THE WEDDELL SEA: An Antarctic Adventure

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The story, characters and companies in this book are fictitious.

THE SHIP'S COMPANY

Selected officers

Captain	James Buchan	*Scottish*	
Captain's wife	Ingrid	*Danish*	
1st officer	Pat Goldsmith	*English*	8-12 watch
2nd officer	Henrik Pederson	*Norwegian*	12-4 watch
3rd officer	Angus Maclennan	*Scottish*	4-8 watch
Chief engineer	Grigori Lepik	*Estonian*	
Radio officer	Bernard Koidula	*Estonian*	
Electrician		*Estonian*	
Hotel manager	Garry Clarke	*English*	
Ship's doctor		*American*	

Staff of Polar Adventuring

Exped. Leaders	Steve Anderson	*English*	
Gerald Thornbush	*English*	Ornithologist	
Lecturer	Jim Ashworth	*English*	Polar historian
Lecturer	Martin Dillon (Dill)	*English*	Geologist
Assistant	Annabel Bates (AB)	*American*	
Zodiac driver	Jo Spinnie	*English*	

Selected crew

Bosun	Anton Kaplinski	*Estonian*
Head chef	Derek Rawlinson	*English*
Barman	Juhan Tamsaale	*Estonian*
Chief stewardess	Heiti Kaalep	*Estonian*

Passengers: "The Hut Group" (also 85 other passengers)
Bill & Dottie Bradshaw, & granddaughter Annie (aged 10)
John & Averil Jackson
Piers & Melissa Wrightman, & son Damien (aged 10)
Martin Carruthers
Henry Birks
Miss Edelston
Arthur Longworth
Liam O'Neill (retired doctor)

Prologue

You are, of course, all familiar with this story, or at least the story as portrayed by the press. However Captain Buchan asked us, and we fully concurred, to write a factual account of the events, warts and all, in order to put the record straight. To our best endeavour, this we have attempted to do. It is an exciting story and we hope we have also portrayed this excitement.

We would like to acknowledge the help and support of everyone on board the *Isis* at the time, without whom there would be no tale to tell. Owing to the numbers involved I hope they will forgive us for not mentioning them all by name. However we are particularly grateful to the 'hut group' for letting us use them to give the passengers' perspective on events. Additionally we would like to single out Captain James Buchan, who proved himself a true hero in the spirit of Sir Ernest Shackleton and Captain Carl Larsen.

Steve Anderson
Gerald Thornbush
Oxford May 2000

“There is a road that leads to the Moon and Great Waters. No changehouse cheers it, and it has no end; but it is a fine road, a braw road – who will follow it?... Come forth, one and all, to the great lands oversea… Come forth, the sky is wide and it is a far cry to the world’s end.”

John Buchan, The Rime of True Thomas

Chapter 1

Bill saw the letter propped against the toast-rack as he and Dottie came down for breakfast, Bill as dapper as ever with his red cravat and his well-trimmed moustache, and the *petite* Dottie dressed in the clothes worthy of every grandmother.

'What's this?' asked Bill, peering at the envelope. ‘I see it's addressed to us.'

'Open it dear, don't just stand there!'

He picked it up and was just about to break the seal when their ten-year old granddaughter, Annie, ran into the kitchen. Spotting the letter immediately, she grabbed it from him. 'It came this morning. Can I open it? Please? Please? It's from mum and dad, I can tell by the writing.'

'Do you know what's in it?' queried Bill.

'Me? I've no idea.'

'Go on, then! Open it for us!'

She picked up a knife from the table, carefully slit open the envelope and extracted three, what appeared to be, tickets, together with a piece of paper.

'Come on. What does it say, Annie?' asked Bill impatiently.

There was short silence while she digested the contents and then she let out a whoop of joy and started dancing around the room. 'No, you read it, grandad!'

Bill read it in silence for a while and then let out a 'wow' almost as loud as Annie's.

'Here, Dottie, it's a present from all our children – they are sending us on a voyage to Antarctica. Three weeks in Antarctica!'

'Antarctica? Is that where the penguins are?'

'Yes! You well know that all my life I have wanted to go there. Now we're going!'

'Why are they sending us?'

'Sending us? It's a holiday – a thank you...' Bill studied the letter closely, 'from what I can make out, a thank you present for their upbringing, and a birthday treat for my seventieth.'

'That's nice of them. When are we going?'

'A month from now.'

'We'd better get packing then!'

'Me as well,' put in Annie. 'I'm coming with you. Look, three tickets!'

'Yes,' Bill confirmed, 'they say Annie is to come along to keep an eye on us!"

'Won't it be dangerous for her? Polar bears, and things?' queried Dottie.

'Don't be silly, grandma, that's the Arctic! Penguins in the Antarctic, polar bears in the Arctic! We're going to see lots of penguins, I'm sure – and I'm quite capable of looking after myself!'

A month later the three of them found themselves walking down the long, windswept pier of Punta Arenas, Dottie desperately trying to prevent her hat disappearing off into the Straits of Magellan. They were headed to a small ship moored at the far end of the jetty, its red hull gleaming in a shaft of sunlight.

'Polar ships always have red hulls,' Bill explained to Annie, 'so that they show up in the distance when they get stuck in the ice.'

'Oo! Will we get stuck in the ice?'

'Of course not! With modern technology and satellite printouts there's no chance.'

'That's a pity! Printouts of what?'

'Printouts of ice. There's a satellite up there,' said Bill pointing to the sky, 'that's sending down pictures of the sea all the time. The captain can see where the ice is, and avoid it. We have Captain Buchan who, I am told, is one of the most experienced ice captains around. We shouldn't get into trouble.'

'Good!'

As they passed into the lee of the bow the name *Isis* stood out clearly in large white letters.

'A new name,' Bill explained. 'Until recently she was called the *Scotia II*, an expedition supply ship, but this new company has renamed her.'

'Why?' asked Annie. 'Isn't it unlucky to change the name of a ship?'

'I don't know.'

They reached the gangway and joined a group of fellow passengers who were waiting to go aboard. Bill took the opportunity to look around and study their companions for the next fortnight, a mixed bag by the look of them! Immediately in front was a prim lady in a tweed skirt and her hair in a bun. Bill introduced themselves to her and she said she was Miss Edelston.

'What brings you to the Antarctic, Miss Edelston?' asked Bill genially.

'I enjoy travelling and I haven't yet been,' was her reply. The conversation lapsed.

'Look, Annie,' said Bill, 'there's a boy over there – he seems about your age. He'll keep you company.'

'Boys! Huh!'

They watched him follow his parents up the gangplank, his mother a tall glamorous lady, with, by the sound of it, a strident voice, and his father shorter with a tendency to portliness; both were expensively dressed.

When it was Bill, Dottie and Annie's turn to board they were greeted by a large, muscular man with a dark, bushy beard. He shook their hands firmly. 'Welcome aboard. I'm Steve, one of the expedition leader's and this is the other leader – my colleague, Gerald.' They shook hands with a taller, thinner man with a wispy red beard.

'Go right up the gangway,' continued Steve. 'You'll find AB at the top and she'll put you in the right direction. Your luggage should already have arrived and be waiting for you in your cabin.'

'Thanks,' answered Bill.

They climbed the gangplank and this led straight into the reception area of the ship, a meeting place, office and shop with corridors leading off in all directions. A long-haired, young-looking girl holding a clipboard greeted them.

'Hi there! I'm Annabel Bates, but just call me AB, everyone else does.'

'Hello there,' said Bill. 'You sound American,' he added.

'Uh-huh, that's right! Kentucky. Now, you are?'

'The Bradshaws, Bill and Dottie, and our granddaughter, Annie.'

'Ah yes.' She looked at her clipboard. 'Cabin 207. Heiti, the chief stewardess over there, she'll show you where it is. Once you're settled in, come back to the lounge – through that door – there'll be tea and drinks.'

The sea was grey, the sky was grey, the hills and mountains were lost in a grey dampness, if indeed they were they there at all, and, as the squalls tore down the channel, spindrift came off the sea, white against the deeper grey of the wind-shriven water. An unfriendly, inhospitable place, well-named as the uttermost part of the earth, but not wholly sterile, for there were trees along the shore, scattered thickets of southern beech, apparently capable of withstanding all that nature threw at them.

Every so often the clouds were riven apart for an instant, giving the impression that there were towering mountains somewhere, impossibly high, mountains clothed in blue-grey ice, ice pouring in streams down from the heights; but, before the eyes could focus,

could understand what they saw, the greyness returned and vision was restricted once more to the immediate sea. However perhaps the brief vision had reflected the reality, for was that not ice floating in the sea ahead?

'Yes,' answered Jim, one of the expedition staff, who was standing on the bridge of the *Isis* with Bill. They were both staring through the glass at the channel ahead. 'That was brash ice – there are several glaciers calving straight into the sea around here.'

'Pity we can't see them,' said Bill.

'Don't worry, you'll see plenty more ice on this trip!'

'Are the mountains ever clear?'

'Not often. The Beagle Channel rarely lives up to its potential, but dramatic when it does!'

'It's dramatic enough as it is. What's the wind speed?'

'Probably gusting force ten in the williwaws.'

'Williwaw? What's that?'

'A squall. Haven't you read Joshua Slocum? An American, the first man to sail single-handedly round the world at the end of the nineteenth century. He was always talking about williwaws in these southern channels.'

'Ah yes! That does ring a bell, now you mention it. And people used to live here as well?

'Yes, that's right. The Tierra del Fuegan Indians, there's none of them left, sadly. And they didn't wear clothes and didn't have proper houses.'

'What, in this?'

They stood in silence, uncomprehending, watching the rain and sleet pass by in squalls, easily overtaking the ship, and, even in the enclosed bridge, they could here the wind shrieking through the rigging above.

'It looks as though it's going to be rough in the Drake Passage,' said Bill finally.

'Yes,' replied Jim.

Captain Buchan was awake instantly, knocked out of his bunk by the force of the crash. Hastily grabbing a jacket, he ran down the corridor, up the short steps and burst onto the bridge from where he saw the ship was broadside-on to the waves, and rolling fiercely.

'Heave to,' shouted Buchan.

'Heave to it is, sir,' replied Pedersen, officer of the watch.

Buchan glanced at the wind gauge to see it indicating force seven, gusting eight, surely not strong enough to create the wave that had just smashed into the ship?

'A freak wave, sir,' said Pedersen, 'it just came out of nowhere. One minute...' He was interrupted by the ring of the ship's telephone.

Buchan picked up the handset instantly, shouting down the line. 'Yes. What is it?... Broken? ...water coming in. Thank you, Juhan. Check the full extent of the damage and get back to me immediately.' Still holding the phone he called across to the second officer, 'Pedersen, have you seen Pat?'

'Yes, sir, he went below as soon as his watch finished.'

'Did he... Ah Pat, there you are, I was just about to ring you,' he said, putting down the phone as the first officer entered the bridge.

'Find the bosun, and do a round of the starboard side with him. Start with the galley, one broken porthole reported. Could be more. Report back as soon as possible.'

'Aye, aye, sir,' replied Pat and he rushed off.

As the ship came round into the wind its fierce rolling eased, to be replaced by the more bearable motion of pitching fore and aft. Captain Buchan studied the damage on the fore deck, the visible damage of a bent mast and a starboard handrail twisted out of all recognition. The phone rang again and he picked up the receiver.

'Yes... dining room, three broken ... galley, two ... Water no longer coming in ... fifteen centimetres on the floor. Yes. Thank you, Juhan. Wait for Pat and the bosun. They're checking for damage, and will be with you shortly.'

A shrill ringing, louder than the telephone pierced the bridge. Pedersen looked at a panel on the wall where a light was flashing. 'Emergency bell, cabin 213, sir,' he announced.

Buchan swore under his breath. 'Dammit! Not the passenger cabins... Turn that blasted thing off.'

No sooner had he done so, than they were interrupted by the same ear-splitting ring.

'Now the bell for cabin 215, as well sir,' Pedersen added.

Buchan immediately radioed to Pat. 'Go straight to the 200 level – passenger cabins 213 and 215. Their emergency bells have been rung and they could have portholes broken.'

'Yes sir.'

At this juncture the bridge door flew open and Steve entered, followed closely by Gerald. 'What was that, James? What's happened?' asked Steve. 'Any damage?'

'Portholes smashed, five so far.' replied the captain. 'Plus maybe two more at the 200 level – passenger cabins. Water could come with every big wave... Pedersen, get a report from the engine room, ask if everything's okay.'

'Yes sir'.

The bridge door opened again and various passengers started to come in, including Bill, as it was normal policy on the ship to have an 'open bridge' where people could come and go at will. Buchan however, scowled at Steve, and hissed under his breath, 'get them out.'

'I'll do that,' put in Gerald, who proceeded to shepherd the curious out of the door. 'Come on everybody, the captain needs space. We'll keep you informed of what's going on.'

Meanwhile, Pat, a large, flabby man, in contrast to the short, squat bosun, Arvo, who accompanied him, had arrived at the door to cabin 213. 'Look,' shouted Arvo pointing down to the floor, 'carpet's wet, water must be coming under door.'

As he spoke, the door opened and, together with a splash of water, a bare-footed, elderly lady staggered out.

'I'll deal with her, you check 215, Arvo'.

'Aye, aye, sir'.

'Well Mrs...' he said, peering at the name tag on the door 'Edelston...'

' 'Miss', if you please.'

'Well, Miss Edelston, are you alright?'

'Yes I am, but my cabin's not. I was sleeping, when water...' He was interrupted by Arvo tugging at his arm.

'I think broken arm here, Mr Birks, passenger in cabin 215 knocked out of bed, we must call the doctor.'

'Is the porthole broken?'

'No...'

'Well, thank God for that.'

Just at that moment the ship pitched more violently than normal and a stream of water poured through the broken porthole, crossed the cabin and knocked Miss Edelston to the deck. Pat and Arvo grabbed hold of an arm each and hauled her upright.

'Are you alright?' asked Pat concernedly.

'I am fine thank you, if a little damp. When are you going to mend my porthole?'

'As soon as possible. I'll report the damage straight away.

Pat radioed the bridge and spoke to the captain. 'One porthole smashed, cabin 213, and water coming in every now and then. Emergency team needed. Cabin 215 seems okay... No, porthole not broken there, but a passenger with a suspected broken arm, can you call the doctor. Send Heiti down here to deal with Miss, er, Edelston, 213. She's a bit shocked. Out.'

'No I'm not!' said the indignant lady.

'Look, Miss Edelston, I must go and check the damage to the rest of the ship. The chief stewardess, Heiti, will be down to deal with you as soon as possible.'

While they had been talking a couple, John and Averil Jackson, had emerged in their dressing gowns from the cabin opposite.

'Please,' said Pat, turning to them, 'can you keep Miss Edelston company until the chief stewardess arrives, she'll be here shortly.'

'Certainly, we'll take care of her.'

'Thanks. Oh, and can you look after the man next door, Mr Birks I think his name is, until the doctor comes.'

'Yes.'

'Now, come on Arvo,' he called, 'we must...'

They were interrupted by Pat's radio bursting into life. ‘Pat, this is the captain, do you read me?'

'Roger.'

'I've got hold of the doctor but he's dealing now with two broken wrists in the lounge, but will come as soon as he's finished there.'

'Okay, I read you. Out.'

However, Mr Jackson, overhearing, spoke up. 'It's alright. Mr O'Neill, down the corridor, he's a doctor. I'll fetch him to look at Henry Birks.'

'Could you? Thank you, come on Arvo... No, on second thoughts, you wait until this doctor comes, then join me in the dining room.'

'Okay, sir.'

The dining room was bad, three broken windows, but, being a deck higher, at least sea water was no longer entering. However the floor was awash, water sloshing forward and back, forward and back, as the ship pitched up and down. The galley, likewise was awash and here Juhan, the barman, was telling Pat what had happened.

'There I was, enjoying a beer with Derek, when there was this almighty loud bang, and water and glass just poured in. I dropped my beer, and Derek was crashed against the sink.'

'Where is he?'

'He went to find the doctor, said he had broken ribs.'

'Well, we had better start mopping out. Can you arrange this, Juhan?'

'Certainly.'

'Thanks... Ah, Arvo, there you are! Come on, we must continue our rounds.'

At breakfast next morning there was a buzz in the air, the level of conversation in the dining room louder than normal. Bill was recounting the night's events to the Jacksons. 'You've noticed that the carpet's all wet. Deep, it was, a foot all over, and three windows broken...'

'Grandad, is that why those windows are boarded up?' asked Annie.

'Yes, dear, this big wave came out of nowhere, and smashed the ship. There are more portholes smashed below, I think, ten at least. And you should see the fore deck. The mast up front is bent over at a terrific angle, and the front railing is all tangled.'

'Wow,' exclaimed Annie. 'Can I go and see?'

'After breakfast, dear,' replied her grandmother.

'Ah, Miss Edelston,' Bill called as he saw the old lady making her way to the breakfast buffet. 'Did you sleep alright?'

'No, I did not. I was flooded in the night, water all over the cabin. My bed was soaked.'

'Wow,' gasped Annie.

'Your porthole broken?' queried Bill.

'How else do you think the water got in? Good morning John, good morning Averil, thank you for your help last night.'

'It was nothing,' John responded.

They watched her go over to the sideboard. 'It would have to happen to her!' said Bill.

'It must have been exciting,' replied Annie. ‘I mean to have your porthole broken, and water pouring in. I wish it had happened to ours.'

'No you don't,' said her grandmother. 'Where would you sleep with your bed all wet?'

'I wonder where Miss Edelston slept?' asked Annie.

'Good point,' said Bill. 'There're no spare cabins, the cruise is booked up. I expect they put her in the hospital for the night.'

'Is there a hospital on the ship? With doctors, and nurses?'

'No, don't be silly, Annie,' laughed her grandad, 'it's called a "hospital", but it's really just a cabin with a couple of beds, and a desk for the doctor...'

'Is there an X-ray machine down there?' asked John. ‘I hear there were some broken bones last night.'

'Did you?' said Bill. ‘I hadn't heard that. No, I don't think there's any X-ray.'

'I didn't see one,' put in Dottie. 'I certainly didn't see one when I went there for my seasick pills.'

There was a loud rap on a table, and the room went quiet as the passengers all turned round to hear Steve make an announcement.

'I hope you are all enjoying your breakfast after our little excitement in the night.' A murmur went round the room. 'You may have noticed the floor is a bit wet in here and that some windows are boarded up. If you've been on deck you will see that our foremast has been bent over, and railings on the starboard side have been stove in. Even though it's been roped off, please keep clear of this area until the railings are mended. We don't want anybody falling overboard.'

'What happened?' someone shouted out.

'A freak wave. As you remember, the sea was not that rough last night, at least not by Drake Passage standards, about Force seven or eight, but around two in the morning, from nowhere, a huge wave reared up and slammed into the side of the ship. In all the crossings Gerald and I have made of the Drake Passage, and, honestly, there're too many for me to have kept count, I've never experienced a wave like that.

