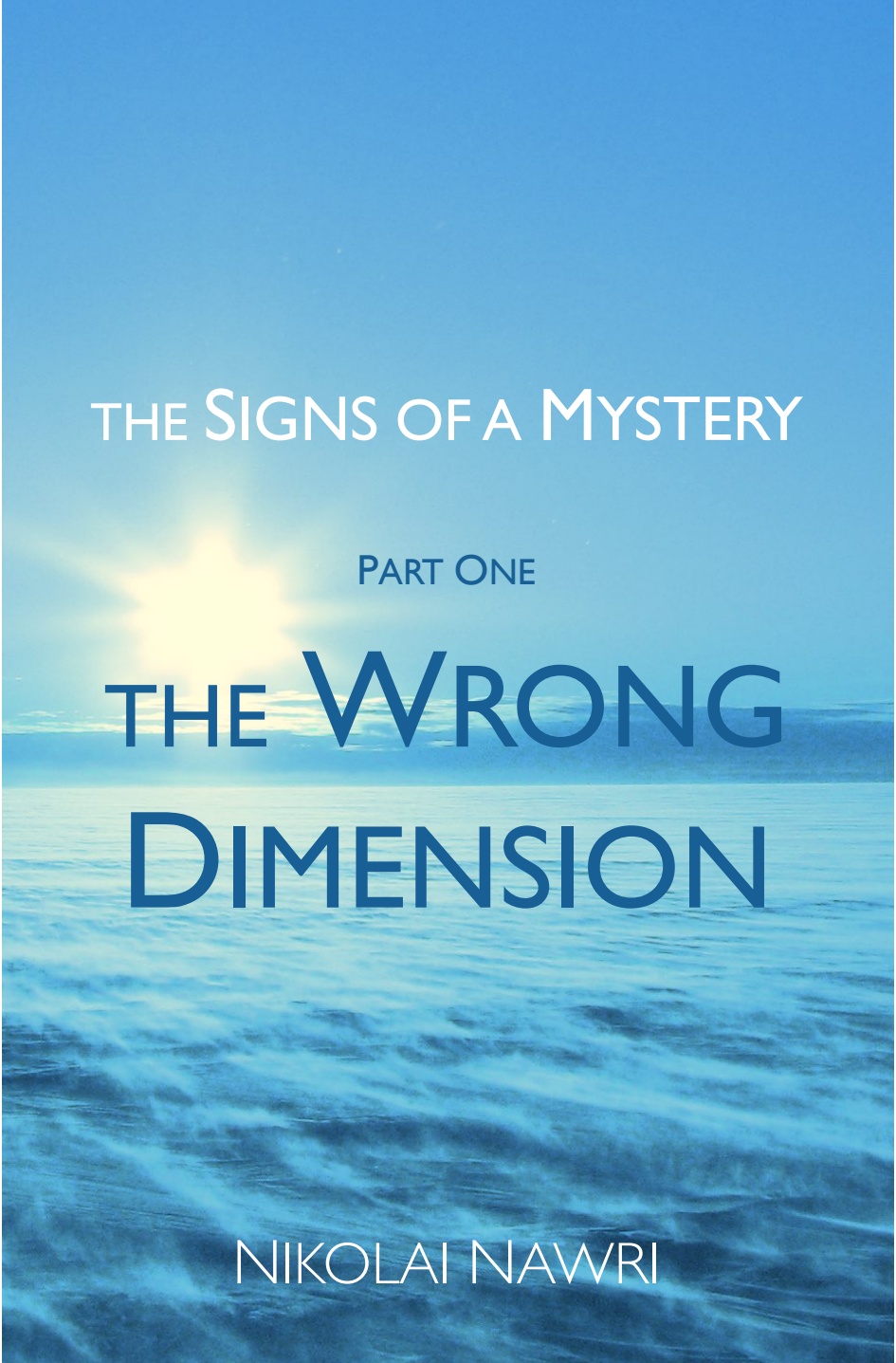




THE SIGNS OF A MYSTERY

PART ONE

THE WRONG DIMENSION

NIKOLAI NAWRI

The Signs of a Mystery

PART ONE

THE WRONG DIMENSION

by

Nikolai Nawri

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Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer
The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,
Or to take arms against a sea of troubles
And, by opposing, end them.

– William Shakespeare in *Hamlet*, Act 3 Scene 1

PROLOGUE

The nighttime sky was not dark anymore. Following hours of total blackout, the criss-crossing beams of bright searchlights were now wiping away the stars, occasionally catching a low cloud, or reflecting off the silver barrage balloons that swayed ghostlike over the vague silhouette of the city.

Above the wailing of the air raid sirens, the unnerving steady drone could be heard of the first bombers, swarming like invisible birds of prey, with more probably already crossing the Channel. Perhaps they would pass by high above, bringing terror, death, and destruction to cities farther north, and London would be spared. Or, perhaps, the bombing would return. Then, as on the terrible night of their arrival, the great city would bleed again, the orange and red blaze of burning homes gushing up into the sky.

Already, the devastation was horrific, with few buildings left undamaged and most roofs gone. Streams of greenish white dust, deposited by the explosives that had rained down onto them two nights ago, were blowing along the streets like poisonous snow, swirling around street corners and through ruined walls.

Elisabeth knew it was risky staying up there in the attic room, directly beneath the rafters. But with so many homes destroyed, living space had become limited in the East End, even with half the population either evacuated or dead. And so, the top floors in the remaining buildings, normally abandoned, provided the last

places to stay for someone who was not only hiding from the Germans, but also from the English.

She looked over to the old bed where her daughter slept, still clasping her favourite doll – the one toy she had been able to take along on their desperate flight. What Lena needed now more than anything else was rest. During the afternoon, her cough from the previous nights had started again, and worse than ever before.

It had taken an hour until, out of sheer exhaustion from coughing and crying over the disappearance of her friend, the little girl had finally fallen asleep. Now, Elisabeth could not get herself to wake her up again, not until the first bombs fell within sight of her elevated vantage point. Then, she would have no choice. They would have to go back to the nearest shelter – Bethnal Green. She remembered that name and, if necessary, she would find it again, even alone.

They would hurry along the deserted streets, forced to climb over piles of rubble from collapsed buildings in some places, carefully avoiding large craters in others. Where a bomb had opened the pavement and broken through into the sewers, the stench steaming up into the crisp winter air would be sickening. They would make their way, as fast as they could, towards the beam of the searchlight near the entrance to the unfinished underground station; down the slippery steps of the staircase, dimly lit at the top by a single lightbulb; down the unmoving escalators, and eventually onto the overcrowded platform.

They would then have to find some space among the hundreds of people, either sitting or lying on thin mattresses, blankets, or

simply on their coats; drinking tea from thermos flasks, or having a simple dinner of sandwiches and chocolate; chatting quietly, or playing a game of cards; then desperately trying to get some sleep, to recover the strength necessary to deal with the harsh reality above ground – just waiting for the relief of hearing the steady tone of the “all clear” signal at dawn.

But sunrise was still hours away, and she knew that the German bombers were not the sole danger for them in this big city. Far riskier perhaps was the exposure in these busy public shelters where, after months of persistent bombings, sharing not only the same confined space, but also the same plight and the same hatred towards a common enemy, a tightly knit watchful community had formed – a community in which, every evening, people queued for hours to get their usual spot on the platform. These new underground neighbours had come to know each other intimately, and the arrival of strangers would not go unnoticed for long, especially if they sounded as German as she did.

During the many endless nights, information passed freely: news about fatalities among shared acquaintances, about homes that had recently been destroyed, about events in other parts of the country, or about the fortunes of war on the Continent. Enquiries were made about missing people. Rumours were circulated about secret ammunition factories and government offices, hidden away in the unused railway tunnels. In such an environment, how easily would news spread about the arrival of two German women with their young daughters? How long could they rely on people’s assumption that they had to be Jewish refugees?

And Lena ... The child worried her more than anything. In the already weakened state she was in, the danger of falling seriously ill in the poorly ventilated shelter was too great. There were too many sick people assembled in too little space, with too little clean air between them. What if Lena caught pneumonia or tuberculosis? What if she had already been infected? What options would they have then, in their present situation, to get proper medical treatment? On their first night in the shelter, Lena had attracted far too much attention with her coughing, and not only compassion, but also indignation and angry remarks from people who were afraid of the spread of infectious diseases.

The coughing had begun in the rowing boat, during the final stage of crossing the Channel, just as they had been approaching the dark Essex coast, and complete silence had been essential. Then already, Lena's distress had provoked nervous complaints from some of the other refugees. They had remonstrated with her, telling her to be quiet. And it was impossible for the poor girl to understand why everyone was always angry with her when she felt so miserable.

Threatened from above as well as underground, Elisabeth knew that, no matter what she did, hiding from one danger would unavoidably expose her to another. Their survival would therefore depend on balancing the two risks. And with Lena's health deteriorating rapidly, she was determined not to expose her daughter to the discomfort and resentment in the underground tunnels, until it became an absolute necessity.

Ingrid had disagreed, the previous evening. She had insisted that the public shelter was still the safest place for them; that go-

ing there, once the bombing had begun, would be too late and too dangerous in itself. But Ingrid did not have to worry about her daughter. Rosemarie was much stronger than Lena. They had argued vehemently about whether to go or not, until the sirens had started, and Ingrid had decided to leave together with their English friends. The two girls had desperately clung to each other, as if they had feared they might never see each other again, until, in the end, they had to be separated by force.

At that moment, Ingrid's decision had seemed to be the sensible one. But then, the following morning, she and Rosemarie had not returned. In the large crowd down on the platform, they had become separated from the others, and no one had seen them since. No bombings had occurred over London that night, and there had been no reported fatalities. Then, what had happened to them? Had they been arrested? Or had the suspicion among the underground crowd already turned to violence? In either case, Elisabeth had no way of finding out. Getting the police involved was only going to get her and Lena arrested and interned – or worse, deported back to Germany.

All day she had waited for Ingrid's return, increasingly desperate towards the evening. Finally, she could wait no longer. Their friends had left for Euston Station as planned, and Elisabeth had been compelled to go with them. This was their chance to get out of London, possibly the only chance they would ever get. It had been difficult enough for their supporters to obtain for them these precious tickets for the night train to Manchester. And now her resources were almost exhausted.

With both their luggage, in the blacked-out and smoke-filled

hall of the railway station, Elisabeth had waited in vain for her friend, still hoping against hope that Ingrid would turn up at the last moment. The large clock had counted down the minutes, seemingly at a faster and faster rate, as the time for their departure had approached. The ominous N°13 on the platform sign had been illuminated by dim blue light while, underneath it on the crowded platform, people had moved about in near darkness.

More and more passengers had boarded the train in an orderly fashion and vanished behind the covered-up windows, visibly relieved to be able to get away from the war-torn capital. Among them, eventually, had also been her devoted friends who had helped her so much. Reluctantly, they had agreed to depart without her, leaving her behind on her own, alone in the largest city in Europe, in a country whose language she barely spoke.

All this because, standing in the busy station, surrounded by uncertainties and risks, Elisabeth had come to a decision. Somewhere out there, among the millions of strangers, had to be two people she knew and loved. And she was not going to abandon them.

Shortly before midnight, the platform had emptied. The last goods and newspapers had been loaded, the doors had been closed, and the guard had given the signal for departure. Briefly, his green lantern had flashed in the dark, accompanied by a shrill whistle. Then, with only a few minutes delay, the long train had pulled out of the station, away from the vulnerable south coast and the crumbling metropolis.

Now, Elisabeth was back in their small attic room, and still Ingrid had not returned. She knew then that something had gone

terribly wrong. Starting tomorrow, regardless of the dangers, she would have to go looking for her friend – and she did not have a lot of time. The winter had just begun, and they were already low on heating material. When the last lump of coal and the last piece of wood had been used up, the cold and lack of proper food and medicine would make matters even worse for Lena. Her only option was to find Ingrid quickly, so that they could leave London together and re-join their friends in Prestwich.

Elisabeth glanced at her watch, one of her few remaining valuables, faithfully ticking away the seconds, those fleeting markers of a restless time. About twenty minutes past two, on 22nd December 1940 – only three days to go until Christmas. The second Christmas since the beginning of the war, and the fighting went on, relentlessly.

Looking out over the ruined buildings, she wondered what would be left of the world when the fighting had ceased. If the devastation that could be seen from her window was not enough to defeat this people, they would never surrender. Surrounded by their dead, the spirit of the survivors appeared unbroken, and the traumatic events only increased their determination to carry on. How much more death and destruction would it take on both sides to bring this manmade catastrophe to an end?

And Lena – if they made it through – how old would she be when the war was finally over? How much of all this would she remember?

Fifty years from now, Elisabeth wondered, who will be left alive? Will life continue to be dominated by chaos and violence? What kind of place will this world be then? Just a barren

wasteland, left behind by human strife? Or will a new generation emerge from the ashes, with more foresight and fewer prejudices?

Fifty years from now – if they made it through – Lena may have grown-up children of her own. What kind of problems will they be facing?

Fifty years from now ...

CHAPTER ONE

A PERFECTLY NORMAL ADVENTURE

All was white. The planet lay hidden underneath a bright blanket of clouds, resting peaceful and quiet. Only diffuse light broke through the intricate pattern of frost that had formed outside the window.

The twin engine aircraft was still gliding smoothly through the thin air, with a reassuring steady drone. Everything appeared to be normal, with no indication that it had been a disturbance in the real world – a sudden noise or some turbulence – that had brought her desperately needed sleep to an abrupt end.

No concrete memory of her dream remained, only a lingering shadow of confusion and fear that reached out from the other side of sleep, leaving her heart rate elevated and her breathing faster and more shallow than usual, together with a vague feeling of falling into an empty space.

It had to have been the same haunting dream again: being immersed in water – immersed but not suspended; sinking deeper all the time; betrayed by the natural element she knew and loved so well; being unsupported in a formerly familiar and apparently safe environment – an unconscious echo of reality.

Looking back over the latter part of the year, it certainly was true that her personal situation had changed dramatically. Just

when she had settled into a regular routine in the new city, when time was finally progressing without drawing too much attention to itself, an unexpected phone call during an otherwise unremarkable drizzly evening in late September had brought her a belated job offer. And before she knew it, she had found herself suspended in mid-air, moving inexorably towards a destination that only three months ago had seemed indefinitely out of reach.

Even in the world at large, 1990 had been a year of momentous developments; a year in which injustices had been defeated and borders broken down; when apartheid had been abolished and the Iron Curtain had begun to open; when Germany had been reunited, while the mighty Soviet Union was falling apart. Then, just as the Cold War was coming to an end, the fighting had started again in the Middle East.

Now she was being taken out of the ordinary run of time, into a dimension that was removed from the unfolding of world history. And with the realisation of the magnitude of that sudden transition came the doubts. It had been easy to apply for the research position on Antarctica when there had appeared to be no possibility of ever being accepted, when it had been unnecessary to consider the consequences of being separated from normal life for more than a year. But chance and unforeseen circumstances had called her bluff. And now she had to step up and prove herself.

Reclining again into the net seat at the rear of the transport aircraft, not quite ready yet to let go of the world she had left behind, her mind drifted back to the last few hours before her departure from England; back once more into Alison's car, on

their way to the RAF station in Brize Norton. There had been music playing on the radio, to lessen the pressure of finding anything new to say that did not involve the recently discovered murder. But then the news had started, and Alison had immediately turned off the radio. Immersed again in the silence that followed, Siobhán could feel, as intensely as she had then, Alison's fear of tragically losing another friend – not to human violence this time, but to the harsh forces of nature.

Reliving those last few hours, Siobhán was reminded of the lifelong unwavering friendship that Alison had given her. And in return for this dedication, right at the very moment when Alison had needed her more than ever before, she had abandoned her. In her recollection, Siobhán was taken back again to the car park by the military airbase, lifting her kitbag out of the boot of Alison's little hatchback, and promising, upon Alison's request, that she would come back alive. Then, she was forced once more to walk away from Alison towards the entrance of the security building. There, as she had done before, she looked back across the car park, which was drenched in the glow from the low afternoon sun, and saw Alison still standing by her car, looking after her. Powerless to change the remembered past, Siobhán had to turn away again and walk through the guarded entrance, to board the plane for Antarctica – leaving Alison behind, lost amidst the aftermath of a ruthless crime.

Suddenly, Siobhán became aware of Paul's voice faintly penetrating the droning of the engines, although his words were unintelligible. He had half turned in his co-pilot seat, peering through the opening from the cockpit and flashing the fingers of his right

hand – only five more minutes to Aurora.

Sure enough, the aircraft was already descending. The low clouds over the ocean had been left behind and, directly beneath them, the sharp white line of the leading edge of the ice shelf had emerged. It was bordered by the blue-green water of the Weddell Sea, which was dotted with a few icebergs that had split off from the sheer cliff and were now drifting among the scattered floes of broken-up sea ice. Stretched out in front, the plateau of permanent snow extended all the way to the distant horizon in the east.

This was it then. As the long journey came to an end, it was time to take a mental leap as well; to leave Britain behind, and to focus on what lay ahead; to move away from the usual daily routines and the customary last-minute Christmas bustle of the civilised world; far away from historic events and personal tragedies; far away from Satanic rituals, abductions, and murders – off into the cold sanity of Antarctica and a perfectly normal adventure.

As the ice shelf edge glided past, somewhere beneath them had to be the compound of the research base. But from the air, the few structures that remained above the snow were still lost in a limitless sea of white.

Then, the aircraft banked left, curving around towards the north, while continuing its steady descent. The irregular surface of the ice shelf became clearer, as the landing site came into view – the first sign of any human presence on the frozen continent.

As the aircraft circled ever lower over the ice shelf, the skiway was shown to be a patch of relatively smooth snow, marked by

red flags that strained in the wind, and surrounded by a rough pattern of pressure ridges and crevasses. A large sledge with several fuel drums was parked on one side, together with an old shipping container that had been converted into a basic shelter. Nearby, a lone figure, clad in a red and blue survival suit, was sitting sideways on a snowmobile, with a smaller empty sledge in tow.

The aircraft was being buffeted about as it turned into the wind for the final descent, rapidly approaching the improvised airfield now.

With engines roaring at full throttle, the skis made their first tentative contact with the snow, skidding over the remaining ripples on the groomed surface, before touching down onto the ice shelf. Then, as the marker flags rushed past, the engine noise decreased, and the see-sawing motion of the aircraft gradually weakened until, eventually, it ran out. The propellers juddered to a stop. The snow that had been stirred up during the landing settled again into its natural swirling motion. They had arrived.

Paul extricated himself from his seat, stretched, and stepped into the cabin. ‘Everything all right back there?’

‘So far, so good.’

He nodded, smiling. ‘I’ll open the cargo doors.’

Brendan followed from the cockpit, also a little drowsy from the long flight.

‘Thanks for the lift, Captain.’

‘Pleasure. And ... well, good luck out there.’ He glanced through the frosted windows, looking concerned. ‘It’ll be fine. Now in summer, you’re only a few flying hours away from Halo.

So, if there is anything, any kind of trouble, we'll get you out.'

But his words were more reassuring than his facial expression. They all knew that the main base, on the other side of the Weddell Sea, was a long way away, especially if the weather turned bad.

Paul swung open the cargo doors. A blast of ice crystals entered the cabin. 'This is you, Siobhán, last stop. I could attach the stepladder, but it almost isn't worth it. It's not far down.'

'That's all right. I believe I can manage.'

'Just take your rucksack for now. We'll hand down your kit bag with the rest of the cargo.'

Siobhán stepped into the open door, and there it was – Antarctica, empty and white. Even the atmosphere seemed to consist of ice, pressing in on her hard and cold. A trace of exhaust fumes still hung around the aircraft, but it dissipated quickly into the turbulent air. Beyond that was the pristine smell of permanent snow, with the frozen surface only a few feet below. Just one small step for a woman – or jump, rather.

With a reassuring crunch, her boots left distinct marks in the dry snow, but only temporarily. A few moments later, her footprints were already being eroded away. Human existence on that continent was still young and insecure. They were still desperately trying to cling to its edges, while the ceaseless wind and the motion of the ice pushed them back out to sea, telling them in no uncertain terms that they were not meant to be there.

And yet, against all odds, she was. After dreaming without hope of ever being given a chance, after the seemingly pointless effort of applying for a position for which she had been disqual-

ified even before she had been born, after the inevitable initial rejection – there she was.

Then, she heard the man from the base walking towards her. He did not slow down as he approached her and, in passing, only briefly placed his hand on her shoulder. Together with a quick nod, that was his sole recognition of her presence. Her own excitement notwithstanding, in the larger scheme of things, her arrival clearly was not the main priority at the moment.

The man climbed up into the cabin, greeted Paul by name, and enquired about the flight. Together, they disappeared into the cockpit, leaving Siobhán alone to take in the scenery, to the extent that it was visible.

A steady stream of snow emerged from the distant interior of the vast continent, having travelled perhaps for days across a world that was still largely unknown. Through this veil of suspended crystals, the low sunlight scattered as if emanating from it, while the sun moved along its southern arc, heading towards evening and a night without sunset.

What a place . . . Who would have thought that a wind-blown desolation could be so beautiful – independent and pure, unpoluted by human civilisation and strife, without any historical or social baggage, without anything to keep humans apart, to separate them into different camps; a place where all humans were newcomers, all were strangers.

And it was definitely going to be a white Christmas this year.
‘Siobhán!’

The man from the base had appeared again in the open cargo door and jumped down. He smiled as he approached. *‘Is mise*

Iain. Ceud mìle fàilte.'

'Uhh ... *tapadh leat*. But beyond that, I'm sorry to say my Gaelic is rather limited.'

Iain laughed. 'That's all right. It's just that with your first name, and since you live in Scotland, I thought I'd give it a go. But you're very welcome anyway.'

He motioned towards the aircraft. 'Sorry about the wait. We had to clarify first whether they would be able to fly back today. Brendan has been on the radio with the control tower at Halo, and they were saying that in a few hours the airport will be down. The weather at their end has already turned pretty nasty, and it's heading our way. I guess you saw the clouds from the air. They have therefore no choice but to stay here for the night, and quite possibly longer. The good news is that there is no need for refuelling now, which is just as well. Avtur fumes have a nasty habit of getting into your gloves and sucking the last bit of heat out of your hands.'

Paul called over from the cargo door, holding a stack of sealed plastic containers.

With a quick gesture of excuse, Iain walked back to the aircraft, to receive them. He checked the labels and nodded. 'Medical supplies. I need to get them inside before they freeze. They were the main reason for sending the plane over today – and the airmail, of course.'

He passed the containers on to Siobhán and took hold of the large postbag that Paul lowered down from the cabin.

With obvious excitement, he carried it back towards his snowmobile. 'This is the most precious cargo we get down here, es-

pecially now after the long winter months when we had nothing coming in from the outside world at all. And with the weather closing in once more, it looks like it got here just in time for the holidays.’

He began securing the bag on the sledge. ‘Brendan said he was going to contact Aurora. They will probably send two of the lads to help secure the aircraft and then take the pilots back to the base. However, I would suggest you come with me now.’

‘Sounds good. But where is it?’

‘Aurora?’ Iain squinted into the icy haze, glistening underneath the retreating sun. ‘You can’t see it from here today. The blowing snow is too intense. Although it’s only about two miles from here – down this way.’ He pointed towards the south. ‘The old skiway was a little closer to the base. But it was destroyed during the winter when a crevasse opened right across it. These ice shelves are in constant motion, not only pushing out to sea, but also heaving up and down with the tides. Cracks and pressure ridges appear and disappear all the time, and we must constantly be on the lookout for a sufficiently smooth surface that is long enough for the Twin Otter to land on. At the moment, this here is the closest we can find.’

‘Anyhow ...’ He took back the plastic containers, to fasten them next to the postbag. ‘I really need to get these drugs out of the cold. Just let me strap your rucksack here onto the sledge, and then we can get the rest of your stuff.’

By then, the kit bag had also been unloaded. Sitting there in the snow, beneath the aircraft, it looked rather more intimidating than it had back in Cambridge. Tired as Siobhán was, it felt as if

it had got a lot heavier too. It would be a struggle to get it off the ground and carry it over to the snowmobile. But she could not afford to show any weakness now, to arrive on Antarctica as the girl who was unable even to carry her own luggage.

Iain's crunching footsteps approached from behind. He stopped discretely off to one side, hovering about uncertainly. But he could not get himself to ignore Siobhán's second failed attempt at shouldering the unwieldy bag. 'Not meaning to be patronising or anything, but if you need help with that ...'

'Actually, I do – cheers. It didn't seem quite so heavy when I packed it. But I'm absolutely knackered from the trip.'

'Sure, no worries. I know exactly what you mean.' He picked up the bag with a polite exaggeration of the effort required. 'Last year, I did not get much sleep either on the various flights here.'

'It would have been nice to go on the supply ship, but it left Hull only the day after I got formally accepted for the wintering position.'

'Yes, the *Steadfast* got here twelve days ago. It's still moored down in Creek 9. That's the big crack in the ice shelf edge that allows us to get down to the ocean. You'll see it once you start your research – although, given the weather conditions, that may not be for a while. Anyway, at least you managed to get here now.'

'As a last-minute replacement, judging by the way they rushed me through the basic training courses. It was quite a surprise when, one evening, I suddenly received a phone call from the Institute – especially after they had completely ignored my application the first time around. They didn't give me much in

terms of an explanation either.'

Iain occupied himself with loading the kit bag onto the sledge, looking uncomfortable, and chose not to respond.

'So, my predecessor had to go back to England then?'

'Kevin? Yes.' Iain shot her a sideways glance. 'But he's better now, last time I heard.'

'Better? Did he become sick? Or did something go wrong during scuba diving?'

'Oh, no, nothing of the sort.' Iain looked even more uncomfortable. 'No, diving went surprisingly well, considering it was the first year we had the marine science programme down here at Aurora.'

He displayed the same evasiveness concerning the previous biologist as there had been at headquarters in Cambridge. There was something decidedly odd about this, something to enquire about at a later point, but it would have to wait. With her bag secured, they were ready to leave.

Iain took two pairs of goggles that had been hanging from the handlebar of the snowmobile and shook off the accumulated snow. 'I brought you one of these. You'll need them, once we get going.'

He put on his own goggles and mounted the snowmobile. 'You should have enough space on the seat behind me. Just hold on to these grips in the back. The ride is going to be a bit bumpy, I'm afraid. With the wind we've had recently, the snow surface has become quite uneven. It's hard to tell in the glare of the sunlight, but over there you can see some of the sastrugi: this regular pattern of waves that look like they froze in the moment

of breaking. We try to maintain a groomed track between the base and here, but it's mostly a hopeless endeavour.'

Iain turned his attention towards the front. 'Right, here we go then. Pad my shoulder if you need to catch my attention. I won't hear you against the head wind and over the racket this thing is making.'

The instant he pulled the starter rope, the sound of the wind was pushed away by the engine noise. He gave a final wave to the two pilots, and they were off. The driving belt cut into the slippery surface. The heavily laden sledge lurched into motion, swerving after them. Then, gradually, it straightened itself out, as the snowmobile gathered speed, its runners gliding more smoothly over the rippled snow. And so, they raced into the uncertainty that lay ahead.

The route to the base was vaguely made visible by a pattern of tracks, which could not survive for long on a surface that was in constant flux. Along the right side, the occasional red marker flag still stood, having survived the persistent onslaught of the harsh elements. But many had seemingly vanished, having been either blown away or buried.

Without a warning, two snowmobiles burst out of the agitated whiteness in front of them, trailing eddies of snow, as they raced past towards the skiway. There was only a brief greeting from the drivers, both leaning low behind their windscreens, straining to make out the waiting aircraft. Then, as quickly as they had appeared, they were lost from sight again.

A localised yellow shine had developed directly ahead. It was strongest immediately above the surface, before it blended into

the diffuse glow across the horizon.

As Siobhán leaned over to one side for a better look ahead, Iain half turned towards her with a confirming nod. ‘Aurora.’

Gradually, two angular structures solidified inside the haze – raised platforms. One stood to the left of the dome of artificial light, with a simple container building at the top. The other towered behind the base, a little farther towards the south, supporting a giant satellite dish.

From closer up, the first indications of the buildings that had been buried beneath the snow became distinguishable, with various access towers, ventilation shafts, and antennas protruding from the surface. Amongst them stood the external fuel tank, and two red igloo-shaped mobile shelters with round windows, each sitting on its own sledge. Above the main access tower, a Union Jack rattled in the wind while, underneath it, a weathered sign, half buried in a snowbank, announced:

Aurora IV

British Institute for Polar Research

75°16'45"S, 24°56'39"W

The artificial light was now revealed to emanate primarily from a ramp leading down into the main part of the base, with a London Underground sign next to the entrance. Some dim light also emerged from the few windows of the raised container building. But without any visible human presence, and with the lifeless structures being swept over by a ghostly current of snow, the first impression of the compound was one of abandonment.

Iain slowed down as they approached the opening of the ramp.

Then, he let the snowmobile run down the steep slope, just fast enough to prevent the sledge from swinging around.

Down at the bottom, the tunnel widened into a long garage. The ground was hard-packed snow, but the walls and the ceiling were formed by arches of corrugated steel, with rows of fluorescent lights installed along both sides.

Iain brought the snowmobile to a stop and turned off the engine. A welcome silence settled, as even the natural sounds were left behind at the surface above.

Iain waited for Siobhán to dismount before getting off the snowmobile himself. He removed his goggles with a sigh of relief. ‘Home again.’

‘Yes ... Sorry, just to make sure I got that right earlier on, with the wind and all: did you say your name was Iain?’

He smiled and took off his gloves. ‘That’s me: Iain McDonnell, weatherman.’

‘Siobhán Dannreuther, marine biologist.’

He nodded and took her outstretched hand. ‘Welcome to Aurora, Siobhán. I guess they told you about this place, back home in Cambridge?’

‘To some extent. At least they did mention that, on Antarctica, I’d be living underground.’

‘Yes, that’s right. It’s basically like living inside a submarine that’s got stuck in a frozen ocean. We’re now under almost forty feet of snow. Each year, about four feet accumulate at the top. Simultaneously, with the heat we’re producing down here, the base melts itself down into the ice. There is therefore a fair amount of pressure building up from above. In addition, there is

the strain inside the ice shelf, as it flows out to sea. With all that, Aurora IV has pretty much reached the end of its lifecycle. For that reason, next summer, when the new team arrive, they will begin with the construction of the fifth generation of the base.

‘Otherwise ...’ He gestured back up the ramp. ‘You saw the Met Tower, which is where I spend my working hours – doing routine observations, launching the daily weather balloon, preparing forecasts, and such things. I hope you also admired our latest acquisition: the brand-new satellite dish. It was installed last summer, and it worked all right throughout the winter – with regular de-icing, of course. It’s available for personal communication in the evening, when the channel is linked to the public network. But it’s extremely expensive, as you can imagine, and only suitable for very special occasions.’

He began unloading the sledge. ‘Aurora is definitely getting old. Still, I would say it is reasonably comfortable down here, considering where we are. I mean, you get used to it, after a while. At least it’s warm, and you’re out of the wind. Outside, on the other hand, it’s a very different story. You’ll see, there are hand-lines leading from here to each of the outlying parts of the compound. When you’re moving about out there, you should never stray away from these ropes. Even on an apparently calm day, the wind can pick up at any moment when a wave of cold air comes sliding down from the elevated interior of the continent. And before you know it, you can find yourself in complete whiteout conditions for hours on end, or even days. When that happens, without any visual references, and with the snow spinning all around you, your orientation may be gone within

seconds, and so are your footprints. Then, since you won't be able to retrace your steps, chances are that you walk off into the wrong direction. In this way, people have frozen to death within only a few yards of their base.'

Iain fell silent and dedicated himself to unloading the snow-mobile.

The garage housed an assortment of tracked vehicles, all obviously well-respected and kept meticulously clean. Additionally, two football goals and two sets of rugby posts occupied one corner at the back, together with an old dog sledge and several pairs of wooden skies. Rather more optimistically, there was also a large parasol for the beach and several deck chairs.

Somewhat hidden among all the other vehicles, propped up on its sledge and still waiting for the long winter break to come to an end, stood the dive boat. The rubber tube now bore the Institute's logo, but the orange and grey colouring clearly revealed its venerable past as a lifeboat. Despite the dramatic action it would have seen before its retirement from the previous service, it looked well up to its new duties. The two powerful outboard engines were brand-new; and arching over them, the roll-bar glinted even in the low artificial light, with the radio antennas mounted at the top. A windlass had been installed at the bow, to be able to lower the rack with the scientific instruments into the water.

Iain noticed Siobhán's excitement about the boat. 'Yes, that's the one. But as I mentioned earlier, I suspect you'll have to wait until after the holidays, when the weather has settled a bit, and summer has fully started.'

‘Now, if you could take your rucksack and those boxes with the medical supplies – cheers. I’ll take your kit bag, and then I’ll come back for the post later.’

He pointed towards that side of the garage from which a steel door and a large sliding gate seemed to be leading into the main part of the base. ‘Basically, Aurora consists of two parallel tunnels, connected at this end by the garage, and in the middle by a crossway. In the North Tube, here on the right, are the workshops, one of the power generators, the laundry, the main storage, the surgery, a little gym, and your biology lab at the very end. The lab is a bit rudimentary and probably not what you’re used to at university back home. But you’ve got a decent microscope, as far as I can tell, a freezer, and what appears to be a refrigerated incubator – all emptied and cleaned. I was told that the previous results are stored in the computer, together with the copy of a draft report. Kevin didn’t get around to finishing it.

‘So, that’s work over there. But most life underground takes place here in the South Tube.’ Iain walked towards the door on the left and opened it. ‘This is the so-called Boot Room. It has the lockers for outdoor clothing. Yours is this one here – cleaned out as well, I hope.’

He sank onto a wooden bench along one side of the room and began taking his boots off. ‘Just put those boxes down somewhere, it’s warm enough in here. I’ll take them over to the surgery after I showed you to your room. And while your indoor shoes are still packed up – somewhere deep inside your bag, I imagine – you can leave your boots on for now.’

The state of the changing room stood in stark contrast to the

meticulous order and cleanliness in the garage. Instead of the crisp outside air, the strong locker room smell was only partially obscured by the volatile scent of some kind of fuel.

