



Gripping suspense from the bestselling
author of *The Lost Swimmer*

OUT
OF THE
ICE

A N N T U R N E R

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Also by Ann Turner

The Lost Swimmer

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OUT OF THE ICE

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*For Joy and the boy,
with love*

‘Every heart sings a song, incomplete,
until another heart whispers back.’

Unknown

1

Penguins the size of small children, plump black and white bodies, robust little wings, propelled out of the sea and flew high onto the pack ice, chattering wildly beneath an Antarctic sky so vast and pale and clear it looked like it might shatter at any moment. The air was freezing but there was no wind, so I hauled off my polar-fleece jacket and shivered in my T-shirt, relishing the freedom after being indoors at base. Through the long winter months when the sun was just a lonely glow beneath the horizon I'd taken a stint as Station Leader, making sure the machinery and skeleton staff of plumbers, engineers, carpenters, doctor and cook kept whirring along. It was exhilarating to be back in the field, drinking in the sparkling light.

ANN TURNER

The Adélie penguins waddled across a bare outcrop and through a gap in a temporary fence housing a small metal weighbridge, where each bird was automatically weighed. They crossed to the rookery on the stony hill behind, each calling for their partner in a piercing shrill, creating an impenetrable wall of noise. I watched in awe as mate recognised mate, rubbing soft white chests together, tipping back their smooth black heads and stretching beaks to the sun, crying notes of pure joy. Mutualling – a heartfelt greeting after months at sea. They had reached the end of their long, annual migration. Spring was finally here.

Migratory. We were all migratory. I felt a deep melancholy as I witnessed the mass display of affection. Adélie penguins mate for life, something I'd yet to achieve. I was thirty-nine and single again. I had no one to come home to; unless you counted my mother, which I did not. And unlike me, Adélies are house proud, building nests of stones. There was much pecking as birds tried to steal each other's pebbles, rushing in and plucking them up, dashing away, getting chased.

Kate McMillan, an ornithologist and close friend, had just arrived for the season. A lanky 185 centimetres tall, thirty-three years old, she was pale-skinned and freckled, with a shock of unruly red hair that shimmered in the sun. She was doing a fine imitation of Charlie Chaplin as she fell into rhythm with the waddling penguins, causing no disruption as she placed coloured rocks on the ground for them. Red, blue, orange, yellow.

I looked down at my tablet and watched the images being streamed by the huge fixed camera that we'd set up yesterday with the help of our base engineers. Built like a tank in hard grey steel, the camera was programmed to swivel randomly to

Out of the Ice

record the breeding cycle. It zoomed in to an enormous close-up of a penguin eye, beady black encased in a white ring, as the bird snapped up Kate's red stone. Then it zoomed back out to the chaos of the rookery where fights were erupting over the new pebbles. The penguins were completely trusting of our presence. Their predators were in the sky and sea, so they held no fear of us. Like all wildlife in this pristine wilderness the Adélies hadn't seen the awful destruction humans were capable of inflicting. It was a land of innocence.

Suddenly I saw a huge close-up of my own face. Behind sunglasses, my expression was ambiguous. My dark hair was looped up messily, my olive skin pale from not having seen sun since April. The camera zoomed out – I was tall and though not overweight the digital images fattened me up. I must do more exercise now the warmer weather was here.

The camera swivelled back to the penguins, and I took notes. Today I was carrying out an Environmental Impact Assessment on how the camera might affect the Adélies. Trained as a marine biologist, I had made my name studying the relationship between penguins and their tiny crustacean food, krill, in the Southern Ocean before spending a decade with my true loves, cetaceans, researching families of whales and dolphins. A second doctorate in environmental science ensured I stayed competitive. Through it all, Antarctica was the one underpinning strength of my life, the place that pulled me back from the darkness, and I would do anything to be here.

I was down this time on an eighteen-month contract with the Australian Antarctic Division, the longest I'd had – normally it was a twelve-month gig, but I'd taken the Station Leader

ANN TURNER

position in the middle – and it would be my final summer before I had to go back to Victoria. Having been in the ice for a year already, there were a few quirks setting in. Kate said I had the *look* – like I was gazing through to a far horizon. I knew it in other winterers but I hadn't realised I had it myself. Even when you're surrounded by a small group of people in Antarctica, you're still more on your own than anywhere else. The landscape is broad and wide and your vision runs to it. You live in your head, the present can flow to the past – you spend hours reflecting. The other day I'd gone outside missing my left boot, and it was only when Kate laughed that I was *toasty* I realised I was standing in my sock. Toast is what the Americans call ice fever – when you start to burn out and the mind plays tricks. Everyone gets a bit toasty over winter, but I was generally fine.