'I've been speaking to Captain Buchan, and he says the same. He has been sailing the *Isis* in Antarctic waters for over twenty years, and says he has never encountered anything like this. In fact he says that in all the time he has been on board the *Isis* – or, of course, the *Scotia II* as she was when run by the UK Polar Foundation before our organisation, Polar Adventuring, took it over – all the time he has been on board, until today he has never had a porthole broken.'

'I hear there are two portholes broken in passenger cabins,' asked Martin Carruthers. 'Is this true?'.

'No, only one,' Gerald put in. ‘belonging to Miss Edelston here.'

'Will we be turning back?' continued Martin.

'No,' replied Steve. 'Although the damage looks bad it's only superficial. We do have spare glass for the portholes on the lower decks – there were two broken in the crew cabins as well, and we will mend these when we are next in calm waters, Deception Island maybe. I am afraid, though, that we have no replacements for these windows here in the dining room so they will have to stay boarded-up as a memento to our little adventure. Any other questions?'

'Have we seen our first iceberg yet? Maybe we hit one in the night?' asked Martin, echoing the thoughts of many of the passengers.

'I have to say that was the first thing I thought when I felt the bang in the middle of the night,' confessed Steve. 'However, as we're in a potential iceberg zone, the officer of the watch keeps a keen eye on the radar at night, and there appeared to be no sign of one either before or after the bang. Also, no such collision would have bent the foremast, and there was no ice on deck either. No, with modern technology to help us, the danger of hitting icebergs is a thing of the past. And may I remind you that there's still a bottle of champagne for the person who spots the first one.

'Then, if there're no more questions, I will now hand over to Gerald to give us today's programme.'

'Okay, okay,' started Gerald. ‘the little incident in the night will not affect our programme at all. We were hove-to for a couple of hours while the emergency team boarded-up the windows, but, as the sea

is calming down, we should be able to make up most of the time lost before our first landfall in Antarctica tomorrow afternoon.

'So the daily programme is as on your sheets. At nine-thirty Steve will give a lecture on the do's and don'ts of landing in the Antarctic. I'm afraid this is a mandatory lecture, there're strict regulations on Antarctic tourism and, as this is the ship's first visit – first visit as a cruise ship that is – we don't want to sully her name.

'After Steve's talk, at eleven o'clock I'll be giving a lecture on penguins. Between lectures, of course, I will be on deck, on deck bird watching, and please feel free to join me there. There should be lots to see – albatrosses, giant petrels, cape pigeons and so on.

'After lunch, for those not enjoying a siesta, we will show a BBC video on Antarctic wildlife. Then at three-thirty Jim will be continuing his story of polar exploration, this time focussing on Shackleton's expedition when his ship the *Endurance* foundered in the Weddell Sea.'

After breakfast the expedition staff were all gathered in the reception area, together with Ingrid, the captain's wife, a striking blond, the archetypal Scandinavian women.

'Well, Ingrid, your first trip south is off to an exciting start,' said AB.

'It sure is, but James is not too happy about it. He has been so keyed up this trip, anxious that all goes well...'

'Aren't we all?' put in Steve.

'Yes, but, as captain, ultimate responsibility lies on his shoulders.'

'In theory, yes. But Gerald and I have a lot staked on this trip as well. We cannot afford any mistakes, we all sink or swim together.'

'Don't say sink!' said Gerald. 'After last night's inauspicious event...'

'Don't be silly,' said Martin Dillon, another of the expedition staff. ‘one freak wave, and no serious damage done. I remember once, south of New Zealand, when all the portholes on the starboard side were stove in, on the old *Adventurer*, that was. And there was also the time, in a typhoon off the Philippines, on board the *Rasmussen*, when a freak wave broke three windows on the bridge. The captain was on the bridge at the time and ...'

'That's enough of your reminiscences, Dill,' interrupted Steve.

'But I was only pointing out that this sort of thing happens all the time.'

'But it was unlucky for it to happen to us,' said Gerald.

'I don't know,' AB replied. 'It has added some excitement to the voyage, and there is a buzz on the ship, with the passengers all talking about it.'

'Except for Arthur with his suspected broken wrist – and Henry Birks and the chef with their bad bruising – at least these last two escaped broken bones.'

'It could have been much worse,' said Ingrid. 'In any case, Arthur was probably drunk, he is always at the bar, and sooner or later would have broken his wrist whether the ship rolled or not.'

'We don't know for sure whether it's broken as we've no X-ray on board,' Steve reminded them.

'Well,' Gerald put in. ‘I said all along, said all along that we should have got an X-ray machine.'

'You don't have to repeat it. I know, I know, but the cost. Perhaps...'

'Excuse me!' a shrill voice interrupted them.

'Yes, Miss Edelston,' AB politely queried.

'When can I get back to my cabin?'

'We have a dry mattress and bedding for you, but the floor is still damp. We thought it might be better for you if you stayed in the hospital...

'No, I want my cabin...'

'And the porthole is still boarded-up. In a couple of days we can...'

'No.'

'Okay, then. I will just check with Heiti.' AB spoke into her radio. 'Heiti, Heiti, AB here ... Yes Heiti, when will Miss Edelston's cabin be ready? ... The floor is still wet... Otherwise okay. Thank you.

'Yes, Miss Edelston, you can go back to it now.'

Miss Edelston marched off. 'How come you're always be so nice to her, AB?' asked Dill.

'I think she's really sweet...' AB was interrupted by the phone ringing. 'It's the captain, Steve, for you.'

'Yes, James... Okay, we'll be up right way. Come on Gerald, the captain wants us.'

Shortly afterwards Steve and Gerald were both sitting comfortably in the captain's cabin supping coffee. The captain was seated at his desk, and Gerald noticed that he was gripping his mug firmly.

'Well,' said Captain Buchan. ‘I asked you up here to give you an update after last night's events.'

'Is something wrong?' queried Gerald.

'No, well not exactly. We have had a man in a bosun's chair down over the starboard side. He reports that, as well as the broken portholes, there are dents in five steel plates.'

'Serious?' asked Steve.

'No. Well it doesn't appear to be. One plate is dented just above the waterline, but the indentation is slight, and there appear to be no cracks. I hope, I only hope, that that is all there is.'

'But we had a full hull survey carried out by Thornbrooks,' said Steve. 'They reported the hull to be as sound now as when she was built – albeit a bit dented. And the insurers checked as well.'

'I know, I know, but the engine room reports a higher than normal water level in the bilges, although only by a few centimetres.'

'That will be the water that came in the portholes, or seeped through the deck when it was awash.'

'I hope so, I only hope so. But I think we should head for Deception Island straight away, and put a diver down. I would be much happier if we did.'

'And if damage is found, what then?' queried Gerald.

'Well, we would have to turn back. We cannot face the ice with a cracked plate.'

'We could always keep to ice-free areas,' said Steve.

'What, in Antarctica?' exclaimed Buchan.

'But, but... Remember the cancellation bond, how we spent it on fitting-out this ship. We cannot afford to abandon the cruise, to compensate the passengers...'

'I am only giving the worst-case scenario,' interrupted Buchan. 'I think it highly unlikely, and the chief engineer agrees with me, that

any plates are cracked. Remember, the ship is ice-strengthened to the highest specifications, and the force of a wave, even a big one, is nothing compared to the ship's normal activity of pushing through pressure-ridges in the Weddell Sea.'

Chapter 2

The sea and sky were the same dull white in all directions, except to the west where a good imagination could pick out a slightly darker shade of white. Bill was on the bridge wing pointing this out to John.

'It is definitely land, I'm sure of it. The South Shetlands, our first landfall.'

'It looks like just a blur to me.'

'Definitely land. No, wait a minute. What's that?'

There was now one brighter patch, and all at once it was like looking through a hole in the mist to a clear blue beyond, and in this hole appeared a dazzling white. It disappeared almost immediately.

'There did you see that, John?'

'What?'

'Did you see that, a glimpse of a mountain?'

'No.'

'I'll just go and check where we are.' said Bill as he set off to look at the chart table.

Returning a few minutes later he reported back. 'Yes, John, it's Livingston Island. Hey, look over there. I think all the cloud is beginning to roll back.'

And it was. Where once there had been a hint of a darker grey, a brightness was developing. First one, then another, then another dazzling white ridge, separating blue sky above from mist below, emerged. It was like putting a jigsaw together: from a uniform background, random pieces were appearing, building up a landscape, a landscape so totally new and alien to most of the

passengers that they had no imagination of what the eventual picture would be. You could not say that there was much colour in it, only a restrained palette of white, blue, black and grey. And yet the white was never white, there being too many shades ever to describe.

Every snow field, each at a different angle, caught the sun differently. And what snowfields they were! Some with great icefalls, motion frozen in time, some ending in black cliffs, but not ending, falling over the edge of the rocks and carrying on below. Narrow ridges, not knife-edged but topped with dazzling round mushrooms of rime. And wide flat-bottomed glaciers, appearing as highways into the interior. And all ending suddenly in the sea, in precipitous cliffs of ice.

'Look, look,' shouted Annie who had been watching open-mouthed as the full picture unfolded. 'Look, there's an iceberg. I'm sure it is. Its an iceberg. Grandad, isn't that an iceberg? And its bigger than the ship, I'm sure it is. I'll win the prize.'

'Champagne it is my dear, but not for you!'

Bill shouted to Steve who was in the bridge, staring at the scene through binoculars. 'There, off the starboard bow, an iceberg.'

Steve turned his binoculars in the direction indicated. ‘Yup, there's no doubt. The champagne's yours, Bill.'

'No it's not,' put in Annie. ‘I saw it first.'

'She did,' agreed Bill.

'Well, little Annie...'

'I'm not little.'

'Well, big Annie, congratulations. You've won yourself, let's see. We'll let your grandparents bask in reflected glory with the champagne, and I'll take you down to the shop and you can choose something...'

'Please not now, there is too much to see.'

'Okay, later!'

Annie ran off to find Damien with whom to share the news. She rushed round all the decks, and then, as there was no sign of him outside, went below, and finally tracked him down watching a cartoon disk in his cabin.

'Damien, Damien, I've just seen the first iceberg, and Steve has promised me a present from the shop.'

'Haven't you seen an iceberg before?'

'Don't be boring,' and she dragged him out of the cabin and out onto the deck. 'There, there it is. My iceberg. Oh, look there's another smaller one over there. Isn't the view fantastic.'

'Just like Glacier Bay in Alaska.'

'You're being boring again. Hey, what are those things over there, jumping in the water? Dolphins?'

Gerald, who happened to be nearby by with a group of passengers, overhearing, said, 'no, those are penguins. Porpoising it's called, when they swim like that. They jump out of the water when swimming fast so that they can breathe.'

'Gosh, they are swimming fast. Look, they're overtaking the ship. What sort are they, Gerald?'

'Chinstraps. They are the commonest around here, and we will see a colony...'

'Aren't they called rookeries?' interrupted Annie.

'Yes rookeries. We will see a rookery when we come into Deception Island, later today. They're called chinstraps because they have a black line under their chins, like a strap holding on their black caps.'

'Isn't this exciting, Damien! Our first penguins and our first iceberg all at once. You mustn't have seen penguins before, not in the wild?'

'Yes I have, in the Galapagos.'

'But you haven't seen Antarctic penguins before?'

'They probably all look alike.'

'No they don't. Why don't you go back to your telly, if you are going to be such a bore?'

'I'll stay a bit.' And Annie thought that Damien, in spite of himself, was quite enjoying being on deck. 'I'll tell you what,' she said. 'If you see an iceberg bigger than mine, I'll give you, I'll give you some of my chocolate.'

'Okay.'

Everyone was on deck as the *Isis* sailed through the narrows of Neptune's Bellows into the vast sunken crater that is Deception Island, the best harbour in Antarctica. Deception cannot be described as beautiful, but it is interesting in the way volcanoes are. Black ash and cinder are everywhere, and even the snow is a dirty black. In the same way that much of Antarctica is a study in white, Deception Island is an essay in grey.

On deck, Steve was talking over the public address system: 'You can see off the port side a black glacier, ending as black ice cliffs in

the sea, all the ice, of course, impregnated with volcanic ash. Deception Island last erupted in the 1970s, and ahead of us you can see the old British research base that was damaged by mudflows during this eruption. The base has been abandoned ever since. You can also see the remains of the old whaling station – those old tanks that are now dead ahead were used for storing whale oil. At one time this whole bay would have been heaving with whaling ships.

'We're putting down the anchor, so be ready to go ashore in about ten minutes. The last boat back to the ship will be at five o'clock, which gives us three hours ashore. However, we'll be running a regular shuttle of zodiac dinghies to and from the ship, so you can come back anytime.

'Remember, wait for instruction to board the zodiacs from AB – only twelve to a boat. If you want to go on one of our guided walks, please wait at the landing for the groups to assemble. Gerald Thornbush will be leading the longest walk, about a mile, looking at birds; Martin Dillon, or Dill as we call him, will lead a walk looking at rocks and volcanic activity; and Jim Ashworth will lead a short walk exploring the buildings, and recounting their history.

'When you leave the ship, please remember to press the button against your name, and again on your return, so we know where you are.

'Right! We'll start loading the zodiacs in ten minutes. Oh, and it will be a wet landing: you'll need to wear gumboots when going ashore, and remember to take walking boots to change into if you don't like walking in gumboots.'

Annie was jumping up and down with excitement. 'Our first landing in Antarctica, our first landing in Antarctica. Can we be on the first boat ashore, please grandad? Come on, let's go and get changed.'

'Okay,' said Bill. 'Come on Dottie, Annie wants to be on the first zodiac ashore.'

'Let's take Damien with us,' added Annie. 'Has anyone seen him?'

Averil, standing nearby, replied that she had recently seen his parents, at the bar, drinking with Arthur.

'I'll go and get him, see you down below,' shouted Annie as she rushed along the deck and down the steps. She entered the lounge and there, sure enough, were Damien's parents, Piers and Melissa Wrightman, a drink in their hands, and Arthur holding forth: 'I can't possibly go ashore with my broken wrist, so I will stay and keep Juhan company.'

'I don't think we'll be going ashore, will we, Melissa?' said Piers.

'No, there doesn't seem much to see. Oh, hello Annie, what do you want?'

'I'm looking for Damien, where is he?'

'In his cabin, I expect.'

Annie dashed down to Damien's cabin where she found him again watching DVDs. 'Damien, do you ever stop watching telly? Come on, we are going ashore. See you at the boat entrance.' And she disappeared without waiting for a reply.

A few minutes later Annie was with Bill and Dottie at the front of the queue for the boats. Behind them, surprisingly, was Miss Edelston. 'Hello, Miss Edelston, have you pressed your button yet?' asked Annie.

'Have I what, young girl?'

'Your button, you know, next to your name to tell them you are leaving the ship.'

'Oh, I see. No I haven't, thank you.'

'I'll do it for you,' and before Miss Edelston could reply Annie had done it.

'It looks as if Damien's not going to come, Annie,' said Bill, 'they're just about to load the boats.'

'I bet he's still watching telly.' As soon as she had said this there was some scuffling down the line, and remarks such as 'watch where you are going!' before Damien joined them at the head of the queue.

'Here I am,' he puffed.

'At last!' responded Annie.

AB announced that they were ready to load the boats, 'twelve to a boat'. Annie and Damien were first out of the side entrance, onto the platform, and down the steps to the waiting zodiac.

Jo Spinnie, another member of the expedition staff, was driving the boat and welcomed the passengers aboard with a smile. Miss Edelston was surprisingly sprightly coming down the ladder, as if she had been jumping in and out of rubber dinghies all her life!

'Oh look,' she said, 'here's Mr Birks. I wonder how he got to be ready on time, especially with his broken arm.'

'It's not broken, only bruised,' corrected Bill.

Henry Birks was helped into the boat by two crew members, and, once settled, AB passed him down his walking stick. As soon as the

boat was full, Jo put the outboard into gear, the retaining ropes were let go, and the zodiac moved off.

'Look,' said Martin Carruthers, who was seated next to Miss Edelston, 'you get a good view of the smashed portholes from here. Jo, can you drive us up close to the ship so we can see the damage?'

'Certainly,' replied Jo amicably.

Once alongside the red hull they could see the three smashed portholes, now boarded up, as well as the three broken windows in the dining room on the deck above.

'Look,' shouted Bill, 'some of the metal plates of the hull have been bent. What a wave it must have been!'

Jo turned the boat towards the shore, and as the *Isis* was left behind they saw another zodiac come up after them to inspect the damaged hull, driven by Angus, the third officer, with the captain and mate as passengers and an unidentifiable person in full diving gear.

'I wouldn't like to go diving in these waters,' said Bill, 'think how cold it must be. Look, over there, on the beach, some blocks of ice.'

'And look over there!' shouted Annie excitedly, 'next to the ice. It's a penguin, yes it's a penguin! What sort is it Jo?'

'Looks like a gentoo, to me.'

'Can we go up to it?'

'Yes, of course, but go up slowly, and remember, keep at least five metres away.'

Jim Ashworth was on the shore to receive the zodiac as it grounded on the beach of black sand. 'Okay, one at a time please. Sit on the

pontoon, swing your legs over the side, and then wade ashore. Remember to leave your life jackets in the red bags.'

The ship was still at anchor at six o'clock that evening when Jo, newly showered and refreshed, entered the reception area.

'Oh, hallo AB, how are you?'

'Fine thank you.'

'A good first landing in the Antarctic. Did you get ashore?'

'Yup, I managed an hour. I got all the way to Neptune's Window, and also had time for a quick look around the base.'

'Did you see the old aeroplane in the hangar?'

'No. Oh, hallo Dill,' she said as Dill entered.

'Did you hear about Mr Birks?' he asked.

'No,' echoed AB and Jo, 'what happened?'

'Well, Gerald's party had set off along the shore, and Henry Birks started off with them but he soon got left behind. The silly man shouldn't have tried the long walk, especially with his damaged arm, you know how he's a bit vague, his mind not quite on what he is doing. Well, there he was pottering along by the ruined hut halfway to Neptune's Window when a large fur seal, which must have been sleeping in front of the hut, charged him.'

'Did it get him?' asked AB.

'Surprisingly not. I think his vagueness helped him, as most people would have turned and run, and most likely have been bitten. Old Henry just waved his stick vaguely at the seal, which appeared nonplussed and edged backwards. The seal was still wondering what to make of him when I ran up and chased it off.'

'It was lucky you were watching. Henry's short-sighted and probably didn't really see the seal at all. Are there normally fur seals on Deception Island? I didn't see any.'

'They are certainly increasing in the South Shetlands,' said Gerald who had come in halfway through Dill's story.

'Did you see what happened, Gerry?' asked AB.

'No, not at all.'

There was a rap on the counter, and they all turned round to see Bill and Martin. 'Excuse me interrupting,' said Bill, 'were we not meant to sail at five-thirty? It's now after six o'clock.'

Gerald looked at AB who nodded. 'Yes, our sailing has been delayed as the crew are still fitting the new glass into the broken portholes. However, I'm sure we'll be off anytime now.'

'What time?' asked Martin.

'I don't know exactly,' said AB. 'Hang on, I'll just check with the bridge.'