‘Diesel ... we use it in the power generators and for heating. Although the main storage is outside, the fumes are everywhere. But you’ll get used to it.’

Iain had noticed Siobhán’s involuntary reaction to the dense atmosphere in the poorly ventilated room and misinterpreted it.

‘My checklist says that I should report to the Base Commander upon arrival.’

‘John, yes – John Rowlands. He’s our BC and also the station doc. But he’s away at the moment, with one half of the lads. They are down by the ship, getting the last load of cargo, and having their dental check-ups on board. We’re not equipped for that here. Meanwhile, you can get yourself a good night’s rest, and then I’ll introduce you to the guv’nor tomorrow, when they have all come back; or when things have calmed down a bit, and everyone is on a regular schedule again. The first relief after the winter is always a busy time, when we have to travel back and forth between the base and the ice shelf edge, unload the supplies for an entire year, and then somehow find the space in here to store it all away – ideally before Christmas. But we got lucky this year. The sea ice wasn’t particularly thick, and so the *Steadfast* managed to get through to us about a week earlier than usual. Now, we’ve got a full supply of new books, magazines, films, plenty of fresh fruits and vegetables – real crunchy lettuce. Not that you would appreciate that yet, but you will, soon enough.’

Iain had finished changing his shoes and got up. ‘In any case,

now you're here, you can safely forget about your checklist. Cambridge HQ are a long way away.'

He opened the door leading out of the Boot Room and flipped a heavy-duty light switch. As a row of pale fluorescent lights flickered to life, another tunnel was gradually revealed, about the length of a competition swimming pool, and made of arched plywood panels. On the left, two-storey prefab building units were joint together into one row. A corridor with a bare wooden floor ran alongside it. About halfway down, a dim column of evening sunlight descended from a shaft in the ceiling, adding a little visual warmth to the austere environment.

There was no sign of life anywhere, and the only noise to be heard was the steady droning of a large engine inside the first of the building units.

'It's quiet in here.'

Iain nodded. 'Those who aren't down by the ship are recovering from their last shift and should still be sleeping – except, of course, the two we met on the way here – and Nigel, the other meteorologist. He's on duty right now, over in the tower.'

'Then I'm keeping you from your well-deserved rest?'

'Oh, no, not at all. All I had to do was to get up a little earlier for my night shift, which starts in about an hour. Nigel and I were exempt from unloading the ship. We're working twelve-hour shifts anyway throughout the year. Especially now in summer, with aircraft coming in again, we need to keep on top of the weather. Our skiway may not look like much, but it's quite important for refuelling and emergency landings. Normally, there is not too much traffic from other bases, but you never know.

About a week ago, the new German team passed through on their way to Helios. That's the nearest base from here, about five hundred miles to the northeast.'

Iain glanced at his watch. 'Right then, let me show you your new home for the next year or so. To begin with, as you can hear, this is the main power generator room and the snow melt. All our water is produced here – that is, as long as enough snow is being shovelled down the funnel from above, which is the main part of our daily duties, as you'll find out tomorrow. Needless to say, this is the heart of the whole operation. Without at least one of the generators running, the base is dead.'

At the next door, Iain contemplated for a moment whether to open it or not, but then decided against it. Instead, he vaguely gestured at it. 'This is our washroom and, you know, other facilities. It's unisex, I'm afraid. But if we work out a system ...'

'Iain, I was briefed about this, and I'm sure it'll be fine – don't worry. They already told me everything about water rationing and the half-a-minute showers. I'm therefore confident I'll manage, just like the rest of you.'

He seemed relieved. 'Good, I'm glad you've been forewarned. Then we can move on to more pleasant territory. Here, for example, we have the kitchen and pantry – very important, but pretty much out of bounds, except when you're on meal duty. And next to it ...' He opened the door and switched on the lights. '... is our dining room and lounge.'

The first half of the room was taken up by two tables. It was spotlessly clean but furnished plainly – reminiscent of a ship's

mess. An open side door led directly into the dark kitchen. Neat rows of framed sepia or black-and-white photographs from the heroic era of Antarctic exploration decorated the walls on both sides of the tables, all commemorating groups of men with haggard faces, mostly hidden behind bushy beards, and with a wild energy in their eyes, born of hardship and desperation.

The remaining half of the room was more disorganised and homely, with a worn-out but comfortable-looking set of dark leather sofas and armchairs, facing a television set that, due to a lack of reception, had to be connected to a video recorder. A row of bookshelves stood along one of the windowless walls, while a plastic Christmas tree, still unadorned, leant against another. In contrast with the dining room area, the lounge was decorated with a set of more recent photographs, showing a succession of wintering teams in increasingly less washed-out colours. The men there were generally younger than the early pioneers had been, and considerably better fed. The occasional beard or moustache was more a fashion statement of the past two decades, than an inevitable part of life on the edge. In the far corner of the room, a winding metal staircase ascended to the upper floor, with a baroque inscription on a shiny brass plate next to it.

‘Le Cercle 75?’

‘That’s our club, as we like to call it. It’s not much, but it’s got a fairly decent bar – keeping in mind that alcohol is strictly rationed down here. There are also two dartboards, a pool table, things like that. The name, by the way, has to do with our position here on the ...’

‘75th Parallel, yes, very clever. Are women allowed in there

at all?’

Iain smirked. ‘I think we may be able to make an exception for you.’

He led the way back out into the corridor and switched off the lights in the lounge. Closing the door behind him, he nodded down the remaining row of buildings. ‘Past the common rooms are the sleeping quarters. This is where everybody lives, door to door. Now, with you, we’re going to be sixteen again – the full contingent. Here, the first one, that’s the unit I’m sharing with Nigel. But, as I said, he’s out at the moment.’

A few paces on, Iain stopped at a wide door on the right side of the corridor. ‘Behind this is the crossway that leads over to the North Tube. In the middle of it is the main access tower, which takes you up to the surface. I can show you all that tomorrow.

‘Meanwhile, this is where Chris lives – Christopher Heywood. He’s the marine assistant and your diving partner. He’s down by the ship tonight. But you’ll meet him latest at the Christmas party. He’s sharing a room with Darren Walsh, our field assistant and boatman. He’s the one who’ll get you safely out to the diving site and back.

‘This here is John’s compartment. He’s got one floor to himself – the benefits of responsibility. The one above is used by visiting scientists in summer, or by occasional guests, such as the two pilots, who will arrive later. But mostly, John lives alone.’

Iain continued to the next door. ‘In here, we have the administration office on the ground floor, and the Comms Room above. That’s where you find the shortwave radio and the satellite phone. For about half the year – when it’s too cold and too

dark for flying, and the sea ice gets too thick for the ship to break – this is our only connection to the rest of the world.’

He pointed to the very end of the tunnel. ‘There, through that steel door is the emergency exit tower – not that you’re likely to need it. Things must get pretty bad down here before it’s safer to be outside.

‘And so, finally ...’ He opened the door to the last building unit and switched on the lights. ‘... this is your home.’

The ground floor was filled almost entirely with boxes, stacked up to just below the ceiling. Iain led the way along a maze of narrow paths that wound between them. ‘All this stuff ... It’s a bit of a nuisance down here, to be honest. Originally, the storage room was meant to be at the top. But over the years, the base accumulated more and more material that no one really needed anymore, but no one was willing to throw out either – as in the attic of an ordinary family home, I suppose – until it got too heavy to be kept on the upper floor, and they had to bring it back down. Since then, people continued chucking things in here, without thinking about how to arrange them systematically. And it got worse when, a year ago, we had to empty out one of the storage rooms, over in the other tunnel, to make space for the biology lab. You just have to try not to get lost and – here we are.’

They had arrived in the corner farthest from the door where, as in the lounge, a winding staircase led to the floor above.

Iain shouldered the kit bag and began climbing. ‘You’ll be staying in what we used to call the Con Room – as in convalescence. It was reserved for crew members who are not injured or ill enough to be cared for in the surgery, but are still better off

being away for a little while from the cramped lifestyle of the rest of the base. It was also used by visitors during the summer months, but we'll find space for them in the other quarters. For now, it's all yours.'

The landing at the top of the staircase opened into a room that, despite the lack of windows, turned out to be more comfortable than Siobhán had expected. About twice as wide as it was deep, it had evidently been intended to house two people, each half furnished with a single bed, a wardrobe, a desk, and a small bookshelf. A larger shelving unit that, judging by the indentations in the carpet, had been dividing the two halves of the room, was now pushed against the wall.

The bed on the right was covered by a coarse rug. On the other lay a fluffy duvet and pillow, together with a pile of folded covers, from which originated the inviting smell of freshly laundered linen. But the air inside the low room was over-heated and dry.

Iain indicated a grid in the ceiling. 'Normally, the heating is done through the ventilation system. There is therefore more or less the same temperature throughout the whole base, which is kept quite low to reduce the melting. Since I wasn't sure how warm you wanted it, I set up this space heater here, to give you time to acclimatise. But I realise now that it's a bit on the warm side. So, if you ...'

'It's perfect, Iain. Cheers.'

He nodded and deposited the bag next to the wardrobe. 'Right then, I'll let you settle in. Have a good first night on Antarctica and ... well, I'll see you again after my shift tomorrow morning.'

After Iain's footsteps had receded on the floor below, and the door had closed behind him – with the droning of the power generator lost at the other end of the tunnel, and the space heater turned off – silence descended over the room.

But only for a moment. Then, the breathy sound of the ventilation system became noticeable; and beyond it, faintly, the creaking of the outer shell that protected the frail manmade structure against the restless motion of the massive ice shelf that surrounded it – the exiled part of an ancient ocean that, having been condemned to spend millennia on land, was now coming towards the end of its long journey back home, unaware of the insignificant foreign object that had embedded itself in its skin.

CHAPTER TWO

AURORA IV

‘I’m bored, Ally, bored out of my mind. I’ve been here for almost three weeks, and I still haven’t had the opportunity to get going with my research. Ever since I came, the weather has been absolutely dreadful. I’ve never experienced anything like it. The sky is entirely clear, the sun is shining around the clock, and yet there is this never-ending strong wind, which picks up the dry snow from the surface and creates an impenetrable cloud that completely covers the base. When you’re inside that, you can’t see anything, you can’t breathe, you can’t walk, and the constant howling drives you utterly insane within minutes. Meanwhile, the sea ice is breaking up into smaller and smaller fragments that get thrown about by the waves – not a healthy environment to go scuba diving in, or to drive a small boat through. I’ve therefore been mostly cooped up inside. The first week was quite exciting, right through the holidays. There was always something new to discover, and generally lots to do: getting to know everyone, becoming familiar with the different parts of the base and the various tasks of the daily routine. But now ...’

‘Sorry to hear that, Shivy – to the extent that I can hear you. I’m afraid the connection is rather poor at this end. Then again, considering how far away you are ... You should be happy now. After all, that’s exactly what you always wanted, isn’t it, to travel to the end of the world, to live life at the extremes? But don’t

get me wrong, I'm happy for you, even if you aren't. To be able to get away from here and leave everything behind for a while – I wish I could, with everything going on at the moment. And I do appreciate you responding to my telex. They told me how horrendously expensive this is, and I'll pay you back. I just needed someone to talk to, and there isn't anyone else who's particularly close – except Gran, of course, but it's different with her. She's been very supportive, but I can't continue to burden her with things like that. I know that, ultimately, I'll have to find a way to cope with it myself. The problem is, I haven't been myself since the murder. I've never fallen to pieces like that before. And to make matters worse, now with you down there in this dangerous place ...'

'Ally, honestly, you don't need to trouble yourself over me. What I said about the weather, it isn't so bad, really, just a little annoying. If you follow some basic rules, Antarctica is perfectly safe these days. And without any violent crimes, life down here may well be safer than in the UK.'

'But you'll be prepared, won't you, when you finally get the chance to go diving, after all this sitting around and waiting? I mean, you know what you're doing?'

'Sure, Ally. No one here is willing to take any chances with unnecessary risks – which is exactly why we continue to be stuck inside. Admittedly, the environment around the base is pretty intimidating. But now in summer, the air and water temperatures aren't a lot colder than during the winter in northern Scotland, where I've been diving for years. And the work isn't particularly difficult either – taking water and ice samples at different

depths down to about a hundred feet. The main work happens afterwards, when I have to analyse all that stuff in the lab.’

‘And I guess there aren’t any dangerous animals down there – no sharks or polar bears, or anything?’

‘There are ... no, no sharks or polar bears. But, Ally, why are you so concerned about me all of a sudden? We’ve chatted before about what I was going to do on Antarctica.’

‘I know, and I’m not seriously worried. I’m probably just trying to distract myself from my own problems by worrying about you.’

‘So, Kathleen ...’

‘Yes, I can’t get over it. It’s been three weeks – as you said – and every time more details are being released by the police about the manner in which she was killed, it gets worse. With all that, I can’t stop thinking how easily it could have been you coming home to her flat that evening. If Kathy had been away for only a week longer, you’d still have been living in her flat, and it would have been you who got attacked and eventually murdered in that terrible fashion. It’s silly to pretend otherwise. Kathy wasn’t a specific target, that much is certain now. Nobody who knew her considers for one moment that she was involved with this Satanic cult, not even the police. But they couldn’t find any other motive that would explain her murder, least of all under those extreme circumstances.’

‘Her work placement in the Cabinet Office – didn’t that turn up anything?’

‘There was nothing about that in the news, but I doubt it. She was there for less than two months. During that short period,

she wouldn't have got anywhere near any sensitive information. Even if she had wanted to, she wouldn't have had the opportunity to get mixed up in some kind of important affair. And, as a general rule, if you want to extract information from someone working in government or for the diplomatic service, there are any number of things you can do: you can break into their office, you can bug their phone, you can steal their briefcase, you can attempt to bribe or blackmail them; but you don't stage a ritualistic killing, which is bound to attract everyone's attention for weeks. I therefore don't think that Kathy's brief affiliation with the Cabinet Office is relevant for anything that happened to her, and we probably have to accept that we'll never find out exactly why she was abducted. Chances are, it genuinely was just bad luck – the wrong place, at the wrong time. I suspect the perpetrators were lurking about outside her block of flats one evening, when they saw her come home. They liked the look of her but couldn't assault her out in the open. So, they went in after her. That way, they found out which flat was hers. From the name plate, they would have known that she was living there on her own. And the simple fact is that if you had still been staying there, instead with me, it would have been you they had seen coming home that evening.'

'But judging by the photographs in Kathleen's flat, I don't look like her at all.'

'You're young and female, that's all that matters to these bastards.' Alison broke off with a quivering sigh.

Siobhán had to admit that her friend was right. There was no point denying that she had had a narrow escape – something

that, in the excitement before her departure to Antarctica, she had failed to fully appreciate.

Alison sighed again. 'At least, the coroner released her body now, so that she could be buried. And you know, Shivy, I was driving back from Kathy's funeral – that was last Saturday, down in Bournemouth, where she grew up. The occasion was depressing enough, meeting her family and other friends. But it was made worse by the fact that I appear to be the last person who saw Kathy before she was abducted. I therefore had to tell everyone how happy she had been, and to reassure them that there was no chance whatsoever that she might have got involved with any kind of shady activity, such as strange rituals or illegal drugs. On top of that, throughout the whole weekend, there was another bad storm down by the coast – no snow this time, but the wind was as bad as on the day we moved your stuff from Kathy's flat into mine, remember?

'Anyway, I was driving back to Cambridge late that evening. The traffic was slow because of the storm, and I had far too much time to think, when suddenly it hit me: the reason why I'm so devastated about Kathy isn't the fact that we'd been particularly close friends. The truth is I didn't actually know her all that well. I'd only met her last summer during the weekly aerobics classes. We got on fine on a casual level, and we chatted occasionally over a cup of coffee somewhere, since she'd just completed the same programme in International Relations at King's as I had. She was interested in the internship at the embassy in Dublin that I'd done after graduating. And when you were selected for the wintering position on Antarctica, I told her you'd be tem-

porarily coming back to Cambridge for your training, and that you'd be bringing back all your stuff from Aberdeen, to store it partly in my flat, and partly at your gran's. I mentioned how I was looking forward to having you back for a while, hoping my little flat wouldn't get too crowded with two people living in it, amongst all the extra stuff, and ... I never told you this, but I was concerned that under those cramped conditions and without having the opportunity to spend quality time together – given my regular working hours and your busy training schedule – we would notice each other mainly by getting into each other's way. I was therefore afraid that the circumstances might create tensions between us, shortly before you left for such a long time, during which we wouldn't see each other at all, and wouldn't get the chance to reconcile. It seems rather silly now ... That was a few days before Kathy went to London for her work placement. And right away, she offered to let you use her flat while she was away, without knowing you at all. She was a lovely girl, whom I should have known better, but I didn't. And now she's gone, and I can never talk to her again, to ask her about all those things I should have asked her about months ago: her family, her friends, her plans for the future ...

'So, it's a combination of things that is bothering me: the shock of realising how close to being killed you came; the relief that it wasn't you on the one hand, and the bad conscience about Kathy on the other. I understand that, rationally, but that doesn't make it any easier. And the problem is there isn't anything else going on at the moment that would distract me. I thought that, once the holidays were over, I might find it easier to focus on

other things, my job for example, but ...’

‘Yes, how was Christmas? Did you go to see Gran?’

‘On the 24th, yes, straight after work, as usual. I stayed with her until Boxing Day. Apart from the murder case hanging over everything, it was lovely, really, just like always. We had tea together and listened to the *Christmas Oratorio* on the old turntable. Only, it wasn’t as always because you weren’t there. But we chatted about you. She’s very proud of you.’

‘I feel as if I didn’t spend enough time with her before I left. I mean, what if she ...’

‘No, Shivy, don’t worry about her. She’s doing well. She asked me to put on the LP for her, but that was just – well, you know how much she values her old records. She was afraid of scratching it, but I could see that her hands were quite steady. And she’s as bright and as alert as ever.

‘Given that, it didn’t take her long to work out that Kathy had lived in the same building in which you had stayed for what ... three weeks before going to Antarctica? We were watching the news together on the evening of Christmas Day. I had tried to distract her, but it was hopeless. She had heard about the murder, of course, like everyone else in the country, and she wanted to see if there were any new developments. And sure enough, as soon as we turned on the telly, they were talking about Kathy having been abducted from her home in Cambridge. That was new information at the time, which the police had just released. Until then, the reports had focussed exclusively on the uninhabited manor house in the Highlands, where her body had been found, and on the ritualistic nature of the murder. Now, they

were standing right outside the block of flats, explicitly mentioning the address. I could tell that Gran recognised the street name, and she tried to remember from where. Finally, she got up and went out into the corridor. I couldn't see her, but it was easy enough to guess that she was checking her address book by the phone. I know she'd written down your temporary address at Kathy's. She didn't say anything when she got back. We simply looked at one another, and she knew that I knew that she knew ... So, I told her that it had not only been the same building, but in fact the same flat that you'd been staying in.'

'Oh, dear ... And how did she take that?'

'As I said, she'd already been troubled by the case before then. And she was particularly sorry when she found out that the victim had been a friend of mine. But aside from that, regarding you staying in Kathy's flat until a week before she was abducted – I was surprised, she took that rather lightly. Gran seems to have your ability to rationalise away this kind of coincidence – or rather you inherited hers, I suppose. Also, she has this indestructible optimism and confidence in you. She is convinced that, whatever the situation or whatever the danger, you'll be able to cope with it. The embarrassing thing is that, right now, she's far more concerned about my mental state here within all the familiar surroundings, than she is about your safety on Antarctica. And no matter how hard I try to downplay my depression and pretend that I got over everything, it's hopeless. She's known me for too long.

'She was so sweet when I went to see her over the holidays – all excited and happy for you. Shivy, I love her so much, and

I hope you appreciate what you have in her. Most of her life she's dedicated first to her daughter and then to you. She's gone through incredible hardship for many years. And now she sees you achieving your goals: first going to university and now to Antarctica, despite everyone saying that there was no point in applying, what with you being "a girl" and all.

'She had the old atlas open on the table, and she showed me where you'd marked the position of your base on the white empty continent all the way at the bottom of the page. I could tell that she didn't have a clear understanding of how you could live down there – after all, she does know that there aren't any villages, with shops and such things. I explained it to her as well as I could. But as far as she knows, you've pretty much walked off the charted territory on her map.'

'You're right. It all happened so quickly, and there was so much that needed to be done before leaving. Somehow, I never thought about how alien all this must be for Gran. But she never asked me about any details, and I honestly had the impression she understood what I'd be doing.'

'Yes, Shivy, because she's content just to hear you talk about your work, whether it's your studies with the dolphins up in Scotland, or now the new research on Antarctica. Your happiness and enthusiasm is what interests her most. And she doesn't want to spoil that for you by letting you know that, for the most part, she only has the vaguest notion of what exactly it is you're up to.'

'But then at least I could explain it to her properly.'

'I doubt it, Siobhán. The Old Lady is quite clever in her own

ways, but she's really from a different world. When she was our age, her sole concern was to keep herself and her little daughter alive from one day to the next, under conditions that you and I couldn't even begin to imagine. After the war, she's known little apart from work, her colleagues at the hospital, the two of us ... Just think about the places we visited with her: apart from Norwich and Cambridge, there were the regular trips to the seaside at Yarmouth; for the summer hols, it was either Bowness or Ambleside by Lake Windermere; and on the way there, your mum's grave in Liverpool – that's all. No wonder Antarctica is a bit of a mystery to her. Now she's old, and there is only so much you can explain to her. She knows that, and you'd notice it too, as soon as she began asking any detailed questions.

'Also, often, you're so completely caught up in your own world – which, let's face it, is largely dominated by your work, and by dreaming about some faraway places – that you don't realise how incomprehensible most things you do are to the majority of people. At first, during our undergraduate years back here at King's, it was all right. Having worked as a nurse for decades, Gran does have a basic understanding of biology. But when you went off to St Andrews and started with your dissertation research, she simply couldn't keep up anymore. My own work, politics and journalism, those are concepts she can relate to. After all, they are part of ordinary life. But every time I went to see her, she had a whole list of questions – actual notes she had made during your phone conversations, Shivy, about some terms you had used – and asked me, if I could explain them to her in a manner she might be able to understand. She always

made me promise not to tell you; but there you are, now you know.'

'Dear old Gran ... What was it she didn't understand?'

'I can't really remember. Often things that didn't mean a whole lot to me either, although I heard you talk about them endlessly for years – you know, "signal analysis," "bioacoustics," "spectrograms," things like that. To you, all of this may be blindingly obvious. But you must realise that, to most other people, that's barely English. About your work in Scotland, I therefore explained to her that you're studying the way dolphins communicate with each other; that, instead of words, they are using different whistles and other sounds; that you record these sounds underwater and compile a sort of dictionary, to be able to see how they socialise and hunt and generally organise themselves.

'And with regards to what you're doing now on Antarctica, I told her you're studying different types of very small organisms, plants and animals, that live in the ocean and in the sea ice; that you're trying to work out how they manage to survive at these very low temperatures, and how they may be the closest examples we have here on Earth of life on other planets, like Mars, for example. Isn't that right?'

'Yes, it is. But Ally, after the holidays, I sent long letters for Gran and you to our main base down here, trying to explain a little bit about my work – together with the film rolls I'd completed during the first week. From there, they were supposed to go north on the first plane. Haven't they arrived yet?'

'Yes, they have – cheers, Shivy. Sorry, I forgot to mention

that. There was so much else on my mind. But I picked them up yesterday at your institute, when I sent you the telex. The films are currently being developed, and I'll collect them and take them to Gran tomorrow. I'm staying with her over the week-end.'

'Ally, that's brilliant – give her my love. And once the research gets going, I'll send you a more detailed account of what exactly it is I'm doing down here, with photographs and all.'

'Sounds good. Then I'll be looking forward to that. Just promise to be careful.'

'I will be. But otherwise, what's going on back home? Nothing positive to report?'

'I don't know. England managed to draw the third test of the Ashes on Tuesday, so that's an improvement compared with the first two matches. But look, Shivy, we've been chatting for far too long. It'll cost you a bloody fortune. Still, it was worth it. I feel a bit better now. Let's hope ...'

'No wait, very briefly, before I forget that as well: yesterday, when I went to your institute, one of the secretaries there mentioned that an editor of *Brigid* had contacted them and asked about the rights to publish your "Antarctic Diary," as she called it. I didn't know you're keeping a diary, Shivy.'

'Neither did I – and I don't, as a matter of fact. I suspect she believes that I should. But at the moment, it's deadly dull, as I said.'

'Well, think about it. Something is bound to happen sometime. I know you never had much interest in this kind of publication, but *Brigid* isn't bad, considering the alternatives. Appar-

ently, the editor read your interview with the *Alumni Magazine*. That's come out now in the Lent edition, with a very nice write-up and some photographs. I'll keep a copy for you. I didn't realise that the magazine was being read outside the university, or even outside the college. But I noticed that *Brigid* are currently publishing a series on new job opportunities for women, and I suppose they have to keep themselves informed about what comes out of our elite education system.'

'Yes, probably ... All right, I'll see what I can do. But first, I finally need to get the chance to prove to all these guys that I can do the job I was hired for – even if, momentarily, I seem to have misplaced my Y chromosome.'

* * *

It felt like being frozen in an interrupted flow of time, trapped in some random instant, a state of complete insignificance, more inactive even than the ice that surrounded them – that rigid body of water that held them in its grip – taunting them with its ceaseless crackling, demonstrating that it was the only thing that was still moving.

Except for the footsteps outside in the corridor. They came to a halt, followed immediately by the sound of the door to the common room being opened. Someone entered, walked through the dining area of the room, and tentatively approached the lounge.

Then he chuckled quietly. 'All right, I get the point.'

'What?'

Chris sank into one of the armchairs, smirking. 'Siobhán, if someone lies on a sofa, inadvertently twitching their foot upon

hearing someone enter the room, it usually means they are conscious. And if they then lie perfectly still again, eyes closed, they probably want to pretend to be asleep, for the purpose of being left alone.'

With some effort, Siobhán pushed herself up into a sitting position. 'Or, alternatively, upon hearing someone enter the room, they wonder to themselves who that might be. And to conserve energy for this unexpected mental task – in an entirely unconscious manner – they suspend any unnecessary activity.'

Chris nodded, still smirking. 'Yes, all right, point taken.'

He fell silent and began studying the intricate pattern of cracks in the old leather of the arm rest, becoming more serious. 'You're okay down here – with us, I mean?'

So, it was still "us" and "her," then.

'Sure, yes. I'm simply bored, like everyone else. It's obvious already that I didn't bring nearly enough to read. Now, in my desperation, I began leafing through these magazines. I was just reading this insane story about some secret bases that the Nazis supposedly had underneath the ice – over in *Neuschwabenland*, or however they called Queen Maud Land. According to the article, they used them to hide some advanced alien spacecraft, which they had found during the war, after it had crash landed there – advanced, as it was. Imagine that: there may even now be a whole society of fascists and aliens living not far from here, planning to take over the world someday using of some kind of superior weapon that they developed from alien technology. Isn't that nice, Chris? A warm uplifting thought on an otherwise dreary afternoon.'

‘Yes, I read that too. Unfortunately, we’re not being told how these vast structures could survive inside the ice for decades. Now that would be interesting to know, considering that our own bases don’t last for much longer than a decade before they are being torn apart and crushed. Take Aurora, for example: it’s been occupied for only eight years, but none of the floors are level anymore and, in some parts of the outer shell, the first cracks already start to appear.’

‘Ta, another comforting thought for the day. But I think I know where this belongs.’

‘No, don’t throw it out. What’s wrong with you?’ With a horrified expression, Chris jumped out of his seat, pulled the magazine out of the wastepaper basket, and straightened it out again, as reverently as if it were a precious old manuscript.

‘Come on, Chris, it’s only some random nonsense about alien UFOs, hidden on giant Nazi bases under the ice.’

‘Exactly. We’ll be needing this before the next winter is over. We only just got it with the last relief, you know. Don’t be so bloody intellectual. There is nothing like reading about the delusions of other people to keep the madness out of your own head.’

He put the magazine back on the table and, with an exhausted sigh, slumped into his armchair again. Mechanically, he attempted to brush his hair back – only to remember that, a few days ago, it had been cropped rather generously by an obliging mate.

He glanced over. ‘Must have been a bit stressful to be called up at such short notice, when the rest of us had months to prepare for this.’

‘I’m fully qualified, Chris.’

‘Oh, no, that’s not what I meant. It’s just ...’

‘I assure you, I went through exactly the same training as you did, only more concentrated, over a shorter period of time. But I took the same first aid course, went through the same field training in Baslow, had the same boat handling instructions on Grafham Water, and the same sea survival training. I’m sure I don’t have your experience as a diver, but I’ve been scuba diving routinely since ‘84, and clocked hundreds of hours underwater, mostly from the field station at Tarbat Rocks, out in the Moray Firth – where, incidentally, the water is freezing.’

‘Yes, I know. I experienced that in the past.’

‘You’ve been diving the firth then? Because of the dolphins?’

Chris laughed. ‘I wish. No, that was for inspection and maintenance of the oil rigs there. Over the years, I’ve supported all sorts of diving operations around Britain – mostly at offshore platforms and occasionally for salvage, which is a bit more fun. But the work here has been the most enjoyable so far.’

He looked apologetic. ‘I didn’t mean to offend you, by the way. I only imagine that, if I had been in your situation, being asked to leave everything behind so suddenly and go to Antarctica ...’

‘I know, I overreacted, and I’m sorry. It’s just that all this sitting around and waiting is getting on my nerves. Almost half the summer is already over, and we haven’t even started with our research yet.’

‘I wouldn’t worry too much about that. It was the same last year – one blizzard after the other, well into January. Then,

within a couple of days, the weather turned, and we had weeks of sunshine. There will be plenty of opportunities throughout the winter too. Actually, once the sea ice is back, we'll be protected from the wind, at least while we're in the water – no need to deal with the waves anymore. And visibility is generally much better than in summer, with the blooms of phytoplankton. I'm therefore sure it'll be all right.'

If only the constant feeling of unease did not follow Siobhán around, even into her dreams; the repeated nightmares she was having of being surrounded by a suffocating mass of water, and yet freely falling through it as if it were merely thin air; falling farther and farther away from the surface, without any chance of ever swimming back up. She knew that she could not, under any circumstances, allow herself to lose her nerves now. And there was only one cure: to finally get back into the water and start focussing on her research.

'It's John's birthday next week.' Chris had been quietly following his own thoughts for a few moments, now looking slightly more animated. 'There is bound to be a big party, and we have to prepare some practical joke again, maybe in the administration this time. But we need to be clever about it. After last year, he'll definitely be expecting something.'

'And you want me to keep cavey out in the corridor, while you rifle the headmaster's office?'

'I'm serious, Siobhán. We've got to come up with something. It's a tradition with the BC's birthday.'

'I see. But if John expects some kind of mischief, we could simply not do anything. And then the joke is he's stressed out

the whole day for nothing. You know, like in a horror film: the scary bit is never as nerve-racking as the anticipation of it.'

'Hmm ... I don't know.' He fell silent again, now studying the orange and brown pattern of the worn-out carpet, casting about for another way into the conversation; perhaps trying to establish the close personal relationship he used to have with Siobhán's predecessor.

'Chris, I think it's only fair to tell you – because, after all, we're meant to be dive buddies ...'

'And I hope we will be very soon.'

'Yes, me too. Therefore, we're meant to look out for each other, aren't we? We need to be able to rely on one another. So, if there is any chance that my – or your – concentration or judgement on a dive might be affected, due to some other stuff going on, the other has got the right to know.'

Chris was now listening with considerable unease. 'I guess so.'

'Well, then I should probably tell you that, for the last few days, or several days in fact – basically, I haven't slept well since I came here.'

'You left unfinished business at home?'

'I ... Yes, I did.'

'And the new surroundings – the constant sun outside and absolutely no sun in here, together with the strange daily routine – all that isn't exactly helping either, is it?'

'That took some getting used to, yes. But now, life in the base is fine. No, the real problem ... What happened was ... It began a few days before I left England. There was a lot going on at that

time, in addition to preparing for Antarctica.'

This was going to be complicated.

'I suppose you heard about Kathleen Reed, the girl who was abducted from Cambridge and found murdered up in the north-west of Scotland, just before Christmas. I saw summaries of the first press releases among the old news bulletins by the teleprinter.'

'You're right, we did hear about the case. That was terrible.'

'Yes, it was. But I suspect the Institute didn't pass on to you that I was personally caught up in the affair; that I was being interviewed by the police the day before I was scheduled to depart for Antarctica, and that I might not be able to travel to Aurora as planned. The reason for that was that I had stayed in Kathleen's flat during the three weeks of training, while she was away on some work placement in London. A friend of mine, Alison, had arranged that for me. Just before Kathleen got back, I moved in with Alison. But she invited Kathleen over to her flat the last Saturday before I left, so that I could meet her. When she didn't show up, Alison tried to reach her by phone, unsuccessfully. She then called all their mutual acquaintances, but no one knew where Kathleen was. The next morning, when she still didn't answer the phone, Alison and I went over to her flat and rang the doorbell. But there was no response either. Then, Alison got really anxious, and eventually, in the afternoon, she went to the police to file a missing person report.

'Promptly the next morning, Kathleen's body was found in that old manor house in the Highlands, after the police had received an anonymous tip-off, most likely from one of the perpetrators. Thanks to Alison's report, the body was identified im-

mediately. Naturally, the police needed to talk to her, to find out about the victim, and why Kathleen may have been abducted and killed in that remote place.

‘By then, it was two days before I was supposed to leave; and Alison knew that, if I got dragged into the case, I would most likely miss the plane and might have to wait for several weeks before getting another opportunity to fly south. On the other hand, any careful examination of Kathleen’s flat was bound to reveal that another person had stayed there very recently. Obviously, I had cleaned the flat before I moved out, but not exactly forensically. At least my fingerprints were all over the place. If the police had somehow been able to link them back to me, both Alison and I would have been in major trouble. During her interview, Alison therefore mentioned my stay in Kathleen’s flat, while she had been away – after which the police called me in for questioning as well, initially that same afternoon, and then again the following day.