Although I'd almost forgotten what the other world looked like. I was on leave from my university in Melbourne, where I'd torched a few bridges and I knew it meant I'd be stuck at Associate Professor level for some time. I adored my team of fellow scientists but I'd had a blow-up with a group of the most senior professors in my department. I shuddered at the thought. I was in no hurry to get back, even though I was passionate about my Antarctic Studies program that was growing more popular every year. I loved this generation of students. They looked at you directly, judged you for who you were in that moment, so different to the baby-boomers, who were always nosy. *What do you do? Are you married? Do you have children?* The students didn't take jobs as a birthright, unlike the old worn academics, too scared or greedy to leave, huddled over their posts like fat spiders. Of which my mother was one. Cristina Ana Alvarado,

Out of the Ice

Professor of Spanish Linguistics and Culture, stalwart of her School; a proud migrant success story.

We were Spanish, and *sacrifices* had been made. In Extremadura in western Spain, cherries grow in abundance in Valle del Jerte. That's where my Granny Maria and Papa Luis were born and raised, a place so beautiful they never wanted to leave. But they were both ten years old at the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War, and were sent on a boat to England in 1936 in a desperate attempt to keep them safe. Their parents perished in the war, killed by Franco's brutal Nationalists. Maria and Luis, heartbroken, yearned to go home to the shreds of family that were left, but it was too dangerous. As young, exiled adults they married, and when my mother Cristina came along, they vowed to stay in London to make a better life for her, a decision that sat heavily. Cristina felt responsible, and always tried to outperform. But she shattered their dreams when she met my dad, Mike Green, a young medical intern from Adelaide, who swept her off to Australia.

Dad was from establishment stock, and going through a belated hippy phase. I arrived two weeks after their marriage on a wild stretch of South Australian beach, much to the shame of Granny Maria and Papa Luis.

My childhood in Adelaide was perfect. We lived in a small house on the waterfront at Grange, a windswept seaside suburb. I learned to swim by the old wooden jetty and each summer pods of dolphins would arrive, ducking and weaving through the pale green waves. I'd run with the local kids along the beach, keeping up with the sleek grey fins as they rose and dipped. And sometimes there'd be another fin, one that stayed on the

ANN TURNER

surface, cutting through the waves in a thick black silhouette. A shark; a white pointer. At weekends a tiny plane would circle the sharks and crowds of swimmers would flee, screaming, onto the baking sand. And when the tide was low I'd lie in warm pools, telling stories of dolphins and whales in faraway oceans to my friends.

All that changed when Dad, who'd excelled as a researcher in biological medicine at Adelaide University, found a promotion in Melbourne and we had to leave. I was devastated. I was nine years old.

We moved into a big creaking house in a dark leafy street in suburban Kew, far away from the beach. A green desert. And then, one year later, Dad moved out.

Mum ached to go back to London but she had a job as a lecturer, teaching Spanish, and as with all Alvarados she stayed to make a better life for her daughter. She insisted that I take my first surname – in Spanish tradition that meant her maiden name. I would be Laura Alvarado. I longed to be Laura Green. I worshipped my father and loved that he – and therefore I – was Australian. While Mum grew increasingly vexatious, difficult and angry, I blamed her and wondered what awful things she'd done to make Dad go. I'd grill her; she'd never answer unless it was to argue. I saw Dad at weekends for a couple of years, and then he moved to Sydney and was, more often than not, too busy to come down, or have me up to visit.

That left Mum and me in the too-big house in a cold, foreign place.

A penguin started to peck curiously at my leg, pulling the trouser fabric, letting it go, pulling again.

Out of the Ice

‘No rock here, my love.’

He looked up and then pecked again. Another penguin dropped a stone between the tripod legs of the camera. The pecking penguin waddled off and returned with a blue stone of Kate’s and dropped it on the leg of the tripod, where it rolled off. I photographed them and made notes. Had we erected the camera on their annual nesting spot? They were tagged with tiny radio antennae that stuck out through the oily feathers on the back of their necks. I looked them up on my satellite-tracking app – Isabel and Charles. I would follow them; make sure the camera didn’t disturb them.