AB went to the phone, talked briefly, and then announced to the assembled company. 'The time's not yet been fixed. They'll let us know.'

'Thanks,' said Bill.

'I wonder what really is the matter, Bill?' queried Martin as the two of them disappeared down the companionway.

'Yes, Gerald, why the delay?' asked Dill.

'Problems with the porthole glass. One porthole is so bent that the glass won't fit in. The captain's having to decide whether to keep it boarded up, cut the metal hull to fit, or attempt to cut the glass.'

'The glass will never cut, that's for sure,' said Dill, 'it'll break, it's far too thick.'

'What's he decided?' asked Jo.

'I don't know. I'll go up to the bridge to find out.' Gerald left, leaving the others to speculate.

'You don't think there's any chance of us having to head back north?' asked AB. 'The hull does look a bit dented.'

'Oh, I don't think so,' answered Dill. 'Remember this ship has spent all its life bashing through ice, and is always getting dents. One more'll make no difference. I remember when...'

'Please, not one of your stories now, Dill, but you're probably right, you know. Steve and Gerald have invested so much in this voyage, and in their company, that they can't afford to turn back now. Steve's very tense at the moment, not his usual self.'

'I've noticed also that the captain's tenser on this voyage than I've ever known him,' put in Jo. 'When skipper of this ship in the past, as the *Scotia II* of course, he was always so confident, brash maybe, but self-confident. This voyage he appears more withdrawn, almost rude at times.'

'Come on, everyone,' AB interrupted, 'let's not get too depressed. It's been a great day, what with the sun breaking through and good weather for our landing. The passengers seem very happy, and there is a cheerful buzz going round the ship. Now then, can you all please now leave me in peace while I type up tomorrow's programme... Oh, hallo Miss Edelston, I didn't see you there. How can I help you?'

'It's my cabin, it smells a bit musty...'

Meanwhile Gerald had reached the bridge. 'Ah, there you are Gerald,' said Captain Buchan, 'we were just about to call you. Can you join me in my cabin, Steve's already there, and the chief engineer's coming up shortly.'

They went down the short steps to the cabin, where Steve, beer-can in hand, was chatting to Ingrid. 'Beer, Gerald?' asked Steve.

'Please.'

'And you captain?'

'No.'

Steve went to the fridge, and as he was opening the door, he heard Grigori Lepik, the chief engineer call out, 'yes please, beer for me.'

Once they had all settled down, the captain began speaking. 'Right, everyone, I've asked you all up to talk through the current situation. Ingrid, do you want to stay for this. Yes? Right, first you, Grigori, what is your assessment of the hull?'

'The wave has dented five plates.'

'What, bigger dents than normal?' interrupted Gerald.

Captain Buchan cast an angry glance at Gerald. 'Don't interrupt, let Grigori have his say.'

'The wave has dented five plates, two just above the waterline, and three high above. The dents are no bigger than those to expect from normal wear and tear going through ice in Antarctic waters, but they are bigger than expected from waves. So no need to worry, except there is a hairline crack between the two lower plates.'

'Reaching under water?' interrupted Buchan.

'No, the crack does not go under water. Also, the crack is so thin there is no need to weld. This kind of crack is not uncommon when going through ice. I think there's no danger.

'We have put glass in all the broken portholes, and we had to cut and weld one, but all now is okay. The deck damage is superficial and my crew are now mending the railings. The foremast we must cut off, as it is not possible to put upright again. That is all.'

'How long before all the work is complete?'

'Well, captain, we can finish the cut and welding in two hours.'

'Thank you, Grigori, I think it best to stay anchored here in sheltered waters for you to complete the work.'

'Very well, captain, I will return on deck to supervise my men.'

Once Grigori had left, Captain Buchan turned round to Steve and Gerald. 'Well, you see how it is. Grigori is happy that the damage is only superficial. However, I am not so sure, this is an old ship, and the force of a large wave will have different impact on the hull than ramming through ice. The crack worries me.'

'But you heard what Grigori said, cracks like that are not uncommon, and it is nowhere near the waterline.'

'Yes, Steve. You're probably right, but Grigori has had no experience of Antarctic ice before, only run of the mill stuff in the Baltic. He does not really know what forces to expect. I'd be happier if we avoided any heavy ice this voyage, until the hull has been properly surveyed again in dry dock. It is one thing risking the lives of staff of the Polar Foundation who, to some extent, know the dangers of Antarctica, and what they are letting themselves in for when working down here. But it is quite another thing to take

unnecessary risks with these passengers; after all there are women,' he said, glancing at Ingrid who glowered back, 'there are women and children aboard.

'Yes, I think it is safe carry on, but we will have to avoid heavy ice. Do you agree, Steve? Gerald?'

'We cannot afford not to,' they replied.

Chapter 3

There was heavy snow falling as the *Isis* left the South Shetland Islands and crossed the Gerlache Strait towards the Antarctic mainland. The first landfall would be an offshore island where there was a wrecked whaling ship worth seeing, or so the programme said.

Bill entered the lounge and joined the group at the bar. Melissa was telling Arthur, 'what's the point of going to see a wrecked boat? I did not come to Antarctica to see wrecked ships, or, come to think of it, junkyards of old whaling stations.'

'I'm sure you're right,' agreed Arthur.

'And now it is snowing,' continued Melissa, 'you can't see anything anyhow.'

'Well, you must expect snow in Antarctica, Melissa,' put in Bill, 'and whaling stations and whaling ships are part of the history of the place. What did you come to see?'

'I don't know. It was Piers' idea to come here – he said we hadn't been here before. I expect it was penguins and icebergs, although I don't know why, as we've seen penguins and icebergs before. What is there to see in Antarctica, Arthur?'

'Oh, penguins and icebergs, I expect. Talking of ice, do you want a whisky, Melissa?'

'What's the time? I'm sure it's too early. Yes, why not, there's nothing else to do with all this snow falling. I've no desire to go and see this wrecked ship.'

'What about you, Bill?'

'No thanks, Arthur, it is too early for me.'

Arthur called to Juhan. 'Two scotch on the rocks, please.' Meanwhile Bill had turned round to face John and Averil who had just come in. 'That was a good lecture of Jim's, wasn't it?' he said. 'He certainly knows his polar history.'

'Yes, fascinating,' replied John, 'I never knew so many whalers had come here. I see it's snowing, do you think this will stop us going to see the sunken ship Jim was talking about?'

'Oh, I doubt it. It takes a lot to stop zodiac operations.' They were interrupted by Steve announcing over the loudspeakers that they were nearly at their destination, and would be starting to load boats in about ten minutes. 'Well,' continued Bill once the announcement was over, 'we'd better go and get ready. Are you sure you're staying on board, Melissa?'

'Yes thank you, I have seen snow before!'

'It's not fair, grandad,' Annie said while waiting at the gangway, 'they are scraping off all the snow, and putting salt on the decks. It's no fun, they should let it get nice and deep. Damien and I were just starting a good snowball fight when I had to come and get ready.'

'Don't worry,' replied Bill, 'I'm sure we will see plenty more snow. They have to keep the decks clear of snow so ancient people like me don't slip and hurt ourselves. By the way, where's Damien?'

'Oh, he's coming.'

'Come on Dottie, we are loading boats now, put your hood up.'

There was a full complement of twelve people in the zodiac as they pulled away from the *Isis*, and other boats were waiting in line to

take the next load. It looked as if there would be no shortage of takers for sitting in a rubber dinghy in a snowstorm! In fact it was not a snowstorm as such because there was not a breath of wind. When they got to the wreck of the whaling ship, which had been barely visible through the mist from the *Isis*, Jim, the driver of this zodiac, turned off the engine and the boat drifted silently.

Although it was not totally silent. There was a faint hissing as the snowflakes, large and fast, hit the mirror-calm sea, and also the occasional squawk of an Antarctic tern which was nesting on the wreck. However, the passengers were all quiet, just listening, and watching. The falling snow merged with the shore, itself a barely visible bank of snow, making the occupants feel cut-off, almost floating through the air.

This tranquillity was broken by another zodiac arriving with the next load of passengers. Jim turned on the engine, and they circled the wreck, Jim recounting its history. 'This ship was full of whale oil, when it caught fire. The crew sank the ship deliberately in this shallow water in order to put out the fire and save themselves.'

'A difficult choice,' said Bill, 'fire or ice, heat or cold.'

'Shall we cruise around a bit before heading back to the ship?' As most people nodded, Jim steered his boat along the shore, under snowbanks and cliffs of ice that disappeared up into the mist.

'Should we be as close as this?' asked Bill. ‘In case a bit of ice falls off and lands in the boat?'

'Don't worry,' said Jim, 'you can tell that this ice cliff is stagnant, and not actively calving bits of ice'

'How?' asked Annie.

'Well, when an ice cliff is actively calving icebergs it always has a blue tinge. This ice is a browny-white, which means the ice is not moving, so we are quite safe.'

'Wow!' said Annie. 'Oh look, what's that moving over there, on that snowdrift? I think it's a penguin, no two penguins. Can we go and see?'

Jim turned the boat towards where Annie was pointing. 'Where exactly? Oh, I think I see.'

The zodiac cruised up to the shore very closely, but the penguins, two gentoos, ignored them completely. They were set on their own business, and in a hurry to carry it out. Jim allowed the boat to follow them along the shore, until the penguins reached a point that appeared suitable to them, dived into the water and disappeared.

The snow was still falling, intense and heavy, and everyone was slowly turning white. 'What do you think, Dottie,' said Bill, 'we paid all this money just to sit in a cold boat in a blizzard. Are we mad?'

Dottie smiled. ‘No, I'm enjoying it.'

'Oh yes, so am I,' put in Annie. 'Where next Jim?'

'Well, there is a little bay round the corner with a gull colony, and some plants.'

'Plants?' asked Bill. ‘Are there plants here? What sort of plants.'

'Oh, mosses and things.'

The zodiac slowly glided through the grey water and the water full of tiny rings where each snowflake fell, the whole effect mesmerising to the eyes. They entered a little bay, with snow-covered slopes on each side and which slowly narrowed until it ended in a lichen-covered cliff with splashes of green moss visible.

'Look,' said Jim, 'those are Dominican gulls nesting on that cliff. You can see their young, quite big now.'

'What's that black bird over there, Jim?' Annie pointed.

'That. Oh, it's a skua. Probably waiting to catch and eat a young gull.'

'Oh no!'

'Yes Annie, skuas have to eat as well. They probably have young to feed.'

'Yes, but it's not fair!'

'Nature's not always fair.'

Jim turned the boat round on its axis, and they motored quietly out of the bay. 'Right, time to go back to the ship.'

'Where is the ship?' Annie asked.

'We've been going round a small island. It's the other side, not really far.'

A light wind got up, making the snow swirl in lazy circles before settling gently on the sea, but also blowing the snow directly into their faces; everyone kept their heads down and it was a cold party that reached the ship to Jim's announcement of, 'our floating hotel coming up.'

They were thankful for the strong arms of the crew members that pulled them aboard, and pleasantly surprised to see the hotel manager, Garry Clarke, at the entrance dishing out whisky-flavoured hot chocolate.

'Wow, that trip was great,' announced Annie, echoing the thoughts of everyone.

'Yes,' agreed Bill, 'every day is better than the one before.'

Over lunch the snow slowly cleared as the ship continued southwards down the Gerlache Strait. John and Averil were sitting at a table with Henry Birks and Liam O'Neill.

'Is your arm better, Henry?' Liam was asking.

'Yes thank you.'

'I heard you were attacked by a fur seal,' said John, 'but managed to chase it off. That must have been frightening. How did you do it?'

'Nothing to it, dear boy. I just waved my stick, and it ran away.'

'Really? I thought Dill frightened it off,' put in Averil.

'No. I had chased it away before he arrived. I was...' Henry was interrupted by Gerald, carrying a groaning plateload of food. ‘May I join you?'

'Of course,' said Averil, 'we were keeping this place for you. I see you have the crayfish salad, a good choice, I think I'll have some more myself. John dear, can you please get me another plate-full?'

'Yes, of course.'

Averil turned to Gerald. 'What kind of penguins have we seen so far? What were those ones on the shore at Deception Island?'

'Gentoo at the landing, on the beach that is. But you saw the large rookery as the ship sailed through Neptune's Bellows – those were all chinstraps.'

'Oh, is it also chinstraps that we've seen beside the ship, swimming fast and jumping in and out...'

'Porpoising.'

'Porpoising beside the ship?'

'Yes. A few gentoo but mainly chinstraps.'

'How do you tell the difference?' she asked as John returned from the buffet with a new plateload of salad. 'Here you are, dear. And have you really been asleep through all the lectures?' Looking across the table he added, 'I've seen you snoring away at times as well, Henry.'

'Huh!' humphed Henry.

'Averil dear, Gerald has told us many times how to tell penguins apart.'

'It's okay,' said Gerald, 'I'm always happy to talk about penguins. Chinstraps are the ones with black caps, and a black strap under their chin. Gentoos have red beaks, and a white patch on the head. Adelies, on the other hand, which we haven't seen yet, have all-black heads, except for a white ring round the eye.'

'I gather,' said John, 'that you used to study penguins when working for the UK Polar Foundation. What did you find out?'

'Well, I was comparing diet and survival rates of Adelies in different parts of their range. In the north I had a study site at the South Orkneys, and in the south at Marguerite Bay.'

'How interesting!'

'I was collecting regurgitated food to find out what they eat. To do this I... Sorry, Averil, this is probably not a good lunchtime conversation.'

'Was it while doing this work that you met Steve?' asked John.

'Yes, he was also working for the Polar Foundation.'

'Also studying penguins?'

'No, he was a general assistant, and helped me with logistics, with getting to and from rookeries, building huts, setting up camps, and so on.'

'What happened to the Polar Foundation? I believe it no longer exists.'

'Yes, that's right, it closed down. Government cutbacks, not seen as essential to keeping the British economy going.'

'That's a pity. I say, it must have been damned good fun, though, working for them...'

Gerald suddenly stared out of the window. ‘Hey what's that? That black shape in the water? I think it's a whale. Excuse me.' And leaping up from his chair, he rushed out of the room.

A minute later they heard his voice over the loudspeaker. 'We have sighted two whales off the starboard side. Humpbacks. One large one, and a smaller one, probably a mother and calf. The captain has agreed to turn the ship round, to turn the ship round and drift slowly up to them. Come up on deck as soon as possible, but remember to keep quiet. By the way, it has stopped snowing.'

There was a rush from dining room.

The ship was drifting in a mirror-calm sea. Blue sky was breaking through and the grey of the snowstorm was astern; indeed the grey was dissolving everywhere, and distant mountains were coming into view. Mountains all white, yet not white, yellow in the far distance and perhaps blue in the near distance. The sea echoed the distant views, echoes broken by floating ice, both flat floes, legacies of the winter's cold, and sculptured blocks, icebergs, frozen fragments of

the interior. And drifting, floating lazily amongst this ice, were two black shapes, two whales who had spent the summer fasting in the tropics, and were in the far south to feed. Not feeding now, but resting, drifting, playing. A mother and her calf.

On deck there was silence, the silence of concentration as a hundred pairs of eyes watched, just watched. Watched and looked, the silence broken by the camera shutters, the shares of Kodak, Fuji and Agfa increasing by the minute. Martin was looking for the perfect shot, whales in the foreground, both of them, visible above and below water, an iceberg behind, and the distant mountains as backdrop. And he achieved it, by careful thought and planning, although many of the others achieved it by good luck – the Antarctic landscape has a tendency to take its own pictures!

The *Isis* spent half an hour with the whales. The whales were in no hurry, and with sunshine and calm why rush? Not so very long ago this peaceful scene would have been very different, so very different: the sea awash with blood, men shouting, steam whistles screaming, the whales floating, but full of compressed air, dead. Appreciated for their body parts rather than their whole, but appreciated all the same, and similar in another respect – bringing in money for the ship owners.

The afternoon was perfect. The captain took the *Isis* close in to the shore, and kept it drifting amongst icebergs, some icebergs themselves taller than the ship, and, of course, no two icebergs ever the same. The zodiacs weaved in and out of the bergs and the bergy bits, landing passengers in wave after wave amongst the brash on

the shore. The natives took no notice, watching the landings indifferently while standing around communing silently, as penguins are wont to do.

The passengers, however, were anything but indifferent. There were smiles on all their faces as they visited this, their first penguin rookery. 'Oh look over there, Damien,' Annie called, 'look at those babies on their nests, with their mummies.'

'How do you know they are not daddies? All penguins look the same,' answered Damien.

'Oh right! Mummies or daddies, then. Aren't they sweet. Oh look, that one's being fed.' And they watched as a parent regurgitated food into the chick's mouth.

'Hey, Mr Birks,' shouted Annie, as she saw Henry walking up close to the feeding gentoo penguins. Hearing her call, Steve looked round to see Henry walking right through a nesting group. 'Henry, keep back. Remember, keep at least fifteen feet away.' Henry appeared not to hear and walked right on, even though many passengers were now gesticulating and shouting at him.

'Silly man,' said Annie, 'he never listens to anything anyone says.'

'See,' said Steve, 'over there, where Henry has just walked. See that white bird, it's a sheathbill. They scavenge around rookeries, eating anything they can. That one's eating the regurgitated food dropped by the penguin when disturbed by Henry. You always have to be careful not to disturb nests, otherwise sheathbills and skuas will take the eggs or young.'

'I know,' said Annie. 'Hey, lets go up there, Damien,' and she pointed up a rocky slope, 'we'll get a great view. Do you mind if we go up there, grandad?'

'No, not if you're careful.'

Annie and Damien followed a penguin trail through the snow and then started climbing the slope. It was easy walking up the rocks, although slippery in places where generations of penguin feet had worn the rock smooth. Halfway up they met Martin kneeling, as if praying.

'What are you doing?' asked Damien.

'Taking photographs.'

'Of what?'

'Plants. Have you noticed the moss here, with grass growing in it?'

'No.'

Just then they were joined by Gerald, who added 'It's true, there are plants growing here. Look over there, do you see? The whole slope is covered with a turf of moss. In some parts of Antarctica this turf can be three metres thick and over five thousand years old. And living amongst the moss you can sometimes find Antarctica's largest land animal.'

'What's that?' questioned Annie.

'A midge, a wingless midge about three millimetres long.'

'Why has it no wings?' asked Damien.

'Well,' Gerald replied, 'Antarctica is a windy place, with not much snow-free land, not much land suitable for the midge. If it had wings, while flying it could easily be blown away onto the ice and die.'

'Oh I see.'

'If you look closely around here, on the moss, you might find some midges.'

Annie and Damien looked, and sure enough walking over the top of the *Drepanocladus* moss shoots were a few tiny midges.

'I've found some,' cried Annie to all and sundry. 'Hey, come and see Antarctica's largest animal.'

'Largest land animal,' corrected Damien, 'penguins are bigger, silly.'

They continued climbing the slope to the top of the ridge where, even at this height, penguins were nesting.

'Gosh, Damien, what a great place for a nest,' said Annie. 'What a view.'