‘The first interview wasn’t a pleasant experience at all. For some time, I even thought they might arrest me and keep me there overnight. What got me into difficulties was that Kathleen had been abducted from her flat. That was shown by the fact that the door chain had been cut, but the lock was undamaged. Clearly, whoever it was who broke in at night, either had a key or picked the lock, but then realised that they had to cut the chain. They were able to do this quietly enough not to wake Kathleen. At least she didn’t get the chance to phone for help. They probably surprised her in bed, somehow sedated her, or threatened her not to make a sound. Then, in some way, they managed

to get her out of the block of flats unnoticed and drove up to Scotland. Not surprisingly, the initial suspicion landed squarely on me. I'd left Kathleen's spare key, which I'd been using, inside the flat when I moved out. But I could have had a copy of it made. The police therefore kept asking me these seemingly random questions, trying to establish what my relationship with Kathleen may have been, and whether I might be connected to this Satanic cult, which apparently is responsible for her murder. They kept on it for more than an hour, but there was nothing useful I could tell them. And so, in the end, they let me go – although, they did tell me not to leave town and to come back the next day.

‘The second interview was much more affable. By then, the police had done some background checks on me. They had obtained character references from the Institute and my university in Aberdeen. They had also received confirmation of the reason for why I'd been staying in Kathleen's flat. But crucially, based on further anonymous information, they had been able to make the first arrests. They had apprehended at least some of the cult members, and since they couldn't establish any connection between them and me, they simply went over everything once more with me, I signed a written statement, and then I was allowed to leave the country. After all, they know where to find me, and there is nowhere to run down here.’

Chris nodded thoughtfully. ‘Blimey ... To be honest, I did have a feeling that there was something bothering you, but I had no idea how bad it was. Let's hope the police find the rest of the gang soon.’

‘Yes, let’s. I only wish we could finally get on with our work. Then, I could start thinking about something else. I mean, how long can these strong winds last? It’s been going on for weeks.’

‘In winter, this is what you get most of the time. Now, in summer, it should eventually stop. But if you want to know for sure, there is really just one place to find out.’

* * *

The hand-line strained in the gale, forming a wide yellow arc that, despite its bright colour, disappeared into the violent cloud of white barely a few yards ahead. Piercing cold invaded Siobhán’s lungs with each careful sip of air. The angry defiant rattling of their flag atop the main access tower of the base was already lost behind her, blown away by the relentless wind. Nature appeared to be intent on wiping out and burying under a blanket of snow any sign of life in this hostile environment. The footprints of previous travellers had already disappeared.

As Siobhán carefully made her way into the perilous space between two places of safety, she could not help thinking that if, against the odds, the guiding rope was to be torn off from both its fastenings, she would be stranded, and her best chance of survival would be to hunker down, conserve as much heat as possible, and wait for visibility to improve.

Gradually, still at a hard to gauge distance, but a little clearer with every laboured step through the deep snow, the upper part of the Met Tower began to emerge from the swirling cloud, surrounded by a diffuse aura of evening sunlight.

Having finally arrived at the ice-encrusted metal structure, she

could see and hear the staircase leading up to the raised platform vibrating precariously in the wind. With some reservation, she began climbing it, focussing intently on every tread of her bulky boots on the slippery rungs.

At the top, she could feel how the tower itself swayed on its four legs, creating the illusion of being on a raft, lost in an agitated sea, while snowdrifts spilled over the sides and crept along the walls of the paled orange container building.

A further staircase led up to the observation platform on the roof, where a diverse array of scientific instruments was reaching skywards. An inscription on a weathered wooden sign above the door read: *Sub specie æternitatis*.

Inside the building, the feeling of drifting at sea remained. But, thankfully, with the door closed behind her, the unnerving howling of the storm was muffled, and normal breathing became possible again.

A narrow corridor led away from the entrance, with a small snow-covered window at the other end, and a door on either side.

The one on the right was labelled “Ozone Lab.” The room behind it was unoccupied, with windows shuttered against the harsh elements, and illuminated only by a continuous succession of green numbers running up a computer screen.

A few steps farther down the corridor, the door on the left was labelled “Met Office,” with a hand-written note taped to it: “Knock, knock, knock on Heaven’s door. If no one answers, knock some more.”

There was music playing inside the room – “I’m On My Way” – with Iain singing along.

He seemed to have heard Siobhán's second knock, as his singing stopped, and the music was turned down a little.

'Come in?'

'Just me ... I hope I'm not disturbing anything.'

Iain glanced up from a map of the Southern Ocean, which was covered with a variety of hand-drawn symbols and coloured lines. 'Well, bless me, if it isn't Dr Dannreuther. I thought you'd never stop by for a visit.'

'I know, I'm sorry. I wanted to come earlier, but somehow the thought of having to brave the Boot Room for any extended period of time, to go through the elaborate process of putting on all the different layers of outdoor clothing ... I just always remembered that I had other pressing things to do.'

'Such as lying on the sofa?'

'Yes, something like that. But I regret that now, seeing how beautiful the view is from up here, looking down onto the drifting snow, rather than being trapped inside it. And you can actually see the sun from here, without immediately freezing to death.'

'Out of the windows on this side, yes. At least during the evening, when I'm on duty.'

'And you're feeling a little homesick?'

Iain followed Siobhán's nod to the tape recorder. 'Oh, I see ... No, today, it's not too bad. I just like the tune.'

He put down his pencil and leaned back in his creaking chair. 'How about you? How are you holding up?'

'All right. But I thought there would be more to do earlier on during the season. I haven't even been able to visit the penguins

yet. The chicks must be about half a year old now. I hoped I would be able to get down to the water and see them before they moulted and lost all their grey baby feathers. Besides that, there isn't much around here to cheer you up.'

'Depends on your preferences, I suppose. Since cigarettes and booze don't seem to appeal to you, eating lots of chocolate is a popular alternative.'

'Guess what ... And I'm sad to say it's starting to show. So, it's high time I get some exercise again.'

'In that case, I have good news for you.' Iain pointed to a sequence of maps that were lined up on a long pin board. 'I'm very pleased to tell you that the weather will begin to turn tomorrow. It should therefore be fine by early next week.'

'Next week? I didn't expect it to change so quickly. You really believe it will be sufficiently calm then to go out to sea?'

'Indeed I do. I was going to keep it for the weather briefing tomorrow morning, but I don't mind telling you now. The wind we're experiencing right now is associated with the last – for now – of a succession of cyclones passing north of us, as you can see there. They will continue to retreat eastwards, and with a little luck, starting Monday, it should be quiet for some days.' He smiled broadly. 'It looks as if you'll finally get to play outside. Are you not excited?'

'Yes, sure ... And what's the next window after that, you think?'

'Why? Are you busy next week?'

'No, I was just wondering – trying to plan ahead, you know.'

'Sorry, lass, can't say reliably beyond five days, or so. But

around here, you can't be too choosy. You've got to take each opportunity nature offers you.'

Iain was clearly disappointed by Siobhán's lack of enthusiasm. He turned the music off and scrutinised her. 'You seem pensive, Siobhán Dannreuther. Everything all right?'

'Fine.'

But he remained sceptical, waiting for an addendum. Siobhán realised it was time to change the subject. Sadly, the room, cluttered as it was, provided little inspiration for topics of conversation – other than the weather. A poster-sized print of a photograph was taped to one wall, entitled "On Her Majesty's Meteorological Service." It showed the vague outline of one of Iain's predecessors tinkering with some scientific instruments in the middle of a blizzard. On a filing cabinet, surrounded by piles of teleprinter messages containing long lists of numbers, was the framed photograph of a young woman. She was sitting on an ancient stone wall at the top of a cliff – by Tintagel Castle, possibly – beaming at the photographer, with the sea glinting behind her in the evening light.

'Who's she then? Is she your lass?'

Iain laughed. 'Aye, she's my lassie. Her name's Talwyn.'

'Nice. Are you ...'

'Engaged, yes, just before I left the UK.'

'That's great, Iain – congratulations! Then we must hope that you make it through the second winter all right. At least there isn't much in terms of temptation around here.'

'No, not really – present company excluded, of course.'

'Well, there have to be trials of some sort. But look, I better

leave you to your work now.'

'No worries. I've got all night to finish the forecasts.' He picked up a thermos flask from his desk. 'Here, why don't you pour yourself some of this tea. It's still reasonably warm. You can use that cup over there by the computer. Then, make yourself comfortable and tell me a little about the ordinary world back home – all the wondrous things that happened during the past year.'

'Sorry, Iain. I appreciate the offer, but I just remembered: I promised Chris I would help him repair some of our diving gear this evening. There is corrosion on some of the metal fittings, and some of the valves and seals aren't as tight as they probably should be. We have to do it some time, especially now that we may be able to go out sooner than expected. So, I better start battling my way back to the base again.'

'Admirable work ethics. Then I shall not detain you any longer. But if ever there is anything ...'

'Cheers, Iain. I'll keep that in mind.'

* * *

Scattered rays of sunlight danced underneath the rippled surface of the water. Dolphins glided effortlessly through the gentle waves, with synchronised graceful movements. They were basking in the afternoon sun, enjoying the fine day and chatting amongst each other, their whistles relaxed.

But gradually the mood shifted. The water got murkier. The bright blue light that had shone down from the clear sky was slowly getting fainter, while turning green. And it was not the

world above the water's surface that was changing. It was the surface moving farther and farther away, as if the space beneath it were slowly expanding, filling with an increasingly oppressive layer of water.

The dolphin's behaviour had changed too. They had stopped moving about and had assembled in a tight circle, looking down to her. Their whistles were more urgent now and not directed at each other anymore. They were trying to communicate with her. Their message appeared to be important. But they were slipping away, and with them the surface of the water, and the warmth, and the light, and the air.

Already, the dolphins were but distant figures. And as their warning voices got weaker, other noises became more prominent. Nearby, there was the soft gurgling sound of water rushing upwards while, at a greater distance, there was an indistinct muffled droning that had to emanate from some powerful disturbance.

She had to get away from there. But despite her desperate swimming strokes, the surface receded ever faster. And as the sunlight faded away, a suffocating cold closed in around her from below, quickly sapping her last remaining strength.

With every passing second, her movements became more feeble and more painful. She could not keep up with the receding surface of the water. Helplessly, she was falling backwards. And as she turned to look down, she could see vague shapes rising towards her, getting closer and closer, without ever becoming any clearer.

Then, in a terrible revelation, a void suddenly opened beneath

her – the entrance to a world of menace, and of death.

The room lay in near darkness, with only a faint red glow emanating from the alarm clock. It was 02:35. Another Sunday had just begun.

This was still Antarctica, and they were still stuck inside a frozen ocean.

The base was completely quiet, except for the usual groaning of the protective shell around them, fighting its losing battle against the encroaching ice.

Siobhán had been awoken once more by the same old nightmare of falling through water. Once more, a restless sleep had turned into a sleepless morning, as insomnia continued to feed on her health and on her nerves.

And it was no good telling herself that these were only dreams, when she knew perfectly well that it was the corrosive effect of these dreams that could become a serious problem in the real world; when each nightmare was an additional drain on her energy; when her nervousness about going scuba diving gradually increased, as her strength declined; when the increasing nervous tension led to more nightmares and more sleeplessness.

Something needed to happen soon to break this destructive cycle.

CHAPTER THREE

ORIGINS

Snow continued to swirl around the access tower, obscuring the view to the outlying structures – the dark circle of the satellite dish to the south, and the angular shape of the Met Tower to the east – while the main part of the base lay hidden beneath a flowing pattern of waves on the surface of the ice shelf, sculpted by the ceaseless action of the wind.

But the wind was not quite as violent as it had been the previous evening. The flag above the tower now streamed in a more dignified manner in the crisp air. And the glow of the sun, directly above, was much less diffuse and milky than during the past weeks. It genuinely looked as if there were some calmer days ahead.

What Siobhán now needed more than anything was one good night's sleep, to be able to shed her constant fatigue. Instead, there she was again, awake for several hours too long, already tired and listless by noontime, and still another sleepless night away from the physical and mental strains of what was likely to be her first dive into the notorious Weddell Sea.

To make matters worse, half her mind was still stuck in the familiar places half a world away, with the people who mattered most to her.

Her grandmother ... At two o'clock her time, on a Sunday afternoon, she had already been to church and had returned for

a simple lunch. That very moment, she might be making coffee, standing in the little kitchen, looking out onto the familiar street – over to the red brick houses on the other side, greyed by the dull winter's light – waiting for the water to percolate through the filter. She might then settle down with a book, or listen to music, or to a serial on the old wireless. Later, she might go to visit one of her former colleagues for tea, or perhaps receive a visitor herself.

And Alison . . . Her daily routine was far less predictable, especially now that she was going through a difficult period. All these years they had known each other, she had always been calm and collected; always secure enough in her own life to be willing and able to support those who found themselves in more difficult situations. Even affected by the murder, as she was, Alison's nervousness and depression did not derive from a concern for herself, but rather from an understanding of the danger that Siobhán had been in while she had lived in Kathleen's flat – whereas Siobhán herself had shrugged the incident off as a tragic coincidence and simply walked away.

But it had all happened so quickly during those last few weeks in England, much too fast to register everything properly as a part of reality. With several important events running in parallel, it had been a hectic time, which felt quite surreal now, looking back, and no closer to real life than her recurring nightmares.

Then, the heavy door of the access tower crunched open behind her, pushing away the snowdrift that had accumulated outside it during only the few minutes since Siobhán had stepped out onto the platform.

Iain emerged from the opening door, a pack of cigarettes in his hand. ‘Siobhán . . . Taking in the fresh air?’

‘While it lasts.’

‘Oh, come on. You can’t begrudge an old man his last smoke before a well-deserved rest from a long night’s work.’

Nonetheless, he manoeuvred himself into a downwind position from Siobhán and tried to shield the feeble flame of the lighter. ‘I saw on the rota that your first week of night duty begins tomorrow. Then we’ll be on a similar schedule, for a while.’

‘Yes, that should be fun.’

‘It’ll be all right. Just do your rounds regularly, make sure everything is as it ought to be. You’ll have to respond to incoming radio messages; but that happens rarely, and you can’t miss the warning lights go off throughout the base. Really, the main thing is not to fall asleep. That would get you into serious trouble. Of course, it’s not exactly perfect timing, is it: having to stay up all night when finally the weather will be as good as it will ever be around here for taking the boat out. I guess you’ll have to try and get some sleep during the afternoons and evenings, between returning from scuba diving and the start of your watch. But maybe, if you asked John . . .’

‘No, I don’t want any special treatment. Everyone else manages to accommodate night duty with their regular work, and so will I.’

‘Siobhán, you don’t have to prove anything to anyone. It’s perfectly normal to trade watches under certain circumstances – crikey, this is hopeless.’ Iain gave up trying to light his cigarette and disappeared again behind the door.

He soon re-emerged, noticeably more relaxed after his first draught, and leaned back against the railing. 'I was chatting with John just now and, apparently, there has been some bad news from East Anglia.'

'What? Have they been invaded by Mercia?'

'Now, that's not fair, Siobhán. The Institute is not that archaic. And things are changing – I mean, look at you.'

'Me? What about me?'

'You're here, are you not.'

'Yes?'

'Well, there you are then.' He watched a trail of smoke dissipate into the pristine air. 'You have to give us a chance, you know.'

'Us?'

'Men.'

'Aye, right ...'

Iain laughed. 'Humans then.'

He took another contemplative draught of his cigarette. 'Look at it this way: focus on the positive developments – and it's not just in the Institute, is it? It's happening everywhere. Now, they are going to send the first Briton into space – a woman no less, and with the Russians. These are exciting times, Siobhán, the dawn of a brave new world.'

'Yes ... Utopia, coming soon to a planet near you. All we need to do now is to get rid of these bothersome Irish terrorists, and everything will be absolutely tipping for the British Empire. We can all relax again, get back to our tea and tiffin, and jolly well get on with things, as we move ahead into the new Millen-

nium.’

Iain scratched his head in mock confusion, but chose not to respond.

‘So, what happened in East Anglia?’

‘Nothing official, mind, but the Institute is having some difficulties securing sufficient funding for the new base next year. It’s therefore likely that one more crew will have to manage with this old contraption before a replacement can be built. Don’t get me wrong, Siobhán, Aurora IV has been a good home for us. But as I told you when you arrived, the base is definitely getting old, and it’s beginning to show. If you get the chance – during your night duty, for example – go through the access panels behind the building units. You can see that the outer shell is already cracked in several places. And there is humidity everywhere. After all, Aurora is basically drowning itself in melt water. To keep in the heat a little better, they used plywood for the protective shell, rather than steel as for the previous incarnation of the base, but it makes little difference. And the water creates no end of problems for the electronics. I heard that, recently, they had a short circuit in the vehicle workshop. In that instance, all that happened was that a fuse burned out, and they had to improve the insulation of some of the connectors. But with things like that, you never know. You can’t compromise in such an environment. You do it properly, or you don’t do it at all. At some point, it simply gets too dangerous. And if by then the new base is not ready, we may have to interrupt the whole programme here – after thirty-five years of continuous operation and data collection.’

He let his thoughts trail away with another puff of smoke and then gave Siobhán an appraising look.

‘You still seem somewhat muted, like yesterday.’

‘Do I? I’m just a little tired. I didn’t sleep much last night – practicing for night duty, you know.’

‘I’m serious, Siobhán. If there is anything that’s bothering you, you can talk to us – and you should. We’re all in the same boat here. We’ve all got people back home, our suspended lives in the ordinary world that keep calling us back. But while you’re down here, you cannot allow yourself to follow these calls. When you’re physically separated from the rest of the world – as we are here, even now in summer – it’s best to let go mentally as well. Keep your mind where your body is. Focus on being here, as much as you can. Otherwise, it will eat you up inside.’

‘The story of my life, Iain: letting go of people, moving on.’

‘I know it sounds harsh, but it’s the only way. Too much thinking isn’t healthy down here. If you retreat into your head, and your thoughts are far away, you disconnect, you lose yourself. And then all sorts of things can happen. I suspect that by now you’ve found out what happened to your predecessor – Kevin.’

‘No, actually, I haven’t. Everybody just keeps making these vague insinuations.’

‘Then I might as well tell you. It began slowly. At first, he got on well with everyone, and the summer was no problem at all. But then, a few months on . . . Nobody knows what caused it. We asked him repeatedly, but he did not want to talk about it. It could have been some trouble with his girlfriend. Maybe they had an

argument and could not straighten it out during their separation, with the limited ability to communicate. Either way, moving into winter, Kevin started to get more and more withdrawn and touchy. His mind was always somewhere else – back in England, presumably. We tried to involve him in our social activities, but he became increasingly difficult to deal with. Whatever it was, playing cards or snooker or darts, he kept losing, simply because he didn't concentrate. Consequently, he got more and more upset. Eventually, towards the end of winter, he completely cracked up after he'd lost at cards the whole evening. Obviously, there was no money involved. We were only playing for points. But he still claimed we were all conspiring against him. To be fair, by then we were all a little shirty – some more than others, perhaps, but basically we all found it increasingly difficult to deal with his aggressive behaviour. And so, push led to shove. John tried to intervene, and then it all escalated. Kevin attacked him and tried to stab him in the face with a dart. That must have been the first time something like that happened on any of the British bases.'

He looked indignant. 'It wasn't funny, Siobhán. You can never know where these things end. And whatever trivial issues there may occur in any conventional situation, they are amplified down here, with so little distractions and the limited ability to avoid each other.'

'Sorry. You're right, one shouldn't laugh about things like that. But anyway, what happened then?'

'Well, as John is acting magistrate down here, it was up to him to decide whether to pursue the case further. I doubt he

ever considered taking legal actions, although it was clear that he had no other option but to send Kevin back to England at the earliest opportunity. By then, Kevin himself just wanted to go home, rather than having to suffer through another eighteen months or so, including another long winter. Ironically, it was that incident that made him snap out of his destructive state of mind. But in different ways, he was in a pretty bad shape – even more depressed than before, and now he also felt embarrassed around us.

‘Then, the only question was how to officially deal with the situation. Obviously, a nervous breakdown like that, resulting in a physical assault, is quite serious. Something like this comes out, and next thing you know you’ve got the Government meddling in the way things are run down here: tighter supervision from London, stricter safety regulations, introduction of regular psychological evaluations, and so on. We do not need this sort of bureaucracy down here. Antarctica is the last place on Earth where, effectively, you’re outside of direct Government control. You know how it is in Britain these days: someone is always spying on you and trying to control your life. Also, for Kevin’s sake, there was no need for anyone outside the Institute to know what had really happened. And so he went back under the pretext of some unspecified family matter.

‘The Institute, of course, could not afford any more staff problems. But they did not want to give up on the biology programme at Aurora either, after they had finally got it funded. They therefore tried to get a veteran who had dived at one of the other bases within the past few years. But they had all moved on in the mean-

time – got themselves permanent jobs back home, wives, kids, mortgages, the lot. Under these circumstances, the Institute will not let you come back here even if you wanted to. It would be too much of a liability for them. Since there wasn't enough time to advertise the job again and to interview a whole bunch of people, they went back to the applications they had received for this tour, hoping that there might be one qualified person among them who could leave the UK at such a short notice, without requiring a lot of training. And then, they contacted you.'

'I see. Originally, they wanted an experienced bloke, a genuine man of the world, and what they got in the end was a wee lassie from the sticks. That must have come as a bit of a shock to you down here. As a matter of fact, I can just about picture your reaction when you got the news: "Gorblimey, guv'nor, I think they are sending us a ... you know ... *a woman*".'

He suppressed a laugh. 'Come on, Siobhán, it's not that bad. And you have to understand ...'

'No, it's exactly that bad because you never manage to treat me as either a man or a woman – and to be perfectly honest, at this point, I wouldn't mind either way. But to all of you I seem to be this strange, awkward, in-between creature who's apparently not male, but still mostly human, and so – by process of elimination – quite possibly female, and therefore someone whom – by some new regulation, I imagine – you're not allowed to treat as such in any way, and simply pretend that ... Oh, go ahead, laugh at me, you big lump.'

Iain attempted too late to avoid the line of snow that came at him from the top of the railing and hit him squarely in the

face. He sputtered and suppressed the spontaneous reaction of throwing his soggy cigarette down the access tower. Instead, he put the stub into his pocket. ‘Gorblimey indeed, you really got me there, didn’t you?’

He continued to grumble, as he did his best to remove the snow from the collar of his parka. ‘I would like you to know, Siobhán, that strangely enough we’re all very glad to have you here – most of the time. We’re all agreed that, apart from the occasional tantrum, you’re basically a good mate. But let’s face it: you are different, and things have been different since you came – simple things, you know.’

He abandoned cleaning his collar and tried to warm up his hands again. ‘Look, we all have our girlfriends back home, and we miss them, naturally. They used to be very far away. But since you came ... it’s almost as if you brought something of them with you. It’s not just the obvious things, like appearance and voice and all that. It’s these little mannerisms that women have, you know: how you tuck your hair behind your ears; the whirly way you move your hands about when you gesture; or the way you sit on the sofa, with your legs pulled up – your whole body language. Please don’t take this the wrong way ...’

‘No, it’s fine. I’m quite flattered, actually. I never had so much attention.’

‘You’re fit enough, Siobhán, you know that. But that’s not the point. What I’m trying to say is ... About those old prejudices against having women on Antarctica – we all know they are rubbish. But we were still concerned about having you on base as the only woman, mostly for your own sake, you must believe

that. Nobody doubts your scientific qualifications or your diving skills. And yes, you're happy with your situation here, being alone with the rest of us. But how could we have known that? I must admit, I was worried myself. Fifteen months can be a long period for anyone, and so ...'

He was unsure about how to continue. 'All right, it's probably best to lay it all on the table. It's like this: before you arrived, John asked me if I could look after you a bit – you know, be your main contact in case there are any problems. He must have thought it would be safe to ask the oldest and fattest guy in the team. He also knows I'm engaged to Talwyn. But basically ... Try to see it this way: if everything continues to go well with you – as I'm sure it will – perhaps attitudes will change within the Institute.'

'Yes, perhaps ... And sorry about the snow, by the way. I guess if I was as stropic as this all the time, I couldn't really blame you for being a little cautious around me. But I'm not, am I?'

'No, you're not. As I said, all of us down here on Aurora are behind you one hundred percent. And if there is anything we can do, any one of us ...'

'Cheers – mate.'

Iain grinned and mechanically pulled the pack of cigarettes out of his pocket, only to decide against having another smoke, and put it back again, glancing at his watch. He looked tired and worn-out – not only physically, but also jaded and dulled to the privilege of being in that special place.

'So, you're quite serious about Talwyn then? I mean, you

definitely are going to marry her when you get back?’

‘Well, we still have a bit more than a year to get through but, yes, if we pass that test, I don’t see any reason why we should not get married.’

He rubbed his cold hands and yawned. ‘Right, I’m off to kip. Good luck tomorrow for your first excursion into the Weddell Sea. And afterwards, if you get bored during your night duty, come over to the Met Tower and tell me all about it.’

‘I’ll do that.’

He nodded and walked towards the door.

‘Oh, and Iain?’

He stopped and turned back, looking apprehensive.

‘Just for future reference – perhaps something for John to mention in his final report – but, you know, age, body mass, and prior engagements are generally overrated as deterrents of female affection.’

Iain smiled, visibly relieved. ‘Careful now, Dr Dannreuther.’

* * *

Chris suppressed a yawn, shivering in the chilly air of the Boot Room, as he made another awkward attempt at closing the zipper of his dry suit that ran along the back of his shoulders.

Out of the corner of her eye, Siobhán watched as he repeatedly snagged it on his fleece insulation layer, relieved when he eventually succeeded. There would be no need for her to interfere, then. For a few more precious seconds, she could remain sitting on the bench, her own dry suit only pulled up to her waist, to avoid the added pressure on her upper body, and to be able to

breathe more easily. That way, in a minute or two, the feeling of dizziness that had overtaken her since getting out of bed would hopefully subside a little.

A draft of fresh outside air entered underneath the door to the garage, moving some dodgy looking balls of fluff across the floor, along erratic trajectories of further acquisition and growth. But higher above the ground, the soft breeze was barely perceptible and not nearly strong enough to be invigorating in the spent atmosphere.

It would have been far too early, even if the morning had not followed yet another sleepless night. And this was clearly going to be one of those days that had to be written off from the start. Already, there was the dull hint of a developing headache, and the cramps were beginning to spread down to her thighs.

This could be getting dangerous and, under normal circumstances, it would have been Siobhán's responsibility to call the dive off. But these were not normal circumstances because it was not only about scuba diving, nor was it only about herself. This was equally about all the others who might follow, if she did not embarrass herself. This was about her not squandering the rare opportunity she had been given – an opportunity that came with the responsibility of being the first. And the first domino in a row could never fall, for the others to have any chance to stand.

Therefore, having waited around for weeks, there clearly was no alternative. The necessary decision was an obvious one. She would have to go through with it and make the best of a bad situation.

Chris was already anxious to leave, glancing over more and

more frequently, as he put on his stabiliser jacket. Soon, he would be getting suspicious. And when he realised that something was wrong, it would be his responsibility to call the dive off.

Just at that moment, as a welcome distraction, Darren appeared in the door from the garage. ‘Morning all. This is the big day, then. A clear blue sky awaits you outside, and calm conditions, as promised by the weatherman.’

He rubbed his hands in a cheerful mood. ‘Siobhán, your first time out – at last. Anything I can help you with?’

‘Don’t fuss, Darren.’

‘I don’t. I was just wondering if you needed anything.’

‘Trust me, I’ve got everything under control – even if I am the Plan-Z-Woman.’

Somewhat taken aback, Darren exchanged a brief look with Chris. ‘Right ... I’ll wait outside, then, by the snow tractor. The boat is already fuelled, hooked up, and ready to go. I also loaded the filled diving cylinders and the science stuff from the workshop. Unless there is anything else ...’

With that, he returned to the garage, closing the door behind him.

Now it was time for Siobhán to get back on her feet and properly suited up. At first, there was the well-known tugging on her hair, as she pulled the outer neoprene shell over her head. But as the long neck seal slid over her face, an unexpected bout of claustrophobia overtook her. The dense rubber seemed to constrict around her, suffocating her. When she finally emerged, she was breathing far too heavily, and the feeling of dizziness had

intensified. Her nerves were evidently in tatters, but that could not be helped.

To occupy himself, Chris had been unnecessarily rearranging the contents of his meticulously packed bag, now noticeably irritated by the delay, and getting edgy himself.

But with her suit closed and her own equipment checked, Siobhán was finally ready to leave.

‘All right, Chris. I think that’s it.’

He managed a nervous smile. ‘So, we’re good to go?’

‘Sure, let’s do it.’

‘It’ll be fine. There is absolutely no stress today. For the first time, we simply ...’

‘Chris, I know the drill. Let’s just get out of here.’

* * *

The stretch of open water left in the wake of the *Steadfast* almost two weeks previously still persisted, providing a safe fairway for the small boat through the narrow fracture in the ice shelf. Sky-blue cliffs towered on both sides, their tops more than a hundred feet above, and glowing in the bright sunlight. Behind them, at the head of the icy fjord, the lonely red spot of the snow tractor became ever smaller, until it was lost from sight, as the boat rounded the first of many sharp bends.

Gradually, the meandering gorge widened. Then, after a final bend, the steep cliffs suddenly fell away on either side, and the limitless expanse of the Weddell Sea opened up in front, dotted with a few tall icebergs that were gracefully drifting away in the continuous breeze that streamed off the frozen continent.

Following the succession of storms over the previous weeks, the sea ice had been broken up and had almost completely vanished. Only some of the larger floes were still scattered about. And with the sun now able to penetrate the water, the phytoplankton was in full bloom, turning the colour of the sea into a deep green, with a faint yellow tint added by bioluminescent krill, which had got trapped within ocean gyres. Hordes of petrels and skuas circled above, making the best of this brief season of plenty.

Manoeuvring out of the cracked ice shelf, Darren carefully shirked some of the larger fragments of ice. Then, with the outboard engines roaring at full power, he turned the boat to the left, following the leading edge of the ice shelf southwards. The former lifeboat reared up as it gathered speed, barely skimming the calm surface of the water. With the sound of small pieces of ice scraping against the keel, they appeared to be skating on a mirror.

After a few minutes, Darren pointed at a particularly large iceberg a few hundred yards ahead of them and slightly reduced the boat's speed. Chris nodded, and the two of them intently scanned the edge of the ice shelf as it glided past.

Then, Darren seemed to have found what they had been looking for. He turned the wheel to the left and shut down the engines. The noise echoed away along the sheer wall of ice that was again towering above them. The boat settled back into the water as it ran out of speed, coming to a halt near a relatively smooth indentation in the otherwise craggy surface, where clearly the large iceberg had broken off not long ago.

Darren turned around at the steering console. 'Right, here we are. This looks stable enough for the moment. It's also quite close to our favourite spot from last year – remember, Chris?'

'Yes. And like last year, with all that stuff in the water, visibility is not going to be more than twenty feet, if that – even with the good light we have today.' He shouldered his diving cylinder. 'I don't know if you've ever dived in soup like that before, Siobhán, but it's very easy to lose sight of the boat from down there. And then there are the strong currents. I think we'll definitely have to rope up.'

Darren nodded. 'Agreed. So, let's go over the final checks – if you two are ready? Right then: inflate suit ...'

Chris gave Siobhán a cheerful wink, while their dry suits expanded, amused by their bloated appearance and obviously looking forward to getting into the water.

'Deflate suit ...'

Darren's flat tone of voice reinforced the fact that nothing but strict adherence to a precise well-choreographed routine was acceptable in a situation in which managing a calculated risk was everything.

Yet, at the same time, undeterred by the bright sunlight, Siobhán's recurring nightmares of the past weeks took hold of her once more. As if emanating from the eerie glow beneath the surface, the frightening spirits of the night seemed to surround the boat, separating it from the daytime world. The soft gurgling of the water against the thin hull became a malicious murmur. The gentle waves turned into a warning sign of a more powerful disturbance deep below, a reminder that they were floating on a sea

of unpredictability, with nothing to keep the boat from falling all the way to the bottom of the ocean but the laws of nature.

‘Inflate jacket ...’

Suddenly, it all felt terribly wrong. With the imposing cliffs above and the murky sea below, the laws of nature, such as they were known, seemed rather frail in comparison with the immensity of nature itself. Who was to say where the scientifically defined reality ended, and where the world of nightmares began? How safe a foundation could this kind of reality be if, every day, it was modified by new scientific discoveries? And with all the uncertainties that still remained within human understanding of the world, who was to say that there could never be any exceptions to the normal functioning of the universe? When all that was required was a passing glitch, a single tear in the fabric of reality, just wide enough to let a small boat fall through and disappear forever into another world.

‘Deflate jacket ...’

Far removed from human society, who was to say that man-made rules still applied? All these comforting routines that were meant to keep unpredictability at bay and enable a safe navigation through daily life ... All these little rituals that were being followed every single day, mechanically, without really thinking about them ... All of this was ultimately bound to fail when, inevitably, the unexpected would happen and things would go wrong.

‘Siobhán!’ Darren sounded irritated.

‘What?’

‘Test your weight release.’

‘Right, yes, I’m sorry.’

With a simple pull of the quick-release handles, the weight harness came loose.

‘Good.’ The boatman appeared satisfied.

But Chris remained suspicious. ‘You’re all right, Siobhán?’

‘Yes, sure. I just got distracted for a moment. I thought there was something in the water. Only a reflection on the surface, probably. I can’t see anything now.’

Darren glanced down into the green depth. There was nothing moving in it but drifting swarms of plankton. ‘Well, let’s get you in the water then, shall we?’ He hesitated briefly. ‘Chris, perhaps you go first.’

Chris splashed a handful of water into his face, pulled the mask over his eyes, and took his first breath through the regulator mouthpiece. He balanced himself on the tube of the boat and indicated “OK.”

Darren laid out the tether and checked the water again. He nodded. ‘Clear.’

Chris let himself slide backwards into the icy sea, quickly retaining balance just below the surface, where the red of his dry suit provided a splash of warmth among the cold hues of the water’s natural colour palette.

Darren smiled encouragingly. ‘All right. Good luck, Siobhán. And don’t worry about other large creatures down there. We never managed to see leopard seals or orcas around here on any of our previous dives. But I’ll signal down to you, as soon as anything of concern is happening up here – four pulls, as you know.’

The salty taste of sea water was reassuring by its familiarity, indicating that, after all, it still was the same old element, only a lot colder than usual. But the cold could be dealt with. Siobhán simply had to relax, let the diving reflex set in and allow her heart rate to go down.