Elsewhere, young penguins arriving for their first breeding season were trying to coerce their way into established partnerships, to no avail. They’d rush in when one penguin was away, only to be pecked out, like a game of musical chairs in which they never won the chair. I sympathised. The camera swivelled and took arbitrary shots.

My nose grew numb from cold and a familiar sensation rushed through me. A storm was brewing. Down here, anything could change at any second. I looked across to Kate and knew she’d felt it too. I threw on my jacket and signalled for home; Kate gave me the thumbs up. We put on our skis.

The wind was fierce as we tilted against it, slowly making our way cross-country through icefields stretching wide to three horizons. Gales had whipped the surface into sastrugi, small ridges like frozen waves, with little peaks and troughs shadowed blue beneath sky that was turning a dark, foreboding grey. We took care to keep to the flagged area our safety engineer had set out, away from deep ice crevasses that could be fatal.

ANN TURNER

In Antarctica, people normally moved around on motorised equipment but we preferred to ski and it was much less disruptive to the Adélie colony. Our tiny Apple hut, a round red dome of warmth and shelter – looking just like its namesake, a cheery red apple – was a welcome sight in the vast white. I tried to pull open the door, but the wind kept blowing it closed. Kate helped, and together we managed to force it ajar long enough to slip inside. Shutting it, there was a beautiful muffled quiet. A blizzard was forming, and the katabatic winds, roaring downhill from the inland ice, grew so strong that everything started to rock.

We ate a quick meal of hot soup and biscuits in companionable silence. Kate was often not much of a talker, which always amused me given how loud her beloved penguins were. Afterwards, we slipped into sleeping bags and lay on single stretchers crammed close for body heat. Kate was absorbed in the footage the camera was recording and was now reprogramming it so that she could control where it filmed. I looked across at her screen and saw the penguins hunkered down, becoming white with snow and ice until they were indistinguishable from the landscape.

I checked my satellite-tracking app and found Isabel and Charles huddled together between the tripod legs, snug on their new nest. I, too, had found my mate down here once: at twenty-seven, in the abandoned Norwegian whaling station of Grytviken on South Georgia Island, I'd married Cameron Stewart, a dark-eyed, dark-haired, intense marine biologist the same age as me. We were part way through a summer investigation of humpback whales, which at that time were in decline. The bloody, awful history of the whaling station should have

Out of the Ice

made us sad, but we were young and deeply in love, and instead it brought out an unexpected fighting instinct. We wanted to do something to respect the whales, to mark and pay homage to their terrible destruction. There was a small museum, and the woman in charge was also a chaplain. Cameron and I were sombre and respectful as we took our vows in front of empty pews in the old timber church that had been built for the whalers.

That night we slept in a tent by the harbour and stuck our heads out to watch the glittering array of stars in the deep sky, listening to a recording we'd made of humpback whales singing. Three pods, each with their own song, which the males sang to find their mate. They were eerily musical, sharing notes and arrangements with human compositions, like ethereal, modern performances.

We spent the next two weeks on board the *Antarctic Explorer* with a group of American scientists, diving with the humpbacks in their crystal-clear underwater world, vivid colours refracting light. With the rhythm of oxygen from my scuba tank, my protective diving gear keeping me in a warm cocoon, I felt more alive than ever before. We followed the humpbacks' songs, which developed each day and grew more complex. A high note here, a bass note there, a new coupling of tones. Our bodies vibrated as the songs swept through us. We named the whales, photographing them, memorising the distinctive black and white markings on the underside of their tail flukes. Each pattern was unique, like a fingerprint; there were no two alike. My favourite humpback was Lev, a calf, about ten months old. He was a friendly clown and had already found himself in trouble, with a diagonal scar running across his flukes. He'd swim so close

I could touch the long white pleats stretching from his mouth to his belly.

My phone started to ring, and I couldn't hide my reaction when I saw who it was. Kate glanced over, registered the caller, and waited to see what I'd do.

'Is it okay with you?' I asked. She grinned, green eyes lighting up. 'Wouldn't miss it for the world.' I punched her on the arm and put the phone on speaker.

'Hi Mum.'

'Laura, haven't you received my messages?' Cristina Ana Alvarado's strong, resonant voice boomed out. I could imagine her sitting where she always did at her kitchen table, running long fingers through stylishly-cut brown hair. Mum was an older, more fashionable version of me. Same olive skin, same dark eyes. I'd always wanted to take after my dad; he had brown hair and black eyes too, but he still managed to look like a white-bread Anglo-Saxon.