'But think of the long walk up from the sea they have to make each time to get to their nests. Hey, what's that? Stop it!' Damien had to duck as a large brown bird flew straight at him, wings tucked in and a roaring of wind through its feathers.

'Wow!' said Annie. 'It's turned and coming back. Let's go!'

They moved a bit further up the ridge, only to be met by another skua attacking them as they entered the new bird's territory. They had to retrace their steps down the slope to a safe spot out of range, where they sat down, with the first skua standing on a nearby rock eyeing them intently – but not actively attacking them.

They looked down the hill, where there was a constant movement of gentoo penguins following unmarked highways to and from their nesting sites. Penguin rookeries are smelly and noisy places, with a constant, raucous background chatter. At the bottom of the hill the gentoos were joined by larger, red-jacketed penguins on the shore,

walking in similar purposeful lines, and following the same paths as it was the easiest way through the snow. The sea beyond was full of ice, and the ship amongst the ice looked so small, although really it was the icebergs that were big. Beyond the ship were the icefalls and cliffs of the glaciated continent stretching away to the north, and glaciated islands to the west. It was a landscape of one substance in all its myriad forms – water. Icecaps, icefalls, ice cliffs, glaciers, snowdrifts, icebergs, bergy bits, icefloes, the sea itself, the occasional cloud still visible, and the penguins and people themselves mostly water. Only the ship stood out as an alien being in this world.

It is a tradition amongst many small cruise ships to start off cocktail hour with what is called a 'recap', where the expedition staff talk through the events and incidents of the day, and answer any questions. This evening Steve started by asking 'Have you had a good day?', and there was universal nodding of heads, which soon broke into spontaneous applause. 'After a day like today, you can see why some of us come back to the Antarctic year after year.

'The weather forecast looks good, and tomorrow we will continue our journey south down the Antarctic Peninsula, visiting some of the most spectacular places on the whole continent. In the morning we will be in Paradise Bay where, ice conditions permitting, we hope to make a landing, and in the afternoon we hope to sail through the narrow Lemaire Channel.

'Any questions about what we have seen today? Yes, John?'

'What is a bergy bit?'

'A bergy bit is really a small iceberg. Technically an iceberg has to be more than five metres, or fifteen feet high, above the water that is. A bergy bit is smaller, between one and five metres above the water. Less than one metre, they are called growlers, and growlers, often being hard to see, are in fact the most dangerous to shipping. Yes, Averil?'

'What kind of penguins did we see at the rookery this afternoon?'

The *Isis* spent the evening anchored in a small bay, surrounded by ice cliffs and ice-covered mountains. After the relative warmth of the day there was a slight coolness in the air, but a dry, refreshing coolness. It was not quite dark, and a few enthusiasts had volunteered for an after-dinner excursion, landing on a small rocky promontory, climbing a short snowslope, and now sitting on the snow listening to the silence of the scene. And the silence was intense, apart from the distant humming of the ship, and the occasional rumble of a faraway avalanche.

They sat in silence for a long time, only deciding to leave when the evening light had faded, changing the landscape from a delicate pink to a chill grey. Steve and AB were the last to leave, sitting arm in arm on the snow.

'Are you happy now, Steve?'

'Yes. Today has gone so well, and tomorrow looks good. The passengers are happy, and I think we can finally relax, just enjoy Antarctica, nothing can go wrong now. How about you?'

'Yes, it's everything I could have hoped for. It is just so much better than I ever imagined. Just look at this,' she said pointing at the view.

They both sat in silence for a few minutes, enjoying both the scene and the rare opportunity for being alone together. Eventually Steve had to say, 'come on, we'd better catch up with the others.' Still arm in arm they walked down the snow to the waiting zodiac.

The sky was now a deep blue-black, with a faint hint of orange in the direction where the sun had set. The sea was so calm and the air so still that there was a sheen of new ice forming over the water, which made the slightest of rustling sounds as the boat cruised slowly back to the ship.

Chapter 4

Day followed serene day. Paradise Bay lived up to its name, with glaciers streaming down from a height of two thousand metres, their calved offspring littering the sea with an assortment of shapes, shapes that even the wildest imagination would fail to conceive. It was a landscape of ice and the presence of a few huts, scientific bases, gave a scale to its grandeur; indeed, without these buildings the full immensity of the landscape would not be realised.

The Lemaire Channel was equally spectacular, the channel itself filled with loose pack ice. Annie and Damien were at the bow of the ship, leaning far over and watching, and they were not the only ones. 'Look, there's another big one coming up,' shouted Damien. And they watched as the bow hit a large, flat ice floe, giving to the whole ship a little nervous shudder. Immediately cracks darted out into the centre of the floe, and the whole floe sliced apart, both sides pushed aside as the ship powered through without slowing, often leaving a hint of red paint on the gashed floes, the floes themselves revealing a brown interior from the diatoms, microscopic algae, growing inside.

Occasionally there was a louder crash, and the ship did visibly slow as a growler was hit, growlers of course being composed of harder glacier ice compared to the floes that were merely frozen sea. Annie and Damien spent a whole hour watching from the bow and, indeed, watching a ship plough through the ice is an activity of which one never tires.

Once through the channel, Steve and Gerald went up to the bridge to discuss the ship's itinerary with the captain.

'We're certainly making good time in this weather,' said Steve, 'and ice conditions appear good. How does the satellite ice chart look, James?'

Captain Buchan took it off the notice board where it was pinned and spread it out on the chart table. 'It does not look too bad,' he said, 'at least as far as Adelaide Island. Two tenths loose pack at most.'

'How long to the Antarctic Circle?' asked Steve.

'Mm, let's see. About a hundred and fifty miles, say fifteen hours.'

'Right! Do you all think we should go for it as planned? It would certainly keep the passengers happy. Martin Carruthers was telling me yesterday that there's no point going to Antarctica unless you cross the Antarctic Circle. I'm not sure I'd agree, but I think we should make the effort. What do you say, Gerald? James?'

'Yes,' they both replied

'And after that, Steve?' asked the captain. 'What next? On southward to Marguerite Bay – I know you want to return to your old haunts. And you too, probably Gerald?'

'Absolutely,' he responded.

'Let me look at that ice chart again,' said Steve, 'what date's it for?'

'Today's, in fact half an hour ago – I've just pulled it off the satellite,' replied the captain.

Steve peered at the chart for a few moments, and then compared it with previous days' charts hanging up on the wall.

'Mm. Marguerite Bay looks chock ablock, eight to nine tenths. We could probably get through, but it would be slow. How many more days have we got before we need to be at South Georgia? A week, isn't it?'

'Slightly more, ten days,' Gerald replied.

'I've been thinking. Look, the ice is thick south of the Circle, and it would be slow to get anywhere. However, if you look at conditions on the east side of the Peninsula, around James Ross Island, they look clear. You know the Weddell Sea, don't you James?'

'Of course, I've taken this ship there many times.'

'Well, how do ice conditions look to you?'

'Better than average, certainly.'

'Much better?'

Captain Buchan peered at the current and previous ice charts again. 'Yes, I'd say so. I've rarely seen James Clark Ross Island so ice-free.'

'Well, why don't we give it a try? I don't know of any other cruise ships heading that far south down the eastern side of the Peninsula this year – I think Paulet Island is the limit – and if we managed to be the tourist ship that gets the furthest south on both sides of the Peninsula, think how good it would be for marketing. What do you think, Gerald?'

'I was rather hoping to get down to Marguerite Bay again.'

'But neither of us have been into the Weddell Sea, so it would be new for both of us. Surely better than going somewhere we've been to before?'

'I suppose so. But how could we persuade the passengers? What would be our aim, what would be our reason for going?'

'I've thought about that. We could aim for Nordenskjøld's Hut on Snow Hill Island.'

'Which hut?'

'You know, the one where Nordenskjøld had to winter when his ship failed to pick him up. Although he didn't know it, his ship had sunk and its captain, Larsen, and his crew, had to overwinter, but on a different island further north. We could get Jim to give a lecture on the whole story, one of the most remarkable of Antarctic exploration, on a par with Shackleton's. I've always wanted to get to Snow Hill Island and visit his hut. Come on Gerald, let's go for it.'

'Mm.'

'Captain?'

'Well, why not. If there's less ice there it might be sensible.'

'That's agreed, then?'

The *Isis* easily crossed the Antarctic Circle, their landing on Adelaide Island being their furthest south. To keep the passengers occupied and to give them their money's worth, Steve and Gerald liked to arrange at least one boat landing a day, sometimes two, occasionally even three.

Driving small boats amongst icebergs, amongst bergy bits and floes, amongst growlers and brash, sometimes with penguins and seals astride, this driving must be one of the most pleasurable activities there is, and Steve and Gerald, or any of the expedition

staff, would take every opportunity to launch the zodiacs and head off into the ice.

Thus the ship visited sites that are now part of the history of Antarctic exploration – the Wordie Hut in the Argentine Islands and the nearby bay where Charcot's expedition wintered in his ship the *Pourquoi Pas*. They visited penguin rookeries, Adelie, gentoo and chinstrap, and they visited the wallows of elephant seals; they walked through soft snowdrifts and they walked on hard, small ice-caps pink with algae; and they enjoyed, perhaps best of all, just cruising amongst the ice, cruising between icebergs and below massive ice cliffs, all the time on the lookout for penguins and seals.

On their way back north the ship called in at Port Lockroy, an old British base now kept as a museum-piece, illustrating how life must have been for researchers exploring the continent in the years following the Second World War. 'Perhaps a golden age,' Steve had said, 'when people knew how to live comfortably enough, but before the age of regulation and bureaucracy had taken over, and stifled any sense of adventure amongst the scientists and their support staff.'

Steve briefed the passengers prior to the landing at Port Lockroy, finishing with: 'And remember to take money with you, it's your only shopping opportunity in Antarctica! Stamps, postcards, tea shirts, mugs, books – takes British money and dollars. The weather is still fine, sunny and calm, about two degrees Celsius, and don't forget your sunscreen as there is a terrific glare off the surrounding snowfields and ice cliffs. The first zodiac ashore leaves in five

minutes, and we will run a continuous shuttle to and from the ship. Oh, and the last boat back to the ship will be at five thirty.'

The base was sited on a small, rocky, islet, adjacent to a larger, ice-covered island that ended in precipitate ice cliffs. It comprised a collection of wooden huts built directly on the bedrock and, it would appear, built in the middle of a penguin colony.

As Piers and Melissa walked up to the huts with Miss Edelston, Melissa called out, 'be careful you don't slip here, Miss Edelston, it's a bit muddy.'

'I have noticed, thank you.'

'Imagine living here, Piers. Look there's penguins and penguin shit all around the hut, and the whole place smells awful.'

'It would be different in winter, with the penguins gone and clean snow everywhere,' Piers replied.

'Yes, but who'd want to be here in winter?'

'At least it's warm today.'

'I'm sure that's not normal, look at all the snow around.'

They climbed some steps, entered the main wooden hut and walked down the passage to the shop. 'Imagine having to spend a whole year living here,' Melissa said. 'It's small, primitive and cramped, and what on earth would there be to do all day?'

'Do?' said Miss Edelston. 'Why their research of course. This was not a holiday camp!'

'But holidays and weekends, there'd be no escape.' Melissa, noticing a bearded individual behind the shop counter asked, 'what did they do in their spare time?'

The bearded individual, Alistair, replied that he had indeed worked in the past for the UK Polar Foundation, and lived in huts like this, albeit a little more sophisticated. 'Well, what did you do?' persisted Melissa.

'Oh, we were never bored, there was always plenty to do. Skiing, photography, reading, watching films, videos. There was generally a good crowd, and we had some great times together.'

'Was there a bar?' asked Piers.

'Of course.'

'Well, that's one thing,' Piers said. 'What about women? Were there women amongst you?'

'At first no, but in later years, yes.'

'Which did you prefer?'

'Having women, of course,' interrupted Melissa.

'No, well I have to confess I preferred the old days.'

'Is that why you are here now?' continued Melissa. 'Do you come to Antarctica because you can't cope with us, women, I mean? Are you married?'

'Excuse me,' butted-in Miss Edelston, 'how much are these postcards?'

'Thirty pence each,' Alistair replied.

'Thank you, I'll have four.'

'Is that all you're buying, Miss Edelston?' asked Melissa.

'I think thirty pence is expensive, and four is quite enough, thank you.'

'Well, Piers, what is there to buy here?' Melissa asked, looking around. 'There doesn't appear to be much. What can we take our friends?'

'Mm. What about those 'I've been to Antarctica' sweatshirts?'

'Well, they haven't!'

'No, I suppose not. We'll just have to settle with mugs, then.'

'Are there any?' Melissa asked Alistair.

'No.'

'How about a penguin poster?' suggested Piers...

By late afternoon, with most of the passengers back on board, Ingrid and the expedition staff were gathered in what had originally been the hub of the old base, the lounge, but was now the shop. They were drinking tea with Alistair, and reminiscing about their days with the UK Polar Foundation.

'Alistair, you're lucky to be here for the summer,' said Jo. 'I bet you thought you'd never get back south again. How many ships have you had in so far this year?'

'Yes, it's great to be back, even though the job is nothing more than a glorified postmaster! Hey, you lot, instead of just standing around, why don't you help me frank these postcards? If we can get them all done before you sail, then you can take the mail north.'

Alistair divided in half the large pile of postcards and gave out the two hand-frankers. 'Mind you don't smudge the postmark. People like to see the Antarctic postmark clearly. What was it you were asking Jo?'

'Oh yes, how many ships have you had in so far this season?'

'Mm, let me see. About thirty so far, generally about five a week – and that's a lot of postcards, although of course Eddie is here to help.'

'Where is Eddie at the moment?' asked Dill.

'He went on board to have a look round the *Scotia*.'

'Isis.'

'OK, *Isis* then, but I will always see her as the *Scotia II*. Why did you rename her, Steve? And why the *Isis*?'

'Well, Gerald and I see it as a new beginning for the ship, a new life, and we thought it warranted a new name.'

'That's right,' agreed Gerald.

'And why *Isis*?' persevered Alistair.

'Well, Gerald and I are both from Oxford, and the name does sound like 'ice', suitable for a polar ship. In fact the idea came to me in Spitsbergen, where there is a headland in Nordaustland called Isispynten, named by some Oxford expedition.'

'But James, the captain, that is, he doesn't like the new name much,' put in Gerald. 'He thinks it bad luck to rename a ship.'

'Well, like me, it must be hard for him to accept the new name when he has known her as the *Scotia* for so long. By the way,' continued Alistair, 'it must have been expensive to buy the ship, how did you manage it?'

'That's a long story, isn't it Gerald?' Steve replied. 'Let's say that the bank owns more than we do.'

'And the fitting-out? Has she changed much inside, she looks much the same from outside?'

'Come and look,' said Steve. 'Follow Eddie's example and come aboard for a beer. By the way, are there any supplies we can bring you and Eddie? Beer? Fresh meat? Bread? Vegetables?'

'Yes please, all of those. By the way, talking of beer, would anyone like one?'

There was a series of nods around the room, and Alistair went out. 'Hey, Jo,' suggested Steve, 'why don't you radio Garry from here, and order some supplies for the base?'

'Good idea,' said Jo, taking out his radio. '*Scotia*, *Scotia*, oops, *Isis*, *Isis*, this is Jo.'

'Come in, Jo,' Angus replied from the bridge.

'Yes Angus. Could you ask Garry to pack a box of supplies for the base. Bread, fresh meat, fruit, vegetables, and beer – don't forget the beer!'

'Roger,' was the reply.

Alistair returned and handed round the cans. 'I hear you've had a good trip so far, and an exciting time in the Drake Passage. What's your itinerary?'

'It's been great,' said Ingrid. 'We started at Punta Arenas, and aim to finish in the Falklands. We've landed at...'

'This must be your first trip south, Ingrid,' interrupted Alistair, 'what happened? Did old James never let you come with him in the past?'

'Not exactly! But I never wanted to cramp his style, to just come as a hanger-on, as a passenger, that is.'

'Then why the change of mind?'

'Well... I thought he needed support with this new venture, he has always been a bit unsure about it.'

'Why?'

'I'm not quite sure. Partly, I think, it is the lack of security in not having a large organisation behind this outfit, and I do not think he really likes passengers that much. He would prefer to be dealing with people doing real work – or so I believe, although he has never actually said so.'

'But he's a good ice-captain, probably the best,' replied Alistair, adding as he turned to Steve and Gerald, 'you're lucky to have him. Did he take much persuading to come?'

'A little, but not much. I think really he didn't want the ship in somebody else's hands – after all he has been with her for about twenty-five years. In fact, he's in love with her more than you, don't you think Ingrid?'

'Sometimes it seems that way, at least this voyage. I hardly see him!'

'And, Ingrid, has the Antarctic lived up to your expectations?' asked Alistair.

'Certainly, more so probably. I can begin to see why you lot keep on wanting to come back. But I don't think I would really like to stay and work here – visit, yes, but not for too long. I feel that the land has no soul, it is too cold, coldly indifferent. It does not care about us. Do you see what I mean?'

'Perhaps,' said Gerald, 'in winter perhaps, when all life has deserted the continent. But in summer it is home to many creatures,

plants and animals, it is their home. But maybe it is indifferent to humans. No soul? I'm not sure, I'd have to think about that.'

'Now, Alistair,' cut in Steve, 'are you ready to come aboard? It's our turn to ply you with beer.'

'Yup. Where did you say you're heading next?'

'The Weddell Sea,' said Steve, 'we hope to get to Snow Hill Island. The sea appears wide-open at present.'

'I've never been on the eastern side of the Peninsula, I'm green with envy. It's great to be based here for the summer, but you lot must see so much more of the Antarctic.'

'Certainly more than when working for the Foundation in the past,' said Jo. 'Then the ship just took you to where you were working. Having tourists is great because now we can travel where we want, and see all the most exciting places. In fact, the *Isis* is your private yacht, isn't it Steve?'

'Come on, let's take Alistair aboard,' replied Steve. 'Come and see how comfortable we have made it since your day, Alistair.'

'I'm not so sure,' put in Gerald. 'We flit from place to place, seeing a lot, certainly, but never staying long enough to really get to know an area. You, Alistair, can get to know this area thoroughly, experience it thoroughly throughout the season.'

'True,' replied Alistair, 'but I would like to see a bit more of the continent – and I'd like to see aboard the *Scotia* again. Let’s go.'

Chapter 5

Twenty four hours later the *Isis* had rounded the northern extremity of mainland Antarctica and was heading for the Weddell Sea, sailing southwards through the Antarctic Sound. Although there was a hint of high cirrus, the sky was still a clear blue and the sea remained a mirror calm. Everyone was on deck, watching – even the Estonian crew, many of whom rarely appeared above decks.

'This is incredible,' said Bill, who was standing on the bridge wing. 'Have you seen anything like this before, Gerald?'

'No, I can't say I have, in fact I'm sure I haven't.'

'Why are there so many penguins? In all directions?'

'Feeding, I'd say. There must be swarms of krill, probably brought to the surface by the current. Look, you can see the current swirling round those grounded bergs.'

'Are they all chinstraps?'