The strap of her mask was a little too tight, but there was no time to adjust it now, with Chris already waiting. She only tightened the straps of her diving cylinder and took her first deep breaths of compressed air.

Darren laid out the second tether. ‘Ready?’

In response to Siobhán’s sign of confirmation, he looked out for Chris in the water behind her and nodded. ‘Clear.’

The first contact with the water, dampened through the diving suit, was followed by an uncomfortable feeling of disorientation, a short period of falling backwards, as piercing cold impacted the exposed parts of her face. Then, in an instant, the world straightened itself out again, as the stabiliser jacket pulled the heavy diving cylinder the right way up. With that, beneath her, the dark abyss of many nightmares opened up. But just above remained the peacefully undulating surface of the ocean, with the diffuse light of the blue sky shining through. And so the laws of nature were still in charge after all.

A little closer to the pale face of the icy cliff they were about to descend was Chris. He watched her carefully and signalled “OK?”

Yes, this was very much OK. In fact, it was brilliant – floating freely hundreds of feet above the seabed, weightlessly, effortlessly, on top of the last truly uncharted domain of the planet.

All the stress and aggravation of life above ground were left behind, as if they belonged to a different world.

A moment later, the lighted rack with the instruments and sampling bottles broke the surface. Out there, in the vast ocean, lowered slowly on its tether, it was a rather frail looking feeler, a modest token of human desire to penetrate the mysterious depths with scientific understanding, to uncover the secrets still hidden in the eternal darkness. But it was a start.

And it occurred to Siobhán that the descent into the ocean also was a way back in time, for this was where her story began. This was where she came from, a descendant of the first pioneers – the bravest, the most inquisitive of her early ancestors – who had ventured out onto the land in wide-eyed and breathless bewilderment.

Eventually, they had left the oceans behind. But now, at least temporarily, she was back.

* * *

‘Do I bore you, Shivy?’ Alison had heard her yawn.

‘No, of course not – sorry, Ally. It’s just that I’m on night duty this week. After sitting around and waiting forever, it’s all happening simultaneously now: I go diving early in the morning, take care of the water and ice samples afterwards, and then try to get some sleep in the afternoon. In the evening, I get up again, have some breakfast, and when everyone else has gone to bed, I begin sleepwalking through the quiet base, checking the water pumps, the power generator rooms, the workshops – until around midnight, when I have lunch in the kitchen, alone, unless

the meteorologist on night shift drops by. After that comes the toughest period, when I have to push through until the morning. And then it's time to go to work again.'

'Exciting ... And how are things with the lads?'

'All right. Much better now that the weather is nice and we can go outside more often – actually do the things we're here to do. But I suspect I shall always be "the new girl." The other day, they had a game of rugger outside in the snow. They asked very politely if I wanted to join in, but seemed rather relieved when I declined just as politely. Mind you, I would join in on a game of football, to see if my goalkeeping reflexes are still alive. But at the moment, with night duty, I'm mostly out of sync with the others anyway.'

'So, there isn't anything ...'

'No, and I can't think about that down here. It's too complicated, and you promised not to ask.'

'Yes, I know. I'm sorry.' Alison sounded depressed and fell silent.

'You went to see Gran over the weekend?'

'I did, yes. She returns your love with the best wishes. I brought her your letter and the photographs that I'd got developed. They came out really well. That's a bizarre landscape down there, with all those natural snow sculptures on the ice – especially these waves that seem to be frozen in a permanent process of breaking, as if an ocean got trapped in a particular moment, when time suddenly came to a halt. We were both very impressed, Gran and I. Also, from outside, the base looks quite cool, with the towers, and the antennas, and the flag. The inte-

rior, meanwhile ... well, understandably, it's a bit basic.

'But I remember now what I wanted to say before you fell asleep. When I left Gran on Sunday evening, before I took the bus back to the railway station, I walked along our old way to school. I wanted ... I don't know. Since you went away, I've been thinking a lot about our years in Norwich, about growing up together. It's strange, but I've become a little nostalgic recently. I'm even re-reading some of our children's classics and quite enjoying it.

'Anyway, I wanted to see if Angel Road Comprehensive has changed within the last ten years, or so – and, of course, it hasn't. It's still the same block of concrete, exactly as grey as it has been right from the beginning. Only time has moved on, and so it feels different now, as if something got lost – the simplicity of the school years, I suppose – even if, back then, they didn't always seem quite that simple. But it was nice to see the old hockey ground again. The long afternoon and evening hours we spent there – do you remember? – instead of studying for the exams.'

'Sure I remember, Ally. We were completely obsessed. We – that is to say you – had got it into our heads that we had to win the East Round, no matter what, and we only stopped practicing when we were completely famished. Speaking of which: is the old chippy still there?'

'I'm afraid so, yes – and just as smelly as ever, despite being closed at the time.'

'Hey, I could murder for fresh fish 'n' chips right now.'

'How fresh do you think the fish was at the chippy?'

‘It wasn’t as bad as you claimed. And I never got sick from it.’

‘No, but I, watching you eat that stuff. And your gran always prepared such lovely food for you.’

‘She’d been working far too much anyway, throughout her life, without having to cook for me at odd hours.’

‘Yes, that was always your excuse – and I know you meant it.’ She sighed. ‘These were good times, weren’t they? I wonder whether the current U18 team are still competing nationally.’

‘Not unless they have a captain who is as fanatical as you were.’

‘Or inspirational?’

‘All right, I’ll settle for that. But, Ally, what’s up? You seem a little off colour.’

‘I know. It’s Kathy – still. Normally, I would simply try and get over it, but with the public attention the case is getting, that’s completely impossible. Also, working for a television station means that I’m constantly being confronted with it. After all, the original crime, the abduction, happened right here in Cambridge. In the current affairs programme that I’m directly involved with, we usually don’t report on individual murders, unless there is some larger societal implication. But with the alleged connections to Satanic ritual abuse, this seems to be part of a bigger problem. It’s just that, the more I find out about what happened to Kathy, and the more I think about it, the more sceptical I get.’

‘Specifically regarding Satanism: within the last ten years or so, how many cases did we see that spawned a flood of overblown sensationalised news stories? And in most of these, no con-

crete evidence of any ritual abuse having taken place has ever been presented, Satanic or otherwise. As a matter of fact, many of these allegations, including some against close family members, have been proven to be completely unfounded. Only a few months ago, last autumn, that famous Canadian case, which started it all, was finally debunked. So, on the one hand, as a current affairs issue, we can't ignore this any longer. On the other hand, I'm reluctant to casually run along with the idea that, when it comes to Kathy, we are dealing with a genuine ritualistic killing. I certainly don't want to contribute in any way to a broadcast that feeds into the already existing hysteria. I'm now at a point where I'm convinced that Satanism is only a smoke screen, a cover for something much darker. The problem is I don't know what that could be.'

'Then the case hasn't been solved yet?'

'No, that's just it. I get the impression that the police are no nearer finding the real culprits than they were three weeks ago. I didn't want to say too much about that during our last conversation. The time on the satellite link is far too precious – literally. I'd rather chat about harmless stuff. But since I can't think of anything else ...

'Basically, what happened was, shortly after you left – you were still *en route* to Antarctica at the time – the police managed to arrest the remaining members of that Satanic cult. Turns out they are quite young, all in their twenties, from ordinary social backgrounds, without any previous convictions. Most of them are from England, and a few from Scotland. They admit having met regularly in the abandoned manor house since last August,

to perform “black masses,” as they call it. But they categorically deny that Kathy had any connection to their group, and that they had ever seen her before. Moreover, they all swear that none of their rituals ever involved any form of blood sacrifice, including animals.’

‘Then what is their version of events?’

‘The truth, I think. For a while, there was nothing but wild speculations in the media because their statements to the police and many details about the investigation couldn’t be disclosed. You experienced the early stages of that before you left. But now, at last, the trials have started. A week ago, I therefore went down to London to cover the initial hearing in the Magistrates’ Court, in case more reliable information was revealed that could be included in one of our broadcasts.

‘In the evidence the cult members gave to the court, they all stated consistently that, on that fateful Friday, they travelled to the Highlands in separate cars, assembling at Loch Assynt over the course of the afternoon – by that old ruin of Ardvreck Castle. From there, they drove on to the manor house together, arriving late in the evening. By then, the surroundings were all in darkness. But there were no other cars parked outside and, as far as they could tell, there was no one else in the vicinity. At least from the front of the building, everything appeared to be normal – as quiet as always, and without any signs of light inside.

‘They had forced a patio door open when they had begun to use the manor house, which had remained unnoticed during all that time because no one really comes out there anymore. So, they walked around to the back of the building, as usual. But as

soon as they entered the drawing room through the broken door, they noticed that in the fireplace the ambers were glowing. At first, they were afraid that someone had returned to the building and decided to leave. But since there was no sound at all, they wanted to check the other rooms first. That's when they saw unsteady light coming from the adjacent dining hall. In the centre of it was Kathy, lying in the pentagram that they themselves had drawn on the floor during their previous meetings. She was positioned such that her head, her hands, and her feet were oriented towards the five corners. The circle of black candles that they had set up around the pentagram was lit. Kathy was wearing a simple white gown and a silver necklace with a large pendant – one of these amulets with a goat's head in an inverted pentangle.

‘Upon first sight, she seemed unharmed, without any obvious signs of injuries. She was just lying there, as if in a trance. But then they noticed that, at some point, the pendant must have been extremely hot while she had been wearing it, as it had burnt itself through her gown and into her skin. That's when it occurred to them that she was in fact dead. They then panicked and fled the scene, thinking that Satan himself had entered Kathy by means of the amulet, making it glow through his infernal powers, while taking her soul to the afterlife. At the time, they honestly believed that, through their rituals, the old manor house had become a focal point for demonic energies. And in their panic, they didn't even ask themselves how Kathy had got there in the first place.’

‘Insane . . . But then, I suppose, one of them lost their nerves, contacted the police about where to find Kathleen, and denounced

at least some of their mates.’

‘No, you see, that’s where it gets mysterious. During the hearing it came out that, in the anonymous phone call made to the police, the caller had not only indicated where to find Kathy, but also that vital evidence had been deposited in a pillar box near the police station. This turned out to be an envelope with several instant photographs, taken through the windows from outside the building, showing Kathy lying in the pentagram, surrounded by the cult members. And there were photographs of the cars parked outside, with all the number plates.

‘Evidently, someone else had been in this remote place at the same time – but why? What were they doing there? Were they really just witnesses of a Satanic ritual that killed Kathy? Or is what the cult members are saying true? Then it is highly likely that these other people are responsible for her murder.

‘Consider this: those who planned and executed Kathy’s abduction in such a precise manner could also be responsible for killing her. But they wouldn’t be the kind of people who then panic and run away, leaving a dead body behind. That is completely ridiculous. The police and defence counsels must realise this, and I’m sure it will be used as an argument in court. It is much more plausible to assume that these “witnesses,” who took the photographs, weren’t only innocent bystanders who just happened to be in that remote spot.’

‘But even if those who were arrested aren’t responsible for the murder, they are still pretty dodgy characters. I mean, they did break into a lonely old place, and they did perform Satanic rituals.’

‘Indeed. The break-in was illegal, of course – and worse than that, fleeing a murder scene without informing the police. But as far as Satanism is concerned, the kind of activities that this might realistically include, all that tends to be massively exaggerated in the media, and always presented as being at least morally corrupt, if not illegal.

‘The arrested cult members themselves hold a very different view of their ideology. During the hearing, they described that they see Satan as a tragic hero, a fallen guardian angel for humanity, who was unjustly cast down from Heaven because he challenged God’s authority. Seeing how bad things were down here on Earth, he argued that God, with his omniscience and omnipotence, should act to prevent the suffering of the innocent and bring justice to the world. In their view, Satan attempts to lead humans away from an autocratic deity by giving them the gift of reason and logic, to free themselves from religious dogma. For Satanists, true evil is the rejection of knowledge of the true nature of the world, and the acceptance of religious ideologies on blind faith. Christians then turn around and call them materialists, who reject spiritual salvation by giving in to the “desires of the flesh.” And so the debate goes on.

‘But whatever your view is of Satanism, most of us I hope can agree that demonic powers have nothing to do with the crime that has been committed. As a matter of fact, the post-mortem has shown that Kathy was killed by a drug overdose. Clearly, whoever it was who abducted Kathy, knowing that the cult members were going to arrive that evening, killed her shortly before, placed her inside the pentagram, lit the candles, put the necklace

into the fireplace for a while, and then ...’ She broke off with a sob. ‘Who does such a thing? How ruthless do you have to be? And how sure of yourself? It makes me sick to know that these people are still out there. That’s what is so troublesome about this affair. Whoever did this is far too clever to make any mistakes. They will never get caught, and they will do it again. If we really were dealing with Satanic rituals, I wouldn’t worry quite as much – only this is different. How do you go up against such cold-blooded violence? What does it take to defeat this kind of evil?’

‘But, Ally, whoever these people are, in the end, they are just human. They move amongst humans, and by humans shall they be defeated.’

‘Now you go biblical on me – you of all people, Siobhán Danreuther. Still, I hope you’re right.’ She chuckled, despite herself. ‘In the meantime, there are far too many open questions – most importantly, what motivates them, these dark figures in the background? The members of this Satanic cult are completely harmless, I have no doubt about that. It is inconceivable that someone would commit such an elaborate and horrendous crime only to implicate them, no matter how strongly the perpetrators might disagree with their ideology. On the other hand, no one would go out to this remote place by accident. These other people must therefore have been there with a very specific motive, which has nothing whatsoever to do with Satanic rituals. Their interest, in some sense, must be in the old manor house. That building must somehow be at the centre of these events. And the main purpose of the people in the background cannot simply be

to scare others away, as they did with the cult members. If that were the case, the last thing they would want to do would be to make sure that, for weeks, the attention of the whole nation – including a full-scale police investigation – was focussed almost exclusively on that place.

‘And now you see the problem: it’s silly to believe that the cult members are responsible for the abduction and murder. But if Kathy wasn’t a random victim of a group of Satanists, we’re right back where we started. And we need to ask ourselves the same questions as we did immediately after the discovery of her dead body. Why would someone abduct and kill her? Why Kathy specifically? And why display the crime in such a public and dramatic fashion?’

‘You’re right, that doesn’t add up. And based on what you’re saying, if this is about the manor house, since it hasn’t been occupied for quite a while, the motivation for the murder may be linked to events way back in time.’

‘Exactly, Shivy. I am convinced that this isn’t about what is happening in that place right now. This is about something that happened there in the past. That is why they are not afraid to draw attention to it. The murder was clearly set up to shock and intimidate, almost as a warning. There is a story here, written between the lines. And while most people who follow the news only hear about Satanic rituals, there must be someone out there who understands what is really going on, and for whom the manor house itself, or what happened there years and possibly decades ago, has a certain significance.’

‘But what kind of a building is it? And whom does it belong

to?’

‘Apparently, it’s in private ownership. At least, I couldn’t find it in any of the Royal Commission inventories. When the police conducted their investigation, they must have been in contact with the owners. But according to the official scenario involving Satanic rituals, the police probably had no cause to suspect them of anything. That the house has been uninhabited for a while isn’t too surprising, given how remote it is. Without a full contingent of domestic staff it would be nigh on impossible to maintain. The plumbing must be archaic. And it’s quite possible that it never had electricity laid out, up there in the mountains.

‘Regarding the architecture, there is nothing unusual about it – fairly common for the Victorian era, as far as I can tell. But I can see how the “Gothic” style might appeal to some people who fancy themselves as Satanists. Especially with the building standing all by itself, next to a deep lake, and shielded from view by mountains – a bit like the setting in some old horror film.

‘Also, the manor house had ghost stories attached to it even before the murder. There are bizarre stories about phantoms and evil fogs that rise from the lake to either induce people to walk out into the water and drown themselves, or to commit murders. Allegedly, the ghost of at least one of these earlier victims is already haunting the building. And according to the tabloids, these supernatural occurrences are the “real” reason for why no one has been living there during all this time, if you can believe that.

‘Ghosts, Shivy, phantoms and ghosts. That’s the kind of stuff we’ve had to put up with since you left. I’m telling you, you’re

lucky to be far away from all this madness. And I'm convinced that someone is taking advantage of these old stories and rumours, to obscure the actual motive behind a very serious crime, and to send a message or a warning to a particular group of people about something quite different.'

'Blimey, Ally, I had no idea how bad this got. But then, to put a meaningful broadcast together, how are you going to sort through all this mess? Did you go and talk to the police again? That detective who interviewed us about Kathleen – he seemed quite reasonable.'

'DCI Anderson, yes. He was rather dashing, wasn't he?' Alison fell into a contemplative silence. 'But I didn't go back, and I won't. He couldn't tell me anything new anyway, nothing that wasn't already publicly known. We'll probably have to wait for the jury trial to get more information. The cult members all pleaded not guilty at the initial hearing, but the evidence against them is strong. Consequently, the case has been committed to the Crown Court, with a trial date set for some time in summer, which means we've got months of uncertainty and futile speculations to look forward to.'

'I know I should let it go. As I said the other day, I barely knew Kathy. But I can't stop thinking about it. To begin with, there is the nature of the crime. Moreover, the murder isn't the only injustice that has been committed. There is a good chance that the lives of a whole group of innocent people are going to be ruined as well. Everything we hear about the incident is obviously wrong. But none of the alternative theories I can think of are without flaws either. I therefore keep turning the same

thoughts over in my mind, without ever coming up with new and sensible ideas. Now it's got to the point where I can't sleep anymore. I simply cannot turn off my brain. So, I started drinking ...'

'Ally!'

'Not a lot, but regularly. It's useless for me to go to bed without having had at least a glass of wine or two – or maybe three, I don't know. I'm just afraid, you know, of lying there – half awake, half asleep – trapped inside my own head, with all this crazy stuff going on. And then, these silly things they keep talking about in the media – evil spirits and such. I know it's stupid. But somehow, I let this nonsense get to me.

'For days now I've had this vague notion of being pursued by some malevolent power, like a shadow closing in. It began during the weekend. On Saturday, when I went out to Norwich to see Gran, it wasn't so bad. But when I left there the next day, walking out to Angel Road all by myself ... Admittedly, it was in the evening, and it was getting dark, which can play funny tricks on your mind. But I really had this impression that someone or something was behind me all the time. Of course, I never saw anything suspicious. It was simply an uneasiness that I felt, but I couldn't shake it off.

'Then, on Monday evening, when I returned from work – as soon as I stepped into my flat, I had this horrible feeling that someone had been here. The lock hadn't been forced, or just visibly scratched, even – nothing had changed in any way. It was only ... like a strange smell hanging over everything. I thought the fears would subside after a few days, but they didn't. And

today, it got so bad that I didn't know what to do anymore, and whom to talk to. After work, I therefore went to your institute to send you that telex. Cheers, by the way, for responding so quickly, seeing how expensive this is.'

'Ally, that's no problem at all. I've got no other opportunities to spend money down here. I don't have any rent to pay. I don't need to buy any food. I can wear all the old clothes I wouldn't dare wearing back home. And besides, you're worth it, every penny – you know that.'

'You're sweet, Shivy. I wish I could manage somehow to be more cheerful, or at least talk to you in person. But once again, we've tied up your vital satellite link for far too long. I'm sure that's exactly the confirmation of the "girls on phone" cliché your colleagues need.'

'Oh, never mind that. Now that I had the chance to go out and do my job a few times, I feel much more confident among the lads. I know that I can do what is required of me, and I simply have to keep doing it. So, let's not worry about the others. Actually, why not make it a tradition? Unless something comes up, I'll phone you every Sunday evening – say, ten o'clock your time? – at least for the next few weeks.'

'Don't you want to talk to your gran occasionally?'

'Ally, she would be absolutely horrified if I called her up from Antarctica. You know how she is with long-distance phone calls. I can barely keep her on the phone from Scotland for more than a few minutes. Then it's always: "Just write me a nice letter, dear." Apart from the cost, I think she prefers that because she can keep the letters and reread them – or, it seems, ask you for

explanations about them, clandestinely.'

'You're right. I didn't dare tell her about our last phone conversation. I only mentioned sending you a telex. I imagine she assumed that you had responded in the same way.'

'I hope so. But look, why don't I phone you again this Sunday evening? If only for a few minutes.'

'All right, sounds good. And I'll try not to let these phantoms get to me until then.'

CHAPTER FOUR

THE GATEWAY

The night-time sun hovered low above the southern horizon, serenely gliding back towards the east and the beginning of yet another calm and uneventful summer's day on Antarctica.

In the dense orange light, the boundless expanse of eternal snow attained a warm glow, and even the acute lines of the tower with the satellite dish appeared to be softened.

Complete silence hung all around. Not even the persistent howling of the wind remained, which had been a constant companion during Siobhán's first three weeks at Aurora.

As she stood among the few man-made structures that were visible above the surface, she felt an emptiness in her surroundings that was unrelated to the wide open space in all directions. It was not the lack of sounds in general. It was something more specific that was missing. For several moments she tried to identify what it was, and then it occurred to her: it was the absence of birdsong. During calm twilight hours such as these, all across the British Isles, there would be a cacophony of avian voices, communicating with all their limitless creativity.

And with that realisation, Siobhán suddenly felt very far from home, and very lonely.

Iain watched her scramble up onto the platform of the Met Tower and surreptitiously put out his cigarette. 'Siobhán, what a pleas-

ant surprise. What brings you out tonight?’

‘I was checking the external fuel depots when I saw you standing here, all by yourself. I therefore thought I could afford to take a little time off and exchange a few words with the only other waking soul for hundreds of miles.’

‘Awake and sober. I wouldn’t be surprised if John’s party is still going on over there.’

‘No, it’s all quiet now. But there is going to be some major cleaning up to do tomorrow.’

‘No worries. In the end, it’s never as bad as it looks.’

‘Nonetheless, I might find that, by the time the others manage to get up, I’m suddenly quite tired and much better off comfortably tucked up in bed. Chris suggested that we might take a day off from diving tomorrow, and I didn’t argue with him. By now, I’ve got a fairly large backlog of samples to process.’

‘Is night duty getting to you?’

‘No, not particularly. If anything, I sleep better now in the afternoon than during the first few weeks at night, when I had nothing else to do. Concepts like “day” or “night” don’t mean a whole lot down here. Inside the base, the sun never shines at all; and out here, it never sets. Life on Antarctica seems somehow disconnected from time. Obviously, I can see how the hour hand is turning inside my watch – twice for each round the sun completes in the sky. But besides that regular motion, nothing really happens. It’s just the same cycle over and over again.’

Iain looked a little sceptical and stifled a yawn.

‘You’ve been on night shift ever since I came.’

‘Indeed, and I shall be for the rest of the summer. But I like

it, and Nigel didn't fight me over it. We therefore simply keep our schedules. That way we don't have to adjust to a different rhythm all the time. I still get to meet the other guys when I wake up in the afternoon – and you, of course.'

Clearly, the notion of "us" and "her" still persisted.

'You continue to be bewildered by my presence here, don't you?'

Iain reacted surprised.

'No, don't get defensive. I'm just curious. I know you're not bothered by me.'

'You're right, I'm not, not at all. But since you bring it up, I was wondering ...'

'... how a nice girl – such as myself – could end up with a bunch of blokes – such as yourself – in a place like this?'

Iain laughed. 'Yes, something like that. It's not one of the most obvious places to visit, for most people. So, there had to be a moment in your life when you thought it might be a good idea to forego everything and everyone else, to leave everything behind – for more than two years, when you applied initially – and come here.'

'But the thing is, I didn't think about it in that way. I just thought about the adventure, rather than the social implications. Even growing up, I was always more interested in realistic adventure stories than fantasy tales – the old accounts about Amundsen and Scott, for example. Naturally, I thought it would be grand to be able to go and see these faraway places myself. But I never had the opportunity to travel abroad, even within Europe. It was simply too expensive. As a matter of fact, this is the

first time I'm outside of mainland Britain. I could never work out how to combine these dreams of exploration with real life, and throughout most of secondary school, I was undecided about what I wanted to do afterwards. Then, entering Fifth Form, one thing that might have compelled me to stay on for A-levels was going into nursing, as both my gran and my mum had done. But aside from upholding a family tradition, that really didn't appeal to me. I understood even then that I didn't have the necessary social skills or patience – as you can probably attest to. Meanwhile, across the country, there was the “Winter of Discontent” going on, with everyone being on strike – those who still had jobs – including the nurses. And, with the steep inflation, what little money was earned became less valuable every day. I therefore mentally prepared myself to leave school to try and get whatever job there was available. But then, I got lucky, I guess.’

‘How so?’

‘Well, you may remember that, adding to the general chaos, it was a particularly cold and snowy winter, blizzards and all – the sort of weather you love to take as an excuse for staying at home and being lazy. On one such evening, coming back from school, I settled down in the living room with a nice cup of tea, flipped on the telly, expecting to be comfortably bored, and there it was: travel, exploration, adventure – all wrapped in one. It was an episode of *Life on Earth*, when it was first shown on the Beeb. And so, after years of sleeping through lessons in school, I had this sudden epiphany that biology was about life – imagine that, Iain – not just about silly schematics in old-fashioned textbooks, or mutilated frogs on the dissecting table. Moreover, I learned

to appreciate that, as humans, we are part of an intricate network of life, spanning the entire globe and going way back in time – our planet’s history written in living cells, not stone. From then on, I had to be at home at least a few minutes before the start of each episode, to have enough time to warm up the old television set and fiddle with the antenna to stabilise the picture.’

Then, she was sitting again on the old over-hoovered carpet, leaning back against the equally worn-out sofa; with Alison lying behind her, leafing through some magazine, present not so much out of interest in the television programme as for company, occasionally stealing a glance and making a comment if something particularly cute or ugly appeared on the screen – like that mudskipper emerging from its mangrove swamp, the bulbous eyes at the top of its head casting about for something to eat, or for any sign of danger.

‘Ugh, what’s that?’

‘Hey, Ally, look at him. He’s only trying to live, you know. And he’s making a pretty good job of it, considering.’

Alison laughed and ruffled her hair. ‘So, you are a romantic after all.’

Iain had noticed her brief absentmindedness. ‘You’re a strange person, Siobhán Dannreuther. You think too much. That’s not healthy down here.’

‘Well, if I am, it’s all your fault. That’s what you get from stirring up old memories – and some are a little distracting. Anyway, watching that series, I realised what I wanted to do. I stayed in school, got three decent A levels, managed to get accepted for an

undergraduate course in natural sciences at King's College, left Norwich where I'd grown up, and moved to Cambridge.

'Uni was a bit of a change from life at a humble comprehensive. But at the residence, I was staying next door to an old friend from Norwich, and she always encouraged me to carry on when I was ready to throw it all in. With her support, I managed to hang on during the first term, and then I got used to the new pressure.

'I became interested in marine zoology, which unfortunately wasn't offered at Cambridge at the time. For that reason, years before getting the opportunity to come here, I already had to make a tough choice: stay at Cambridge and take up one of the advanced subjects on offer there, or pursue the topic I really wanted to do, which would mean moving away from family and friends. In the end, it was clear what I had to do. I got my B.A., went to St Andrews for the postgraduate programme in marine mammal science, and eventually got a Ph.D. working on dolphin echolocation and communication.

'Initially, there was hardly any data to work with, which required us to get into the water ourselves to be able to study these animals. I therefore joined the university sub-aqua club and learned scuba diving. At that time, I also began to collaborate with scientists at the University of Aberdeen. I went on field trips with them in Moray Firth, where we made audio and video recordings, to try and distinguish between navigation and communication signals, or to associate certain sound signals with certain types of behaviour. Just then, Aberdeen were in the process of establishing a field station at the lighthouse on Tarbat

Ness – that narrow spit of land sticking out into the firth, along the north coast. Fortunately, they needed people. And so, after my dissertation, I transferred to Aberdeen on a postdoctoral research fellowship. I divided my time between fieldwork in Moray Firth and analysing the data in the university lab.

‘But then, less than a year later, before I had the chance to settle in too much, I saw the announcement for the job here pinned to the department notice board. At first, I got excited about it, although it didn’t take me long to find out that, by default, women aren’t allowed at all as members of British Antarctic wintering teams. I knew that it was pointless to apply, but I did it anyway – in an act of defiance, I guess, simply to annoy the establishment. Obviously, I never heard back from them, and I quickly forgot about it myself.

‘So, it came as a bit of a shock when, more than a year later, I got a call from the Institute, asking me if I was still interested in working on Antarctica. Moreover, would I be able to leave in three months’ time and stay there for the next fifteen months, assuming I passed all the required tests and medical exams. At first, I probably didn’t come across as being particularly coherent. But after a while, I managed to say “yes, thank you,” and here I am. And so far, I must say, I have no regrets.’

‘But you’re going back to Aberdeen when this is over?’

‘Definitely, yes. I love it up there. I’m temporarily on leave right now, but I’ve still got my contract with the University.’

‘Glad to hear that.’

‘Your family is from ...’

‘East Coast too – a small place, just north of the capital.’ He

suddenly looked up. ‘There, did you see that? I think it was an aurora, very briefly – you see? There it is again.’

A faint green shimmer flitted across the dark blue sky directly above.

‘Yes. Beautiful, isn’t it? That’s the first one I’ve seen.’

‘Now, in summer, they must be fairly intense to show up against the sun, even at night. But this is a prime location for auroras. In winter, you can see them quite regularly. In fact, geospace research was one of the reasons the original base was built here, back in the ’50s.’

‘Thus, the name.’

‘Indeed.’

‘They look like a curtain blowing in the wind, don’t they? Or a luminescent veil suspended from the sky. How high do you think are they?’

‘They?’

‘The lights, whatever they are.’

‘They are trillions upon trillions of excited little molecules falling back into their ground state and becoming thoroughly depressed in the process.’

‘So, how high are they?’

‘Upper mesosphere, lower thermosphere.’

‘Meaning?’

‘Meaning way up – hundred kilometres and more.’

‘I see. But why did all these little molecules get excited in the first place?’

‘You’d get excited too if you were hit straight-on by high-energy particles from the sun. And the cool thing is, they come

in different colours. The green light here, for example, is from atomic oxygen.’

‘You weather people really are dull.’

‘Siobhán, that’s got nothing whatsoever to do with the weather. These emissions are much higher.’

‘You’re still dull. The Inuit have a much better explanation.’

‘The Inuit?’

‘Yes, the northern circumpolar peoples, you know?’

‘I do. But what are they saying?’

‘They are saying that auroras are gateways to the afterlife – at least that version of the afterlife that is reserved for good people, and particularly those who suffered unnatural and violent deaths. Therefore, whenever an aurora is seen in the sky, it’s a sign that the barrier between the two worlds, ours and theirs, is very thin; a warning that something bad is about to happen, some catastrophe or accident, or even a murder.’

‘*Planet Earth According to Siobhán*, from the popular series *An Outsider’s View of Our Galaxy*.’

‘Don’t be so dismissive. I’m not sure who told me – wait, now I remember: it was a former flatmate of mine, back in St Andrews.’

Claire . . . Curious that Siobhán should be reminded of her at that very moment.

‘Anyway, if this barrier is weak, it becomes easier to establish a connection between this and the other world, to communicate with your ancestors and other helpful spirits, to get advice and encouragement from them in hard times; to tell them that you’re still thinking of them, that you miss them, and that you’re hoping

to see them again.’

Iain looked slightly concerned. ‘Siobhán, you’ve been here for just about a month, and you’re already getting sentimental. How can you possibly make it through the long winter at this rate?’

‘But death is a sentimental issue. Think about it: if you could establish a connection to the afterlife, if your ancestors could communicate with you, if the spirits on the other side could light torches – as the Inuit belief – to show their loved ones, whose time has come, the right way, so that they don’t get lost and end up in a bad place of the afterlife ...’

He seemed genuinely worried now.

‘Come on, Iain, say it.’

‘Say what?’

‘That I’m crazy.’

‘You are crazy, Siobhán. You think too much. I told you that a moment ago. And you know what your problem is, don’t you? You don’t drink enough. So, start working on your contingency before someone else does. You’ll sleep much better that way.’

‘Och, aye, spoken like a true Scotsman – not a problem in the world that couldn’t be alleviated with some healthy bevvy, eh.’

He chuckled. ‘All I’m saying is you have to be pragmatic down here, otherwise you can get into all sorts of trouble. You know now what happened to Kevin – and unlike you, he was completely sane when he arrived here.’

‘In other words, I should be a good girl, concentrate on getting my work done, and otherwise keep my head down.’

‘We simply have to make sure we make it through this second year, and especially the second winter. Then, we can all go home.’

‘Iain, this may surprise you, but I haven’t come all this way just to go home.’

‘No, you’re right. Of course, it’s different for you. You only got here. But why would you care about your ancestors anyway?’

‘Because some are worth it. And family is important.’

‘I don’t know. In my opinion, the usefulness of parents beyond the age of twelve is highly overrated.’

‘You don’t mean that.’

‘Well, that’s my experience at any rate.’ He turned around, with a wistful glance at the door of the simple container building. ‘And speaking of death: I think it’s time for me to go back inside. Too much fresh air kills.’

‘That’s easy for you to say, living up here. But I’ll take a few more deep breaths before immersing myself again in the pong of the underworld over there.’

Iain nodded with a smile and closed the door behind him.

The cool green light still wavered across the sky, blending smoothly into the orange glow above the snowy horizon in the south. Taking in this colourful display above the empty landscape, Siobhán felt that some things were beautiful enough to justify a little sentimentality – even if, technically, the truth was less romantic.

And so, as the summer sunlight continued to fade, little by little every day, gradually giving way to the ethereal lights of

the auroras, there was at least one good thing to look forward to during the long dark months of winter.

* * *

Chris reclined on the sofa, in the otherwise unoccupied lounge. He warmed his hands around a steaming cup of tea, attempting to replace the heat he had lost in the icy waters of the Weddell Sea. He vaguely gazed at the television screen, where a beige pick-up truck sped through the shimmering air over the Australian Outback.

A second cup sat on the table.

‘For me? Cheers, mate – exactly what I need right now.’

‘I drowned yours in milk, as I’ve seen you do it.’

‘Perfect. But Chris, before you get too comfortable: there should still be some hot water left in the shower, if you want to take the opportunity while it lasts – you know, before the others return from their rugby match.’