'Sorry, I've been busy.'

Kate snorted, too loudly.

'Who are you there with, honey? Is that Kate?'

'Yes, we're in the field.'

'Hi Cristina,' called Kate. Mum asked Kate how she was, but before waiting for an answer began to speak earnestly. Once she started, it was challenging to get her to stop.

'I don't suppose you've seen the news?'

'No, Mum, I've been—'

'That's the problem down there. You forget about everyone else.'

Kate nodded exaggeratedly and whispered, 'That's the point.'

Out of the Ice

‘It’s awful,’ said Mum. ‘I’ve just got home from a protest march. Those poor refugees are desperate. They’re drowning in the Mediterranean as they try to get to Italy. And more innocent children have washed up on the shore, just like that little boy.’

My tablet beeped – Mum had sent a photograph of two girls, no more than six years old, neatly dressed in bright red parkas and jeans, lying face-down in shallow water, tiny arms stuck out to their sides, as if they were trying to hold hands. Drowned.

‘Australia needs to take more refugees, it’s barbaric.’

I nodded, unable to speak. The wind roared, rocking our Apple hut violently, and the connection broke up. Mum was still talking as the call was lost. I sat back, staring at the photo. Kate leaned over, and reeled away in shock. ‘Wish I hadn’t seen that,’ she mumbled, quickly refocusing on her penguins. ‘Your mother’s right, we should be taking more.’

‘She’s always right on those things,’ I said. *It’s just everything else she’s wrong about.* Like sending this terrible photo, already lodged in my mind, opening a portal into my memories that were pouring in, unstoppable. When Cameron and I had returned from Antarctica, I’d discovered I was pregnant. My mother heard the news of the marriage and pregnancy at the same time. I thought she’d be livid but she was ecstatic. In one swoop my family life improved, and Mum mellowed. Cam and I set up in a rented house in Elwood by the sea. We both had postdocs at Melbourne University and our world was each other, our work and most centrally our ever-growing, cutely kicking, adorable soon-to-arrive baby boy. Mum started a second career purchasing baby clothes and all the trappings of prams and bassinets and toys imaginable.

ANN TURNER

As the days grew closer to my full term I stopped working. Mum and Cam helped set up a cosy room filled with mobiles of penguins dangling from the ceiling, and colourful posters of whales of every species on the walls. We bought new furniture, and arranged the clothes in drawers from zero to twelve months. We were like blissfully nesting Adélies.

When my waters broke, Cam, Mum and I went to hospital as planned. Everything was going perfectly until intense pain exploded in me, and blood flowed like rain. Our baby was coming, clawing his way out in monstrous bursts, but something was terribly wrong. Specialists raced in and took over from the midwife. The contractions were fast. Too fast. I was rushed to the operating theatre. Mum held one hand, Cam the other, as I was wheeled along, and then to my horror they had to leave. An oxygen mask was clamped on my face, I was given blood to replace the gush of red seeping out, and rapidly prepared for an emergency C-section. Doctors swarmed. An intravenous drip in my arm and a general anaesthetic were the last things I remembered. When I woke up, my life had changed.

As I opened my eyes, the recovery room was silent. I looked around, waiting to hear for the first time the beautiful cry heralding my baby's arrival, expecting him to be close in a crib. My mother was nowhere to be seen. Cam, dark eyes sunken and bruised from tears, broke the news. Placental abruption. Sudden, unexpected. Starving our boy of oxygen. The doctors were unable to save him.

Stillborn.

Cam held me tight.

Out of the Ice

I asked to see my baby. The midwife was crying as she carried him in, swaddled in a hospital blanket, and placed him gently on my chest. Nothing made sense. He was beautiful, perfectly formed, with a head of black hair like Cam. Even in this miniature state I could see that he would take after his father – straight nose, narrow, pointed chin like an imp. I held his tiny crinkled hand and kissed him. My baby was limp, with no heartbeat. That wasn't possible. He'd been bucking playfully inside me for months, with a strong, healthy, throbbing heart.

He was as white as snow. A white I'd never seen.

We called him Hamish. A Scottish name, like his father. The midwife offered to take photographs. Cam said no. Every instinct in me needed to bathe Hamish, dress him in his soft blue pyjamas and wrap him in his own new woollen blanket. I was slow and careful as I washed his dark hair, my body numb and aching simultaneously. I tried to keep him warm, but he was as cold as ice. Cam stood shivering beside me, crying softly. He reached out his hand to touch Hamish; pulled it back, unable to.