'No, they're all Adelies, there must be a huge colony around here, although I don't know exactly where, I don't know this area.' Gerald shouted through the open door to the bridge, 'James, do you know where these penguins come from, where the nearest rookery is?'

'No, afraid not,' he shouted back.

'It would be good to find it, and make a landing, Steve,' suggested Gerald, 'conditions are so perfect, and we haven't yet visited a large Adelie rookery.'

'You're right,' said Steve who, after a pause added. 'I know, I'll contact Hans. He knows every good wildlife site in Antarctica. Where is the *Challenger* now, James?'

'Let's see, what's the date? Mm, probably in the vicinity of Elephant Island,' the captain answered.

'Radio contact?'

'Should be.'

'Okay, I'll give the *Polar Challenger* a try.' Steve picked up the handset, and on channel 16 called '*Challenger*, *Challenger*, come in *Challenger*, this is the *Isis*.' He paused, 'there seems to be no reply.' He tried again, and this time got a response.

'Hello *Isis*, this is the *Challenger*. Move to channel 23.'

'Roger.'

They regained contact on the new channel, and Steve asked the other ship if Hans was available. A few minutes later Hans' voice came over the radio, 'hi Steve, how're you doing?'

'Fine thanks, and yourself?'

'Fine. How's the trip been so far?'

'Great, we're having a superb trip. We got as far south as Adelaide Island, and are now heading for Snow Hill Island.'

'Lucky you, we've not had time to go east this season, our trips are too short, and we've been no further south than the Lemaire Channel. But it doesn't really matter as the perfect weather this past week has kept everyone happy. Plenty of whales around as well.'

'Are you headed north?'

'Yes, we're off Elephant Island and then Cape Horn in two days time.'

'We're in the Antarctic Sound and there are thousands, just thousands of penguins, Adelies, more than I've ever seen in the

water before. Where do they come from? Where's the nearest rookery?'

'They'll be from the rookery at Dark Point. Have you not been there? Well worth a visit.'

'Right, thanks, no I haven't, we may give it a try.'

'Okay, enjoy the Weddell Sea. I have to go now, *Challenger* out.'

Steve joined Gerald and the captain at the chart table. 'Dark Point,' said Steve. 'Where is it?'

The captain pointed with the pair of dividers he was holding, 'there.'

'How long?'

'Let's see. What's our exact position, Pedersen?'

Pedersen called out the co-ordinates from the satellite navigator, and captain Buchan measured the distance on the chart. 'Less than an hour, say three-quarters.'

'Right, let's go for it, you agree Gerald?'

'Absolutely, absolutely.'

Steve went to the public address system, and talked into the microphone so that all on deck could hear him.

'Isn't this just fantastic? These are all Adelies, feeding on swarms of krill that must be in the area, possibly brought to the surface by the strong current. Notice also that the icebergs here, unlike most of the ones we have seen before, are all flat topped. These are all tabular bergs, pieces of iceshelf that have broken off, drifted north, and run aground in this channel. Probably remains of the Larsen Iceshelf that has broken up recently, caused by global warming, some say. Of

course, although they are tall, higher than the ship, there'll be about four times as much below water.

'Hang on a minute, Gerald has spotted something. What is it Gerald?' Gerald took over the microphone from Steve, and continued the commentary.

'There, off the port side, below that large berg, a school of seals, crabeater seals. You can see them clearly against the blue of the ice. They're porpoising like penguins, and, like the penguins, going faster than the ship. And what's that over there, in front of the seals? A whale, two, no three whales, just drifting, humpbacks. We'll try and cruise slowly up to them.'

Pedersen turned the ship gently to port, and drifted up to the whales, who seemed to be sleeping, oblivious of the ship.

Bill and John were standing together on the stern deck watching the scene unfold.

'John,' said Bill, 'are you still filming? You haven't had your eye out of that camera for the past hour.'

'Here,' replied John, 'look at this playback – you can see penguins porpoising, the school, or whatever you call it, of seals, the whales floating behind, and the blue of the iceberg as backdrop. Much better than David Attenborough and the BBC!'

'No thank you. I prefer to see it with my own eyes. Looking through that camera of yours, you don't actually see anything.'

'Rubbish, I see everything. And when Averil and I get back we will have it for all time to reminisce over. Haven't you taken any pictures this trip?'

'Nope, I let Annie take them, I've given her my camera. I've cupboards of pictures back at home which we never look at, can't see the point any more.'

They were interrupted by the sound of Steve's voice over the tannoy. 'Conditions are so perfect that we have decided to take advantage of the good weather. We're going to follow these penguins home to their rookery at Dark Point, about three-quarters of an hour's sailing away. Judging by the number of birds, it must be a big colony. None of us have ever been there before, so it will be an adventure for all of us.

'So, get ready, in about three-quarter of an hour we'll be making a landing.'

After staying with the whales a further ten minutes, the ship retraced its steps a few miles, weaving through the channels between the giant vertically-sided bergs, all the time being raced, and overtaken, by the massed porpoising penguins, leaping in and out of the water like some wound-up clockwork toys, so many that you could hear the splash of their dives above the noise of the ship.

An hour later the zodiac armada was breasting the beach of Dark Point, so-named because the darkness of the rock stood out against the surrounding glaciers. Penguins were coming ashore in droves, swimming the last bit fast, and jumping high out of the water when finally making landfall.

Annie was excitedly pointing. ‘Look, there're some gentoos. They're coming right towards the boat, they haven't seen us.' And before anyone realised what was happening, a penguin jumped right

into the boat, mistaking the black zodiac for a black rock. It landed at Dottie's feet, and it was hard to say who was the more surprised, Dottie or the penguin. It looked around quickly, became flustered, and flapped its flippers vigorously while scrabbling at the side of the boat. Gerald, who was driving, stopped the engine and calmly picked up the bird, before dropping it over the side where it swam away at great speed to join its friends. 'You see,' Gerald said, 'it is easy to p-pick a penguin when you have to!'

'Well done, Gerry,' said AB.

'Wow, that was exciting,' exclaimed Annie, 'let's hope another one tries that trick! It must have forgotten the five metre rule.'

'No,' laughed AB, 'it's us who have to keep five metres from penguins. They're allowed to come up to us, but we're not allowed to go up to them.'

'That's not fair!' pleaded Annie.

'Get ready,' called Gerald, 'we're about to land.' Expertly cutting the engine at just the right moment, and lifting the outboard as the water shallowed, the zodiac gently beached itself on the gravel. Everybody got up at once.

'Please,' shouted Gerald, 'one at a time only please, don't stand up 'til it's your turn.'

'What time's the last boat back?' asked Annie.

'Half past six, we've got three hours here.'

Those three hours passed in a flash. No-one wandered far from the landing, there was no need to. Even Dill admitted later that this was one of those lifetime experiences.

For reasons best known to themselves, the penguins were landing at the far end of the beach and walking its full length to get to their nests at the other end. For the full three hours penguins came ashore and marched twenty-abreast along the tideline, purposeful, intent, and, apart from an occasional sideways squint, completely ignoring, indeed streaming round the other larger red-jacketed bipeds.

'Wow!' is all Annie could say, open-mouthed, for the first five minutes – indeed no-one was speaking. Looking one way you saw a mass of white fronts coming towards you, looking the other you saw the retreating backs, all in black.

'Why are there so many? Where are they all going?' asked Annie.

'They'll have young now,' said AB. 'Where we were in the channel they were feeding, now they are all coming back to feed their young.'

'There must be millions,' put in Damien, 'can we go and see the babies?'

'Yes, let's,' said Annie.

'May I join you?' said Ingrid, who had just wandered up.

'Oh do,' replied Annie, 'we're just going off to find the babies. Why do you think they're landing one end and walking to the other end of the beach, when they could swim the distance in no time?'

'I don't know,' said AB, 'I'm not a penguin psychologist!'

'Probably leopard seals,' put in Damien, 'they are frightened of the seals who hang around waiting to catch them when they come ashore...'

'Horrible animals,' said Annie.

'...so they probably come ashore at the first possible place.'

'But if the seal's going to get them, it's going to get them. It doesn't matter where they come ashore,' suggested Ingrid.

'They probably haven't worked that one out,' said AB, 'penguins are not very bright!'

'Yes they are,' Annie defended, 'they're very bright. And Damien, how come you know so much about these horrible leopard seals?'

'I do listen at lectures, you know. Wouldn't it be great to watch a seal catch and eat a penguin. They turn them inside out before eating them.'

'No, I think it'd be horrible. They are just like those nasty skuas.'

They walked down the shore to where the gleaming parents, washed clean by their swim, were rejoining their all-black offspring, dressed in dirty down and grouped in crèches, guarded by a few volunteers who had deigned not to go to sea.

'It's amazing,' said Annie, 'they all look the same, how do they make sure they feed the right baby?'

'Probably by sound,' said AB.

'But they all sound the same to me.'

'That's because you're not a penguin, silly,' put in Damien.

'Oh look,' said Ingrid, 'those two are chasing a parent for food. Look, they are bumping into lots of birds and getting pecked.'

'Yes, that's the feeding ritual,' explained AB, 'there are various theories as to why they do it. One is...'

Once back on board, Steve requested all the staff, that is himself, Gerald, Jim, Dill, Jo and AB, to gather in the reception area. He and

AB, coming in together, were the last to turn up. 'Right,' said Steve, 'beers all round. Where do you keep them, AB?'

AB went to a cupboard, extracted a beer for everyone, and then settled herself next to Steve.

'Cheers,' said Steve lifting his can, and all followed suit. 'I thought it was time to celebrate. Since we arrived in Antarctica each day has become better than the next. The weather has been glorious, we've managed to land everywhere we've wanted, and the passengers are all relaxed and happy.'

'Yes I know,' said Jo, 'I've just come down from the lounge and the buzz of conversation is the loudest I've known it.'

'And Bill has been raving about this trip non-stop,' added Dill. 'He keeps collaring me and asking if I've ever known it better.'

'Even Piers and Melissa were ashore today,' said AB, 'and I could have sworn they were almost smiling. And is it true, too, that Arthur left the bar to go ashore?'

'Yes,' replied Jim, 'he came back in my boat and even joked that the penguins were well dressed.'

'Well,' said Steve, 'that's good. We've only one more day before we have to leave the continent and head north, which is sad, although, of course, most of us will be staying on board for the next voyage.

'Anyhow, I think we can all relax a bit now, and look forward to a rosy future for Polar Adventuring. In fact, let's drink a toast to Polar Adventuring.'

'To Polar Adventuring,' everyone called out.

'Have you and Gerald finalised this season's arctic programme yet?' asked Dill.

'Yup,' replied Gerald, 'Steve and I were discussing it with the captain earlier, now we know that our systems all work. We'll start in July with a trip to Spitsbergen, followed by a trip to Greenland, and then we'll do the Northwest Passage to Alaska. From there we'll continue westwards to Wrangel Island, finishing back in Spitsbergen via Franz Josef Land.'

'Sounds good,' said Dill, 'but won't it be too early to try the Northwest Passage?'

'Based on the ice of recent years,' replied Steve, 'we think almost certainly that it'll go.'

'Isn't it getting a bit late in the year, Steve, to market the programme?' asked Jim.

'Probably,' agreed Steve, 'but it would've been risky to have marketed ourselves too soon. We did, of course, several months ago advertise a draft programme for our arctic season, so now we just need to circulate the final itinerary. Indeed, AB has already emailed Sandra in the Oxford office with the details. Who of you wants to join us in the arctic?'

Shortly afterwards passengers and staff were assembled in the lounge for recap, where Steve started proceedings with, 'have you all had a good day?' There were shouts of 'yes', and then the room erupted in applause. 'I'm afraid tomorrow's our last full day in Antarctica before we have to head north although, having said that, the South Orkneys, which we will be visiting on our way to South Georgia, are still technically in the Antarctic – while South Georgia isn't.'

'The banana belt,' interrupted Dill.

'Yes,' continued Steve, 'South Georgia is sometimes known as the banana belt. In fact, I once saw a T-shirt with 'South Georgia Banana Grower's Association' written on it.'

Averil whispered to John, 'I never knew they grew bananas in South Georgia', who replied, 'it's a joke.'

'Oh!'

Meanwhile Steve was saying, 'we're now heading south into the Weddell Sea, which is colder and wilder than the western half of the Peninsula where we've spent all our time so far. Not many cruise ships come this way, and we hope to be the only one this summer going for Snow Hill Island. Ice conditions are still looking good, so we should be there early tomorrow morning. We'll be spending the morning ashore, at the site of Nordenskjøld's hut which Jim will be telling you about in a minute. In the afternoon we'll be sailing back northwards to Paulet Island, which again features in Nordenskjøld's story. There we'll be making another landing, looking at the historical site, which is also situated in one of the biggest Adelie rookeries in the area.'

'Oh no, not more penguins!' called Martin from the floor, and a chuckle went round the lounge.

'I'm afraid so, but not more than a million! Any questions about tomorrow?'

'Will we be near where Shackleton's ship sank?' asked Martin.

'I'll hand that question over to Jim.'

'Thank you, Steve. Yes, Shackleton. In fact his ship foundered about three hundred miles south of Snow Hill Island, and then, of course,

his party had to make their way first by ice floe, and then by boat the nearly five hundred miles to Elephant Island – without losing a single man. But then, I've already told you this story.

'Equally remarkable, I think, is the story of Otto Nordenskjøld. I'll be giving the full story in a later lecture, but in summary this is what happened.

'Otto Nordenskjøld was a Swede who had commissioned the veteran whaling captain, Captain Larsen, to take him and a small group on a scientific expedition to Antarctica at the end of the nineteenth century. They were landed successfully by Captain Larsen at Snow Hill Island and, intending to overwinter, built a hut. All went well, they carried out useful research, and, being from Sweden and used to the snow, had a great time over the winter months.

'They had agreed with Larsen to be picked up the following summer. However, next summer Larsen never appeared because his ship was brought to a halt by dense pack ice. Realising that he would not make it to Snow Hill Island, Larsen sent off three men to try and reach Nordenskjøld over the sea ice. Encountering open water, though, these three never got there and had to overwinter in a makeshift hut at Hope Bay on the mainland.

'Meanwhile Larsen's ship, the *Antarctic*, had become crushed by ice and sank about twenty five miles south of a small island called Paulet. The captain and his crew of twenty or so made their way to Paulet Island by sledge and boat, a journey of some two weeks. They built a stone hut, killed about a thousand penguins or so as provisions, and survived the winter.

'Nordenskjøld, of course, had no idea that his relief ship had sunk, so had to overwinter on Snow Hill a second time. The story seems complicated, and it is, but in essence for that winter the expedition was in three separate groups – Snow Hill Island, Paulet Island and Hope Bay – none knowing the fate of the other.

'Next spring, the group from Hope Bay skied over the eighty or so miles of sea ice towards Snow Hill to find Nordenskjøld, but by chance ran into him on the way there – finding him out on the sea ice with a team of dogs. He was so blackened with soot from his stove, that burnt seal blubber and oil, that they failed to recognise him at first.

'And Larsen on Paulet Island, when open water appeared, left in an open boat with some of his crew and rowed the sixty miles south to Snow Hill. By chance Captain Larsen and his small boat arrived at Snow Hill Island the same day as an Argentinian ship.

'This was before the days of radio, so the outside world had had no idea of the expedition's fate. But, realising that the expedition was overdue, rescue bids had been mounted, including one Argentinian and one Swedish. The rescuers, of course, did not know where to look for them.

'The Argentinian ship, the *Uruguay*, had been searching the area without success and, luckily for Nordenskjøld, was in fact just making one last quick look round before heading north. I always think it one of the most remarkable coincidences of history that Larsen's boat and the *Uruguay* arrived at Snow Hill Island on the same day. Thereafter it just remained for the ship to pick up the remainder of Larsen's crew on Paulet Island.

'Thus all were saved, with the overall loss of one man, a member of Larsen's crew who had become sick on Paulet.

'Shackleton's ship the *Endurance* of course sank in the Weddell Sea twelve years later. What's remarkable, though, is that, apart from one man dying of sickness, the captains of both these ships, the *Endurance* and the *Antarctic* that is, brought everyone out alive after seeing their ships founder in one of the most inhospitable regions of the world.'

'What happened to Nordenskjøld afterwards? Did he do any more exploring?' asked Martin.

'Yes, he did some, though he was saddled with debt for a long time as the Swedish government charged him for the cost of the their rescue attempt – even though he was rescued by the Argentinians before the boat from Sweden had arrived to look for him. Afterwards he became a professor at a Swedish University.'

Chapter 6

At five o'clock next morning Steve and AB were woken by the phone ringing in their cabin. Steve sleepily picked it up. ‘Good morning Steve, it's Angus here. We're just arriving at Snow Hill Island.'

'Thanks Angus, I'll be up.' He turned over, kissed AB and told her, 'no need for you to get up yet. I told the duty officer to ring me when we reached the island. See you at breakfast.'

Steve joined Angus on the bridge to find the captain there as well; they all looked out on a cold, colourless scene. The colours of the previous days, shades of blue, white and gold, had gone, to be replaced by shades of grey. There was high cloud in the sky, a uniform grey, and this greyness was echoed in the sea, albeit broken here and there by the dull white of floes and small bergs. The only contrast was provided by the island itself, this side being snow-free and composed of rock, cliff and scree.

'I see the wind's got up,' said Steve.

'Yes,' replied Angus, 'it's been steadily picking up since I took over at four.'

'Has there been much ice about?'

'Again since I took over there have been some icebergs and a few large floes – about the same as now.'

'There was more earlier on,' put in James. 'About two in the morning Pedersen called me up when we encountered a dense band of pack, but we were through it in half an hour, there was no problem.'

Steve picked up a pair of binoculars and studied the island closely. 'Is Nordenskjøld's hut visible?' he asked.

'Yes,' answered Angus, 'it's that black speck over there.'

'Ah yes, got it. How deep is it here? How close in can we get?' asked Steve.

'We'll have to anchor about a mile offshore,' said Angus.

'I'm not sure,' put in the captain, 'there are a few floes about, drifting quite fast in this wind, and we don't want to spend the whole morning upping anchor to let them past. I think we'll drift. Yes. We'll go in another mile, and then heave to.'

'Aye, aye, sir,' Angus replied.

'Right then,' said Steve, 'we'll put a boat down in five minutes, and then Gerald and I will go in to scout around. By the way, Angus, have you woken up Gerald?'

'Oops, no, I forgot.'

'Can you ring him now, and ask him to join me on the aft deck in five minutes? And can you arrange with Pat for a boat to be ready. I'll go and get dressed up.'

Ten minutes later Steve and Gerald were in a zodiac streaming full speed for the land. They negotiated easily the scattered floes and finally beached the boat on a gently shelving shore. From there it was an easy walk to the hut, which appeared to be unoccupied. They radioed back to the ship that the landing appeared to present no problem.

Three hours later the first passengers were being taken ashore. The wind had increased further so that white horses flecked the sea, and

every now and then spray broke over the boats, cooling even further the passengers sitting hunched on the pontoons. There was a hint of snow in the air.