‘In a moment.’ He was evidently too lazy to get up and turned his attention back to the music video.

‘They had a new album out last year.’

‘Did they? Is it good?’ He seemed genuinely interested.

‘It’s all right – more aggressive than *Diesel and Dust*. They are clearly serious about the subjects they address in their songs.’

‘Yes, clearly.’ He became pensive. ‘You know, we’ll have a lot to catch up with once we get home after more than two years. All that life that’s been going on while we were away.’

He took a sip of his tea. ‘It’s funny, isn’t it, home? Watching this makes you realise how far away that really is. I mean,

right now, this parched desert is closer to us, here on this frozen continent, than our own rainy little island.’

‘The wonders of geography, Chris.’

‘Yes, that’s never been my strength – science.’ He slumped deeper into the sofa. ‘But I’m going to mend your regulator tonight.’

‘What’s wrong with it?’

‘Nothing major. It’s just that, when we ascended today, I saw a few small bubbles come out of one of your first stage connectors.’

‘I can take care of that.’

‘No, it’s all right. You’ve got the samples to deal with, do all the analyses, and I’m no good at that. Kev occasionally tried to explain some of the science stuff to me, but I never got the hang of it.’

‘I’m not surprised. I don’t know what to make of it myself. The kind of biology we’ve pulled out of the sea and the ice so far is totally baffling. Strictly speaking, these simple organisms shouldn’t be able to live at these low temperatures. And yet, they are absolutely thriving down there. I was therefore thinking the other day, when I looked at them under the microscope, their morphology is really ...’

At that moment, the old ship’s clock on the wall in the dining room area chimed.

‘Wait, it’s Sunday, isn’t it? What time is it – seven o’clock. I almost forgot: I’ve got a phone call to make.’

Chris failed miserably to suppress a smirk, glad to escape the biology lecture. Saved by the bell.

* * *

‘Shivy, what’s going on? This is becoming seriously creepy! I’m scared! I can’t be imagining these things, can I? Because if I am, I’m going insane, aren’t I? And if I’m not, it’s even worse.’

‘But why would anyone pursue you all of a sudden?’

‘Why would anyone abduct and kill Kathleen? Ask yourself that, Shivy. Why? I’m telling you, there are evil powers about, some kind of darkness that I can’t see. But I can feel it, and it’s getting closer all the time. I’m trying to keep it at bay by shedding light on it, by attempting to find out what is happening behind the scenes, who really is responsible for the murder. I’ve been going over every aspect of this case, every little detail I could dig up, again and again, now focussing primarily on the manor house, as I said. I’m still convinced that it’s the building or the surrounding area that is at the centre of the crime, rather than these Satanic rituals. In my own time, I’ve spent several evenings trawling through our news archives, looking for any notable event related to that place. But I couldn’t find anything, nothing at all. Despite all these old myths about phantoms and ghosts, there doesn’t appear to be a single recorded tragedy – a murder or an accident – that might have given rise to these stories. Based on what is publicly known, the building is completely unremarkable. And I went right back to the Mid-Nineteenth Century, when it would have been built – approximately, judging by the style. To check the exact date and the ownership, I would have to look up the title to the land in the Scottish Record Office in Edinburgh, and I can’t do that. This is, after all, a personal obsession. It would be rather embarrassing

if the people I work with found out that I'm wasting my time investigating the history of an old building, rather than following the most obvious lines of enquiry that everyone else is pursuing.'

'But Ally, you shouldn't be too harsh on yourself for being affected by the sensational reporting about the murder. A collection of newspapers got here with the post on Friday. I've seen some of these articles now that you were telling me about, with the photographs from inside the manor house, including the one of the entrance hall with the grand staircase – and, of course, that horrible one of the dining hall, with the pentagram and the burnt-down candles on the floor. To think how it must have been for Kathleen to end up there ...'

'Exactly, that's what I can't get out of my head. As I said, I've tried to make sense of it, but whatever resides in that place ... I don't believe it can be rationalised. There was no particular reason for why it hit Kathy, and there will be no particular reason for the next attack – and, yes, I am certain it will strike again. Moreover, I'm convinced that this darkness has been here before. There is something coming back to us from the past. It has lain dormant for decades, and now something has happened. Something has awoken it – and it wasn't these Satanic rituals, I'm sure of that. This is much worse.'

'I don't know what to say, Ally. I mean, you know what I have to say, and I know what you don't want me to say.'

'No, you're right. I'm being foolish. I realise that, as soon as I manage to calm down for just a moment – only, most of the time, I can't. But I understand that this is an awkward situation for you, and there is nothing you can do, being so far away.'

‘Haven’t you talked to anyone else about it, in person? Not about the murder, but these . . . these fears.’

‘What’s the point, Shivy. I mentioned that I’d told Gran about having known Kathy, and she noticed that I was rather troubled by the whole affair. Back then, that was understandable, but I won’t bother her with my paranoia now. And if I go to a psychologist, what are they going to tell me that I don’t already know? That I’m having a nervous breakdown, or panic attacks? That I’m being “overwrought” and should take some time off? Fantastic, I can tell myself that. As a matter of fact, that’s exactly what I am planning to do. But until then, I’m stuck here, in the wake of a terrible tragedy, incapable of making sense of what’s going on, and watching myself slowly going mad.’

‘Don’t you go out with your friends sometimes?’

‘I don’t want to impose myself. I’m really no good company at the moment.’

‘I’m sure they would understand. And if it helps you . . .’

‘Well, that’s the problem, you see. I don’t think it would. I find socialising too exhausting right now, in addition to everything else. On balance, I feel better on my own – even if, occasionally, I get caught up in some unpleasant thoughts. I just have to push through, but I’ll be all right.’

‘And work isn’t helping either, I imagine, with the constant reminders of what happened.’

‘Not exactly, no. It’s obvious that I can’t deal with this on a detached professional level. I’m too personally involved. I decided therefore that I would not contribute to our planned documentary on the Satanic culture in Britain – if indeed there is

one. Also, it is quite clear that I need to get away from here. Shortly before our last conversation, I'd requested a sabbatical, and I got the confirmation now – three-months beginning on the 28th, that is Monday week. Normally, you couldn't make such a short-term request, but I suspect everyone at work recognises that I'm a little out of it at the moment. They were all very nice about Kathy, trying to be supportive. But as I said, this is different now. This is either me being paranoid, or there genuinely is something going on, of which Kathy's murder only was the beginning.

'Whatever the truth is, I have to get out of Cambridge for a while, to get at least some physical distance from everything. I'm not decided yet on what I want to do. My first thought was to do some voluntary work abroad for the UN. But it turns out they expect you to sign up for at least one year, and I can't afford to be away from my job for that long. I do want to come back here, eventually. I really like Cambridge. I like the town. I like the old colleges. I like being surrounded by university culture, even if I'm not studying anymore. And Gran lives nearby, of course.

'Alternatively, I thought I'd like to go to Dublin again, freshen up my Irish, use the National Library to do some research, learn more about the history of the island – Acts of Union and onwards, the historical background of the Troubles, basically. And when I get back, perhaps I can try and get a programme commissioned about that, instead of Satanism, which clearly isn't healthy for me. I don't know. But I definitely want to do something worthwhile, get fresh ideas into my head, and purge the

old ones. The good thing is, three months are plenty of time, and there is no need to stress myself out. So, I was thinking: rather than flying, I might take the *Sealink* from Holyhead. I've never done that before. It's much more relaxing, and I'll finally get to see Wales as well.'

'Ally, that sounds absolutely brilliant. You should definitely do that. And in the meantime, don't let these silly news reports get to you.'

'Silly? That's easy for you to say. You don't know how it is back here. Satanism and these ghost stories may only be diversions, created specifically for the media. But there is something very nasty behind these events.' She paused, trying to get her voice under control. 'Shivy, you're not here. I can only tell you how it feels to me. There are shadows all around me, and they are closing in. In the past, as you know, I never used the chain at the door. Now, I put it up as soon as I come home – for all the good it did for Kathleen. Still, I'm thinking that maybe it will buy me a few seconds, just long enough to call the police – because I fear it will happen, Shivy. As I told you, I have this feeling of being followed, for more than a week now, as soon as I step out of the door. Even inside ... I can't see it, but it's here, creeping out of every dark corner. I keep far too many lights on, all the time. And even so, I don't feel safe anymore in my dear little flat. I can't sleep, and if I do, I have the most horrible nightmares. Then, I wake up, but the nightmares are still there, as if the boundary between dreams and reality wasn't solid anymore. And no matter how ... What was that?'

'What do you mean?'

‘I heard something, outside the door. Shivy, there is someone outside the door.’

There was the noise of a table skidding on the floor. A glass shattered. Then, the only sound left was the static crackle in the satellite link.

‘Ally? ... Ally!’

‘Yes, I’m still here. It’s only the neighbours. I heard their child’s voice.’ She sighed. ‘It’s all right, I’m sorry. As I said, I’m in a bad shape right now. Just let me ... Look, let’s talk again the same time next weekend, as we agreed. By then, I should have made a decision and found something exciting to do during the sabbatical, and then we can chat about that. Right now, I’m feeling awful about a couple of things, but there is nothing you can do. I’m just being hysterical, and I’m wasting your money and your time. So, I’ll let you get on with your life. But I’ll be thinking of you – love forever, remember?’

‘Ally, wait.’

‘*Go dté tú slán*, Shivy.’

‘Ally, please wait ... Ally?’

She had hung up.

* * *

Once again, the evening sun floated along the horizon, suspended in a golden haze. In about three weeks, it would be setting again. The short summer was almost over. And thus, time did move forward on Antarctica, even if it did so at a glacial pace. The calm days would come to an end, replaced once again by the endless howling of the wind, and the continuous flow of snow from the

elusive world of the interior of the vast continent. And then, as winter approached, darkness would settle ...

‘Siobhán, old girl.’

‘Iain ... Did you come out here for a smoke?’

‘Good point.’ He leaned back against the railing of the main access tower of the base and began rummaging in the pockets of his parka. ‘I was going over to the Met Tower to start my shift, but I still have a few minutes.’

He finally found a crumpled pack and pulled out a cigarette. ‘Missing anyone in particular?’

‘A friend of mine – a very good friend.’

He nodded slowly. ‘I know the feeling.’

‘She’s like a sister to me.’

He glanced over. ‘I see ... Family again?’

‘Yes, family. Contrary to what you believe, some of them are worth the heartache – and the tears. But I’ll be all right now.’

‘Anything major going on?’

‘I ... We just spoke on the phone. We didn’t have an argument exactly, but she basically hung up on me. I don’t blame her for that at all, and that’s not why I’m upset. What hurts me is knowing how depressed she is, and that there is nothing I can do to help.’

‘Why? What’s bothering her?’

‘Alison? Well, it started with the murder of Kathleen Reed, shortly before the holidays. Didn’t Chris tell you about that?’

‘Chris? No. But we did hear about the case through the news bulletins that come in by telex. Then, yesterday or the day be-

fore, I read about it again in the latest stack of newspapers.’

‘I was just wondering. About a week ago, I told Chris that I’d stayed in Kathleen’s flat until a few days before she was abducted.’

‘Blimey.’

‘Yes. I never actually met her, but she was a friend of Alison’s. You can therefore imagine that, when Kathleen’s body was found, she was completely distraught. And it only got worse when more and more of the circumstances of the murder came out. I mean, you saw the papers now. You saw what they have been publishing for the last few weeks – all this stuff about Satanic rituals. It makes absolutely no sense, and I agree with Alison, up to a point, that there must be something else behind it. But in her distressed state, she fears that there are some dark forces at work that picked Kathleen at random and will randomly strike again. Regardless of whether we imagine these dark forces to be supernatural or not, to me, it seems unlikely that Kathleen would have been a random victim. A more probable scenario is that, while she was in London, she met a new group of people. Through these people, she got herself entangled in some kind of shady activity, most likely without noticing anything. It might have been as simple as a casual conversation in a café or a pub, which she had completely forgotten about the following day. But during that conversation, she might have mentioned that she was from Cambridge, and that she was going to return there soon. From what she had said, it might also have been implied that she was single and living alone. Sometime later, when she returned home, someone followed her, used the opportunity

to abduct her from her flat, and all suspicions were directed towards Cambridge and the Highlands, when really the origin of the crime lies in London.’

Iain nodded gravely. ‘Dodgy place, I always said it.’

‘Big place, with some dodgy people living in it. And may I remind you, Iain McDonnell, that it is you these days who lives in the outskirts of this great English city, whereas I . . .’

‘Yes, all right, Siobhán, no need to rub it in. And I have you know that I was only following the job – grudgingly.’

‘Fine, just . . . Anyway, understandably, all of this had a strong effect on Alison because it was she who knew Kathleen, and it was she who had to remain in this mess, whereas I could simply leave everything behind and come here.’

‘I see . . . But you said she is like a sister to you. I take it then that you’re not actually related?’

‘No. We met when we were both very young, about two years old, in Norwich. Only a few months earlier, Alison had been in a car accident that she had survived on the back seat, while her parents hadn’t been so lucky. She was then taken in by an aunt, who was working full-time and couldn’t look after her during the day. I was in a similar situation, also without parents, and being raised by my nan. Therefore, when we began to attend the same day nursery, as the youngest in the group, orphans in a way, and without any siblings, we naturally gravitated towards each other. Alison never got on with her aunt. She probably sensed that she wasn’t welcome, that she was seen as a bit of a nuisance at home. For that reason, as she got older, she spent more and more time with Gran and me – whole weekends, usually. And once we

were in primary school, she even went on holidays with us. So, just like a sibling, she's always been there, for as long as I can remember.'

'Then, I suppose she was the friend from Norwich who pulled you through the first term at Cambridge?'

'Yes, she was. Alison is only about half a year older than I am, but there is something about her character that naturally casts her in the role of the bigger sister. She's not only cleverer than I am, but also more determined and charismatic – better with people, you know, more popular. She's always been the driving force in our relationship. For example, when we started to attend comprehensive school, Alison got herself onto the field hockey team and wanted me to join as well. But I was a slow runner and felt more comfortable in the water. Because of that, I joined the swimming team instead. Then, in Fifth Form, Alison became captain of the U16 girls and somehow managed to convince the school that they should try and qualify for the National Championship within the next two years. Only, they needed a goalkeeper. She therefore kept asking me to give it a go and, eventually, I agreed. We managed to get through the East Round by sheer determination, inspired by Alison's enthusiasm. But in the finals, the competition got a little too strong for us. Even so, it was fun. I'd been a bit of a loner until then, and it was good to be part of a group.'

'And she's still staying in Cambridge?'

'She's back there now. Initially, after she got her Master in International Relations, she was accepted for an internship placement with the British embassy in Dublin. At that point, I and

everyone else were sure that she was going to have a stellar career in the diplomatic service or in politics, and that we wouldn't be seeing much of her anymore. We were therefore all very surprised when, only a year later, she quit the internship, moved back to Cambridge, and began working as a reporter for a regional television station. It turned out that she had got homesick. She clearly felt more strongly rooted than I ever did in the region where we had grown up. She never said anything because she didn't want me to feel guilty, but I know that part of her reason for returning had also been to be closer to Gran, who was in her seventies by then and living on her own.

'After a couple of years, the station Alison works for launched a current affairs programme, and she got offered the position of deputy editor. Until recently, she seemed completely happy, but that murder really unsettled her. That's what makes this whole situation even more disturbing, to see her fall apart like this. In the past, she was always the stronger of the two of us. She was always the one who helped me get through difficult times. Now, it would be my turn to be there for her. But I can't, being stuck here – and here is where I wanted to be for so many years.'

'That's tough, Siobhán. I had no idea. Otherwise, I hadn't been so callous about distancing yourself from life back home while you're on Antarctica – you know, what I said a week ago.'

'That's all right. I should have talked to you sooner, although you can do even less about this than I can. I simply have to keep in touch with Alison as well as I can, give her the opportunity to talk about those issues she doesn't want to discuss with anyone else, and hope that, eventually, she gets over her depression.'

Which, incidentally, is why I have been using the sat phone more frequently probably than the rest of you together – just in case you were wondering.

‘But listen, I mustn’t detain you from your duties any longer. I’m sure Nigel is already looking forward to his lunch and some company over here.’

CHAPTER FIVE

THE WRONG DIMENSION

The entrance hall was filled with pale moonlight, falling through the tall windows in the facade of the old manor. The slanting paths of the rays were traced in a thin mist of dust that hung ghostly in the still air.

Straight ahead, and flanked by two ornate columns, a wide staircase led to the first floor. Halfway up, it branched into two elegant wings that curved towards either side of the building, giving it the impression of a magnificent bird of prey that was protecting the rooms above.

As Siobhán walked into the centre of the hall, her echoing footsteps took on lives of their own in the otherwise forbidding silence, becoming immaterial copies of herself that flitted through the desolate spaces, until they dissipated down a dark corridor or vanished into the walls.

On her left, a door stood ajar. She reached out, and it swung slowly towards her. The room behind it was empty. In the dim light from the entrance hall, she could see that the walls were bare, except for a solid frame that appeared to be filled with a perfect darkness. Was it a window or a mirror? Was it a darkness looking ahead, or looking back? Or was it a painting, perhaps, that had been covered in black, to conceal the image it had once contained? Standing in the doorway, Siobhán could not tell. The nature of this darkness would only reveal itself upon

closer inspection.

Instantly, however, under her first step inside the room, she felt the floor give way, like the surface of a thick viscous fluid that would not lend her any support. Suddenly overcome by a sense of danger, Siobhán realised that the room would protect its secrets. Even if she managed to enter and to take a closer look at the frame, she would never be allowed to leave. This room was out of bounds.

She therefore turned away from the door and started walking down the corridor that led underneath one of the wings of the staircase. Its end was out of sight, lost beyond the reach of the faint moonlight. Unsure how to proceed, she followed her echoing footsteps, which appeared to be carrying with them an awareness that she failed to make conscious; as if they belonged to a version of herself that had been there before, a disembodied memory of events that she now had to recover.

Then, another frame appeared on the wall – without any doubt a large painting this time – the full-length portrait of a young woman, standing in a room that, by its style, could well be somewhere in the old building. She was elegantly clad in a Victorian evening gown with a richly embroidered bodice. Her long dark hair was gathered up in an elaborate design of braids and curls. Yet despite the festive attire, her eyes were sad, her gaze unfocused and aimed into emptiness.

Or so it had seemed at first. But walking past the painting, Siobhán felt, more than she saw out of the corner of her eye, a furtive movement, accompanied perhaps by a faint rustling sound. When she turned, she had the impression of a slight shift

in the woman's countenance, as the sad eyes fleetingly appeared to meet her own.

And, suddenly, it occurred to Siobhán that the young woman's stance might have shifted as well, although she had not consciously noticed her feet before. Standing as the woman was now, with one foot in front of the other, she seemed poised to step forward and out of the painting at any moment – as if the painting was a gateway from another world after all.

Just then, however, Siobhán's attention was drawn to the end of the corridor where, out of the darkness, a large double-winged door was slowly opening towards her, with an unsteady shine emanating from it.

Gradually, the grand dining hall was revealed, with long velvet curtains drawn across the windows in the wall opposite the door. The room contained no furniture. Instead, at its centre, a white pentagram was drawn on the dark floorboards, surrounded by a circle of flickering candles. Inside it, a figure lay motionless, clad in a simple white dress.

The candlelight flitted across Kathleen's face, creating the illusion of movement; yet her features were rigid, her eyes closed. She appeared to be unconscious, but still alive, her chest expanding with irregular and shallow breathing.

Siobhán gripped her arm, trying to wake her. She tried to speak to her, with a voice not even she herself could hear – her desperate thoughts failing to materialise as sound, as they were extinguished instantly in the cursed atmosphere.

Siobhán took hold of both of Kathleen's arms and shook her in another attempt to rouse her. Then, suddenly, Kathleen's eyes

opened – if only they had not. If only they had stayed closed in an eternal state of oblivion. They were glassy and lifeless from the horrors they had witnessed.

Siobhán looked behind herself for a way out, but it was as if, during her attempts to waken Kathleen, the room had rotated around her, to confuse and disorient her. She could not see the door anymore through which she had entered. But across the hall, another door had opened into a smaller room, out of which a red glow emerged from a fireplace. This, then, was the only exit.

Would she be able to support Kathleen long enough to find the way back to the entrance hall? Siobhán slid her arm underneath Kathleen's shoulders, trying to raise her off the hard floor. But Kathleen was weak, still not properly awake. She was swooning, her body hanging limply in Siobhán's arms. And they did not have much time.

Any moment now, the phantoms would realise that they were trying to escape. They would rise from the deep lake outside the manor house. Under the silvery shine of the full moon, they would come gliding up the sloping lawn and in through the tall windows from which the curtains were now drawn back to reveal the nighttime sky.

Then, she noticed that there already was something moving in the adjacent room. The slender figure of a woman slowly stepped out of the darkness and in front of the glowing fireplace, where she remained standing quietly, just beyond the range of the flickering light from the candles.

It was the woman in the Victorian evening gown. And now,

Siobhán recognised her. How could she have failed to do so before? It would be alright now. Alison would help her, as she had always done before.

Siobhán attempted to call out to her – again with only a soundless voice. She desperately beckoned to Alison, to make her understand that she needed her to rescue Kathleen, to allow them all to escape from this haunted place.

But Alison did not respond. Instead, she took a silent step backwards. Her appearance became diffuse, like a memory that was starting to fade. Then, she turned around slowly.

Once more, Siobhán attempted to call out, to beg Alison not to leave her. But the vision continued to recede, away from the glow of the dying embers in the fireplace, and vanished into darkness.

* * *

The footsteps out on the corridor briefly slowed as they approached the gym, but then continued towards the biology lab. A moment later, the door, already standing slightly ajar, was pushed open a little further.

‘Dr Dannreuther, working hard?’

In response to Siobhán’s non-committal grunting, Iain entered tentatively. ‘What kind of secrets have you brought to light from the mystical ocean depths?’

‘Just critters, but lots of them.’

‘Critters? Is that a technical term?’

‘Critters don’t deserve technical terms – even if, technically, they are single-celled photoautotrophs.’

‘And they are so small you need a microscope to see them?’

‘Individually, yes.’

Iain sidled over. ‘Can I take a look?’

‘Be my guest. I have to give my eyes a rest – and I need a good stretch. I’ve been hunched up and staring into that thing for too long today.’

He squinted into the ocular with a reaction of surprise. ‘Blimey, I didn’t expect that. There is a whole zoo down there.’

‘Exactly, and that’s the problem. Why are they there – in these numbers, and with that diversity? Conventional wisdom suggests that lifeforms should be reduced to a few specialists at these low temperatures and staggering levels of salinity in the small pockets of water that are trapped within the sea ice, especially without any sunlight during a large part of the year. Incidentally, how’s the ozone hole doing these days?’

Iain glanced up from the microscope. ‘Just fine, thank you.’

‘Splendid, precisely what these little critters need, one more thing to worry about – increased UV-B.’

Iain was immersed again in the microbial world of diatoms. ‘I don’t know, Siobhán, I think they are brilliant, completely bizarre shapes down there, no two exactly the same, at least among this lot – reminds me a lot of ice crystals. Perhaps you’re being unduly harsh on them.’

‘Yes, you’re right. They are quite fascinating, if truth be told. It’s just that I miss my warm-blooded friends.’

‘Them being?’

‘They being chirpy and clicky and whistly and squeaky and squawky – and so unbelievably cute.’

He leaned away from the microscope with an alarmed expres-

sion. 'At this rate, the next winter is going to be a pretty rough patch for you.'

'I know. And I'm beginning to appreciate what a commitment it was to come here for this amount of time. But what really troubles me right now is Alison. I mentioned her about a week ago, remember? She was quite depressed over the murder of one of her friends. But now, I don't know what happened to her. We had arranged for me to phone her yesterday evening, and I tried to reach her several times, but she never answered. And then again this evening, as soon as the satellite channel got switched over to the public network, I repeatedly tried her home number, without any success. I know that today was the start of her three-month sabbatical. She told me about that last time we spoke. Back then, she wasn't sure yet what she wanted to do. She only mentioned she thought about going to Dublin. But if she went there already, why didn't she tell me?'

'Maybe she left spontaneously at the weekend, when the Institute was closed, and she couldn't leave a message for you.'

'I don't know, Iain. I guess it would be possible. It just isn't like Alison to make rash decisions like that. She always plans things out meticulously. No, I have this terrible feeling that something isn't right – and I'm scared, genuinely scared, you know. Last night, I even ... well, I had a bit of a funny dream about Alison. The kind of bizarre dreams you sometimes get about people, when you can see them, and you want to speak to them, but they are not actually there, or at least they are not responding, as if you yourself weren't really there inside your own dream – you know the kind of dream I'm talking about?'

Iain nodded slowly, but without much conviction.

‘Anyway, with all these things going on, I can’t follow your otherwise good advice of letting go of the ordinary world back home and focus on being here. I feel disconnected from everything, neither properly here, nor there, you see – as if I were stuck in-between two separate realities.’

‘Yes, I can see that. But if that’s how you feel, you shouldn’t withdraw into the remotest and loneliest corner of the base. We’re very happy to include you in all our activities – or inactivities, as the case may be.’

‘I know. But when I’m ... like this, basically, I don’t want to give anyone an excuse to say: see, that’s what you get from allowing a soppy hysterical woman to work on Antarctica.’

‘Nobody on this base thinks like that, Siobhán. And I can’t see you beating your predecessor in terms of hysteria.’

‘No, I suppose that would be difficult.’

Iain suppressed a laugh. Then, he became more serious. ‘Can I ask you about your family? It’s just that you mentioned growing up with your nan, and without any parents.’

‘There isn’t much to tell, really. Mum died of pneumonia when I was very young, only a few days old. So, obviously, I can’t remember her at all.’

‘But what about your dad?’

‘My biological father is shrouded in mystery. It was Liverpool during the early Sixties, you know. Counting backwards from when I was born, I picture a lively party during a warm night in the August of ’62, perhaps spilling out from The Cavern Club – although, the truth is I don’t know the details because

Gran herself couldn't tell me. Back then, of course, it was impossible to get a legal abortion. But despite that, I like to think that Mum was looking forward to meeting me. That's certainly the impression I get from looking at the photographs that were taken during her pregnancy, in which she does look happy. She was quite pretty, and as I got older, I hoped to become more and more like her. Unfortunately, now that I'm basically the same age as she was when she died, there isn't much to suggest that we're related at all. There are no pictures from when Gran was young, but I suspect that Mum took mostly after her dad. Her hair, at least, was much darker than her mother's. I therefore like to think that I'm taking after Gran, recessively.'

'Rather than ...'

'Yes – and don't you lecture me on genetics. You better stick to auroras and things like that.'

'I don't know. It seems you have more exiting theories about them as well. But in that context, I have been wondering about what you meant about ancestors, those who are worthy of remembrance.'

'I was thinking about my mum.'

'Yes, I realise that now. And I'm sorry about what I said about family not being important and all that. We evidently come from very different backgrounds. But on your mother's side, have you no relatives other than your nan?'

'No, that's another broken line. Gran is from Germany, originally. She came over to England during the Blitz, without her husband. It was only she and her daughter. Mum was only five at the time.'

‘And your grandfather was caught by the Nazis?’

‘No, Gran isn’t Jewish. That wasn’t the reason for her leaving Germany. It’s complicated, and no one really knows what happened. From what she told me, her husband was in the navy, a commander on a submarine. When the war started, he was gone for months at a time. And then, one day, they disappeared – the submarine and the whole crew. The first thought was that they had been sunk. But somehow, rumours then sprung up that, instead, they had defected and gone over to our side. Whether or not that was true, the Germans certainly took it very seriously, and they were going to arrest Gran – for interrogation, to prevent her from escaping as well, or simply as a hostage. Fortunately, she was warned just in time and managed to escape, together with a group of Jewish refugees. In retrospect, she never believed that her husband would have betrayed her and their little daughter in that way. But at that moment, she didn’t have any other options, did she, especially with my mother. I mean, we know what the Nazis did with people they didn’t like, or whom they didn’t trust. There is no evidence to suggest that Gran’s husband ever arrived in Britain. Nor, as far as we know, was he ever seen again anywhere else. In the end, the most likely scenario is that his submarine really was sunk, and that all those rumours were completely unfounded. But the damage was done. When the war was over, Gran therefore decided not to return to Germany. She had received some fairly nasty letters from her own and her husband’s family, accusing her of being a traitor who had gone over to the very enemy that had killed her husband. So, you see, my roots in England don’t go very deep. At the same time,

I have no desire to find out more about the German part of the family either.'

'No, I can see that. But you know, wars are strange and confusing. Looking back at them from peacetime might not necessarily give you the right perspective to understand the actions of those who actually lived through them. While you're involved in a war, you only ever get to see one side of the story. And your actions are going to be influenced by the views of that side, and not the other. But then again, what do I know. My own personal experiences are minor by comparison with what our parents and grandparents had to go through.'

'You were in the armed forces?'

'Yes, Siobhán, me – a trained killer, if you can imagine that.'

'I'll try not to.'

'Hmm ... but it's true. I was with the Paras, originally stationed in Northern Ireland. Then, back in '82, when the task force was assembled ... We were on leave at the time, but our unit was recalled to barracks. And before we knew it, we were on an improvised troop transport heading south.'

'You were on the Falklands? How was it?'

'We won.'

'Yes, but I mean, the fighting?'

'It didn't feel very heroic at the time, I can tell you that. My unit was one of the last to be deployed, and it took us more than three weeks just to get there. It was well into autumn and already bloody freezing by the time we made the landing – in secret, as if we were the invaders. For a whole week, we were dug in and waiting. Our boots had got wet while wading ashore, and

now they froze around our feet. That's most of what I remember from those first days – being cold and miserable. Then, one night, we finally got the order to launch our attack. We therefore marched off in single file, in the dark, across unfamiliar terrain, not knowing the strength and location of our enemy. We simply stumbled along over snow-covered tussocks and peat bogs – the Falklands, that was the real Bogside. I must have sprained my ankle at some point. But luckily, with the cold, I'd lost all sensation in my feet by then and didn't even notice it until much later. Shortly after dawn, we got caught in enemy fire, exposed on open ground, and outnumbered by more than two-to-one. The supporting frigate had her gun jammed, and the Harriers and helicopters were grounded due to fog. Then, it happened: our platoon commander got killed. They had lured him into an ambush by displaying white flags. That's when it turned genuinely nasty. We ... well, we did it, in the end. We pushed through. But we were badly prepared for the circumstances on the islands – the harsh environment, without any natural cover. Before, we'd been used to controlling urban conflicts, being caught up in street fights with armed civilians. Still, there was one familiar element: the Argentinians were also Catholics. In their trenches, among the scattered body parts, we found their rifles with pictures of the Virgin Mary taped to the butts.

'It was a bloody mess. And where was the morality in that? These guys we killed, they were all conscripts. They hadn't signed up to being in the armed forces, as we had. They were completely under the control of a ruthless military dictatorship. And even with something as morally clear-cut as the Second

World War, fighting is never as straightforward as you might want it to be. Ask yourself this: who or what exactly is the enemy you're supposed to fight? Who or what are, let's say, "the Nazis"? Sure, they are a particular group of people, but that's not what makes them dangerous. That's just what makes them human. What makes people like that truly dangerous are their opinions about certain things, their attitudes and prejudices, whatever they may be – fascism, racism, antisemitism. And therefore, what you're up against are ideas. But the problem is, you can't shoot at an idea. You can only shoot at people who may or may not, at that very moment, hold that idea inside their heads. But how many people must you shoot to kill an idea? In the end, you can't escape ideas or ideologies. You're always going to be part of one group or another: you're a Fascist or a Socialist, you're a Christian or a Jew, you're a Catholic or a Protestant. And how many opportunities do you ever get to choose which group you want to belong to?

He looked down at his hands, twisting his engagement ring. 'It really was a bloody mess, the Falklands. Stuff like that, once you experienced it yourself, never leaves you. Even when we got back to Britain ... I was scared to be deployed again, but I didn't feel at home anymore on civvy street either. I honestly believe that if I'd been seriously injured myself, perhaps it would have made things easier. It has happened at last, your worst fears have become reality, and despite that, you're still there. Maybe it would have reduced the guilt a bit too, I don't know. Instead, it was Warrenpoint all over again. While my mates died all around me, I walked away largely unscathed. There was no reason for

why it should have been them and not me – and why it wasn't going to be me the next time. I realised then that I had to get out, and so I left the Regiment.'

'Yes. I remember it, of course, watching it on the telly – the departure and then the return of the task force. But somehow the Falklands seemed like a long way away. And now we're getting involved in the Middle-East again. Wars are strange, aren't they? If you don't pay attention to the media, you could easily sleep through them.'

'Unless they come knocking on your own door. Then it's a very different story. But there was one positive outcome from all this. The Falklands had put the Southern Hemisphere on the map for me, and Antarctica in particular. If you want to get away from armed conflicts, there is really no better place than here – the only continent on the planet where all military activity is strictly prohibited. But of course, at the time, it seemed just as impossible for me to ever get the chance to come here as it must have for you, when you first applied. Leaving the army, at almost thirty years old, I couldn't afford to indulge in dreams anymore. I had to be realistic. Based on my experiences as a paratrooper, meteorologist was one of the civilian professions that occurred to me instantly. Unlike working as a paramedic, it provided a relatively small chance of ever being confronted with severed limbs again. I was lucky enough to be accepted for the forecaster training at the Met Office and moved to Bracknell, as you know. That's where I met Talwyn. I got caught up in our relationship and somehow forgot about Antarctica. But after a while, it kept resurfacing. And when we began to talk about

marriage, she insisted that first I should at least try and get onto the wintering team, to get it out of my system. And here I am.'

He attempted to look excited and checked his watch. 'Blimey, is that the time? Just gone past half eleven.'

'What? That late already? How is that possible?'

'Well, I did the 0 UTC observations and balloon release, which was 2100 hours our time. Then, I updated the weather maps, went over to the South Tube for a while ...'

'Yes, all right, I believe you. But doesn't time fly when you're having fun. The others are probably making assumptions already.'

Iain got up and stretched himself. 'Let them. But I have to get back to work now.'

'And I better try and get some sleep, just in case the weather tomorrow is still good enough for diving after all – the dire predictions on the notice board notwithstanding.'