After the funeral, with the pale coffin so small it looked like it housed a doll, we packed away the ultrasound scans of our growing boy, but we left his room furnished, with the penguin mobiles and whale posters. We kept his clothes. So many clothes. Cam and I couldn't talk about it. Milk still came, useless. I was fragile for weeks from the caesarean. I couldn't concentrate or care about my research. Mum tried to be supportive, but she was furious with the universe. It brought all the losses the Alvarados had faced rushing in. I blamed myself, my mind churning. What had I done? I hadn't smoked,

ANN TURNER

drunk alcohol, taken drugs; I didn't have high blood pressure, wasn't overweight. I'd had none of the risk factors. But I was certain it was my fault, and I knew my mother blamed me too. She said I was being irrational but I couldn't shake the feeling. I withdrew further and further.

Cameron and I tried for another child, but nothing happened. I wanted a baby desperately, to raise a little boy or girl so differently to the way I'd been brought up. I wouldn't dominate; I'd make sure not to drive the father away. But Cam and I just weren't the same after Hamish. Two miserable years later we separated.

I felt so displaced I moved back in with Mum, which was a terrible mistake. We'd argue and make up and argue in a revolving psychodrama. And always, the face of my beautiful baby Hamish hovered. As soon as I closed my eyes. As soon as I woke.

I caught my breath, a hot flush burning my cheeks. In Antarctica ghosts could visit.

The blizzard was shrieking. I listened to the familiar roar, feeling the force of wind and ice and snow raging across the continent. It comforted me, even though it brought mortality knocking. Life could be so easily extinguished in extreme cold, if you were caught in the wrong place. Life was fragile. With sadness, I closed the image of the two drowned refugee girls, sickened by the injustice that they'd had to flee their homeland, only to meet death rather than a future of hope, the shared migrant dream.

I lay back and kept listening to the wind, grateful to be warm and sheltered, and then I tapped open a journal: *Bio-Medicine*

Out of the Ice

International. Mum had always wanted me to study Spanish literature, but there was something in my head that relaxed when I observed minute details with clean precision and recorded facts and figures, and I was addicted to collaboration, the teamwork that gave me an endless stream of tiny, tight-knit families.

As Antarctica howled, I scrolled to the long article by my father, Professor Michael Green, on the influenza virus and how susceptible the world was to a massive pandemic, greater than anything we'd ever seen. I kept abreast of Dad's research, even though I hadn't seen him since I first graduated from university, following in his footsteps with my science degree. When Hamish died, Dad had sent flowers and money, and written expressing his condolences – but he couldn't come to the funeral because he was overseas. Since then we'd had email contact, and left occasional phone messages. For the past decade Dad had been either away or too busy when I tried to catch up with him in Sydney. It saddened me, but I knew it was Mum's fault. I looked so much like her, and she'd treated him so badly. That didn't stop me feeling angry with him on my own behalf, but I always found myself slipping back into admiration. Dad had become a pre-eminent scholar, the most respected microbiologist in his field in the Asia-Pacific region. At least I could enjoy reading his work. It couldn't hurt me.

Or so I thought.

2

The morning was clear and pristine, as if the storm had forged everything anew in this ancient land. My heart swelled at the sight of endless white ice, lurid green flags marking out the safe path, red ones off to the edge warning of danger, as my skis made a rhythmic whoosh. Apart from the echo of cracking icebergs out to sea – smaller bergs calving off their mother-bergs – and the sound of my lungs working hard, there was a profound silence.

I relished this time between camp and base. In between those two different worlds – one of quiet focus, the other of group camaraderie – was a space that no words could describe. It was a place I'd give my life for.

Out of the Ice

I took it slowly, but far too soon the great red shed that formed the heart of our base grew large on the horizon, with quad bikes scooting up and away as people arrived back and others left for field trips. The base was still ensnared by sea ice which, as summer arrived, would melt and allow ships to sail close to unload their cargo. The buildings scattered along the coast gave the feel of a rundown frontier land. I envied Kate, who had stayed back in the Apple hut and would be joined this morning by Gretchen, another ornithologist who'd be her partner in the Adélie research. I'd only check in physically from time to time but would monitor the rookery every day via satellite. It would take three months to finalise my report on the new camera but in the meantime I'd oversee the continued repatriation of waste around the base, working with a team of newly arrived engineers. Beneath the ice were layers of domestic rubbish buried deep, leeching harmful contaminants, which had to be excavated. But before that, we had to deal with the surface waste: barrels filled with oil and an assortment of chemicals, old batteries, pipes, cables, and other refuse that in the past had simply been junked in the garbage field. Everything discarded must now go back to Australia. It would be a long, slow process: the barrels were leaking, and couldn't be easily moved. Here in the clear, freezing air, human waste and the uncaring ways of decades ago stood out like beacons of neglect. I often wondered if people back home would be less polluting if what they were doing was so starkly noticeable. Here you couldn't miss it.