'This is more like the Antarctic,' announced Bill to all and sundry in his boat, 'we've been spoilt up to now.'

'Real weather at last,' said Dill who was driving. 'Get ready everybody, we'll be landing in a moment.'

They disembarked in an orderly manner, having now become well trained, and took off their lifejackets, leaving them in the bags provided for the purpose.

'Come on, grandad!' said Annie. 'Let's go straight to the hut, and see how real explorers used to live.'

The hut was less than five minutes walk from the beach and was built of wood in the traditional manner. There were bunks for twelve in four rooms that barely justified the name, but a coal-burning stove indicated that it could become warm and cosy if need arose. Indeed, with the cold wind blowing outside the hut already appeared hospitable.

Jim had based himself there so as to interpret its design and history to the passengers. 'Why is it in such good condition after all these years?' Bill asked.

'Well, the Argentinians keep it in good condition as it is now a designated Antarctic historic site. It's kept as a kind of museum.'

'Is it still used?' asked Bill.

'Yes sometimes by scientific field parties, and by others who stay here a while to maintain it.'

'It's certainly in a bleak location.'

'Yes,' agreed Jim.

'I quite agree too,' added Melissa. 'Imagine having to live here!'

And the location certainly was bleak. Gerald pointed out that, unlike any landing they had made previously, there was absolutely no sign of wildlife here: there were no mosses, lichens or algae, nor were there any penguin rookeries or indeed any other breeding birds.

'It is truly a desert,' Gerald explained, 'a cold desert devoid of life entirely.'

'Why is this?' asked Bill.

But before he could answer a loud sound rent the air, the sound of the ship's siren repeated in four long bursts. As soon as it had stopped the walkie-talkies of the staff members ashore burst into life, 'calling all staff, calling all staff. This is the captain. Return to the ship at once, return everybody to the ship immediately.'

'Okay,' said Gerald to those passengers at the hut, 'back to the boats, we must return to the ship immediately.'

'Is that what the four blasts of the ships whistle meant?' asked Averil.

'Yes,' he replied.

'Don't you remember from our first briefing, Averil?' said John. 'It's the signal to return.'

'Oh,' she replied.

The passengers were widely scattered, some visiting the hut, some with Dill looking at fossils, and some just wandering around by themselves. However immediately upon hearing the signal there was a stream back to the landing. The staff launched the boats

which had been left beached on the shore, and started a shuttle of passengers to the ship, for there were too many to go all at once. The wind was still strong, still getting stronger, and now there was more that just snow in the air – it was properly starting to snow, small icy pellets.

'Why were we called back?', everyone was asking.

'It's the ice, I think,' said Bill, 'have you noticed how this wind is bringing the ice into the shore? The captain is probably worried that it will block us off from the ship.'

'That would be exciting,' said Annie, 'then we'd all have to live in the hut.'

'But we wouldn't all fit.'

'That's true, I s'pose.'

For those passengers remaining on the shore, it seemed a long time for the boats to come back for them as the drivers had to wend their zodiacs in and out of the ice which was ever being piled up against the shore by the wind. But finally there was only one boatload of passengers left. They were all sitting in the boat waiting to go back to the ship while Ingrid, who had been helping passengers into the dinghies, went to collect the lifejacket bags left on the beach.

'Hey,' she called to Jim, the driver, 'there's one lifejacket left. Someone must still be ashore. We'll have to wait. Does anyone know whose it is?'

'No,' was the universal reply.

Jim radioed this information to the ship, adding 'Can you see anyone ashore from where you are?' But the ship replied that it was now snowing too hard to see the shore clearly.

'Well,' said Jim to his passengers sitting huddled in the zodiac, 'you'd better stay here while Ingrid and I go and look for the missing person.'

'It could be that someone has gone back to the ship without a lifejacket,' suggested Bill.

'I think that would have been noticed,' said Jim. 'By the way, Ingrid, have you a radio?'

'No.'

'Well, we'd better keep within sight of each other. We'll start with the hut.'

'Can we help?' asked Bill.

'No, thank you,' replied Jim, 'I think it best if you all stay together – we don't want to lose anyone else', and Jim and Ingrid rushed off towards the hut.

While they were away there was not much conversation in the waiting boat, most people hunched up keeping their faces down from the wind and snow, and just willing themselves back on board their luxurious ship.

Miss Edelston surprised them all, breaking the silence by echoing all their thoughts with, 'this is exciting, isn't it? Do you think we'll all be stranded, and have to stay in that hut? Did anyone notice if there was any food in it?'

'I sincerely hope not – hope we don't have to stay in that hut, that is,' said Melissa, 'I could murder a G and T just now.'

'Once we've found the missing person, it won't be long before we're back on board,' assured Bill.

'Please,' asked Annie, 'if we do have to stay in the hut, can I have a top bunk?'

'Did anyone notice how many beds there were?' asked Martin.

'I don't think so,' said Bill, 'probably about ten. But why are we all talking like this? Look the snow's beginning to clear.'

And there was a brief lull in the snow. Jim and Ingrid could be seen coming back from the hut, the two of them only, standing out against the ground that was now becoming white. Jim was radioing the ship. 'No sign of the missing pax. Are all the other boats back yet?'

The captain replied over the radio. 'Not yet. There are two still out, one close to the ship, and one appears to be stuck in the ice. No, it's coming out now. I think all their passengers should be aboard in about five minutes. As soon as all passengers are offloaded, I'll send Steve back to help you. Did you read that Steve?'

'Roger,' said Steve, who was driving one the boats, 'I'll take Gerald with me... AB, AB, do you read me?'

'Yes,' said AB who was based at the side entrance to the ship where the zodiacs docked.

'AB, as soon as these last two boats are in can you check the tally to see who has not pushed their button to sign back onboard?'

'Okay,' said AB.

'Jim, Jim, this is Steve, do you still read me?'

'Yes,' replied Jim.

'Jim, please tell us who you've got with you, so we can check them against the tally board, and find out who, if anyone, is missing.'

'Okay. Ingrid and I will be back at the boat in a couple of minutes, and we'll let you know.'

Shortly afterwards Jim radioed the information back to the ship, announcing that he had twelve passengers in all – Bill, Dottie and Annie, Martin Carruthers, John and Averil, Miss Edelston, Dr Liam O'Neill, Piers, Melissa and Damien, and Arthur.

'Arthur?' said Steve surprisedly. 'What's he doing ashore?'

Once everyone from the other boats had checked in, AB made the tally to see who was missing. 'Oh no,' she said to herself, and then over the radio, 'Steve, Steve, AB, it's Henry, it's Henry who's missing.'

'Oh shit! Not Henry!' retorted Steve. 'Did you read that Jim?'

'Yes.'

'Right,' continued Steve over the radio, 'I've picked up Gerald and we're now heading back to the shore to help you.'

'Roger,' said Jim.'

But Steve and Gerald did not get very far in their boat. The ever-increasing wind was pushing towards the shore a stream of bergy bits and broken floes, which were jostling close-packed together, and the amount of ice was increasing all the time. Although the ship was still in relatively open water, soon there was almost half a mile of ice between this open water and the land.

Steve tried one opening after another into this ice, but each lead soon ended with two floes pressing tight together. There was the danger that even if he did manage to penetrate into this band of ice

he would be trapped, for even a small floe weighs many tons and would easily crush an inflatable rubber dinghy.

'It's no good, Jim,' he had to admit in the end, 'I can't reach you. How's it looking your end? Is there any sign of Henry yet?'

'No, not a trace and, knowing Henry, he could have wandered anywhere. And the ice is closing in here as well – I would not like to risk it. It's also beginning to blow a full blizzard, I can't see the ship anymore, so that, even if there were no ice, it would be hard to find you.'

'I think you'd better get everyone back to the hut,' said Steve.

'I was thinking that as well.'

A covering of white over their jackets made all the stranded passengers look much the same, and it was a silent group, each engrossed in their own thoughts, that Jim and Ingrid helped out of the zodiac. It was not possible to see the hut through the driving snow, but Jim confidently led the way so that only five minutes later they were crowding into the small hut, kicking the snow off their boots and shaking it off their jackets, as instructed.

Ingrid stood at the door counting everyone in, 'eight, nine, ten, eleven, twelve, thirteen... Thirteen? Stand still everyone while I count again.'

'There's no need,' said Bill, 'we seem to have found Henry.'

'Henry?' they all said.

And sure enough, once hoods were down and hats were off, Henry appeared amongst them.

'Henry,' said Jim, 'where in God's name have you turned up from?'

'Oh, I was heading back to the landing, as a blizzard seemed to have got up. I couldn't really see where I was going, but I was following the shore, and then I saw this line of people, and just followed. And here I am.'

'And here you are,' said Martin crossly. 'If it weren't for you, we'd all be back safely on the ship.'

'What's that?'

Jim interrupted. 'Henry, did you hear the ship's siren earlier?'

'Yes.'

'Well, why didn't you immediately head back to the landing?'

'What?'

'The siren is the signal to return immediately,' explained Bill.

'Oh.'

And that is all anybody ever got out of Henry. 'He was probably wandering along in a world of his own,' was Martin's view.

'Looking for another fur seal to molest,' suggested Bill.

Jim contacted the ship to inform them of the safe return of Henry. The captain took the message, and there was evidence of relief in his voice. 'But I'm afraid,' he told them, 'the ice is closing in fast here, with some big icebergs and floes moving in. I'll have to take the ship further out. We'll radio you every hour on the hour to keep you informed.'

'Okay,' said Jim. 'I'm sure we'll be comfortable here. I've seen a stack of coal outside, and I'm sure there'll be an emergency food cache. I'll listen in for you every hour. Out.'

'Comfortable, here? How?' complained Melissa. ‘We can hardly move!'

'Remember,' said Jim, 'twelve people spent a whole winter here in comfort, and, how many of us are there? Fourteen, no fifteen. And we'll probably be here only a few hours until the wind drops and the ice opens out.'

'Let's put the kettle on,' said Dottie.

'We'll have to light the stove first,' said Bill. 'Anyone got any matches?'

'Hang on,' said Jim, 'first things first. Let's allot bunks, where people can leave their jackets and things.'

'I'm not taking mine off,' said Melissa.

'Well, anyhow,' continued Jim, 'it might be best for everyone to know which is their own bunk, where they can lie down if need be. Ingrid, can you count bunks?'

'Twelve, I think,' said Annie.

'Yes,' agreed Ingrid, 'twelve.'

'Okay,' continued Jim, 'everyone choose a bunk. Annie, you and Damien better share, heads at either end. Ingrid and I will make do with a chair for the present. I will get some coal, and once the stove is alight it'll soon heat up.'

'Sooner the better,' said Henry, 'I'm freezing.'

'You're not the only one,' said Melissa crossly.

'Ingrid,' added Jim, 'can you look to see what food's here?'

'Can I help?' asked Annie.

Chapter 7

Annie and Damien had great fun looking through the cupboards and shelves. They inspected every tin and packet, shouting out their contents to Ingrid.

'*Azucar*. What's that?' asked Damien.

'Sugar,' replied Ingrid.

'Well, there's lots of that. *Cafe*? Coffee, I suppose. Yes it is,' he confirmed, opening the lid, 'a big tin.'

'Any tea?' asked Ingrid. '*Te*, that'd be.'

'No sign,' said Annie, 'but here's some packets saying *dulce de leche*, what's that?'

'Sweet milk? I'm not sure.'

'I'm opening some. It looks like fudge, yummie!'

'*Arroz*, there's lots of packets of *arroz,*' shouted Damien. 'It feels like rice.'

'Yes it is.'

'Wait a minute, slow down,' said Ingrid, 'let's be more organised. We'd better make a list. Can you look for a pencil and paper?'

'You're expecting us to be here a long time?' asked Martin, who had just entered the room. 'Planning a long stay?'

'Just being prepared,' replied Ingrid. 'We've found coffee and fudge which will do for elevenses, and there's rice for lunch if need be. Anything to go with the rice, children?'

'I don't know,' answered Annie. ' There's something here that says *vaca seco*, it looks pretty revolting.'

'Ah, yes, dried beef. We can have a good lunch, at least. I wonder if Jim's got the stove alight yet.'

'He's brought the coal in,' said Martin, 'and now he's looking for kindling. Talk of the devil, here he is.'

Jim entered the kitchen, asking if they had found any matches.

'No,' replied Annie.

'It's alright, I've got a lighter,' said Martin.

'Great,' said Jim, and returned to the stove which was in the communal hallway.

Annie had a sudden thought. ‘We'll need a kettle, of course. Is there one?'

They all looked around, but all they could find were some big saucepans.

'They'll have to do,' said Ingrid.

'Okay,' Annie continued, 'let's fill them. Where's the tap?'

'Don't be silly,' put in Damien, 'there's no taps in explorer's huts, so we'll have to find some water.'

'I know, there was a stream we passed on the way up to the hut. Let's get it from there.'

They went through the hallway to the door, but when they opened it a flurry of cold air brought in the snow, and they shut it again quickly. However, by now Jim had the stove lit and, turning down offers of help from others, went out into the blizzard himself to get the water.

He returned a few minutes later, but with no water, saying it was too dirty, too full of silt to drink. 'We'll have to melt snow.'

'How exciting,' said Annie, 'like real explorers!'

'We'll need lots of snow to make enough tea for everyone...'

'There isn't any tea,' interrupted Annie, 'only coffee.'

'Well, we'll need lots of snow to make enough coffee for everyone. This new snow's very light, and melts away to almost nothing. When the blizzard dies down, we can collect some brash ice from the beach – a much better way of making water.'

'We'll need some ice later to put in my whisky,' Arthur shouted through from his bunk.

'What whisky?' asked Martin.

'I always carry a flask with me.

'Enough for everyone?'

'Not much.'

There was no one room in the hut big enough to seat everybody at once, so when they gathered for coffee, half the group were seated round the only large table in the room that doubled as kitchen, dining and a bunk room, and the other half were standing or sitting round the stove in the adjacent hallway.

Jim was explaining that in Nordenskjøld's time they would also have had primus stoves to cook on, and that it was the invention of the highly efficient primus that made exploration of the Antarctic possible. Suddenly his radio crackled into life.

'Shore party, shore party, this is *Isis*, do you read me?'

'Yes *Isis*, this is Jim, reading you loud and clear. We are all comfortable here, enjoying a cup of hot coffee.'

'Good,' said Steve, from the ship. 'There's still a lot of ice drifting along the shore. We're now about three miles out. We better not

speak too long, I don't want you to waste your batteries. Have you got a spare set with you?'

'Yup, I always keep a spare set with me.'

'Are you sure? Can you please check for my peace of mind?'

Jim went to his jacket, and padded it to feel for the battery case in his inside pocket. He padded again, and then frantically checked all the pockets. Eventually, after checking them all three times, he had to concede that he must have left the spares behind.

'That's stupid,' said Steve, 'but there's nothing we can do about it. Keep your radio turned off to save the batteries, and only turn on at the hour to receive our signal. Don't call us, we'll call you. Right, we'd better synchronise watches.'

This was done, and then once more the shore party were left to themselves. Melissa complained to Jim he shouldn't have said they were all enjoying their coffee as she couldn't stand coffee without milk.

Miss Edelston looked sharply across to Melissa. 'I don't even like coffee, I always drink tea. Now stop complaining!'

Melissa was about to respond to this, when Piers, her husband, got in first. 'Melissa, dear, think what a story this will be tell our friends – stranded in a hut in Antarctica.'

'I know, stuck in this horrible little hut, when we could be aboard the ship enjoying a quick gin and tonic before...' Melissa paused, as if a new thought had struck her. 'Maybe you are right, Piers. How many of them, our friends... They'll never have been stranded in the Weddell Sea... We'll be heroes, like Shackleton. Yes, what a story.

You're right.' She paused a few moments, then added, 'okay Jim, show us how to be arctic explorers.'

Everyone stared at Melissa in surprise. 'Come on then, what happens next?' she continued.

There was more colour in her face and more excitement in her voice than they had ever seen before.

'Okay then,' said Jim, 'scradge.'

'Scradge?'

'Yes, the explorers name for grub. Let's get some food on. Most polar expeditions centre on food and thoughts of food. I hear the menu is rice and beef, is that correct Annie?'

'Yes.'

'Okay, let's get going.'

The heat of the stove warmed up the whole hut so that those in its immediate proximity were soon down to their shirtsleeves, and even those lying on their bunks had their jackets off. Melissa continued to surprise them all as she organised their lunch. With advice from Jim, she had Damien in charge of melting snow, his job being to fill every available pan and bowl with snow and have them arranged around the stove, pouring out water from the bottom of the pans as required. She had Annie in charge of the actual cooking, rehydrating the meat and cooking the rice.

'Right everyone,' she called out, 'what sauce do you want with the scradge? There seems to be a choice of chilli or pepper?' After much discussion they eventually decided on chilli.

During the cooking, the ship again contacted the shore party, reporting little change in their situation other than the ship now being four miles out from the shore. 'But the snow does seem to be easing,' Steve added.

Jim went to the door and peered out. There was still snow blowing past, but, as is often the case with a strong wind, it was hard to tell whether it was actually snowing or whether it was just spindrift.

When the food came they all ate it hurriedly, congratulating Melissa and Annie in the process.

'It's amazing isn't it,' said Bill, 'here we are gulping down and enjoying this scradge when a day ago we wouldn't have even looked at it.'

'Ah yes,' added Martin, 'give me a lobster *thermidore*, followed by a veal cutlet served with *mange-tout,* a toss of mushrooms and a mustard sauce, all washed down with a bottle of Chilean white, followed by cream-filled profiteroles... Or, failing that give me a risotto of rice and beef with a chilli sauce – there's not much to choose between them. In fact, I think this rice risotto is better!'

'Talking of white wine,' said John Jackson, 'where's Arthur? I don't think he's come for lunch.'

'Well, he can't have gone far!' added Martin.

'No, he's on his bunk,' called out Jim, 'and his hip flask's next to him, empty. Yup, he smells of whisky. Did no-one notice?'

But apparently no-one had; Arthur, lying quietly on a bottom bunk in the unlit hut, had managed to become quietly drunk without anyone noticing.

'Well, there's nothing we can do,' added Jim. 'Okay, who's going to wash up? Damien, how's the water doing?'

'There's plenty.'

'Any volunteers?'

'I will,' answered Miss Edelston.

'No,' put in Bill, 'let me.'

'I insist,' and insist Miss Edelston did, with Bill, Dottie and Averil doing the drying-up and putting away.

Melissa had arranged for more coffee all round, and while drinking this they discussed their predicament.

'What will happen if the ship can't get back to us?' asked Miss Edelston, echoing all their thoughts.

'Oh, it will,' answered Jim.

'But if it doesn't?' she persisted.

'Well, we'd have to be rescued by helicopter.'

'Helicopter,' said Martin, 'where from?'

'There's a large scientific base on Seymour Island, less than fifty miles from here. There's another at Hope Bay, which we passed earlier at the tip of the Peninsula, and there's plenty on the South Shetlands. With all these research bases, and associated supply ships, there's bound to be a helicopter within reach.'