'I like your optimism, Siobhán, but you should put more faith in "weather people," as you like to call us. There is a gale moving up from across the sea. It's already started to whistle outside, and by tomorrow morning, it'll be howling. So, I'm afraid you'll have to take a break from aquatic pursuits for the next few days, and use the opportunity to study the critters you've already got.'

'Are you sure?'

'Definitely.'

'Right ... Then I think I'll take some sleeping pills and knock myself out. I haven't managed to sleep very well during the last couple of nights. I'll ask John whether he can give me some-

thing, if he's still up.'

The South Tube corridor lay deserted. But the unsteady light of the television set emerged from the open door of the lounge, together with the soft music of the final scene of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*.

'Incidentally, Iain, why did you come to see me in the first place? Did you want something from me?'

'As I said, I had some time to kill between routine observations, and I ... well, I thought I could use the gym. I therefore came over here and saw the light in your laboratory.'

'Iain ...'

'Fine, I was in the lounge with the others, watching an old video and having a beer – better? And when I didn't see you anywhere in the common rooms, I thought I might go looking for you. I just wanted to make sure you're all right.'

'You know, I think I am – or, at least, I shall be. And I do appreciate you stopping by for a chat.'

He nodded. 'Good night, Siobhán, and sweet dreams.'

'If only ...'

* * *

Dim light broke through the sluggish waves. Above the surface, a dark silhouette could be seen. It was a row of jagged mountains, clearly delineated against the nighttime sky, which was filled with the diffuse glow of an invisible moon.

Below, the rocky ground fell away steeply, through murky shades of green, until it vanished into an unfathomable darkness.

Up from that abyss, long flowing strands of seaweed reached out towards her like the tentacles of an ancient monster.

And she was certain that other menaces would be lurking down there. She felt the irresistible pull of the unknown depth. But she could not allow herself to give in. She had to be strong and fight against it. She had to get back up to the surface, although the waves already seemed to be at too great a distance for her to reach.

Suddenly, the deathly silence over the water was disturbed by a wailing sound, the sound of an air raid siren. A war had broken out. The enemy was approaching and, any moment now, they would launch their attack.

She could hear voices, more and more voices, and they were getting louder. People were shouting, people in distress. Clearly, a battle was raging above. And there she was, caught between the fighting on land and the phantoms of the deep.

But, finally, the siren stopped. The shouting subsided. The fighting had come to an end. The war was lost.

Then, a distant rumbling penetrated the waves, as that of thunder; as if a storm was passing over the devastation left in the wake of the hostilities. It was followed by a pitiful groaning, like the sound of a stricken vessel that was floundering helplessly in a violent sea. It was about to break up. It was going to be flooded, and it would sink.

Total darkness filled the space around her. Her mind was sluggish, her thoughts only vaguely discernible through a thick fog. And she felt dizzy, as if the encompassing darkness were spin-

ning.

Although, there could be no doubt that she had just been abruptly cast out of the realm of yet another nightmare and plunged back into her bed in the familiar room at the very end of Aurora's South Tube.

She listened into the surrounding void. The room itself was completely silent, without even the breathy sound of the ventilation system. But at a distance, the rumbling of her dream still persisted, as if a thunderstorm were indeed passing over the ice shelf.

Additionally, there was something wrong with the air. It was thicker than usual, and not only for the lack of circulation. No, the air carried with it a distinct smell – the smell of smoke.

And finally, her sluggish mind registered what she would normally have realised straight away. What she could hear was not a storm raging above the ice shelf. That would never be audible tens of feet beneath the surface. It was the sound of flames.

The base was on fire.

CHAPTER SIX

FALLEN BEHIND

The first difficulty Siobhán had to overcome was the complete darkness in the room. Previously, when she had woken up, there had always been the faint red glow from the alarm clock, which had allowed her to see the lamp above her bed.

Now, anxiously feeling upwards along the wall, it took several seconds until she touched it. Then, the light switch flipped with a dead click, and the room remained in darkness. Clearly, the power at least in parts of the South Tube was already down, which probably meant that the fire was starting to spread into the sleeping quarters of the base.

There was no time to lose. She had to get herself down to the ground floor, out into the corridor, so that she could confront whatever situation she would find there. And she would have to do this blind.

With her head still spinning, she tried to orient herself in the dark. On her left, she felt the bedside cabinet; and on it, the chain with the two identity discs. She grabbed it and hastily put it around her neck. The way things looked, it was now more likely to serve its purpose than she would have expected before going to bed.

Next to the chain, she felt the cool steel casing of her watch. As one of her most prized possessions, she was not leaving that behind and mechanically slipped it on. After weeks of living

underground, the dial had lost its glow, but her internal clock told her that it still had to be in the middle of the night.

Then, her hand made brief contact with a glass. A moment later, she heard it drop onto the carpet. That reminded her of the sleeping pills she had taken, and she realised that they had to be responsible for the thick fog inside her brain, and for her dizziness. Even so, she had to get going now.

The instant she stepped out of bed, she felt the cold touch of water against her feet, but it was just the puddle from the dropped glass. This was not one of her nightmares becoming real. She was not going to fall through the floor into an aqueous abyss. The floor was as solid as ever. All she had to do was keep putting one foot in front of the other, heading away from the bed and drifting slightly towards the right. Somewhere in that general direction, she would find the stairs that led down to the floor below.

The first object she encountered was the chair with her bathrobe hanging over the back. On the seat, she felt her tracksuit. That would have to do for the moment, and she could only hope that her outdoor gear had not been destroyed yet in the fire.

There was also one sock, one only, the other probably on the floor somewhere. Tentatively moving her hand over the rough texture of the old carpet, she felt a thick hardcover book near one leg of the chair, with copies of journal articles next to it. A little farther off, her hand touched a few paperbacks, then her slippers, the portable cassette player, several tapes, the dumbbell weights, together with the rolled-up exercise mat – nothing that would be of any use to her now. Finally, she came across one of

her trainers, the left most likely, and the other one nearby. The second sock still eluded her, but she could not linger to worry about that. This was a situation where every minute could make the difference between life and death.

With her circulation still down, and her muscles sluggish to respond to the feeble instructions from her clouded brain, walking across the dark room towards the staircase was like battling through black syrup.

The stairs appeared suddenly as a void in front of her, too quickly for her to react in any coordinated manner. All she could do, in her current state, was to give in to the pull of gravity by stumbling down the narrow steps, spiralling around a few times, followed by a less than elegant landing at the bottom. But the first objective of her escape from the death trap on the floor above had been accomplished.

Now, it was a matter of finding the way out of the chaotically crammed storage room. There was no hint of light anywhere, only the noise from the fire, vaguely ahead and to the right. That was where the corridor was and, somewhere in that general direction, would also be the door. However, in between lay a confusing network of improvised passages, meandering between rows of tall stacks of boxes. Somehow, she would have to find the right path through this maze.

She had walked both directions an uncounted number of times, although always without paying much attention, and never in the dark. At first, it was easy enough. All she had to do was to follow the metal shelving unit away from the stairs. At the end of it, she was certain, she had to turn to the right.

Three more paces on, a narrow gap appeared, this time on her left. This would lead into the proper direction, but it felt too soon. She therefore kept walking past the next pile of random objects and then turned to the left. But only a few steps on, an obstacle barred her way – a solid stack of heavy boxes, which should not have been there, had she taken the correct turn.

There was no point in doubling back. Attempting to find her usual way out, without the use of her eyes, was clearly futile. She would just have to risk it and try to find another path, although any further wrong turns would lead her deeper and deeper into an unexplored network of dead ends among the discarded relics of the past.

Groping sideways into darkness, she felt an obstacle on the left, but there was no immediate opposition towards her right. Consequently, she turned that way and quickly came across something lying on the floor – a single box apparently, not particularly big, but big enough to trip up an unsteady pair of legs.

Her arms outstretched in front of her, she stumbled helplessly into a wonky pile of cardboard boxes. Instantly, the pile toppled over, taking down another, and causing objects to come crashing down in the darkness all around her, including some wooden crates, by the sound of it.

Now, everything was in total confusion. At this point, all she could do was to battle blindly through the jumbled mess towards the noise from the fire, even if that meant pushing through more barriers. Compared with the prospect of burning to death, being struck by falling objects somehow did not seem that bad.

But the next obstacle she encountered was an immovable wall

of heavy crates. She randomly followed that barrier towards the right – without tripping over any further detritus on the floor – walked around the last of the crates and, for a short distance, back to the left.

Then, for once, she got lucky. Just ahead, down at floor level, was a thin horizontal line of dim light. She had found the door.

Outside, the tunnel was filled with smoke. Through it, the fire could be seen raging at the far end, most fiercely at the power generator, and spreading from there. The wooden structure that housed the kitchen had already broken down. The fire inside it had almost burned itself out, while a fresh line of flames now advanced through the dining room and the lounge, their front panels collapsing into the corridor.

Any moment now, the blaze would break through the common rooms and start attacking the sleeping quarters. Despite that, no one else seemed to be about. Why had the others not noticed anything? How could anyone sleep through this racket of bursting timber? Were they perhaps already unconscious, having inhaled the smoke for longer than she had, in her bedroom at the very end of the tunnel?

Siobhán began walking down the corridor, shielding her face with one arm, while banging on the living room doors that she passed – without getting any response. As she got closer to the origin of the fire, the heat gradually increased, while the crackling and whistling of the flames became more menacing.

Finally, Siobhán arrived at the bedroom unit nearest the fire. Beyond it, the jagged fragments of the common area loomed inside a billowing grey cloud. Through the thick smoke, she could

just see how, with a woeful groaning, the outer shell around the burnt-out remains of the kitchen caved in, yielding to the pressure from above. A moment later, the segment of the shell over the ruined space that used to be the dining room followed.

Now, the full weight of the ice bore down onto the top floor of the first bedroom unit. Although the flames had not reached it yet, it was not going to withstand the pressure for long. Already, the first cracks were forming in the upper part of the wall. Then, suddenly, it began bulging outwards.

Siobhán had just enough time to retreat a few steps before the wall of the top floor crumbled and came crashing down into the corridor. Anyone in that bedroom unit was in serious danger now.

Some of the wooden beams and panels were too heavy for her to shift, but Siobhán managed to climb over the splintered fragments to reach the door. She pulled against it, only to discover that it did not budge at all. The frame had probably become deformed.

The heat was truly intense now. Even during those few moments of being distracted by her futile attempt to open the door, the fire had advanced towards her by several yards. The outer shell of the tunnel continued to groan, sagging lower and lower. Already, the ice above the fire was beginning to melt, with water seeping through widening cracks in the shell, and instantly turning to steam.

Siobhán had to find a way to open that door, and quickly. What she needed was something that could be used as a crowbar. Desperately looking around her, she noticed lying among the

debris in the lounge a narrow piece of metal that seemed to have broken off the outer shell.

Coughing continuously now and struggling to breathe, she pushed through the jumble of broken building material, closer towards the flames, until she reached the metal bar.

She picked it up but immediately let go again. It was too hot to hold in her bare hands. As there was nothing else that would be useable, she tried touching the bar through the sleeves of her tracksuit and found that it was just bearable, if she switched hands regularly.

She was about to return to the nearest bedroom unit, to attempt once more to pry the door open, when she heard a distant voice behind her.

‘Siobhán!’

Two figures wearing silver firefighting suits had appeared in the door from the crossway that led over to the North Tube.

‘Siobhán, what are you doing there? The emergency exit is at your end of the tunnel.’

The outlines were vague in the thick smoke, but Iain’s voice was unmistakable. After a brief exchange, one of the figures left again, while Iain approached, a breathing apparatus on his back, but with the mask pushed up onto his forehead.

‘Iain, I was trying to get to you. The fire, you know . . . I woke up, and I didn’t see anyone, and I thought you were all asleep. Then, suddenly, the upper floor came down, right here. There were flames everywhere, and your room was going to be next, and I didn’t know what to do because I thought you were still in there, so I . . .’

He laid his hand on her shoulder. ‘Siobhán, I was on night shift over in the Met Tower when the fire broke out, remember?’

‘I forgot.’

Siobhán was certain that she represented the picture of misery and foolishness, choking and coughing and disoriented as she was.

With an exasperated look, Iain took the metal bar out of her hand. ‘What on Earth were you planning to do with this?’

‘I wanted to use it to force the door open because it’s stuck.’

He shook his head and dropped the bar unceremoniously. ‘Come on, we need to get out of here.’

‘But the others?’

‘They are all over in the North Tube already. Now come on, the smoke is going to kill us, if the flames don’t.’

Inside the crossway, Iain pushed the solid steel door shut against the heat and the aggressive noise of the raging fire. He was anxious to get farther away, back to the others over in the opposite tunnel.

‘Iain, wait a second.’

‘What is it?’

‘I feel dizzy, and my legs are suddenly getting weak. I need to catch my breath. Just let me sit down for a moment.’

‘Here, use this.’ He took off the mask of his breathing apparatus and sat down next to Siobhán.

‘No, it isn’t the smoke. It’s the effect of the sleeping pills.’

He suppressed a curse. ‘Siobhán, I’m so sorry. I should have remembered. I can’t believe we let you sleep back there. We

only realised you were missing once we were assembled over in the gym and did the roll call. But with the fire and everyone running around blindly in the smoke, trying to get Andy and Nigel to safety ...’

‘What happened to them? Are they all right?’

‘Alive, for now, but in a bad shape, especially Andy. He was on night duty, as you know, sitting alone in the kitchen when the alarm went off outside the power generator room. He was hit by the blast of the explosion as he went to investigate. He was being treated in the surgery when Chris and I got ready to look for you, but there is only so much we can do for him here. We must get him to Stanley as soon as possible.

‘And Nigel – he was classic. He had fallen asleep in the lounge while they were watching a film – not exactly sober, as you can imagine. The others had left him there when they went to bed. He didn’t wake up until the fire broke through from the kitchen. He was hopelessly disoriented, didn’t know where to go. But we got him out, just in time. His burns are not so bad, but he inhaled a lot of smoke.’ Iain coughed contemplatively. ‘You know, I think I’m going to give it up after this, if we make it out alive.’

‘What, smoking? I think you should.’

‘Oh, look at you, Siobhán. You’re in absolutely no position to hand out health advice to anyone. I mean, were you honestly going to try and rescue all of us dressed like this? Or is it considered fashionable these days to only wear one sock when fighting fires?’

‘I didn’t plan this endeavour in any particular detail, did I? I

woke up with smoke entering my room and the power down. I knew I didn't have much time, and this was the only clothing I could find in the dark. Then, when I'd finally found my way out into the corridor and couldn't see anyone, thinking you were still asleep, I simply started with the room nearest the flames – which happened to be yours, by the way.'

Iain swallowed hard and nodded. Then, he studied something on Siobhán's forehead. 'That bump and the scratch . . .'

'I think that may have happened when I got attacked by some boxes earlier on.'

'All in a day's work for Dr Dannreuther – but it doesn't look serious.' He got up and held out his hand to her. 'Come on, we should get going. The survival suits and everything else in the Boot Room was destroyed. But we've still got the backup suits in the main storage. You can put yours on over what you're wearing now.'

'Actually, I had a big laundry day recently, and virtually all my clothes are hanging in the drying room – so, no problem there. I can wear several layers of socks, if that comforts you.'

He grinned. 'All right. Let's go then.'

'But Iain, wait. We can't just let it burn. This is our home.'

'We have to, Siobhán. We've got no chance fighting fires down here, even dressed in these special suits. It's too dangerous being underground, and without water. You know the rules: rescue only, and then evac.'

'Evacuation? All of us? You mean we're going back to England?'

'Yes, Siobhán, we're going back. Before we retreated into the

North Tube, we managed to send out a distress call, using the emergency battery power. After a while, Halo responded. They will try and get an aircraft through to us before the weather gets really bad. So, yes, with a little luck, we're going home.'

* * *

'Siobhán, if you give me a few seconds to collect my stuff, you can have the privacy of the storage room all to yourself.'

'Don't be silly, Iain. This is not the time to be childish. I can barely see myself in the fading light of this torch – why is it that batteries always run out as soon as you need them? And anyway, I'm sure you've seen these things before, and more.'

'Not for some time though.' He grumbled and turned away.

'Well, there you are then. Enjoy it while it lasts. In a moment, it will all be hidden again underneath this incredibly stylish sports bra – there, safe to look now.'

He glanced over, busy peeling himself out of the firefighting suit. 'Will you be all right? Can you manage with your suit? It looks like you burned your right hand.'

'It's not too bad. I don't think the skin will blister. And in the grand scheme of things ... What I don't understand is why we can't stay here, those of us who aren't seriously injured. We've got everything we need right here in the North Tube. Isn't that the idea behind having the two tunnels: redundancy for emergencies? We've got the second power generator, and with that we've got heating and ventilation. There is plenty to eat in the dry food and freezer store. Water we can get from the snow melt for the laundry. And we've even got the little washroom and the

toilet in the hospital. Then, why do we have to evacuate immediately? Can't we wait for, I don't know – the *Steadfast*, that's it. They will be here in three weeks' time, and perhaps sooner when they find out what happened. Why don't we wait until then? And when the others arrive, maybe we can mend it, the base.'

'Mend it? Siobhán, you saw what is going on over there. The main generator room has exploded. By now, all our sleeping quarters and the Comms Room are probably destroyed as well. And by the time the fire has burnt itself out, there will be nothing left to mend. Even if the flames don't spread into this tunnel, we would only stay in an absolute emergency; only if the fire happened in winter, basically, and there was no way out. Since now we may have a chance to leave, it would be foolish not to try. From now on, flying conditions will only get worse. And just imagine all of us staying in this one tunnel for even the few weeks until the ship gets here, without the kitchen and a proper bathroom, without the lounge and the bar. We would all be mad within a few days.' He shoved the scant remains of his personal belongings that he had kept in the Met Tower into an old duffle bag. 'No, Siobhán, let's face it – Aurora IV is dead. The base was old when we got here, and now it's dead.'

'And Halo?'

'That's where we're going first. But they don't have enough space and resources to accommodate us for an entire year. Therefore, we're going to be moved on to Stanley as soon as possible. From there, we'll be on the first *TriStar* back to Brize Norton.'

So, this was it, the sad end of a dream. Somehow, the whole situation around Siobhán's journey to Antarctica had always been

surreal, right from the very beginning, starting with that surprise phone call. Even then, it had seemed too good to be true. Now, there she was, putting on her survival suit one last time – not to explore this enigmatic continent, but to escape from it, to run away in disgrace, defeated.

‘There is nothing valuable left in your room, is there?’ Iain sounded more compassionate now, having perhaps seen her wipe her eyes.

‘I took my watch, which is the most expensive item I have down here. The rest is minor. But wait – the letters I got from Gran and Alison!’

‘You’ll see them soon enough in person, much sooner than expected.’

Of course, why had she not thought of that? Now, she might even get the opportunity to meet Alison before she left for Dublin. And if she had left already, Siobhán could visit her there. They would straighten everything out. Everything would be back to normal, the way it had always been. With that, something good was going to come out of this after all.

‘You know, Iain, you’re right. This is definitely not safe down here. We should get going.’

He continued standing there in the semi-darkness, watching Siobhán shoulder her bag and walk towards the door.

‘Come on then. By now, we’re probably the last ones left down here.’

He finally picked up his own bag, shaking his head. ‘Sometimes, I do wonder about you, Siobhán.’

* * *

Leaning against the emergency exit door, Iain used his weight to push away the snow that had accumulated outside it, within only the few minutes since the others had left. Immediately, an ice-laden blast entered the narrow access tower.

Iain nodded towards the opening. 'For England, Siobhán.'

'After you, Scottie.'

He smiled and stepped out into the storm. The wind really was howling now, with white vortices forming in the wake of any manmade structure – reminiscent of the conditions during Siobhán's arrival just over a month ago. But now, a genuine air of desolation hung over the whole compound.

Judging by the sagging surface of the ice shelf, the South Tube hull had continued to collapse since Siobhán's escape, with smoke and steam rising up the ramp from the garage. The Met Tower was dark now. Its raised platform, and that of the satellite dish, were reduced to diffuse silhouettes within the dense stream of swirling snow.

The early morning sun was still low in the southeast. But nearby was the unsteady glow of torches from a small group of people, huddled together between the red domes of the two mobile shelters. Human life still clung to this hostile environment – the Thirteenth Aurora Wintering Team, to whom Siobhán had almost belonged herself. The last to arrive, the last to leave. And now, all that was left to do for her was to close the door. The lights were off already.

Good-bye, Aurora, and thank you. It was a privilege staying with you, if only for a little while.

* * *

Fine ice crystals circled above in a hypnotic fashion. But the transient eddies that kept them suspended remained at a benign distance on the other side of the balaclava, the woollen hat, and the thick hood of the survival suit. Through the multiple layers of clothing, the realism of the scene was diminished. The wind sounded muffled and soothing, like the rushing of waves on a beach.

And imprinted onto the wind were the quiet voices of the others, only a few paces away. They were evidently still there, still waiting for the arrival of the aircraft.

The sun was now high in the sky. It had to be close to noon, which meant that Siobhán had slept for about six hours straight, dreamlessly for once, better perhaps than ever before on Antarctica, despite lying back on the seat of a snowmobile, in the path of an approaching blizzard.

Chris' grinning face came into view. 'Hello, mate. Glad to see you could join us again on this memorable day.'

'Why, did I miss anything?'

He chuckled. 'No, not at all. We're just having a picnic out here, enjoying the scenery.'

'Right, that's lovely. But while you're here, give us a hand, mate. I want to get up – cheers. I realise now that the sleeping position wasn't quite as comfortable as I thought it had been immediately after waking up.'

'Yes, I was wondering about that. But after establishing occasionally that you were still breathing, I decided that you probably knew what you were doing.'

He filled two polystyrene cups with coffee from a large ther-

mos flask. ‘We managed to get the stoves going, eventually. But we forgot to take any milk powder out of the storage when we left the base. So, I’m afraid you’ll have to make do without.’

He looked tired but defiant, perhaps even a little confident. Generally, with the increased daylight, the atmosphere was more optimistic than it had been during the early morning hours. The initial shock had subsided. The others were sitting together in small groups, loosely gathered around two simmering camping stoves, set up between the two artificial igloos. Their snowmobiles were lined up as barriers against the wind and the encroaching snow.

‘How are Nigel and Andrew?’

‘Nigel will be fine. He’s in this shelter here, still on oxygen, but breathing more regularly now. Andy is in the other shelter. For him, the main thing is a severe head injury, then the burns and several fractures. John patched him up as well as possible out here, but there is nothing more that can be done at this point. He’ll need some fairly advanced surgery in a proper hospital, and quickly. They are keeping him sedated to reduce the pain. But basically, we’re all just standing by for the arrival of the *Twin Otter*. It left Halo at about three-thirty this morning, immediately after they received our distress call. If everything goes well, they should therefore be here any moment. Then, it depends on the wind, whether they will be able to land.’

‘If they managed to take off at Halo about eight hours ago, the main storm must have passed there already. Then it’s currently over the sea and is going to hit us soon.’

‘Yes, that seems to be the situation. They were going to try

and outfly it, skirt the northern edge of the system and use the storm's circulation to their advantage, but it will be tight. The way it looks, we'll barely have enough time for refuelling. John has the mobile radio set with him in the shelter. He's in contact with the pilots and was mildly optimistic about an hour ago. Still, we're not going to leave the base until we get the confirmation that the aircraft is approaching. We can't go back and forth, especially with Andy.

'Darren and Iain went off in the snow tractors to bring fuel drums to the landing site. On the way, they are grooming the track, to make sure we don't get stuck at the last moment. They will also mark the skiway with flares. But we won't light those before the aircraft is actually coming in. Until then, all we can do is wait.'

'In that case ... I just remembered all the stuff in the lab. While we're standing around here, doing nothing, I should get that out. Otherwise, all our work, all the sample collection in the freezing water was for nothing.'

'Don't be stupid, Siobhán. You can't go back inside. The fire may still be going down there. Who knows, it may already have spread into the North Tube. You can't rely on the cross-way to hold back the flames forever. With a constant supply of air through the ventilation shafts, the fire won't stop until all combustible material is used up: the wooden building units, the furniture, the carpets, mattresses, books – everything.'

'Exactly, all my notes, the rolls of photographs – Chris, that expensive underwater camera I brought with me! The Institute are going to kill me if I leave that behind.'

‘They are definitely going to kill you if you die down there. You open that door to the emergency exit tower again, and if the fire has spread into the North Tube, the draft could create an explosion that blows you sky high. Of course, if the aircraft can’t pick us up today, we’ll have no other choice. Then we’ll have to see if we can get back into the base. But I’m not looking forward to that.’

‘They are still not going to be happy with me, you know. I should have thought of the camera, instead of getting my clothes out of the drying room.’

But Chris was unconcerned. ‘Compared with the loss of the base, none of this really matters, as long as no one dies. That’s the main thing right now. Although ... I saw our boat when we rescued the snowmobiles out of the garage. It was parked a little farther back, closer to the South Tube entrance. When the main power generator exploded, the fire must have caught on to the fuel that was left in the outboard engines. If I hadn’t known that we’d left it there ... It was all ... I barely recognised it. There were the remains of the sledge, but the rest was nothing but charred bits of rubber and lumps of molten plastic.’

‘I’m glad I didn’t have to see that. It’s strange, isn’t it? What is it with vessels that you get so attached to them? They should simply be utility vehicles, shouldn’t they?’

‘Only they are not.’

‘No, they are definitely not. And it was our boat.’

Chris nodded. ‘Our boat.’

He shuffled his feet, drawing a random zigzag line in the surface of the trodden down snow – but he looked up when the hatch

of one of the mobile shelters opened. John emerged and straightened up gingerly after hours of crouching inside the low dome. His expression was optimistic.

‘All right, listen up everyone, we just got the confirmation: the *Twin Otter* is approaching, and there is still a good chance they will be able to land. So, this is it – we’re moving out. You all know what to do.’

He exchanged a few encouraging words with the lads, as everyone prepared for departure. Then, he noticed Siobhán standing by her snowmobile, some distance away from the others.

‘Siobhán, are you ready to leave?’

‘Yes, but I was thinking . . .’

‘Good. Then you can lower our flag – if you find that the main access tower is still safe to climb.’

‘The flag? Why can’t I . . .’

John got impatient. ‘Yes, the flag, Siobhán – please.’

He turned away, without accepting any response.

* * *

The iron rungs of the ladder leading up to the roof of the access tower were overgrown with weeks’ worth of windblown snow, which left little space to step into and gain a secure hold with the bulky boots.

At the top, it was impossible to stand upright in the strengthening wind without hanging on to the flagpole, which itself was shaking violently.

The rope that held the flag aloft was as encrusted with ice and snow as everything else on the elevated structure. Even the

simple loop that tied off the end of the rope had turned into a rigid shape.

Hoping to melt the ice sufficiently to be able to loosen the knot, Siobhán took off her gloves and was instantly reminded of the burns on the palm of her right hand that she had received earlier that day.

She therefore held the knot in her other hand until she felt it become wet and give way under the pressure. After some fiddling with her now numbed fingers, the loop finally opened. But, inflexible as the rest of the rope was, it still refused to run through the narrow wheel at the top of the pole.

At last, under the pull of her full weight, the flag allowed itself to be lowered, rattling indignantly all the way down, apparently reluctant to admit defeat. It had only been flying above the base since the return of the sun at the end of the previous winter, a little less than half a year ago. Even so, from up close, it already looked weathered. The colour had faded somewhat, and the edges had started to fray.

It had been intended to stay up until the last sunset before the winter. But by then, the ice shelf would be a frozen wasteland, abandoned by human life. And the remnants of their modest dwelling would be buried in eternal snow.

* * *

Some clothes, a diving suit, and a flag – that was all she would be bringing back from her Great Antarctic Adventure.

Seeing Siobhán unceremoniously shoving the Union Jack into her bag, John came over again, with a look of indignation. ‘I’ll

take that – thank you.’

He straightened out the crumpled fabric and folded it carefully. ‘These things are important, Siobhán, even if they don’t seem to have any practical value.’

She was tempted to respond that, if that were true, things that did have a practical value should have a higher priority. But this was clearly not a topic for debate. Instead, John walked back to the mobile shelter he had emerged from earlier, to dedicate himself again to more pressing tasks.

Meanwhile, there was one important thing that Siobhán should be doing, something far more important than getting a tattered old flag. If she did that, it would turn everything around, failure into at least partial success. Instead of returning empty-handed, she would have accomplished everything that could reasonably be expected of her under the circumstances, and no one would have any excuse to generalise her failure to the detriment of others. It would only take a few minutes, and all the other dominos standing behind her did not have to fall.

Otherwise, if she did not go back down into the base, the biological research at Aurora would have been a total failure for a second time. The programme would undoubtedly be terminated, especially with the additional costs of rebuilding the base. And if that happened, who knew when it would be reactivated, if ever.

After all, how dangerous could it be? There had been no indication, just a moment ago, that the access tower in the middle of the crossway between the two parallel tunnels had become destabilised from below. Given that, the fire could not possibly have spread over into the North Tube, where the laboratory was.

Faint lights, just visible through the heavy snow, were approaching from the direction of the landing site, indicating that Iain and Darren were only now returning. Since everyone else was busy too – breaking up the temporary campsite, digging out the snowmobiles, attaching sledges to some of them – their departure was still going to take some time.

No one paid any attention to her. She would be back before the others were ready to leave, and no one would ever know.

* * *

A deep layer of fresh snow had piled up again outside the emergency exit of the North Tube since Iain and Siobhán had left the base. The solid steel door was freezing cold. Furthermore, its snow-encrusted frame gave no indication of recent melting due to intense heat from inside.

With one foot pressed against the wall, Siobhán pulled at the handle with all her strength – until, with a dry rasping sound of fracturing ice, the door suddenly swung open. There was complete silence inside the dark shaft that led down to the base. No smell of smoke, and no explosion. But she had to be quick now.

At the bottom of the ladder, the door to the North Tube was cold too. It opened smoothly, without any sign of deformation by either heat or increased pressure from above. The whole structure still appeared to be intact.

There was a dim shine in the middle of the tunnel, but not from flames. It was only a few rays of sunlight that came down the ventilation shaft. Despite the absence of any obvious danger, the total lack of sound was unnerving. Normally, there should

have been at least the constant droning of the diesel power generator.

The biology lab, situated next to the emergency exit, was exactly in the state in which she had left it the previous evening. In a hurry, she began gathering everything she would need. First and foremost, she had to get the waterproof camera. It was still sitting on the table, out of its bag, to allow it to dry after their last diving trip. She quickly packed it up, together with the undeveloped film rolls.

She then rounded up the various notes and sketches that she had left lying on her desk and by the microscope. Many were only doodles that probably deserved to go up in flames, but there was no time to sort through them now. Instead, she stuffed the whole pile into an empty folder.

The diskettes with all the digital information fitted into one box. But then she realised that she had forgotten to bring a bag. She therefore shoved the folder and the box down the front of her survival suit and slung the camera over her shoulder.

Just as she was about to leave, she remembered that the diskette containing the report that she had been writing was still in the computer. She popped it out of the drive and pushed it into the side pocket of her suit.

The rest, including all the precious samples in the freezer and the incubator, had to stay. The process of gathering the most important of her scattered belongings had already taken longer than she had planned.

The others had finished packing up but were only now beginning to leave. The first two snowmobiles towing the sledges with Andrew and Nigel, both bundled up in sleeping bags, slowly and carefully departed into the thickening cloud of swirling snow.

Iain was waiting at the end of the line, a sledge hooked up to his snowmobile, which was laden with some bulky objects under a canvas cover. He looked around nervously. Then, he saw Siobhán emerging from the direction of the base.

‘Siobhán, where were you?’

She decided that it was best for him not to know.

He had pulled her snowmobile behind his own. Both engines were running, idling steadily.

Through the blowing snow, the sun was still shining, now directly above their heads.

It would be all right.

Iain observed her closely and recognised the camera bag. His eyes were hidden behind goggles, but his gesture of exasperation was telling enough. ‘You’re unbelievable, Siobhán. You really are bloody unbelievable.’

‘Don’t panic, Iain. I got the stuff out, and now I’m here – no problem. Anyway, what’s all this lot on your sledge?’

‘Some of the sensors and other equipment from the Met Tower. But ...’ He pre-empted Siobhán’s response. ‘... these things genuinely are expensive, and I didn’t have to go down into a burning base to get them, just when we’re preparing to leave – honestly, Siobhán.’

‘It was perfectly safe. Don’t worry about me all the time.’

Seeing that those in front of him were not leaving yet either,

Iain relaxed a little. ‘Darren and I marked the track with a fresh row of flags on the left side – heading towards the skiway – at intervals of about 200 feet. But with the low visibility at the moment, you may not necessarily be able to see the next one. We’ve therefore got to make sure we keep the taillights in front of us in sight. And be careful not to get off the groomed track. With all this drifting snow since last night, there are some majestic sastrugi on both sides.’

‘I’ll watch out for them. But what happens to the snowmobiles?’

‘We’ll leave them at the skiway and secure them under tarpaulins. When the *Steadfast* gets here next month, they will take care of them.’

‘Then the ship is still coming?’

‘Yes, Siobhán. But we’re definitely not staying here.’

‘No, I understand. I was just wondering. And I’m ready now.’

Iain nodded and let his snowmobile slide forwards a few feet, at the same time as the figure ahead of him drove off. But then he stopped, turning back and indicating “lower your goggles.”

Through the coloured lenses, the scene suddenly looked surreal. Everything was tinted yellow, and the weak contrasts in the diffuse light were unnaturally enhanced, lending a sense of welcome detachment from the dangerous surroundings.

The gauges on the dashboard of the snowmobile showed no sign of any trouble. The engine was at optimum temperature, and the tank was almost full.

It would be all right.

Siobhán slowly released the clutch, careful not to stall the ma-

chine. With only a small change in the engine noise, the snowmobile glided into motion.

The others in front of them were already on their way, the taillights near the front of the line becoming fainter in the white haze.

Iain smoothly accelerated away, with the sledge swivelling behind him. Then, turning back again, he raised his hand in a questioning gesture. He understood Siobhán's wave and sped up, trying to keep the lights ahead of him in sight.

The storm had continued to intensify since Siobhán had woken up about an hour ago. Already, the sun was nothing but an indistinct glow in the white cloud that engulfed them. They had been driving for perhaps a minute when Siobhán turned to look behind herself, hoping to catch one last glimpse of the base, only to find that the outlines of the Met Tower and the satellite dish had vanished.