'There you are, you dag!' Georgia Spiros's voice rang through the gaping dining area as I sat down to hot porridge. In her mid-forties, Georgia was tall, athletic and graciously slim, with

ANN TURNER

sparkling black eyes and a grin that could melt ice. A senior detective in the Victoria Police, this was her third time as Station Leader – she'd just arrived to take over from me for the summer. The Australian Antarctic Division employed leaders from all civilian professions, who took leave to work in this extreme land.

The dining room was simply a shell with tables and chairs and a few comfortable sofas up one end, but Georgia managed to fill it with her exuberance. She came at me with open arms. I stood and hugged her. 'You need to fatten up,' she said. 'I can feel your ribs.'

'Lies will get you nowhere.'

'Tell that to a jury.'

She hugged me again, a great bear hug. There was nothing halfway about Georgia. If you were in, you were in.

'Missed you,' she said. 'And thanks for your notes. I feel completely up to speed. We'll have our formal meeting Monday, just to make sure everything's covered.'

'Absolutely,' I agreed warmly. Meetings with Georgia were always good fun. 'How are your kids?' I asked, and she punched my arm. Hard. 'Mad Greek *dag*,' I said. 'What's all that about?'

'Can't think about them. I just hope Jeff does his bit. Between you and me, I nearly didn't come. Stacey's doing her final year of school next year, and I'd like to be there at the start. But she told me I had to be in Antarctica or I'd drive them crazy. Even Alex weighed in. Just as long as I call every day, he said. And David sends his regards,' she added casually. I froze.

David White was my second ex-husband. Yes, I have two of them: the one area where I've outdone my mother. In my early thirties I was desperately lonely when Antarctica called again.

Out of the Ice

Returning to the icy wilderness had given me the first twinge of happiness after the loss of Hamish. It was a summer assignment studying whales in the Southern Ocean, with emphasis on how global warming might be affecting all the different species.

Our Station Leader that season was David White. He was tanned, blond-haired, blue-eyed, with a footballer's body; the physical antithesis of dark-haired, brown-eyed Cameron – and the difference didn't stop there. David, like Georgia, was a police detective who'd held a lifetime fascination with Antarctica. He'd won the job because he was gregarious, solid and adult, like he'd never even been a child. He made us all feel secure.

I was out in the field much of the time but when I came back, David was keen to hear my stories, particularly when I dived with the humpbacks and saw Lev again – now a fully grown forty-tonne whale, still with his diagonal scar and the black and white fluke markings I remembered vividly. As I swam near, Lev had moved his giant body gently with his long pectoral fins, like wings, so as not to crush me. He was as friendly as ever.

When the season ended David and I went back to Victoria, and two months later we caught up. He was stationed in Torquay on the Surf Coast and had a house further along the shore at Aireys Inlet. From his family room, perched high on a cliff, I saw migrating humpbacks the first day, their sleek black bodies surging through the aqua sea, hurling themselves high out of the water, breaching, then rolling playfully onto their backs to reveal their white pleats. They were following us from Antarctica, migrating to warmer waters for the winter. I grabbed David's binoculars from the windowsill. I could barely believe it as one whale started to lobtail, beating the water with its tail, its giant

ANN TURNER

flukes rising up like a black and white butterfly – with a diagonal scar running through. My skin prickled, I flushed with joy: it was Lev. As I noted with excitement the date, time and location of the sighting, I couldn't help thinking it was a sign. I spent the rest of the year commuting up to Melbourne for work, returning to the fresh sea air at Aireys that revitalised me, and David who made me feel better than I had for a very long time. One morning he carved a question in the sand. *Marry me?* We were so happy, how could I not?

It was David who had introduced Georgia to Antarctica. That was a year before everything went wrong between him and me.

'DVD night tonight,' said Georgia. 'I've chosen a ripper. Quite arty-farty. Reckon you'll like it. Now do the vacuuming.'