'Well, that's a relief.'

'But I'm sure Captain Buchan will only call one as a last resort, both as a matter of pride, and also so as not to impose on others. Cruise ships like to be self-sufficient, as they are not always popular with those working down here: there are many who see tourists in the

Antarctic as a problem, who shouldn't be down here in the first place.'

'That's good news,' put in Melissa, 'I don't want to be rescued too soon.'

'Nor do we, do we Damien?' added Annie.

'You continue to surprise me, Melissa,' said Piers. 'I never thought I'd see the day when you wanted to stay cramped in a squalid little hut – without even an inside toilet.'

'Well, you don't know me then,' she replied. 'Right, Jim, what's the programme for the afternoon?'

'It's lucky we've been marooned with a polar historian,' laughed Bill. 'You, Jim, will always know what to do as I'm sure you've infused all the polar experience of the past hundred years!'

'I'm not sure about that!' he replied. 'I think what we'll do for the rest of the afternoon is have an hour's rest, and then I'll give a lecture, or talk rather, on the full details of Otto Nordenskjøld's expedition, including his stay in this hut. He was a geologist, you know, and found some interesting fossils in this area, including the remains of a giant penguin.'

Jim paused to look at this watch. 'Okay, time for another schedule with the ship. I'll just turn my radio on.' He took his radio down from the peg where he had left it hanging, turned the 'on' switch, and frowned slightly. He took out the battery unit, and put it back in again, and then pressed the 'talk' button. Eventually he had to admit it was dead.

'I didn't turn it off after the last sched. and the batteries must've been getting low. They don't last long in this cold weather.' He

turned it off again. 'There's still five minutes to go. If I leave it off, it might regain a little power: the ship's transmitter is powerful, and might get through to us.'

'You silly idiot,' said Ingrid.

'I'm sure it's easily done,' defended Bill.

'But to forget the spare batteries as well,' she continued.

'Well, now we're really cut off,' Melissa interrupted, 'we'll just have to fend for ourselves until rescued, like the sailor who had so many things to do...'

'That he didn't know where to begin,' continued Annie. 'But he had lots of things to do, even though he didn't do any of them. What's there for us to do here?'

'Well, I've outlined this afternoon's programme,' said Jim, 'let's begin with that – sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof!'

He turned on the radio a few minutes later, and they did hear the ship faintly calling them. However, they gathered nothing much had changed although Steve had guessed correctly what had happened.

There was one discovery later that afternoon. Under one of the bunks was a wooden crate containing three bottles of pisco. 'Now we can party,' said Melissa.

'Later,' suggested Ingrid, 'let's have it with our meal.'

'Which will be a delicious concoction of rehydrated beef, rice and pepper sauce.'

They all agreed to save up the pisco until later. 'Which reminds me,' said Jim, 'Arthur hasn't stirred yet.' Jim went across to Arthur and shook him, but he did not move. 'He's still sound asleep.' Jim

shook him again, but again without success. 'Liam, can you come over and look at him. His breathing's a bit irregular.'

'Okay,' was the reply.

Liam felt his pulse and checked his breathing. 'His pulse is a bit faint, with a hint of irregularity as well. I think he's still sleeping off the whisky, but we'd better watch him when he wakes up.'

Melissa again co-ordinated the evening meal, this time cooked by Dottie and Averil. Damien continued his job as chief snow-melter, now ably assisted by Annie. It was Damien who reported that it had definitely stopped snowing, although there was still a strong wind blowing.

'Can we now go and get ice off the beach?' he asked Jim.

'I don't see why not.'

In the end the children and the men, with the exceptions of Henry, who was being ostracised by the group as the cause of their predicament, and Arthur who was still bed-bound, all braved the wind and walked down to the shore.

The scene was very different from that which had greeted them when they had landed in the early morning. The snow cover was complete, but varying over short distances from being a shallow covering with stones sticking through, to deep drifts over four feet thick. It also varied from soft to hard, sometimes giving a dull thud as a hard surface layer of windslab settled under their weight, and in some cases consisting of smoothly carved shapes of wind-blasted sastrugi. There was a faint hissing coming from the ground as the spindrift was sped along by the wind.

The shore was different too. Instead of open water interspersed with floes, there was now a dense mass of ice out to sea as far as the eye could see, a mass of variegated shapes, all gliding slowly but inexorably down the coast. There was no sign of the ship.

However the little group were glad to stretch their legs, following in the footsteps of Jim who was trail-breaking. The tide had gone out, leaving a muddy snow-free fringe to the sea, upon which bergy bits and brash had grounded, so it was easy to find ice of the right size to carry.

Everyone gathered a suitably-sized lump of ice, plodded back to the hut, dropped their loads and, by mutual consent, went back to the shore for another load. They did three round trips in all, not because they needed all the ice but because they wanted an excuse to stay outside a bit longer.

After their exertions Annie was first back into the hut, rushing up to the cooks and announcing that there was enough snow to build an igloo.

'Can I build one, granny?' she asked Dottie. 'Please.'

'Not now, dear, the meal will be ready soon.'

'Aw!'

By dint of moving tables and chairs around, and using the odd empty crate, there was seating and table-space for everyone at dinner, albeit separated into hallway and kitchen groups. On the hour, Jim again tried to contact the ship, but all they could receive was a faint sound that may or may not have been Steve's voice. Arthur had by now woken up, but was feeling a bit groggy, and refused all offers of food or drink.

Before the meal, Melissa passed round all the available glasses and mugs, and Jim gave everyone a large measure of pisco. Damien and Annie, to their chagrin, had to make do with water – until Annie discovered that the dulce de leche or fudge could be dissolved in water to make, in her words, 'a delicious sweet drink.'

'Okay everyone,' announced Jim, 'before starting our...'

'Bed of lightly boiled long grain rice,' interrupted Melissa, 'served with nuggets of best Argentinian beef, in a sauce of black pepper with a hint of chilli.'

'Well, before starting that,' he continued, 'I think we should all drink a toast to ourselves, and our safe return to the ship. Lift your glasses everybody.'

'To ourselves,' they all toasted.

'I think we should all toast Henry,' said Melissa. They all looked at her in surprise. 'Without Henry wandering off, none of us would be here, and we wouldn't have had the chance to be real arctic...'

'Antarctic,' corrected Bill.

'Well, Antarctic explorers, then. Refill the glasses, please Jim,' after which she added, 'to Henry.'

'To Henry,' was the reply, but it was not unanimous.

'I'm not toasting that silly man,' Miss Edelston whispered to Liam, her neighbour. 'Nor am I,' he replied.

Henry, though, did have the grace to admit that he was probably not deserving of the toast.

By the time the meal finished one bottle of pisco was empty, and another only half full. Damien was busy melting ice over the stove,

and Annie was passing round fudge to have with their coffee. Although cramped, it was pleasantly warm, with the sound of the wind blowing round the hut adding to their feeling of snugness.

'That was an embarrassing moment for you, Jim,' Bill was saying. 'Finding out that you'd left the spare batteries behind, probably one of the most embarrassing of your life?'

'Absolutely.'

'Well, it can happen to anyone. The simplest of mistakes can have disastrous consequences and I don't really think it's necessarily anyone's fault – we humans weren't made to be perfect! I had a highly embarrassing moment a year or two back, which is one reason why I'm here now.'

'What was that?'

'You might have seen it in the news. Remember when an oilrig, being floated down an estuary on a barge, crashed into a suspension bridge? The bridge was closed for over a month. Well, it was all my fault – early retirement followed soon after.'

'How did it happen?'

'Ridiculously easy, really. My planning was meticulous...'

'That would be true,' put in Dottie. ‘Bill's always meticulous – which is annoying sometimes.'

'Quiet, Dottie. As I was saying, it was always going to be a tight fit to get the rig under the bridge, which was being floated down on a barge. I had the height of the bridge, the height of the rig, and the state of the tide all worked out exactly, and calculated that there would be three metres clearance, plenty really. Unfortunately I

forget to add on the height of the barge on which the rig was being carried – another five metres. As I said, it could happen to anyone.'

'And was there much damage to the bridge?' asked Jim

'Not too much and luckily it was localised, though people driving over it at the time thought that an earthquake had hit. The roads authority were none too pleased, though!

'Hey Dottie, tell them what happened to you last month.'

'No, it's too embarrassing.'

'Come on Dottie,' said Martin. 'I'll tell a story against myself, if you do.'

'Yes, Dottie,' added Melissa, 'come on, tell us.'

'It's nothing, really. I had a huge trolley-full at the check-out, of the supermarket, that is, and when I came to pay I found I'd left my money behind. A long queue was building up behind me, and I got very agitated as I searched my bag and pockets for my purse. The check-out girl was not helpful, but just sat there and glowered at me.'

'So what did you do?' asked Averil.

'Eventually I had to put everything back in the trolley and leave it there. I said I'd put things back on the shelves myself, but a supervisor came along and said she'd do it. That's about it, really.'

'Poor you,' Averil commiserated. 'I can sympathise, though.'

'Now then Martin, what's your story?' challenged Melissa.

'It's quite funny, at least in retrospect. At the time, though, I took it very seriously. Of course, I was much younger then.'

'Yes,' agreed Bill, 'it's only after a decent interval that we can laugh at these things, it's rarely funny at the time. Sorry, carry on.'

'I was at this fashionable party in London, lots of authors, playwrights, critics, and so on. I had just read this book and was telling this man I thought was a literary critic, he did look like one, I was telling him how dreadful I found this book. The plot was thin, the characters wooden, the writing dull, and so on, you know how it goes.

'Soon, though, I realised I was getting a frosty reception, the man staring stonily at me from behind steel-rimmed spectacles. He moved on and then the person standing next to me told me that it was the author of the book I'd just been slagging-off!'

'Who was he?' asked Piers.

'He's famous now, and the book in question turned out to be a best-seller! I'm not sure whether that was my poor judgement, or the public's poor taste! My glass is empty? Any more pisco, Jim?'

'Plenty. Anyone else?'

'Yes please,' Melissa answered, 'it's good stuff. It warms the heart of an arctic explorer. Did Nordenskjøld have any, Jim?'

'He'd probably have had aquavit.'

'But only over the equator once, not so good!... Do you want my story now?' asked Melissa, who then carried on without waiting for a reply. 'One of my most embarrassing moments was when I woke up one morning to find the man asleep beside me wasn't Piers – I couldn't remember who he was at all! And there was another time when Piers and me were on the bed, the maid came and found me… Ow!' Piers had kicked her under the table, and she glared at him.

'Melissa, be quiet,' he said, 'there're some things...'

'Go on Melissa, what happened?' pursued Martin.

But Melissa stopped there and the hut fell silent, apart from the noise of the wind rattling the windows and shaking the walls in fits and starts.

There was only one blanket per bunk so Ingrid and Jim had agreed to take it in shifts overnight, staying awake to keep the stove alight and the hut warm. Bill had offered to share a bunk with Dottie, leaving the last one for Jim and Ingrid.

Ingrid took the first shift, and for a while Melissa stayed up with her, talking quietly.

'You've been very quiet, Ingrid, what's biting you?'

'I'm concerned about James. I worry about him and his ship.'

'But he's a good captain?'

'Yes, of course. Too good, sometimes. He worries more about his ship than me. He doesn't seem to notice me on this voyage. He hasn't made love to me once.'

'Not once?'

'No.'

'What's he like at home?'

'Better, certainly. But it's a long time ago now.'

'It's like that with me and Piers sometimes.'

'What do you do about it?'

'Well, I suppose I get bored with him, and, I don't know, maybe he gets bored with me as well. There's various things...' Melissa paused. 'Let me see, maybe you could spice things up a bit, something different, something to take his mind away from his ship.'

'Such as?'

The next morning the wind was less strong but there was still ice hugging the shore and a light fog over the sea prevented them seeing whether there was open water beyond, or even the ship. For breakfast they voted for rice and dried beef without any sauce.

Over the meal the main topic of conversation was when the helicopters would arrive.

'Probably mid morning,' said Jim. 'We'd better keep ourselves busy 'til then.'

'I know,' said Annie excitedly, 'can we build some igloos?'

And that was how they spent the morning, everyone except Arthur. Arthur was a little better and managed some water and rice, but, under the instructions of Liam, stayed put in his bunk.

Jim showed them how to cut blocks of snow with a kitchen knife, windslab being best, and how to build up the wall of an igloo, working upwards in a spiral, before putting the final block on the top from inside. They found it more difficult than they thought!

They all set to with vigour, apart from Henry who wandered about giving useless advice and comment, and ultimately ended up with three passable igloos. John filmed the proceedings, and Annie had them all stand in a group for a photograph. All morning they imagined the sound of helicopters, stopping every now and then to listen, but the outside world kept itself at bay.

Miss Edelston produced coffee mid-morning, and Damien and Annie volunteered to cook lunch, this time it being the turn of the chilli sauce to go with the beef and rice. It was eaten ravenously, although Martin said that tomorrow they should try penguin for a

change. Annie glared at him. Afterwards most people lay on their bunks to snooze in the afternoon.

The second evening passed much like the first, except there was less pisco to go round. 'We'd better be rescued soon, as the alcohol has run out!' Melissa said. 'In any case, I think we'll have done enough arctic exploring by then!'

'We haven't done any actual exploring,' said Jim, 'we've been confined to base camp.'

'Well, we'd better do some tomorrow,' Melissa suggested. 'What did they explore round here?'

'Geology, fossils mainly.'

'Okay, we'll go fossil hunting.'

'Right, as long as the snow has melted enough and it looks as though it will have done – on the ridges at least.'

They were out fossil hunting when the helicopter arrived. Melissa was showing Damien and Annie a particular interesting looking specimen. 'It looks like a small bird, mummy,' said Damien. 'Look you can see its wings.'

'So you can.'

'Let's take it back to show Dill. He'll know what it is.'

'But,' said Annie, 'you are not allowed to take anything away from Antarctica. Remember, it's the regulations.'

Before they could discuss it further they were interrupted by the roar of the rotors.

Chapter 8

When, two days previously, Steve and Gerald had returned from their abortive attempt to get back to the shore, they went up to the bridge to talk the situation over with the captain, who hailed them as soon as they entered.

'It doesn't look good. There seems to be ice as far as the eye can see coming along the shore. I doubt we'll be able to get to them for a long time yet.'

'How long?' asked Gerald.

'Can't say. At least two hours.'

'Some of us could try to get there by walking over the ice,' suggested Gerald.

'What would that achieve?' queried Steve. 'It'd be dangerous, and we might lose someone in the process. Jim's with them...'

'And Ingrid,' interrupted Buchan.

'And Ingrid. And Jim'll know what to do. I'm sure they'll be safe with him. I'm worried, though, about that silly idiot Henry, he wanders off by himself, he could have got himself anywhere. For all we know he's lying face-down in a snowdrift dying from hypothermia. Remember how he almost got himself killed by a fur seal on Deception?'

'Let's hope he turns up, that's all we can do,' said Captain Buchan. 'Let's count our blessings, though. Thank God there's a hut ashore. What's it like inside?'

'It'll be cramped with, how many is it? Fifteen. It will be cramped, but it looked weatherproof, and there was a stove that seemed in good nick.'

'Well, at least they'll be out of the wind and cold.'

'Do you think it worth trying to get round the ice by going downwind,' suggested Gerald, 'by going downwind and landing, and walking back to the hut? We could then take people back along the shore to the boats.'

'No,' replied Steve. 'It would be too far for some of them to walk, such as Henry, Arthur and Miss Edelston, especially with the snow picking up. We're safe on the ship, and they are all together safe...'

'Except Henry.'

'Except Henry. It's best to keep it that way.'

The radio crackled into life *'Isis*, *Isis*, this is shore party.' Captain Buchan immediately picked up the receiver. 'This is *Isis*, go ahead.'

'Henry has turned up, safe and well. Repeat Henry...'

'Yes I heard you. That's great news. What happened?'

'We're not sure yet, he just turned up. We've arrived at the hut.'

There was evident relief on the bridge, especially when the captain reported back that they had plenty of coal and Jim believed there was an emergency food cache.

'Phew!' said Steve when they had finished talking to the marooned group. 'Thank God they're all safe. All we've got to worry about now is how to get them back to the ship.'

The captain was looking at the drifting ice through binoculars. 'What do you think, Pat?' he asked the officer of the watch.

'There're some quite big bergs bearing down with this wind. I think we should move out.'

'I agree. Otherwise we'll be manoeuvring all day.'

'Yes. Okay Steve, I think we'd better take the ship out where there's less drift ice.'

'But away from the stranded passengers?'

'They're safe enough there for the moment. I have the safety of the ship to consider and I don't went to encounter heavy ice.'

'I suppose so.'

'What if we can't get back to them?' queried Gerald.

'We'd better cross that bridge when we come to it,' replied Steve. 'But we'd have to summon outside help.'

'Over my dead body,' Buchan growled.

'And mine,' agreed Steve. 'It'd ruin the reputation of Polar Adventuring. We'll just have to hope the ice shifts, there wasn't much on the satellite photo, remember. That's a point, what's today's satellite picture say, James?'

Before the captain answered, Pat called out that it had been too cloudy today for the satellite to see anything. He added that the previous day's picture had shown a lot of ice south of James Ross Island. 'The wind's blowing from that way but the channel between there and Snow Hill is relatively narrow, and the ice might get jammed up there.'

'Mm,' said the captain, 'it's hard to predict. It could well jam up, and all this ice would blow away in no time, or it could keep on coming... Right, we'd better get moving. Slow ahead on a course of 360 degrees.'

'Aye, aye, sir.'

Gerald tapped Steve on the shoulder, and pointed to a small group of passengers standing silently at the other side of the bridge, watching the snow and ice drift by outside, but also watching the three of them talking. 'You're right, Gerald,' said Steve, 'we'd better let them know what's happening.'

He went to the public address system and switched it on. 'Right, you probably want to know what's been happening...'

After lunch AB was in reception chatting with Garry and Derek, the hotel manager and chef.

'Well, this has put a kybosh on everything,' Garry was saying, 'what happens if we can't rescue them?'

'They can always be rescued,' replied Derek, 'remember there's a South American base not far away on Seymour.'

'Has it got choppers?'

'I don't know, but it's got an airstrip.'

'Planes couldn't take off in this blizzard, could they? And what use would aeroplanes be, anyway?'

'They could drop food.'

'Apparently they've got plenty,' put in AB. 'I think they're probably having a great time. I wish I'd been one of the ones stranded – I've always wanted to stay in an Antarctic hut. Just being aboard a ship the whole time doesn't somehow seem authentic.'

'What?' Garry exclaimed, 'trapped in a hut with Melissa and Piers, not to mention Miss Edelston, Arthur and Henry – I couldn't imagine anything worse!

'There's Ingrid,' said Derek.

'That's true, it'd be some consolation. It'd have been good if it were just Ingrid and me that were stranded.'

'Really!' said AB.

'I agree,' laughed Garry. 'Better still if it were just you and me, AB.'

'Shut up!'

'There's one thing, though, AB.'

'What's that?'