Driving now at a greater pace, the goggles were accumulating snowflakes faster than she was able to wipe them off. Every time she took one hand off the shaking handlebar, the snowmobile threatened to careen off the groomed track or to topple over. Eventually, she decided that she would be better off without the goggles and pushed them up onto her forehead.

But in the few seconds during which she had been distracted, Iain's taillights ahead of her had vanished – briefly. Then, a pair of dim red lights became visible again, slightly off to the right, and moving fast. She adjusted her course and accelerated a little to keep up.

Very quickly, however, the motion of the snowmobile started

to feel choppier, and she could see that the texture of the frozen surface that rushed past beneath her had become rougher. The track had apparently made a turn to the right, and she was now taking an unintended shortcut.

To get back onto the groomed track, she would have to veer away from the occasional flicker of lights in front of her. And as long as it was impossible to see the way markers, the worst that could happen was to lose sight of the others. Her best chance therefore was to continue straight ahead. While the runners of the snowmobile still managed to skip over the irregularities, there was nothing to worry about.

It would be all right.

Then, in an instant, there was the wave. Without a warning it appeared out of the cloud of streaming snow. Caught in the beam of the headlight, it rose up gracefully in the wake of a pressure ridge. Its regular shape had a simple beauty, despite being formed by nothing but random collisions of individual ice crystals, driven by the ceaseless action of the turbulent wind – an image for the creation of a meaningful existence out of the chaos of everyday life.

The inevitable impact was nothing but a sudden tug in her stomach. With a roar of the engine, the snowmobile's track lost contact with the ground.

There followed a quick ascent – and a fall into weightlessness.

CHAPTER SEVEN

A MURMUR OF A PRAYER

There was a continuous low humming, quiet but purposeful. And moving about it, a fluctuating buzzing at a higher pitch – like that of a beehive, like the buzzing of busy bees.

It was all right. It was only the sound of a beehive on a fine summer's day.

And there were voices too – distant voices – people enjoying the fine weather, people in a park . . .

Waterloo Park, on a sunny afternoon; her grandmother sitting on a bench, reading, allowing her to wander off a little, to look at a flower bed.

There was a bee climbing in and out of the petals. It was working very hard, moving farther and farther into the midst of the many colourful blossoms. But she could follow it, carefully crawling among the stems, without frightening it away.

Then, her grandmother came up behind her. 'What have you found there, darling?'

'Look, Omi, it's climbing into the flowers.'

'Yes, but be careful, darling. Don't get so close. It might sting you.'

'No, Omi, look: it's a bummel bee. They are very friendly.'

But her grandmother was worried. She did not believe that a nice bee like that did not sting.

Suddenly, it flew off, struggling at first to get airborne, heavily laden as it was. Then, finally, it ascended into the clear blue sky, sailing higher and higher ...

... its humming becoming more and more distant, until it was gone.

* * *

There was snow piled up all around – soft snow – and the dry whistling of the wind, still depositing more snow in the wake of the icy ridge nearby.

Some larger broken pieces of compacted snow were scattered about.

It was cold, desperately cold.

She knew she should get up. But her legs were numb and heavy. They refused to move.

Lying across them was an irregularly shaped object, covered in snow, with only a handlebar sticking out – a bicycle – she had fallen off her bicycle.

There it was, lying on the pavement. The beautiful new bicycle her grandmother had been saving up for, working so hard, for such a long time. And now she had scratched it.

‘Come, darling, get up.’ Her grandmother was neither sad nor angry. ‘Get up and we’ll dry your tears. It’s not so bad. See, your bicycle is right here. We pick it up, and then you can try again.’

But then she would fall off again, and again, until everything was broken, the bicycle and she.

And there was Alison, still sailing along down the pavement, unaware of what had happened behind her. She did not fall. She never fell. She continued chattering away about all the faraway places the two of them were going to visit, now they had their bicycles.

Finally, she noticed that Siobhán was not keeping up anymore. She came to a wobbling halt and turned around, shocked to see her friend lying on the ground. ‘Shivy!’

She put down her own bicycle and began running. ‘Shivy, I’m coming!’

With a jolt, Siobhán realised that she had to go back. She had to meet Alison. She had to talk to her, support her. Otherwise, these shadows, these phantoms that she had spoken of, they were going to get her. And then she would be taken away, just like Kathleen had been.

No, that could not happen. Siobhán would be there for her, just as Alison had always been there for her. She would protect her – unless it was already too late. Because, where had Alison been when Siobhán had tried to phone her? Why had she not answered? If she had been at home, she would never have ignored the persistent ringing, especially since she had known that Siobhán was going to call.

Where, then, had she been? Had she already left for Dublin? But, in that case, why had she left so soon, without saying anything, without sending a single message by telex?

No, something was not right. Alison would never have left earlier than planned without telling her. Something terrible had

already happened. And Alison had not talked to anyone else about these phantoms, about how the shadows had been closing in on her over the past two weeks, about how she had felt that she had been followed around, and that her flat had been invaded. Now, Siobhán was the only person who knew about the danger that Alison was in.

This was serious. She could not waste any more time. She had to get back to England and warn the police. And what was she doing there, lying face-down and buried in snow? That was ridiculous! Why would she do that?

There was something dark in the snow, down in the depression where her head had rested, some frozen liquid. It looked like blood – it had to be blood.

Right, that was it, enough of this. She had to get up. But there was something wrong with her legs. Something was weighing down on them, something bulky, hidden underneath the snow. It seemed to be a snowmobile, turned over onto its side.

Clearly, there had been some kind of an accident.

The seat of the snowmobile was resting on her back. The metal edge of the running-board had fallen across both her thighs.

Her right leg was completely stuck, without any feeling or strength in it at all. The left leg moved a little. If she could wriggle that out, maybe she could push the snowmobile off.

Obviously, if only one of her legs was broken ... If the bone fragments were to be displaced when she attempted to move ... If the splinters were to cut through the femoral artery ...

Then again, if she did not risk that, she would freeze to death out there for sure. In the end, it really was a simple choice. She

had to try, at least, to free herself.

After some struggling, she managed to slide her left leg out. It did not appear to be broken. But, instantly, a dull pain developed in her right thigh, as it was now supporting the full weight of the lower part of the snowmobile. However, having one of her legs free allowed her to push herself up from the ground, until the heavy machine slid off her.

She carefully turned onto her back and then sat up. She was relieved to find that her right leg too seemed to hold together, although it was completely numbed from having its circulation cut off in the cold. It would take some time to let enough warmth and strength flow back into it before she could get onto her feet.

She therefore remained sitting for a while and tried to get her bearings. What a place she had landed herself in. Only diffuse sunlight broke through the dense current of snow that raced across the ice shelf, making it impossible to see for more than a few yards in any direction.

Beyond the constant howling of the wind, there was a deadly silence and endless emptiness. She was alone, alone on Antarctica.

Slowly, the events leading up to her accident were coming back to her. They had been leaving the base – they had to leave because of the fire. They had been driving through the blizzard, trying to get to the aircraft. She must have got off the groomed track. Then, it had happened somehow. And the others had left – they had left without her.

But the base could not be too far away. Although the strong wind had obliterated any tracks in the snow, this could not be too

complicated. Surely, she would be able to work this out.

They had been driving to the skiway. Therefore, the base had to be due south. It was a little after one o'clock. If she added one hour for solar time, with the number twelve on the dial of her watch aimed at the sun, the base should be in the seven o'clock direction, and less than two miles away.

But without any visual reference, it was easy to get confused. What happened if the sun became completely hidden above the billowing snow? The only real hope then was to catch brief glimpses of the dark shapes of the Met Tower and the satellite dish, once she got closer to the base. This would be a risky endeavour.

As her legs got warmer, with the circulation starting up again, the previously dull pain was getting more acute. What if it became overpowering before she was able to trudge all the way back through the deep snow? How could she be sure that she would continue to walk? What guarantee was there that she would not collapse and simply give up? It was too easy to doubt her own weakness before the pain began.

The snowmobile, carelessly pushed away, was still lying on its side, and almost covered in snow again. Nonetheless, it provided the best chance now of getting out of the cold.

The windscreen was broken, but there were no traces of oil or petrol in the snow. The engine and fuel tank therefore appeared to be all right. With a little persistence, the snowmobile should start up again – it had to.

But first, it needed to be turned back onto its running belt. With her legs dug into the deep layer of loose snow, and one

shoulder resting against the seat, she pushed with all the strength she could muster. Slowly, the seat lifted off the ground, tilting grudgingly, until the machine tipped over, the right way up, with her bag still safely secured on the luggage rack.

So, this was the moment of truth. Now she would find out if the engine could be started again.

With some trepidation, she got onto the seat and pulled the starter rope in one determined motion. Instantly, a stinging pain broke through the numbness of her right wrist. But for all that, there was only the empty spluttering of a lifeless engine.

No, please, don't do this to me. You cannot do this to me – not now.

She made a second desperate attempt, using her other hand. It was awkward pulling with her weaker arm, and the result was the same.

Please don't be mad at me. I know it's all my fault. But it's just the two of us now. And we must stick together, you and I. Otherwise, we are both not going anywhere.

A few red drops fell onto the seat in front of her, as she gave the starter another desperate pull. But again the engine remained silent.

Don't make this difficult for me, please. Surely you don't want to stay out here forever. I can get us back to Aurora, I promise,

but I need your help.

Silence, but for the triumphant howling of the wind.

Come on, one last journey is all I ask from you, to get us out of this. Then, you and I can rest.

Once more the engine stuttered, but less reluctantly than before – and with a little bit of throttle, it started up. It sounded perhaps slightly harsher than it should, cold as it was, but it was definitely running now. The man-made noise pushed against the wind, fighting back with a determined roar. The lights came on. The vibrations of the mechanical pulse registered even in her numbed legs. The heat from the engine slowly spread through the ice-encrusted metal.

Life had returned to the wasteland.

* * *

Clean white steam emerged from the ramp that led down into the garage, but no smoke. By melting the ice above it, the fire had drowned itself in the end. And the acrid smell that had hung over the compound before their departure had been carried away by the wind.

The wooden shell of the South Tube had almost completely collapsed. But the access tower in the middle of the crossway still stood. And the layer of snow above the North Tube gave no indication that this part of the base had been affected by the fire.

The surface of the ramp was almost sheer ice. The snowmobile glided down eagerly, as if sensing the end of their journey, before running down its momentum in a dense puddle of slush

at the bottom.

They had made it.

As soon as the engine was turned off, an eerie silence settled – except for the regular dripping from the ceiling.

With the other vehicles gone, the first half of the garage was empty. Farther back, the sad remains of the dive boat floated in a shallow pool of melt water, swathed in a veil of fog that rose into the cold air. It was a depressing sight, and Siobhán was keen to get away from it as soon as possible.

The pain shooting up from both legs was getting more and more persistent. As she could not imagine carrying her heavy bag, she left it on the snowmobile. Gritting her teeth against a particularly intense rush of pain, she pushed open the heavy rolling gate to the vehicle workshop at the beginning of the North Tube.

There was no indication of immediate danger inside the large room, no signs of damage that could be seen in the dim light from the garage. The power was down, as expected, but a solid-looking torch lay on one of the shelves, seemingly with a fresh set of batteries.

Silent shapes of abandoned machinery appeared in the narrow beam of light, resting lifeless in the pattern of moving shadows. Among them was the air compressor they had used to refill their diving cylinders, together with the underwater science rack – all useless now, nothing but remnants of a lost opportunity.

Past the vehicle workshop, a ghostly atmosphere hung over the North Tube corridor, without any sound or movement. Beyond the range of the torch, only the hint of a pale glimmer de-

scended from the skylight in the middle of the tunnel. Even the early afternoon sun was unable to struggle through the suffocating stream of snow that was relentlessly burying the base.

Nonetheless, the North Tube looked exactly as it had always done. All the vital equipment and supplies were still there. As it was only a few weeks since the supply ship had left, the main store was still crammed with food to such an extent that there was hardly any space to walk. Most of the food was dry, of course, or deep frozen. But there would be enough cereals, chocolate bars, cookies, and cakes to last for the next several days. There also had to be some water left in the snow melt, although it was probably starting to freeze.

Judging by the thin layer of condensation on the metal door handles, while the temperature still appeared to be above freezing, it had clearly dropped already by a few degrees. And with the power down, the remaining heat was going to dissipate soon. Something would have to be done about that.

The inside of the power generator room was an intimidating network of pipes and cables, running between the engine, the fuel tank, the air intake shaft, the heat exchanger, and the snow melt.

For more than a month, Siobhán had lived in the base. During that time, she had never been bothered to find out how these things actually worked. She had simply taken for granted that there had always been light and warmth and fresh water at their disposal, even while they had been surrounded by permanent ice. The regular droning of the engine had been a well-known component of the background noise, together with the pervasive

diesel fumes. It had always been there, but mostly unnoticed. Even during her week of night duty, if the beast had sounded and smelled normally, it had appeared to be healthy, and that had been good enough.

Now, the circumstances were different. The sleeping beast could not be ignored anymore. There had to be an operation manual somewhere. It had to describe how to turn the generator back on. And if someone could write about it, Siobhán was confident that she could learn it. It would give her something to occupy herself with, to pin her hopes on, until the others were able to return to the base and get her out.

But it would have to wait until tomorrow. Tomorrow, she would work it all out. Now, she was too exhausted. The throbbing in both legs had become too distracting. Additionally, a discomfort in her chest was getting more noticeable with every breath. Notwithstanding the other complications, her main worry was that very soon the discomfort she felt might turn into an overpowering agony. While she was still able to think rationally, managing the pain therefore had to be her first priority.

The surgery was in total disorder, a gruesome reminder of the events that had led to the evacuation. The head end of the operating table was covered in coagulated blood, while more blood had run down the legs and collected on the floor. A pattern of dark footprints led back and forth between the operating table and the supplies cabinet. The rubbish bin overflowed with bloody swabs and cut-up clothing. A discarded medical needle with a piece of thread had fallen next to it.

Alarminglly, all the bottles of *Entonox*, which had usually stood in one corner, were gone. But there still had to be some painkillers left, something more potent than aspirin. Fortunately, the supplies cabinet had not been locked again in the haste of evacuating. In it were stacks of syringes of different sizes, bandages, a variety of drugs and, on the bottom shelf, a cardboard box labelled *Morphine Sulphate*. It contained several glass vials, together with a lengthy list of instructions and dire warnings, which Siobhán struggled to read. She found it hard to keep the small print in focus, and straining her eyes aggravated the already pounding headache that had taken hold of her consciousness. She could not deal with this right now. This was not the time for reading. This was the time for action and common sense, combined with a little bit of luck.

A stinging pain raced across her chest as she pulled her left arm out of the thick sleeve of the survival suit. Since the situation got more serious with every passing minute, getting the morphine into her bloodstream would have to succeed, and fast.

Still, it was prudent to start conservatively, with the smallest syringe available. If the drug had been provided in any sensible concentration, that was not likely to result in an overdose.

Drawing the clear solution from the vial and getting rid of the air bubbles was the easy part. Now it got tricky, and she would have to do it single-handedly. Her lifelong fear of injections had to be put aside. She could not look away now. She had to watch as the fine needle pierced the skin and slowly pushed into the cephalic vein.

Through the wall of the distended blood vessel, she could still

see the menacing tip as she readjusted the grip of her right hand around the syringe to be able to depress the plunger. The resulting small movement of the needle allowed a trickle of dark blood to seep out from the injection point.

That was too much. Her right hand began to shake uncontrollably in nervous agitation. A flash of pain erupted from her arm as the tip cut through the vein and into the surrounding nerves. She involuntarily released the syringe, and it clattered onto the floor.

This was hopeless. Any further attempts would likely only end in tearing open the rest of her veins, or giving herself an embolism. And even if she did succeed once, how long would the effect of each injection last? How many times would she have to repeat the same terrifying procedure before she could receive proper medical treatment?

Enough. She had already come a long way from lying face-down in the snow, and this was as far as she was able to go. From now on, things were beyond her control, and all she could do was wait. If that meant that she would slowly fade away, as the base got colder and colder around her, so be it.

Already, a growing exhaustion was competing with the pain that continued to spread throughout her body. As she leant weakly against the supplies cabinet, her attention was drawn to the hospital bed, which stood in one corner of the surgery, almost entirely hidden behind a curtain.

The linen appeared clean, without any sign of blood. The mattress was comfortable, and the soft weight of the blanket felt reassuring. She lay back and, with a relieved sigh, let her head

sink onto the pillow. As her eyes became heavy, she switched off the electric torch. There was nothing more to see, nothing more to do, but rest.

* * *

In the complete darkness, all that was left to her senses was the constant crackling of the ice shelf, as it continued its steady voyage to the sea.

As much as she wanted to let go, her consciousness remained locked inside her aching body, without any hope of escaping into sleep – although it had to be in the middle of the night by now. It was impossible to tell. The faint luminescence her watch had gained from the sun on her way back to the base had dissipated again, and the dial had vanished into the dark.

But if she held the watch up to her ear, she could hear its regular ticking.

You're still alive too, aren't you? Still hanging on. Still with me, metering my time, down to the last second.

Do you remember when we started our journey together, all these years ago? When life was simple – at the beginning of things, rather than here, where everything comes to an end. When I began scuba diving, still full of plans and enthusiasm ... When we went to see the dolphins for the first time ... You weren't cheap exactly, but you've been worth every penny. You never let me down. And we did have some exciting adventures together, didn't we? Some close calls, admittedly, but we always managed to get through, you and I.

And all the many exams we sat together ... You always kept

ticking at a steady pace. Even when time ran out, you always kept ticking.

So, you just keep ticking now, when time may be running out for me once and for all. You carry on. You carry on ticking, even if my heart cannot keep up anymore.

* * *

A pale shine had developed in the corridor outside the open door of the surgery. The sun had to be high up in the sky again. A new day had arrived after all, a brief extension to life – but also bringing with it an extension to the uncertainty, to the fear, to the pain, to a growing desperation – and all this, to what end, if there was no chance of escape?

Eventually, of course, the others had to come back for her – they were bound to. If they had been unable to find her out there in a blizzard, if they had been unable to delay any longer their flight to safety with the severely injured – that was understandable. But surely, they had to come back as soon as the storm subsided.

Only how long could that take? A few days, or even weeks? Either way, one thing was certain: she would have to stay submerged in this frozen ocean, let the storm continue to rage above, and hang on for as long as she could.

Meanwhile, there was no point in lying in the hospital bed all day. She had to move about, at least occasionally, to keep her circulation up, if not her spirit – and she had to attempt to get the power generator running again. But first, she would have to find something to drink.

Even at rest, pain was now pulsating freely across her chest and throughout both legs. The right one buckled under her weight as soon as she attempted to get out of bed. But her thirst was immense by now. And, eventually, she managed to take the few steps to the washbasin.

Upon opening the tap, there was an ominous groaning from the direction of the snow melt, some distance down the corridor – a hissing, getting closer – and then a fountain of crystal clear water came gushing out of the pipe, still tasting perfectly fresh, although very cold already, not far from freezing.

With the drain plugged, the basin filled up quickly, providing her with a reservoir that would last for at least two days – unless the temperature dropped significantly and the water turned to ice. Until then, there still remained some hope.

* * *

A drizzle of afternoon sunlight fell through the dusty stagnant air underneath the skylight at the top of the silent ventilation shaft. Somewhere up there the sun was still shining. That one thing was certain: high above the storm, the sun was still shining. And when the storm had died out, and when the wind-blown cloud of snow had settled onto the ground again, the others would return. Sooner or later, they would return.

When that happened, she would be ready. She would be sitting right there in the bright column of light, shining down onto her from a clear blue sky above. It would be far more dignified than lying in bed – weak and helpless, and in the dark.

And when they found her there, and she could not talk to them

any more, when she could not explain to them what had happened and how she had ended up there, maybe they would say: “Look, there’s that girl – Siobhán, remember her? Perhaps she wasn’t quite as silly as we always thought. Perhaps she could have been one of us – if she hadn’t died.”

But maybe she was seeing the situation the wrong way around, as she gazed up through the skylight. Maybe it was not the snow drifting over the stationary base at all. Maybe it was the snow that was at rest, while the base sped along beneath it. Taking her where? Away from Antarctica? Back home? Back to life?

Wherever she went, the pain and the cold still stayed with her. And as things stood, everything else having failed, the cold was the only thing left that could take the pain and the aimless consciousness away – and it would, eventually. Until then, pain and consciousness would continue to be inseparably entwined, trapped inside the same damaged body.

* * *

The snow was still flying across the skylight, in the faint glow of the evening sun. Another day faded away. Another night approached. The shadows were back again, creeping up to her from either end of the tunnel – the phantoms of the night closing in once more.

Her shallow breath began to condense in the stagnant air. The last amount of heat was gone. The base was dead.

So, this was it then – this really was it. It was finally time for her to leave.

But it could not be. This was too soon. She was not ready yet.

She could not allow herself to be ready, to abandon the responsibility that birth had presented her with. Or was that responsibility no longer her own? Was it already in the hands of another, someone who was wiser and more powerful? And if that was so, was that someone aware of their responsibility, aware of her existence? Or were they distracted by more important things, by all the other people who, at this very moment, were also about to depart this world?

If you are out there, and if you really care, you cannot simply ask me to give up when, until now, I managed to accomplish so little with my life, when I know that there would be so much more that I could do. If only I could get a second chance. If only you could have a little faith in me. Let me have a new beginning, and I shall try, I shall do my best not to disappoint you.

Because my heart, my brain, it's all good – just cold, just tired – but it could still work so well. All I need is a little bit of warmth, a few hours of sleep – away from the pain – and you'll see, I'll be right as rain again. Surely, that isn't asking too much?

She could not simply let go. But she felt that she had done everything she could to stay alive. She just did not know when or how it would end. Two days ago now, she had succeeded in getting herself back into the base. Since then, she had spent hours walking up and down the corridor, trying to keep her circulation going, until the pain in her legs had got too intense. She had tried to turn the power generator back on, but all she had ever got in response to her efforts were warning lights and alarms, until the starter battery had been drained. It was hopeless with-

out the instructions, and the manual had apparently been kept in the administration office, over in the other tunnel. She had tried to get there, but it was all burnt out. It was all lost.

Yes, it is all over now. Already, I can feel myself fading away, falling asleep. And this time, it will be final. I can see that now.

But if you could just ... the pain, you know. It makes it so hard to concentrate. And there are a few things I would like to say, while I'm still able to. Perhaps somehow you can find a way. Perhaps, from the perspective of eternity, things do look different than they appear to us. As for me, I have run out of ideas and strength. Let me therefore try and say this:

*Our Father, who art in Heaven,
hallowed be thy Name,
thy kingdom come,
thy will be done,
on Earth as it is in Heaven.
Forgive us our trespasses ...
Give us our daily bread ...*

No, this is not how it goes – forgive me. I shall try again. It's just ... it has been a while, you know. So, please be patient.

*Our Father, who art in Heaven,
hallowed be thy Name.
Thy will be done on Earth ...*

No, I cannot do it. I cannot remember the words. It all fades away with the last daylight – all the words, all the thoughts, all

the memories – the flow of consciousness dissipating, and never forming again.

But the words are not mine anyway. That is not what I want to say at all. You see, what I really want to say is much simpler. I know I haven't spoken to you in a long time. I'm tired now, and I cannot think clearly anymore. But if it is in your power, please, listen to me. Try to understand.

Our Father, give me certainty.

End this darkness and let me step into the light.

If I am to live, take away my pain.

Give me the strength to follow the path appointed to me,

so that, when the end does come, I shall not have lived in vain.

But if I am to die, take away my fear.

Let me fall asleep and, in the final moment, stand by me.

Let me rest, knowing that I did all I was meant to do down here.

CHAPTER EIGHT

INVASION

There were voices ... voices echoing from above, remote and vague, as if sounding from a great height, down into a deep valley.

Soft white light shimmered up ahead in the distance, steady and welcoming ... with a darkness leading up to it, like the path through a long tunnel.

Gradually, the voices became clearer, descending from their lofty heights, calling her name, calling out to her, for her to join them. But everything was so heavy down on the ground, making it hard to move and impossible to get up.

Then, a tall figure appeared in the light, itself even more radiant, with a blinding halo around its head. It raised a hand, as in a greeting – and the halo vanished.

A masked face emerged from the glare, with the eyes of an ordinary man – a man wearing a red survival suit.

Standing inside the column of light underneath the ventilation shaft, having just switched off his headlamp, he turned back towards the crossway. *‘Torsten, Frank! Sie ist hier!’*

A short answer was shouted back from the direction of the South Tube.

They were Germans – the Germans were coming – the Nazis, from their secret base under the ice. But what did they want? Protecting their secret? Or were they looking for something?

Whatever the reason, they had obviously broken into the base, and now she was too weak to defend herself. Slumped against the wall in the middle of the corridor, there were exits on either side, but too far to reach in her current state. The only other way out led through the main access tunnel, which was blocked by the men.

A crippling pain raged in both legs. Her chest hurt with every breath. Her mouth was parched, her throat tight, her voice gone completely. And it would be futile to call for help anyway.

The man came a step closer and took off his headlamp and balaclava. He was young, and he smiled as he knelt down next to her. ‘Hello, Yvonne. I am Stefan. I have come to get you out of here.’

He took off one of his gloves and held out his hand. Siobhán grasped it, automatically. He did not try to pull her up. He simply wanted to say hello – very formally – but his hand was warm.

The logo on the chest of his survival suit indicated that he was from the *Deutsches Institut für Polarforschung*.

His smile widened. ‘I am glad I found you. But better if you stay sitting here, only a little longer, to see how you are doing. Then, we can leave.’

He motioned towards his two companions, who had now entered the corridor. ‘These are Torsten and Frank, by the way.’

They all tried to appear optimistic, but they were clearly uneasy about the situation.

Torsten approached tentatively. ‘*Stefan, das sieht ziemlich schlimm aus da drüben – alles ausgebrannt und vereist. Die*

äußere Röhre ist fast komplett eingestürzt.'

Frank looked up and down the corridor. *'Was glaubt ihr wie gefährlich das hier ist?'*

Stefan shook his head. *'Keine Ahnung.'*

He turned back to her. 'Yvonne, do you know how dangerous it is in here? Has this tunnel been damaged by the fire as well?'

He seemed relieved when Siobhán wearily shook her head. 'Okay. But it feels as if the oxygen is very low. I imagine there was no ventilation since the fire, so no fresh air for three days.'

Torsten was still nervous. *'Wir sollten uns hier nur so lang wie absolut notwendig aufhalten.'*

But Stefan was confident. *'Wir fangen gleich an. Dazu müssen wir sie aber bewegen. Und wir brauchen die Ausrüstung.'*

Torsten nodded and disappeared again with Frank into the crossway.

Stefan smiled, seeing her utter confusion. 'Yvonne, just in case you are wondering: we are from the Helios station. I don't know if your colleagues managed to tell you that we were coming? Apparently, the power is out in the whole station, so maybe not? Well, what happened was, we received your emergency call on the radio, first about the fire, and then later when you got lost. But the weather was terrible, of course, too bad for flying. So, we came over the ice.'

He pulled a thermos flask out of his rucksack, having noticed Siobhán's difficulties with speaking.

'Here, you must be thirsty. It is fresh water. We melted it this morning.'

But she was so exhausted that the only thing keeping her

awake was the pain.

‘Okay, maybe later. But we were told that maybe you had an accident? Can you tell me what happened? Are you hurt? All this blood is from your nose, yes? And it has stopped bleeding now, so no problem. We will get you out of here as soon as possible. But before we can move you, I have to make sure that you do not have any bad injuries.’

‘Femur ... right.’

After a moment of shock, Stefan managed a reassuring smile and nodded. ‘Okay, I understand. I don’t believe it is broken if you were able to get back here – bruised maybe. But we will be very careful. And I can give you something against the pain.’

He picked up two gloves lying next to her. ‘You probably need them. Your hands are very cold. And I can see you burned the right one a little in the fire.’ He carefully pulled the gloves back over her hands. ‘I think it is okay now. There are a few blisters, but they are all closed.’

Torsten and Frank returned with a large bag and a folding stretcher. Stefan excused himself and turned away to converse quietly in rapid German with the other two, as they assembled the stretcher and unpacked a comfortable-looking thick down sleeping bag.

Despite their pretend optimism, they were evidently well aware of the difficult situation in which they found themselves. Having driven over the stormy ice shelf for three days, all the way from their base, a long journey home still lay ahead, over treacherous ground again and with low visibility. They could not have had much sleep since they had left and had to be getting worn-out

themselves. This adventure was far from over, and they knew it.

Stefan turned around again, holding a large pair of scissors. ‘Yvonne, I will have to cut open the sleeves of your suit. Until we know exactly which injuries you have, I do not want to move your arms around. But we have this sleeping bag for you, and in the snowcat it will be very warm.’

As he began cutting along the sleeves of Siobhán’s survival suit and the fleece jumper underneath it, the others prepared a syringe for a morphine injection. Relief was finally nigh. Whatever would happen on the journey out of there, at least it would not hurt anymore.

As Stefan peeled away the cut sleeves, he noticed the traces of her own botched attempt and hesitated. ‘Did you have an injection already?’

‘Tried . . . I couldn’t.’

Although he looked concerned, afraid of administering an overdose, he could see the pain and fear in Siobhán’s eyes and nodded. ‘Okay.’

Torsten handed him the syringe. Stefan was still a little nervous, but his hands were steady. He took her upper arm in a firm grip until the cold blood vessels gradually emerged underneath the skin. For an instant, the tip of the needle was poised over the cephalic vein. Then, against the smallest resistance, it pierced the thin layers of tissue. And with a steady push from the plunger, the drug entered her bloodstream. Stefan smoothly withdrew the empty syringe and covered the tiny puncture with a plaster.

It was going to be all right now. With every heartbeat, the

opioid was circulated more widely through her body. Soon, the first molecules would make it into her brain. They would bind to endorphin receptors and cut off the neural pathways from the damaged tissue. That was all there was to it. Pain was only a repetitive signal, a redundant flow of information, which could be turned off without any harm. It was not real. It was just a bad memory, still slightly annoying, but fading ... fading ... fading away.

And with the pain receded the stress and the aggravation. The hectic movements of the others dissolved behind a hazy curtain. The noises echoing along the tunnel became muffled and distant. She was floating away into a wonderful state of lightness, as the cold wooden floor beneath her seemed to disappear.

‘Yvonne, don’t fall asleep now, please. You need to keep breathing.’ Stefan’s agitated voice sounded remote, as if emerging from a different room. But his hand on her cheek was warm – now gently brushing the hair out of her eyes.

How long had it been, with everything else going on ... moving from one place to the other ... the field work up north ... then preparing for Antarctica ...

‘Yvonne, you need to breathe. We do not have oxygen for you. So, you need to concentrate on breathing.’

His face was very close, much closer than his voice. But it was hard to get into focus – there it was again. He was not bad looking, really ... perhaps a bit young.

‘That’s right, Yvonne, stay with me. I need to know more about what happened to you. You do not have to speak, if it hurts, or if it exhausts you. Simply nod or shake your head,

okay? First, can you tell me, have you any other injuries?’

But she was fine now. She was really very fine.

‘Yvonne, you were out with the others, on the snowmobile. You were going to the landing site. And then you got separated and had an accident, yes?’

But that was so long ago. Why was he still concerned about that?

‘Yvonne, please, stay with me. I will let you sleep in a moment. But first, I need to know: when you fell off the snowmobile ...’

Why did he insist on talking about that silly accident? It was embarrassing. She had messed up. But she was not always like that. She could be quite sensible. She could even make herself look representable, if she took the time.

Why could they not have a normal conversation? He could ask her, for example, what kind of music she liked. Or, perhaps, he could ask what she had done before coming to Antarctica. He might be surprised. Because, after she had left school, she had gone up to Cambridge, to King’s College, which really was not bad for a working-class girl. She had liked it there. All the old buildings ... Her grandmother had used to visit her occasionally, to go to the concerts in the old Chapel – Mozart, for example. Curious ... She had been thinking about the *Requiem* earlier on, before the lads had arrived. So beautiful, the music and the lyrics. *Lux perpetua*, just like the Antarctic summer. Perpetual light and eternal rest – *requiem æternam*.

She was falling, tumbling headfirst down a deep shaft, while diffuse light danced around her on its surface. Down, down, down it went, falling deeper and deeper . . .

The young German hurried next to her, clearly worried about something. The mood was tense. They were trying to escape from something. But where were they going?

This was Aurora . . . the North Tube . . . and they were heading towards the garage exit.

‘No! No, no, no! You can’t take me away from here. I cannot leave right now. I have to talk to Alison.’

‘Yvonne, there is no one else left in here. All your colleagues are already at the Halo station.’

‘No, you don’t understand. Alison is not here. She’s in Cambridge, but she’s not there anymore. They took her, you understand? She was abducted. She knew something. She didn’t know what it was, but it was something everyone else had overlooked because they all thought it was about Satanism, and it wasn’t – of course it wasn’t, what an idea.’

‘Yvonne, please. You have to remain calm. I promise you that all your friends are safe.’

‘How can you say that? You have no idea about what is going on. I’m telling you, that was before the accident. When they followed her, when they entered her flat while she was out. Why didn’t I take her seriously? I should have believed her, right away. To think that she would become paranoid, even after that horrible murder – that’s completely ridiculous. I know Alison too well. She isn’t like that. She’s never been like that, all these years we’ve been together. And then, suddenly, she’s gone.

She's gone, and all that's left is silence. So many times I tried to phone her and never got an answer. But I know what I have to do now. I just remembered something.'

'Yvonne, you cannot get up right now. Your legs are very badly injured. If you try to walk, you will only hurt yourself more. No, please, stay on the stretcher and we will get you to your friends as soon as possible.'

'There is no time. Don't you understand? You have to put me down. I have to go to the Comms Room – now, immediately. I have to phone Gran. I am such an idiot. Why didn't I think of that before?'

'Yvonne, you can send messages from our station. And you can phone anyone you like – no problem. But you really cannot get up right now.'

'No, please, lie back down again and let us carry you out to the snowcat. It will be very comfortable in there and you can ...'

'Yvonne, no!'