Saturday was chores day at base. I considered myself lucky only to be vacuuming. Bathroom duty was much worse.

The dining room lights were dimmed and Georgia, beer in hand, stood at the front to introduce the film to the audience of winter tradies and newly-arrived scientists, mechanics, electricians, engineers, and an extra cook for the summer season. And Fran, our doctor, who had spent the past months growing a crop of hydroponic tomatoes but now faced the prospect of many more people to care for. (We loved Fran for those tomatoes – it was the only fresh fruit we had all winter.) We'd grown from a group of nine to about four dozen. The base was buzzing.

'This is a classic, set in the place I love almost as much as here. Can you guess where?' Georgia swigged her beer and

Out of the Ice

topped it up straightaway from a large bottle. ‘Open your eyes to Venice. Take it away.’ She motioned dramatically to a bearded engineer who stood at the back of the room working the projector.

A little girl in a red raincoat was playing by a pond. Donald Sutherland appeared, sitting in a comfortable cottage, looking at a slide of a church. I caught my breath. I’d seen it before, and every ounce of me wanted to run from the room. The little girl in the red raincoat, his daughter, was going to drown in the pond. I couldn’t move. I shut my eyes when it happened.

In Antarctica, there are rules. It’s important to stick with the group; at times, that can save your life. If I left now it would send a terrible signal, because Saturday film nights were bonding exercises. In such a vast and potentially hostile environment, social isolation can set in, and Station Leaders always tried to forge connections between expeditioners.

I forced myself to watch the eerie landscape of Venice, its dark alleys where Julie Christie and Donald Sutherland get lost, the child – or *was* it a child? – in the red raincoat scampering away into the night. The body of a murdered woman hauled, upside-down, from a dank canal, her clothes falling away to reveal bruised flesh.

I knew that *Don’t Look Now* was a good film, a great film, but I grew increasingly hot and claustrophobic, aware of the stale air from so many more people at close range. I was relieved when the lights came up.

Georgia was quickly by my side, hand gripping my shoulder as the audience clapped appreciatively and I joined in.

‘Good, eh?’

‘Brilliant.’

‘Been to Venice?’

‘I have.’

‘Love it?’

I nodded. I did like Venice. But in the daytime and on the Grand Canal, not the malevolent, disjointed, empty Venice we’d just seen.

‘Jeff and I are taking the kids once Stacey graduates. We’ll stay at my favourite pensione, Hotel Leone Alato, in a little alley near St Mark’s Square.’ Georgia’s grin was so dazzling it warmed me up.

‘Got a moment?’ she said.

I followed her into the small room that doubled as the communications centre and Station Leader’s office. Georgia plonked herself behind the desk; I sat opposite.

‘Strictly speaking I should wait and tell you this Monday, not on your night off, but the final approval’s just come in.’ Georgia had been steadily drinking through the film so was even more forthcoming than usual, but I had no idea what she was talking about.

‘There’s a field assignment for you at Alliance Station.’

I stared at her mutely as she smiled broadly back. We both knew that Alliance, a British base on South Safety Island in the Southern Ocean, was strictly off-limits to all but a team of elite scientists and a small support staff of technicians.

‘An Environmental Impact Assessment of Fredelighavn, the old Norwegian whaling station at Placid Bay,’ she continued. ‘There’s a push by some in the International Antarctic Council to open it as a museum.’

Out of the Ice

‘What!’ I blurted. ‘But no one’s allowed in because of the seal and penguin colonies. Not even the staff at Alliance.’

‘That’s being disputed,’ Georgia replied matter-of-factly.

‘Why? No one should go there. I’ve seen a few pictures from the seventies before it was closed off. It looked like paradise.’

Georgia nodded. ‘That’s why some people want to open it. They allowed a team of engineers in last summer to do a safety check. There’s no asbestos, so unlike places like the old whaling station at Leith on South Georgia, tourists could go in safely. The buildings are evidently in very good condition, and with global warming there’s been ice melt. That, and with some help from the engineers, has meant most of the sheds and houses are accessible.’

‘What happens to the wildlife?’ I asked, concerned.

‘That’s what you’d assess. Along with the suitability of the site.’

‘I hate tourists,’ I bridled. ‘Why do they need access to so much of Antarctica? Can’t they just leave it alone?’

‘There are many who’d agree,’ Georgia replied. ‘Including, from what I hear, the staff at Alliance. The scientists don’t want a bar of it. But Chile and Argentina are really pushing.’

