us. Shahzada's eyes met mine, and he beamed from ear to ear, his face radiating happiness and excitement. Suleman waved and offered a brief smile before focusing on the person next to him, listening to instructions.

The engine of the Zodiac roared to life, mixing with the slapping waves and shouts of the crew. I pulled out my phone, took my very last pictures of them and followed them along the port side of our vessel. I stood at the stern, unable to go further, and watched them reach the *Titan's* platform.

'This is going to take a while,' somebody behind me commented, drawing my attention.

'What is?' I asked.

'Them going down. It's gonna take at least an hour till they change their clothes, climb into the submersible and are sealed in.' The mission's photographer, M, joined me.

I nodded, bringing my gaze back to my loved ones.

A little over an hour later, the crew closed the lid and sealed them in.

Little did I know that they would never surface again, becoming the latest victims of the *Titanic* 111 years after it sank.

I watched them embark on their journey together – their last journey – never suspecting that everything from now on would be defined as either 'before' or 'after'.