* * *

There was warmth and softness. And there was motion too – a soothing rocking motion, as if lying in a boat, floating on a calm lake.

This was only an illusion, of course. If she opened her eyes, she would find herself, still hunched up and miserable, sitting underneath the ventilation shaft, on the hard wooden floor of the North Tube corridor. She was simply falling asleep, falling asleep at last ... drifting away from all the pain and the fears.

But she could not allow herself to do that. She knew that this

is how people freeze to death. They forget that they are cold. They fall asleep, and then they never wake up again.

Therefore, she had to open her eyes and realise that . . .

She was not in the North Tube after all. Nor was she anywhere else in Aurora. It was a strange room – small, with a low ceiling.

And the motion was real. It was accompanied by the monotonous droning of a powerful engine.

The lights built into the roof of the vehicle were turned off. Instead, pale daylight entered through a frosted window in the side wall. It was cold outside, but a warm flow of dry air entered through a vent directly above.

The softness was provided by a thick sleeping bag, unzipped halfway down, and secured to a narrow bench by a compression strap that was wrapped around it in the middle.

Then, she noticed the jumper she was wearing – light blue, made of a soft fabric, and with a roll neck. It was none of hers. But it was cut for a woman – quite stylish and obviously expensive, well above her pay grade. And it had a wonderfully fresh smell about it – unfamiliar, in a nice sort of way.

The young German sat on a bench along the opposite side of the cabin. His eyes were closed, and his head nodded with the movement of the vehicle. He appeared to be sleeping.

Stefan was his name. And it had been he who had got her out of Aurora, he and the other two. And now, they were on the way to the German base.

But the lads did not understand what was really going on. They did not know what had happened before they had arrived at Aurora. They did not know about the shadows. They did not

know how the shadows had gathered around Alison before she had disappeared. They did not know how close the shadows had got to Siobhán herself before she had left England. They did not know how close the shadows had got to her again as she had sat alone in the dying base, as the cold had slowly taken hold of her body, as the darkness had crept up to her from both ends of the tunnel during what she had thought would be her final night. They were unaware of the fact that, perhaps at this very moment, the shadows were closing in on them once more, having followed them out of the lifeless base to make another attempt at capturing her.

Driven by a rising panic, she realised that she could not stay there. She had to get back to England, as soon as possible. She had to find Alison, meet up with her. Together they were strong. Together they could defeat any enemy.

But getting up turned out to be difficult. There was a heavy numbness weighing down onto her whole body, leaving her with no strength and hardly any sensation in both legs. And yet, somehow, she needed to get out of this sleeping bag.

Stefan opened his eyes as soon as the buckle of the compression strap clanked down onto the floor. He had to have been dozing only.

‘Listen, Stefan, I’m sorry I woke you up. But you can go back to sleep. I’ll just ... I’ll be on my way.’

He seemed confused and blinked several times, evidently still not fully conscious. Then, he got up and crouched down next to her, to fasten the strap again.

‘No, Stefan, don’t do that. You’ve got to let me go. I can’t

explain the situation right now. It's a bit complicated because ... The thing is ... I don't know when, but they will come after me again, sooner or later. And when that happens, you will be in danger too. As long as you're with me, you'll be in danger. It's the shadows, you see. They have already killed once, and they will stop at nothing. So, just ... just abandon me here and return to your base. You'll be safe there – yes, you'll be safe.'

He smiled faintly and put his hand on her forehead. 'We will not abandon you, Yvonne, and we will definitely not allow anyone to kill you, I promise. Try to sleep and, tomorrow, we will be at Helios.'

Her grandmother used to stroke her hair like that, many years ago, when she woke up from a nightmare. Perhaps this would turn out to be just another nightmare after all – a nightmare she could only escape by falling asleep.

* * *

She awoke from the sudden impact of a wave of piercing cold. But they were still indoors. There were bright floodlights underneath a curved ceiling made of glinting steel. Indistinct noises echoed within that dome. Obscure shapes moved about erratically. An oppressive atmosphere of restlessness and agitation hung over everything. And away at a distance, people were talking in a great confusion of voices.

Then, a single voice appeared, closer by. The vague outline of a woman leaning over her, the face hidden in the glare from above. But she had long dark hair – it was Alison. She reached down to Siobhán, calling her by her name.

But Siobhán was caught in a swift backwards motion, carried away in a current of distorted sounds and blurred images.

Ally, I'm sorry I left you. I'm sorry I wasn't there for you when you needed me most. I know I should have been, just like you've always been for me. I should never have left you. I meant to come back sooner, only something came up. I got delayed, but I'm here now, as promised. Remember, I said I would return from Antarctica, when you were worried about me, and here I am.

Alison was speaking faster now. The words were unclear, but there was a sense of urgency in the tone of her voice – and of concern. She was trying to warn Siobhán of something, of some kind of danger.

The space between them was distorted, as if Siobhán were seeing her friend through a layer of water, looking up to her from beneath the waves. And it was getting harder to breathe.

She needed air. She needed to talk to Alison. But the water was too deep and too heavy. The phantoms had finally caught up with her. They had lured her into their cold dark lake, high among lonely mountains. And now they were pulling her farther and farther down, until she would sink all the way to the bottom and never rise to the surface again.

An object was placed over her nose and mouth. It was going to suffocate her. But with a panicked gasp, fresh air rushed into her lungs.

Alison faded away.

CHAPTER NINE

BORROWED TIME

A line of palm trees swayed in a soft breeze. Behind them, a turquoise sea stretched to the horizon, its gentle waves running up a white sandy beach, under a clear blue sky.

Aside from the poster, the rest of the wall facing the foot of her bed was taken up by a cupboard with a glass front, and a metal shelving unit, both containing a range of medical supplies.

The wall on the right, directly by the side of the bed, had a small light near the ceiling, which spread a diffuse glow throughout the room. In one of the corners to the left of the bed was a door, with an erasable schedule attached to the inside. The other corner was closed off by a white curtain, with a washbasin and a mirror next to it.

On the bedside cabinet stood a lamp, a box with tissues, a water bottle, a glass – and behind it, her watch, the first object she recognised in the strange room. It was twenty minutes past one, but whether it was in the morning or in the afternoon was impossible to tell in the windowless room. The self-winding mechanism of her watch was still going. It could not have been lying there at rest for much more than a day.

And something else she now saw behind the water bottle – two identity discs on a chain:

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This had to be she, then. And that was something for certain at least.

Then she noticed, on the floor behind the bedside cabinet, a large bag that also looked familiar – her kit bag for Antarctica.

Antarctica, yes ... The surprise of being selected for the team, the frantic training period in England ... Finally, the day of her departure, walking into the RAF station, alone and completely out of place ... The long and exhausting journey south in the transport plane, surrounded by all the military guys ... The stopover on Ascension Island ... Switching aircraft on the Falklands ... The restless night at Halo ... The flight across the Weddell Sea and her arrival at Aurora ... The Christmas and New Year's celebrations, being the outsider again, the newcomer. It was all coming back to her.

But this was not Aurora. This was a hospital room somewhere else. Obviously, something had gone seriously wrong.

Her right wrist was bandaged, and the palm of her right hand was sore, as if it had been burnt recently. More worryingly, a blanket of pain lay over her whole body – dull throughout her legs, more acute and piercing in her chest, and throbbing with every pulse inside her head.

The sterile interior of the room contained no clues about what had happened, or anything that would reveal its location. The only additional information that entered from outside was an indistinct mixture of sounds – intermittent human voices over a constant background of mechanical noise.

Then, closer by, she heard the swift steps of a single person, slowing down and stopping just outside the door. The handle slowly moved downwards, until the door was carefully pushed open.

The woman quietly stepping into the room was good-looking, in a rugged sort of way. Prolonged exposure to the cold and dry Antarctic air had visibly affected her. Her dark brown hair fell in wavy strands that, under normal circumstances, would probably have been shiny and soft. But the more robust style suited her, whereas Siobhán guessed that her own hair had to be a lank mess.

Upon seeing that Siobhán responded to her presence, the woman switched on the main light.

‘Hello, Siobhán. I am glad you are awake. I did not want to disturb you. But I hoped I could talk to you before we leave.’

She had a distinct German accent – a bit like Siobhán’s grandmother, only slightly more pronounced. As she approached, she picked up a stethoscope from one of the shelves.

‘How are you now? Can I sit here while I check your pulse and breathing?’ In an unconscious movement, she tucked her hair behind her left ear, as she settled onto the side of the bed. ‘No, you don’t have to move. I have enough space. And raising your upper body hurt, didn’t it? I suspected already that you have some fractured ribs. At least your chest is badly bruised. So far, there are no signs of any complications, but we will have to be careful.’

She inserted the earpieces of her stethoscope. ‘Just let me slide this underneath your shirt. It will be a bit cold, but only for

a few seconds.’

As the diaphragm moved over Siobhán’s chest, the pain over some ribs became more intense – definitely broken, then. And that meant no diving for at least a month, possibly even longer.

There were many questions to be asked about what had happened. But the woman probably did not want her to speak right now, focussed on her task as she was. She appeared to be in her late thirties, at the peak of life, when persisting health and fitness were matched by professional skills and life experience. She had a plain wedding ring. But although her left ear was pierced, she did not wear an earring at that moment.

She glanced up from her watch and smiled as she noticed Siobhán scrutinising her. With an encouraging wink, she removed the stethoscope and straightened out Siobhán’s shirt. ‘Still nothing to worry about. Your heart and lungs sound exactly as they should. There is no sign of damage from either smoke inhalation or your broken ribs. Just try to breathe normally and deeply. And if you need to cough, it is important that you do, even if it is painful. If it hurts too much, I can give you more pain medication, rather than having the risk of you getting a pneumonia.’

‘But perhaps I should introduce myself again. You do not seem to remember our earlier meetings. My name is Monika – Monika Wendt. I am a medical doctor and also the outgoing manager of the German Helios station. That is where you are now. We used to have daily radio contact with Aurora, to see if everything is all right on both sides. But, unfortunately, we can only meet very seldom. So, maybe you have not heard about us?’

‘In any case, Helios is on the Ekström Ice Shelf, about nine hundred kilometres northeast of Aurora. The scenery here is very similar to what you know from your station. And you are not our only visitor right now. A few days ago, a group of emperor penguins from the nearby colony came by to say hello. Do you like animals, Siobhán?’

‘Yes. I’m a biologist – a marine zoologist.’

‘That is very interesting. There are no biologists working here. So, what kind of research have you been doing here on Antarctica?’

‘I ...’

‘Have you been studying the animals at the Aurora station?’

‘Yes, the dolphins ...’

‘The dolphins?’

‘No, I’m sorry. That was before. At Aurora, I was ... Well, there were the penguins, I suppose, just like here. Although, I can’t really remember seeing them.

‘Oh, and we were scuba diving, of course. That was the main thing. Cryobiology, that’s what I’ve been doing: collecting water and ice samples, and then analysing their physical properties and biological content, trying to work out how single-celled organisms manage to live under those conditions. It was intended to be the start of a long-term monitoring project, but I fear that’s come to a permanent end now.’

‘So, you remember what happened?’

‘Yes, I remember it now. The fire and the evacuation ... The others, did they make it?’

‘Yes, all your colleagues managed to get to the Halo station.

The two who were severely injured were immediately brought to the Memorial Hospital in Stanley. I heard they will both make a full recovery. The rest of the team waited at Halo until it was clear that you were safe. They are now on their way back to England.’

‘Somehow I got separated from them, didn’t I? I remember being out there in the storm. We were leaving the base on the snowmobiles. I remember the red taillights in front of me disappearing into the swirling snow. Then, I got off the groomed track and . . . I don’t know.’

‘Well, you definitely had an accident, that much is obvious. You probably hit something with your snowmobile, at high speed – a pressure ridge, for example, or a sastruga – and you were thrown over the handlebar. This would explain the fractured ribs. I also think that the snowmobile must have landed on top of you because your thighs are badly bruised, front and back, as if they had been squashed – not only hit on one side, as from a fall. It is possible that the internal bleeding extends all the way to the bones, especially in your right leg. The bones themselves are seemingly intact. But with contusions like that, I am sure it will be painful to walk for several weeks.’

‘My wrist?’

‘Sprained, I believe, not severely, and definitely not broken. But it is a little swollen. You can take the bandage off, as long as moving your hand does not hurt. My main concern right now is to get you hydrated again. Drink as much as you can. Try to get yourself to use that at least once this evening.’ She nodded towards the curtained-off corner.

‘And when you see yourself in the mirror, don’t be alarmed. You have some frostbite on your cheeks and nose, but nothing major. It will be gone in a few days, long before you are back home. Overall, I think that this adventure could have gone much worse for you.’

‘Still, I did mess up in the end, didn’t I – as they always knew I would, sooner or later.’

Monika looked confused for a moment, then she smiled. ‘You know, Siobhán, this is Antarctica. Men have died down here long before you and I arrived. No one is going to blame you for what happened.’

She shifted a little to get up, but then settled down again. ‘And if you feel any resentment towards your colleagues for having left you behind ...’

‘No, I don’t, not at all.’

‘Okay, good. Because, you know, they did try to find you before they left. But you remember how difficult it was to see anything. And as soon as you were lying on the ground, you were probably covered by drifting snow within a few seconds. Eventually, they had to break off the search when someone else almost got lost as well. The wind only kept getting stronger, and the aeroplane could not wait anymore. They had to get out. You know how badly injured at least one of your colleagues was at the time. To leave some people behind in the station when they did not know how far the fire would spread, or how long they would have to stay there, would have been very dangerous. And there would have been nothing for these people to do until the weather got better, at which point someone could have flown in

from Halo.

‘Meanwhile, we had already started to prepare for a land rescue when we received the first distress call about the fire, just in case your aeroplane was unable to land. We had equipped the snowcat for a long journey over the ice, with a sledge for the fuel barrels. And we had worked out the best route because we had never done this before. When we heard that the aeroplane had landed, and the weather was still good enough to get back to Halo, it was a big relief for us, as you can imagine. But then, shortly afterwards, the message came in that you had got lost during the evacuation, and that they would have to leave without you. Of course, we knew that we would not have a better chance of finding you outside than your colleagues had. But we thought that there was a small possibility that somehow you would manage to get back to Aurora on your own. Then, we could pick you up and get you out sooner than your colleagues could have, who would have to wait for the weather to improve before they could do an airlift again. So, the boys left immediately. Do you remember the three?’

‘Vaguely ... yes, I do now.’

Monika nodded. ‘One of them, Stefan, is a geophysicist, but he worked as paramedic during his ... well, instead of going to the military. And when we got the wintering team together, he was trained as my medical assistant. As the distress call came in, I was in the process of organising the handover of the station to the new manager, before our departure. And anyway, out there, without proper medical equipment, there was nothing I could have done for you that Stefan could not do as well. I

therefore sent him out, together with two experienced drivers for the snowcat. But, to be honest, when I watched the boys drive away from here into the blizzard, I did not expect this to be a rescue mission at all. We knew that, even if things went well, it was still going to take about three days to get through to Aurora. And after that time, if you had still been outside in the cold ... But you can be certain that, if we had not found you, your own people would have come back as soon as it was possible to fly, and as soon as it made any sense to begin the search again.'

'I don't doubt that at all. As a matter of fact, I'm glad they left when they did. It's bad enough that I made a fool of myself, without putting everyone else at risk. I only regret that I forced them to make that difficult decision. A really bad case of *cherchez la femme*, I guess.'

'I am sure your colleagues do not see it like that. I spoke with John on the radio, while you were on the way here. The connection to Halo was not great to begin with, but when I told him that the boys had found you alive, and that you were not in a critical condition, there was this strange noise in the background. It sounded a little bit like interference with a broadcast from a football stadium – after a goal, you know. From then on, it was hard to understand what John was saying. But I got the impression that they will give you a very nice welcome, once you are back in Cambridge.'

She noticed Siobhán's tears and handed her a tissue. 'Don't be so hard on yourself. In the end, you came closer to death than anyone else on your team, and your colleagues know this. You had bad luck in a dangerous situation. You got into trouble, and

then you got yourself out again. The main reason why you are here today is that you did manage to get back to the station and survive there for three days, all on your own. So, stop blaming yourself and take your time to recover. Yesterday afternoon, when you arrived here, although you did not speak, I could tell that you were in a lot of pain. I had to give you an analgesic, so that you could sleep. I hope you are feeling better now.'

'I'm all right. Only . . . I have this headache, and I'm still a little confused. I can't properly remember anything that happened after the accident. I've got some vague memories, just blurry images that are now coming back. But I can't be sure if they are real or simply hallucinations.'

'I am not surprised. You received fairly strong painkillers during the last four days. And you are probably concussed as well, from your accident. Normally, with injuries like that, you should stay in bed for at least a week. But the problem is, my team is leaving tomorrow on the ice-breaker. We are going home, and I think you should come with us. Otherwise, you would have to wait until an aeroplane manages to get through again, and that could take several days. As you will see, the weather is still quite bad. Who knows to which station they would bring you first, and how many stops you would have to make before you are back in England. This could be very exhausting. On the ship, the whole trip to Germany will take about six weeks, and it is quite comfortable, with good food and plenty of fresh air on deck. There is also a sauna and a swimming pool. You can start your reha on board, and by the time we arrive in Bremerhaven, you will have completely recovered. Then, you can fly home from there.'

She put her hand on Siobhán's arm. 'You will enjoy the crossing. There will be other biologists you can talk to and find out what they are working on. We will see a lot of animals – especially whales, they are my favourites. But I am sure we will also see some dolphins, when the ocean gets a little warmer.' She winked cheerfully.

'Sounds brilliant. Ordinarily, I'd give everything for a cruise like that.'

'That will not be necessary. I already got confirmation from the ship that they have a berth for you on C Deck, where most of the scientists are. And about your friends and family at home: John told me that the Institute contacted your relative and told her about what happened, that you are safe, and that you are coming back a year earlier.'

'My relative? I suspect they must have talked to a friend of mine – Alison. She was my primary contact. My only surviving relative is my grandmother. But I didn't want her to hear about any bad news from anyone but Alison.'

'I see ... maybe a little misunderstanding. Although, if they contacted your grandmother, it was not really bad news, in a way, given the circumstances – disappointing, of course, that your stay on Antarctica was much shorter than expected.'

She got up. 'I will leave you in peace now.'

'Monika, just a second please. These lads – Stefan and the other two ...'

'Torsten and Frank, yes. You will meet them again on the ship.'

'If they aren't too busy, they could ... I mean, I wouldn't

mind. I'd like to ...'

'I know, Siobhán. But I don't think that would be a good idea right now. They were asking about you, but I told them not to bother you. I have to draw a clear line. If I let these three in, everyone else will want to see you too. You are a bit of a celebrity at the moment, and I do not want the whole nosey team parading through the hospital – two teams, in fact, outgoing and incoming. Try to get better first. What you need now most of all is rest – and water.' She indicated the bottle on the bedside cabinet.

Then, she spotted the kit bag. 'I saw that you have plenty of clothes here. That is all you really need on the journey home. The boys found the bag on a snowmobile when they left Aurora. And since it had your name on it, they took it. Yesterday evening, when I looked for fresh clothes for you, I noticed that you have a very nice camera in there too. If you have films left, you will be able to take some great photographs on the ship.

'We will transfer you to the ice-breaker in the same way as you came here – in the snowcat. So, I promise you do not have to get on a snowmobile again. And it is a short trip this time. The docking site is only about ten kilometres from here.

'We will begin to move out to the *Polaris* at about six o'clock this evening. I will be in the last group to leave the station, and it will probably be best if you come with me. Then we can bring you on board without creating a lot of excitement around you – you know, when all the others start partying and are busy meeting old friends from home, who are doing research on the ship. But before we leave, we still have plenty to do – pack up the last

boxes and bring them to the ship. That is what this noise is about outside in the corridor.’

She walked to the door, where she turned back. ‘I will check on you again in a few hours. Then we decide what medication to give you for the night. By the way: your watch is still running, but on Falklands time. You should set it forward by four hours, to synchronise with us.’

* * *

Her relative . . . Had that really been a misunderstanding? Would the Institute have used that term had they spoken to Alison? Her family name, being different from Siobhán’s, did not naturally suggest a kinship between them.

Otherwise, it could only have been her grandmother. Her name and address would have been in Siobhán’s personal records, but the Institute would have had to look up her grandmother’s phone number. Knowing that Siobhán had explicitly asked them not to contact her in case of an emergency, they would only have done that had they been unable to reach Alison after several attempts – both at work and at home.

Then, Siobhán was reminded of Alison’s sabbatical. If her watch still showed the correct time, the date had to be correct as well – 5th February. With an arrival at the German base the day before, after a three-day journey, they would have left Aurora on the 1st. Then, the fire and the evacuation would have happened three days before that, on 29th January. And Alison would have been on her sabbatical since the previous weekend. That, therefore, appeared to be the solution: Alison had already

left for Dublin when the Institute had attempted to contact her.

And yet, something felt wrong about this explanation. As Siobhán lay in the hospital bed, her eyes closed, her mind trying to reach back to before the evacuation and the accident, out of the confused images a vague fear began creeping up on her; like the distant memory of a nightmare, unreal but nevertheless menacing; a foreboding that something had gone terribly wrong; that the second chance that she had been given by her rescue out of Aurora would come at a price.

CHAPTER TEN

THE LAST TWILIGHT

The steep flight of metal stairs rose up threateningly ahead of her, undulating like a wave, ready to break at any moment, while the feeling of heaving and rolling increased with every laboured step upwards.

Below her, the steady droning of the diesel engines was too determined for them to be just idling. The ship did really appear to be on the move now, cutting through the Southern Ocean. Despite that, it would have been wrong to blame the dizziness and nausea on the swell alone. The painkillers she had been taking over the past days undoubtedly had a role to play in this as well.

Up on the landing, the music was louder than it had been on the deck below and was clearly emanating from the forward part of the ship. Also audible now was the buzzing of many excited conversations – too many, and far too excited. Neither her nerves nor her stomach were currently capable of withstanding the exertion of socialising, particularly with a group of happy people, who were returning from a unique and wonderful adventure they had shared – a wonderful adventure that had been roughly taken away from her.

Fortunately, with everyone else at the leaving party, the corridor was empty in both directions. A green exit sign was pointing to the left, away from the commotion. It would feel miserably cold outside, after she had been lying in bed for days, especially

as the only serious piece of outdoor clothing she was wearing was her parka, which she had hastily put on over her tracksuit. But what she needed more than anything else at that moment was an open space and a steady horizon, something reliable to focus on.

The corridor ended at a solid steel door, painted white, whose small round window only reflected the illuminated interior. The door was unlocked, and it opened onto a narrow gangway.

Instantly, a blast of freezing outside air rushed up against her, biting into her lungs and eyes. But, for all that, her view to the horizon still remained obstructed by two red life boats, which hung over the side of the ship along the entire length of the gangway.

It had to be late at night already. Only a faint natural shine lay around the ship, which was slightly more intense towards the stern. If she could manage to get up onto the observation platform behind the bridge, she might still be able to catch a last glimpse of Antarctica. Just to see it one last time, to offer a grateful farewell to this tragically beautiful continent, which had almost refused to let her go.

She pulled the zipper of her parka up to her chin and began climbing the ladder that led upwards from the gangway, treading carefully on the metal rungs that were encrusted with frozen sea spray and threatened to stick to the inside of her hands. More worryingly, by the time she had reached the top, her injured legs were screaming in protest.

Looking towards the bow, she could see the red navigation light. There was also faint light emerging from the windows of

the bridge. All other rooms on the upper deck lay in darkness. Although she still had not reached the highest platform of the bulky ice-breaker, the wind was already stronger up there than it had been on the gangway below, howling past the funnel and the radar tower. At least the noise from the party was blocked now, while the regular humming of the engines lay dampened far below.

Petrels circled all around the superstructure, taking for granted their seemingly effortless mobility. Watching their graceful movements, after a few deep breaths of the crisp air, she felt her senses become sharper, and her nausea subside. It was as if all the cooped up negative energy that had accumulated over the past week had been absorbed by the wind and carried away.

Negative energy ... For a moment, she wondered why that expression had suddenly come to her mind. Who used to say that?

Claire, of course – Claire again – silly, superstitious, loyal old Claire. What she might be doing now? Still living at the old place in St Andrews, with a better flatmate perhaps, or with a boyfriend? It was curious how, after all this time and halfway around the world, Claire had returned to Siobhán's memory, as vivid as ever.

But it was too soon to turn her mind back towards home. She could not do that while they remained under the spell of the Southern Ocean. On the port side, where she had come out, was only the dark expanse of the open sea. She therefore climbed up the remaining ladder to the observation deck and looked over to the other side.

Someone was already standing there, a lone figure in profile, outlined against the glow of the nighttime sun and looking back towards the vast snowfield in the distance. She was not alone up there after all, not alone in solitude.

Stefan did not hear her approach over the noise of the wind and the excited birds. He reacted with a jolt when he realised that she was standing next to him. ‘Oh, hello, Siobhán. I did not notice ... How are you?’

‘All right, I guess. I’m just really weak – tired, somehow.’

‘Yes, I noticed. You fell asleep almost as soon as we were in the snowcat and began driving away from the station. We were talking a little about something, and I got worried when you did not respond anymore. I checked your pulse, to be sure everything was okay. You did not even wake up when we brought you on board. That is why I was surprised to see you now all the way up here.’ There was a mild tone of reproach in his voice.

‘You’re right. Strictly speaking it is far too early for this kind of excursion. But when I woke up, I felt claustrophobic in my cabin. I had to get some fresh air and see the horizon. And I have to say, it was worth the effort.’

Stefan nodded and gazed back towards the retreating edge of the ice shelf. He seemed uneasy around Siobhán, perhaps due to the forced closeness that had existed between them for the duration of an emergency; a closeness that had rushed ahead of true familiarity, and against the ordinary rules of social contact; an experience that he remembered, but she did not. And now they were back on the level of common courtesy that was acceptable

between two people who were almost complete strangers.

He looked tired. He probably had not slept much during the past week. And the physical and mental strain of the rescue mission had clearly taken a toll on him.

‘Stefan, with the hectic during our departure, I never got the chance to thank you and your two mates for getting me out of that mess.’

‘Oh, no problem. You would have done the same for us. We wanted to visit you earlier, when we were still at Helios, to see how you are doing. But we were not allowed to go into the hospital room. Monika had put a sign on the door, you know: “Entrance *Verboten*.”’

‘I see. And you don’t mess with that, do you?’

‘No, not with Monika.’ A more relaxed grin spread across his face. ‘So, how are you? Your ribs are still broken, obviously, but your legs?’

‘Not as bad as they could be, I suppose. They just don’t look very pretty, do they?’

‘No.’ He was shocked by his own spontaneous response. ‘I mean, with the bruises – but they will go away, the bruises, in a month or so.’

He was evidently embarrassed about his intrusion into her private sphere. ‘I’m sorry I had to, you know . . .’

‘Don’t worry about it, Stefan. I’m a big girl. Actually, I meant to ask you about what happened after you found me.’

‘You don’t remember it at all?’

‘I’ve got these blurred scenes circulating in my head, but I can’t work out which are real and which are fantasy, or in which

order they occurred. It's driving me mad. The last thing I'm sure about is leaving our base with the others. I know I must have had an accident with the snowmobile. But after that, it's all confused. Somehow, I must have managed to get back to the base because that is where you found me. And until you got there, nothing significant could have happened. I must have been just sitting around somewhere, waiting for ... I don't know ... to die, probably, eventually. Then, you three arrived, and there had to be a fair amount of activity and excitement. But even so, all I have from that moment on are vague recollections – mostly hallucinations, I'm sure – of falling or flying, of indistinct figures without faces, or of hearing the sound of voices without words.'

'I know, that was my fault. I messed up the analgesic. I had no idea how strong this new fentanyl stuff really is. Based on your reaction, I think I must have given you a dosage that was a little too high.'

'Yes, that would explain things. But I imagine I wasn't complaining too loudly at the time.'

Stefan laughed. 'No. You fell asleep almost immediately. That was the problem. I was afraid that you would stop breathing. That would have complicated things. With anaesthesia, you have to supply oxygen, and we did not have that. Also, I did not know what kind of injuries you had, and I needed to talk to you, to find out. So, I was definitely not trying to put you to sleep.'

He was unsure about how to continue. 'You know, in the end, it was much less dramatic than we thought it would be. When we left Helios, all we knew was that there was a fire in your station, and that you had got lost during the evacuation. About

you, we only knew your name – sort of. Otherwise, we had no idea about what had happened to you, where we could find you, and in what state you would be. The drive to Aurora was mostly boring. There was not much to see with all the snow in the air. Torsten and Frank took turns driving, while I chatted with whoever was awake, or I tried to sleep myself. When we got there, the weather was so bad we knew we had no chance of finding you outside. So, we went down into the station, just to see if it was completely destroyed. And, suddenly, there you were.

‘When I saw you, half lying on the floor, with blood all over your face, I first thought you were dead. Then, I noticed that your eyes were moving a little. You did not speak, but you were conscious. You responded when I said hello. You shook my hand, do you remember? You had taken your gloves off, and I could feel that your hands were very cold. I was not sure whether it was only your hands, or whether you were really hypothermic. Well, as I said, I gave you the pain killers, and then . . . The return trip was a bit more entertaining with you for company. Mostly, I was trying to keep you hydrated, when you were awake. If you cannot remember, you did not miss very much.’

Siobhán doubted that. ‘But when I was awake, how was I – mentally, I mean. Did I say anything?’

He was visibly uncomfortable now. ‘You know, at the beginning, when we found you, you were obviously in shock. But that is not surprising, everyone in that situation would have been, after the fire and getting lost during the evacuation; having to find the way back to the burnt-out station; then three days on your

own, without knowing if someone was going to pick you up, injured and in a lot of pain. The fact that you were still alive is remarkable enough. And on the way to Helios, under the influence of the drugs, you were kind of ... well, naturally, a little worried.'

Worried ... Siobhán began to suspect that her behaviour during that return journey was part of the reason why Stefan now trod so lightly around her. If only the cruise was something for her to enjoy, to appreciate as the unique opportunity that it clearly was. If only she did not have this overpowering desire to get back home as soon as possible; a desire born of a constant foreboding that some danger still surrounded her.

'So, at least five weeks on the ship before we get to Germany. Do you know what you'll be doing during all that time?'

Stefan nodded tentatively, although without much conviction. 'I thought I could work a little on my doctor thesis. It was a great holiday down here, but now I have to get back to normal research. The seismological measurements that I was taking at Helios are part of a global network. And the topic of my dissertation is to use all that data to try to distinguish natural earthquakes from nuclear tests. But things happened so quickly while we were on Antarctica. Two years ago, when I got the subject, we were still in the Cold War. Now it is all different. The old enemy is not our enemy anymore, apparently. We are not even returning to the same country that we left – although, from what we heard, the western part where I live has not changed very much. But who knows what is going to happen. The Russians are maybe not the only scary people on this planet, who will do

nuclear tests.'

'No, perhaps not. There might well be others. We just need to rummage round a bit.'

He laughed and then became serious again. 'I was looking forward to the cruise. But now ... I want to be somewhere, you know, either here or there, not stuck between two worlds – a little stupid, I know.'

'No, Stefan. That's not stupid at all. As a matter of fact, I know exactly what you mean.'

He glanced over. 'Now it is probably good for you to be here on the ship, until you are healthier. But you could go from board in Cape Town.'

'Cape Town?'

'Yes. We will be there in twelve days, only for a short stop. But you could get a flight to London from there. It is very expensive, of course, but it is possible. I am thinking about it myself.'

'Are you anxious to get home?'

'Anxious? No, not really. No doubt it is going to be very different. Hamburg is a big and busy place. And we have been away for more than a year. But I am more anxious that, as soon as I get back, everything here ... well, there on Antarctica, will feel very far away, like a dream, you know, as if it never actually happened.'

Like a dream, that was exactly how it felt to Siobhán; a dream that had evaporated, and a nightmare that had materialised in its stead.

Stefan was watching the petrels, which continued to follow them, sailing close to the waves and diving for the food that was

being churned up in the wake of the big ship. It was difficult to size him up. He had to be in his mid-twenties, but he came across as an overgrown boy. Out of the thick survival suit he was skinny; and with his regular glasses instead of the glacier goggles, he looked more like a desk-bound academic than a tough Antarctic explorer. But he had done his job well. And now he could return home with his head held high, and with a collection of very special memories that would last him a lifetime. He probably had a nice girlfriend waiting for him, just as quiet and blond and blue-eyed as he was, who had written sweet letters to him, telling him that she was thinking of him every day, and that she missed him; someone he could think of and miss and rely on while he had been away in that harsh and unforgiving place.

He squinted into the low sunlight. ‘Do you believe you will go back there sometime?’

‘I don’t know. I might, eventually. It was a close call for me the first time around. But then again, of all the places to be dead in ...’

‘You will be okay, Siobhán. We are both a little depressed today. But tomorrow, everything will be better. It will be a good journey. And when we are in Cape Town, you can decide whether you are fit enough to fly back from there.’

He nodded confidently and made an effort to lighten up. ‘By the way, there is a party going on right now, down in the bar on B-Deck, to celebrate our departure. It started up here when we left, but the others went inside very soon. It is warmer there, and there is more to drink. Maybe you do not want to stay very long. And with the drugs you are taking, you should definitely

not drink any kind of alcohol. But it would be good if you would come anyway. I could introduce you to the others. Then you are one of us, not some mysterious stranger who was secretly carried on board under the cover of darkness.'

He gave her a cheerful wink.

'Sure, good idea. I'll join you in a minute.'

The sharp edge of the white coastline slipped farther and farther away as *Polaris* continued on its steady course, heading north-eastwards, away from the last rays of the setting sun.

Antarctica, once again, was bathed in dense twilight – the last twilight over Antarctica she might be seeing in a long time.

For now, she was going home.

PART ONE OF THE SIGNS OF A MYSTERY

December 1940 – The Second World War has been raging across Europe for over a year when a German submarine vanishes under mysterious circumstances.

Fifty years later, the conflict finally seems over as the Cold War comes to an end. Walls are being broken down. People who were separated for decades are brought back together. And things that have lain hidden surface again.

For Siobhán Dannreuther, her grandparents past is distant history when a research project on Antarctica provides her with a welcome opportunity to escape the dreary winter of the British Isles. It promises to be a perfectly normal adventure.

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