I smiled wryly at the thought of my Spanish compatriots who hated the British, who also laid claim to some of the very same parts of Antarctica as the Brits, including South Safety Island.

‘The Chinese are thinking of building a base on the island but there’s a lot of quiet diplomacy against that,’ said Georgia. ‘Some think if Fredelighavn’s opened, the Chinese will choose somewhere else. It’s all just more jockeying for position before the Protocol expires.’

The Antarctic Treaty was drawn up in 1959 during the Cold War and came into force in 1961, reserving everything south of latitude 60°S as a place for science, with no military activity allowed; all sovereign claims were frozen. In 1991 the Madrid Protocol went further and banned all mining, but this was coming up for renegotiation in 2041. Although countries could stake no new claims, squatting on land with base stations was a game they played. There were likely vast oilfields and other riches to exploit beneath the ice. Countries were getting prepared.

Personally, I would have excluded tourism in the Treaty too – but they probably hadn't even thought about it in 1959.

'I might be biased,' I said.

'Nonsense. You're too good a scientist.'

'I could look at the evidence, I suppose.' Fredelighavn was the stuff of legend. South Georgia Island had six disused whaling stations, but Fredelighavn was the only one on South Safety. All the stations had expanded over their years of operation into small industrial settlements, but Fredelighavn was rumoured to have the most remarkable architecture, which was now overrun by the most extraordinary range and abundance of wildlife. I felt a magnetic pull to the promise of a natural wonderland.

And Alliance itself was an unusual base. The name, like those of most British bases, came from a nearby geographical location, Alliance Point, at the southern end of Placid Bay. But it had turned into another alliance: the British worked closely there with Americans and Australians. There was speculation that scientists studied viruses at Alliance. I'd once read a fleeting reference in one of my father's articles that led me to the same

Out of the Ice

conclusion; it was nothing specific, but I'd always been curious. It was another incentive to take up the offer.

'There was a full background check on you,' said Georgia. 'You know no one's allowed there lightly, and this is a very important study. You were deemed politically neutral. Only people like me are aware how much you hate tourism. Your penguin and whale studies are revered.'

I tried not to blush, pleased they'd seemingly ignored my trouble with the professors in Melbourne. I knew those men would have done everything they could to hurt my chances.

'What about the Antarctic Heritage Trust?'

'You'll be talking to them, of course. If anything comes to fruition, they'd be the ones implementing. But the Council wanted someone at arm's length. They also want you to go to Grytviken Museum to check it out.'

I drew in my breath.

'What?' she said.

'I've been to Grytviken. Got married in the church.'

Georgia's eyes opened wide. She didn't know *everything* about me.

'I'm sure it's changed – I haven't been for over a decade,' I said.

'Cruise ships stop there. It's a favourite place.'

'I know.' It wasn't the first location I'd want to go to. I blocked the memories as quickly as they came: the ghastly flensing platform where the whales were cut up, the sheds full of the whale-processing machinery. And where I'd been so drawn to Cameron Stewart that I'd vowed to spend the rest of my life with him.

‘And Nantucket,’ Georgia continued.

‘I’ve never been there,’ I said, pulling myself back to the present. Nantucket. An island north of New York, across the Atlantic Ocean from Norway; another home of whalers plying their murderous trade.

‘They have a state-of-the-art whaling museum and—’

‘Am I the right person for this job?’ I interrupted before she really got going. ‘I’m not that keen on whalers.’

‘You’re respected. You’re an expert. And people believe you’ll be fair. Fearless even.’ Georgia gave me a pointed look.

I grimaced. Being fearless is what had landed me in the mess with the professors. And with David White. Yet clearly I was coming out of that all right in these quarters.

‘What about my current duties?’

‘We’ll get someone down to replace you. They want the report by the end of March. There’s a lot to do. The Australian Antarctic Division’s given their permission and sends their apologies for the short notice. Everything ran late getting approval from all the participant countries. It’s a delicate matter.’

I paused, torn between desire to see the fabled place and a deep repulsion at what went on there. And I also wanted desperately to support those who were backing me.

‘So, I guess I’ll go,’ I said. ‘Best to have some control of the situation if they’re going to open it up as a museum. And if the AAD’s put me forward, I certainly don’t want to cause trouble.’

Georgia laughed heartily. ‘You’d be mad not to go. I can’t wait to hear what it’s like. And even though you’re stationed at Alliance, you’ll be reporting to me, and the AAD, which in turn will report to the International Antarctic Council.’