'You'll be getting a bit of peace at the moment without Miss Edelston dropping by every five minutes with some fatuous question.'

'I like her, remember, I think she's great. What will you be like when you're eighty?'

'I hate to think about it.'

They were interrupted by Steve and Gerald coming into reception, Steve asking if anyone had seen Jo and Dill. 'I think it'll be a good idea to have a staff meeting now.'

'Okay,' said AB, 'I'll call them.'

'Well,' asked Garry, 'what happens next, Steve? Is the ice showing any signs of breaking up?'

'We can discuss this once everyone's here.'

Using the public address system, AB summoned the missing staff to a meeting and then she went over to Steve and hugged him.

'Don't look so worried, Steve,' she added as she looked round. 'And you too, Gerry. Everyone's safe, and no-one's in any danger.'

'Yes, but we can't hang about here for ever – we've a tight schedule and we've got to be in South Georgia in three days. And I

don't really think we should leave people in that hut any longer than we have to: we may well have to consider calling in outside help.'

'What's this about calling in outside help?' asked Jo as he entered.

'No,' replied Gerald, 'we were just considering it, considering the eventuality.'

'Does Sandra know about it? Have you told the Oxford office?' queried Derek.

'No, not yet,' said Steve, 'I don't think we should publicise to the outside world what's happened until we have to, ideally until it's all over. There's nothing useful that the office can do anyhow, and once the news gets there, it's bound to get out. And then we'll be bombarded with calls from anxious relatives, the media, the Foreign Office, *et cetera, et cetera...*'

'Are you sure it's right?', AB questioned. 'I mean, doesn't Sandra have a right to know what's going on?'

'Yes, of course, but the time's not yet ripe... Ah, Dill, there you are! Now we're all here, I thought we'd better go through our options.'

'Anyone like a beer?' put in Derek.

'That's a good idea,' answered Steve. 'Beers all round.'

'Not for me, please Derek,' said AB, 'I'll just have a mineral water – I've a lot of paperwork to do shortly, passenger lists for the next voyage, and so on.'

'Okay then everybody. As I see it, our main decision is how long to wait for the ice to clear. The last thing we want to do is to call for outside help, but it may have to come to that.'

'Please, no,' put in Gerald.

'Right, how long do we wait? Views, please.'

'They've plenty of food, have they? And fuel?', queried Derek.

'From what they've told us, yes. But I am worried that we might lose radio contact with them – Jim, the silly fool, forget to take any spare batteries.'

'And if we do lose contact, I don't think we should leave them too long,' added Gerald. 'It would look bad if one of them hurt themselves, or became ill, and it looked as if we'd just abandoned them.'

'I remember the time when we once left behind some passengers for three days,' volunteered Dill. 'We'd just visited this island off Tahiti...'

'Not now, please Dill,' cut in Steve, 'another time.'

'I think,' said Jo, 'that they'll probably be safe enough overnight, and we should leave it until morning to decide what to do next.'

'That's okay as far as it goes,' said Steve, 'but I think we need to plan for the worst case scenario before tomorrow morning, and have a plan ready if we can't get to them.'

'What plan?'

'We'll have to find out where the nearest helicopter is. But I agree with Jo, I don't think we should contact anybody for help before tomorrow. Is that agreed?'

They all nodded.

'But it would be sensible to find out today where we can expect help. Dill, can you radio any friends you have on other cruise ships in Antarctica, and try and find out what the situation is? You know what I mean, the location of any research or support ships, or

Russian cruise ships with helicopters – without giving anything away, of course.'

'Certainly.'

'Meanwhile I'll contact Hans again on the *Challenger*.'

All the staff were on the bridge next morning, searching the ice with their binoculars. The ship had been forced to retreat about ten miles offshore, and there was a light fog that prevented them seeing the island. Indeed, it restricted visibility to less than a mile. The wind, although no longer gale force, was still strong. There was plenty of pack around, but leads were visible in all directions.

They agreed with the captain to try to take the ship as close into the shore as possible. Peering into the mist, he zig-zagged the *Isis* from one lead to the next 'Port ten.'

'Port ten it is, sir,' came the reply from the crewman at the wheel.'

'Steady.'

'Steady.'

'Port five.'

'Port five.'

'Steady.'

'Steady.'

'Starboard five.'

'Starboard five.'

'Steady.'

'Steady...'

All morning this was the only sound on the bridge, apart from the occasional bump when the bow was pushing aside some ice. But,

aware of the damaged plate on the hull, the captain was not forcing the ship too hard, and, in any case, these were large solid floes, more than a year old, intermixed with a considerable amount of even more solid glacier ice.

The captain kept this up until midday, although all the staff had long since given up looking as the combination of mist and ice, with no horizon visible, was mesmerising to the eyes. After a whole morning manoeuvring through the pack, though, the ship was only two miles nearer the shore.

The captain turned to Steve. ‘There appears to be a thicker band of ice ahead.'

'Yup. I think the time has come. We've now wasted nearly a day and I don't think it fair to the passengers still on board to hang around much longer. We'll also have to miss out South Georgia if we hang around here much longer, which we want to be a high point of the voyage.'

'You're probably right Steve, but you do realise it's the first time I've ever had to call for help? But I suppose the safety of our passengers must override mere pride.'

'I know how much you hate it, me too...'

'And me...' cut in Gerald.

'Well, I'm sure it's true of all of us, but maybe it won't be all bad. The publicity, although perhaps not too good at first, may help us in the long run – there's no such thing as bad publicity! It will certainly bring us to the attention of the public, and it's not a bad story to tell! I don't think anyone can really blame us – it was an Act of God. The kind of thing that happens in the Antarctic – to anyone. And if

we pay for the rescue, for helicopter time, then no-one can complain.'

'Can we afford to pay?' asked the captain.

'Can we afford not to? The extra business brought in by the publicity may well pay for it. So might insurance.'

'Will it?'

'I'm not certain. We'd better ask Sandra to check. In fact, now's the time to contact her... AB, can you write a summary of the facts, and also a press release?'

'I already have! I thought it might come to this.'

'Good girl! Let's read it. No, on second thoughts, Gerald, you check it through, and I'll order a helicopter.'

By judicious use of contacts, they had determined that the nearest helicopter was probably at the South American base on King George Island, about two hundred miles away.

Steve was on and off the radio about four hours before he had secured help. Emails were also flying back and forth, and the Foreign Office in London became involved as well; although this may have helped in gaining assistance, Steve and Gerald feared one day it might result in probing questions from the Government.

It was with a sigh of relief, though, that Steve could announce throughout the ship that a helicopter would be flying this evening from a base in the South Shetland Islands to a base at Hope Bay, about eighty miles away.

'Then, tomorrow morning, weather conditions permitting, it will fly to Snow Hill Island to pick up our stranded colleagues.'

Next morning Steve and Gerald were waiting in a nearby zodiac as the helicopter landed on a large ice floe about half a mile from the *Isis*.

'I wonder how've they all got on,' Steve was saying, 'I think they've probably had a terrible time.'

'I know, imagine being stuck in a small hut for two days with Melissa and Piers, not to mention Arthur, Henry and Miss Edelston.'

'I bet Melissa is the first out.'

But she was not. They watched as the first group came out of the helicopter, and Melissa was not amongst them. Gerald went out to meet the passengers once the helicopter had taken off to collect the rest of the group, and they crunched across the ice island as he led them to the boat. He helped them in, Steve meanwhile keeping the zodiac pushed hard against the floe by having the throttle open and bow against the ice.

As they headed back to the ship Steve asked if they had had a good time.

'Oh yes,' cried Annie, 'it was great, the best bit so far. Isn't that right, grandad?'

'Absolutely,' replied Bill.

'And how about you, Miss Edelston?' queried Steve.

'I agree with Annie and Bill, it was exciting.'

'Weren't frightened about being stranded?'

'No. Jim told us what would probably happen, and it did. Melissa was great...' Steve and Gerald turned round to stare at her. 'Yes, she was great, she kept all our spirits up...'

'Unlike Arthur,' cut in Bill, 'who kept all his spirits down!' Arthur glowered across at Bill.

'As I was saying, before I was interrupted,' continued Miss Edelston, 'we had a good time in the hut, except perhaps Arthur,' and, looking at him meaningfully, she added, 'he was drunk, and spent most of the time in his bunk. And we were cross with Henry at first, isn't that right Henry?'

'Yes, I suppose so.'

'We were cross with him at first for being the cause of our predicament, but we later forgave him as we were having such a good time.'

As they drew up to the ship there was a loud cheer from the deck, everyone lining the rail and waving. Twenty minutes later this was repeated as the remaining evacuees arrived on board.

The helicopter had already departed, like some strange beast, its occupants never emerging, but when glimpsed all cocooned in the modern paraphernalia of helmets, headsets and immersion suits: like an apparition, a *deus ex machina*, the helicopter disappeared as suddenly as it had arrived, leaving the whole expedition once more unto themselves, alone amongst the mist, floes and bergs of the windswept Weddell Sea.

When all were back on board they repaired to the lounge where there was a hubbub of sound as everyone crowded round the polar heroes and heroines. Melissa was in her element. ‘It's amazing how many things you can do with dried beef and rice!'

'Really?'

'You might think you'd get bored with it, but when you're on a real arctic expedition you'll eat anything.'

'Gosh!'

'Of course, there was no water, so we had to melt snow for all our needs – drinking, cooking and washing.'

'Wow!'

'Damien was in charge of melting snow, weren't you Damien?

'Yes.'

'He did a superb job, and Annie was his assistant, and she was also chief cook.' Annie went a bright shade of pink as everyone turned to look at her.

'Of course, once the blizzard eased we used ice instead of snow to make water, it's much better, you know. You get far more water from ice.'

'Really?'

'Going to the loo was an expedition in itself. You had to go outside into the blizzard, feel your way along the wall, open this latch with freezing fingers, and find the loo in almost pitch blackness. And there was no loo paper – you had to use snow.'

'Incredible!'

'We partied every, both, nights. We found this stock of pisco, it's not bad really, really warms your throat, just what an expeditioner needs. Good drink, good food, a warm hut, good company – what more do you need in life?' There was a murmur of astonishment in the lounge, but Melissa didn't seem to notice. There was no stopping her.

'We had to build igloos, in case the hut burnt down, emergency shelters. Isn't that right, Jim?'

'Well, er, perhaps, yes.'

'Did you sleep in one?' was a question from the floor.

'No, we didn't sleep in any, actually, but we could have done if we had to. We didn't have any emergencies. And we did some proper exploring, scientific exploring, that is. Which reminds me, Dill, where are you? I found this fossil, looks like a bird.' She took it out of her pocket, and handed it over to Dill. 'What is it? Have you seen anything like it before?'

'No, I don't think I have.'

Captain Buchan finally came off the bridge at ten o'clock that evening and, entering his cabin, found Ingrid lounging in a chair, a glass of whisky in her hand.

'Ah, here you are at last,' was his welcome from her.

'We've only just left the ice.'

'All clear ahead?'

'Yes, it looks like open water, and the pack is all to the east of us.'

'That's a relief... Poor you, you must be exhausted. I've poured you a whisky.'

'Thanks.' He gulped it down, and Ingrid poured out another, asking, 'can you relax now? Who's on the bridge?'

'Pat, of course.'

'Well, there's no need to worry... Come and sit next to me, you've hardly spoken to me since our rescue.'

'I've had to be on the bridge, I've the ship to look after, you know.'

'You and your damned ship... Sorry, no, I didn't mean that. Of course you must look after us all, not just me.'

'That's good of you to say so.' He sat down on the bed, and Ingrid got up and joined him. She put her arms around him. 'Come on, let's not argue. Were you worried about me?'

'Of course.'

'Really worried? Did you think something might happen to us, that we might not be rescued?'

'I was very concerned, of course, but I had every confidence in Jim.'

'Even though he forgot his spare batteries?'

'Yes. He has plenty of polar experience.'

'So've you. Why did it happen?'

'Well. I probably left it too late to sound the siren. I should've got everyone back to the ship sooner, we probably shouldn't have let anyone go ashore in the first place. But there was a lot of pressure to land, having come all this way, and having built up the story of Nordenskjøld.'

'You let that get the better of your judgement?'

'Yes. Is there any more whisky in that bottle?' Ingrid reached over and topped up his glass. She continued, 'but no-one was ever in any real danger, were they?'

'Apart from Henry.'

'Apart from Henry.'

'And, for the first time in my career I've had to call in outside help.'

'Poor you.' She put her arms round him again, resting her neck on his shoulder and they became silent. After a while she said, 'come on, let's go to bed.'

'That's probably a good idea, but I think I'll have a shower first.'

'Fine.'

While the captain was showering, Ingrid carried out her ablutions, undressed, and went to bed. After what seemed to her a long time he eventually emerged. ‘That's better.'

'At last, come on. I need warming up.'

He lifted up the duvet, clambered in, and lay down beside her, and she immediately embraced him. ‘Come on, take your mind off the ship and the whole expedition for a while. Relax, talk to me.'

'I'll try.'

They remained silent for a while, and Ingrid did feel some of the tension going out of his body, but soon realised he was beginning to fall asleep. 'Please, don't go to sleep just yet. Come on, please notice me, make love to me.'

'I'm tired.'

'I know, I'm tired as well. But I have been abandoned in a hut for two days, and I need comforting.'

James did then turn over to face her and held her in an embrace, but soon was fast asleep. Ingrid got out of bed, walked over to the desk and from a cupboard underneath took out a bottle of whisky. She took a tooth glass from beside the basin, poured herself a large measure, added a little water and gulped it down. She poured another, but drank this more slowly, almost savouring it. She stared disgustedly across at her husband, sound asleep and snoring gently, and poured a third…

Chapter 9

At the noise of the crash, Buchan leapt up from the bunk. Hastily grabbing his shirt and trousers, he scrabbled into them, noticing while he did so a tipped-up bottle of whisky dripping onto his desk and Ingrid lying, mouth wide open, still sound asleep. He ran out of the door, slamming it shut behind him, down the corridor, up the short steps and burst onto the bridge.

'What is it Pat?' he shouted as he entered.

'Must have been a growler, James. I didn't see it and there was nothing on the radar.'

'Where did it hit?'

'Starboard side, forrard, I think.'

'Starboard side?'

'I think so.'

'Stop engines.'

'Aye, aye, sir.'

'What was our speed at the time?'

'Twelve knots, as agreed.'

The sea was a flat calm, as is generally the case when there is pack ice about. The wind had dropped and the clouds cleared to reveal the stars, crystal clear in the clean Antarctic air. Visibility was good, although there was a hint of mist beginning to drift off the sea.

The bridge began to fill up as people emerged from the bar, lounge and cabins to find out what had happened.

'Pat, I'll stay here,' the captain called. 'You go below and check for damage. Take the bosun with you.'

'Aye, aye, sir.'

Captain Buchan paced up and down the bridge a few times before picking up the handset and calling the engine room. 'This is the captain. Any damage?... No. Good. Can you check the bilge water levels?' The duty engineer replied that he would call back shortly.

The captain continued his pacing but, finding the area getting crowded, called out, 'can I have more space please? Can everyone who doesn't need to be here please leave, and that includes you too, Bill. We'll let you know what the situation is as soon as we know ourselves. Come on, give me space.'

Reluctantly the passengers left the bridge and, once they had all gone, Steve asked how serious things were.

'I've no idea yet,' Captain Buchan replied tersely, 'it only happened a few minutes ago.'

The phone rang and he immediately picked up the handset. 'Engine room here. Bilge water levels appear normal.'

'Thank you. Please check them every quarter of an hour, and report to me if there's any change.'

'Aye, aye, sir.'

Shortly afterwards those on the bridge noticed a torch flashing on the deck below, and could see two figures peering over the railing. A minute or two later Pat and Arvo came in.

'Okay,' reported Pat, 'here's the news. There appears to be no damage below decks – as far as we can see, anyway. From what we can see of the hull, there does seem to be a dent.'

'Where?' interrupted the captain.

'Roughly where it was damaged before, with that freak wave.'

'How serious?'

'It's hard to see in the dark, but the plates do appear to be more dented than before.'

'Let me see.' So Pat and the captain went down to the fore deck and peered over the side, shining torches on the hull. However, because the hull sloped away from them, it was hard to make out much. Finally the captain spoke. ‘You're right, Pat. It does look worse than before,' and they returned to the bridge.

'Yes?' queried Steve, as they entered. 'How is it?'

'Hard to say,' replied the captain. 'We need to do a proper inspection in daylight, from a boat.'

'Could we not do it now, with torches?'

'Not really, I'd like a proper look at it, especially as the berg seems to have hit the same place that was damaged before.'

'Just our luck,' put in Gerald. 'I thought lightning wasn't meant to strike twice in the same place!'

'Well,' said Steve, 'perhaps not so unlikely. The growler only had a choice of port or starboard to hit, but I suppose it was unlucky to hit starboard again... Right then, shall we get underway?'

'Not yet,' answered the captain, 'I would like to check the bilges again.'

'Why, are we leaking?'

'It doesn't appear so, but I would like to make sure. The engine room will be reporting shortly.'

'I suppose I'd better let the passengers know what's going on,' said Steve as he went over to the intercom and pressed the 'on' button. 'Okay, everybody. You probably all felt the bang a short while ago.

Well, it appears we hit a growler – you know, a small iceberg, often hard to see even in daylight.

'We've stopped the ship as a precaution, while we check to see if there's any damage. There doesn't appear to be much, so we will probably be on our way again shortly. That's all, sleep well.'

'There doesn't appear to be too much damage?' said Garry as he entered the bridge at that moment. 'You should look in the bar, and the dining room – glasses, crockery and cutlery everywhere.'

'Much broken?' asked Gerald.

'Plenty.'

'And anyone hurt?'

'It doesn't look like it, at least I've had no reports of anyone. Arthur fell off his stool again, but doesn't appear damaged.'

'But nothing serious, then?'

'No, it all looks superficial. But the stewards will be unhappy having to clear up the mess and to re-lay breakfast.'

At that moment the phone rang and the captain picked it up instantly.

'Buchan here. Mm... I see... Mm... Okay, thank you. Don't put the pumps on. Report back in fifteen minutes.'

Everyone looked at the captain expectantly, until he came out with, 'about two centimetres. There is about two centimetres more water in the bilge of the forrard compartment than a quarter of an hour ago.'

'Is that a lot?' asked Gerald.

'That's a rate of eight centimetres an hour. It's not a lot, but there shouldn't be any coming in.'

'What can the pumps cope with?'

'Oh, it's nothing. The pumps would hardly notice it.'

'Shall we proceed, then?' asked Steve.

'Not yet,' Captain Buchan replied. 'I want to monitor the situation a bit longer.

'Why can't we carry on at the same time?' queried Gerald.

The captain gave him a dirty look, as if his authority was being questioned. 'If a plate has been damaged, I want to see it first. If there is a crack, then the speed of the ship could open it further. And I don't want to put the ship through any more ice until I have assessed the damage.'

'But we've cleared the ice, haven't we?' persisted Gerald.

'I hope so, but we can't be certain yet.'

'How long until we know if we can proceed?'

'I've no idea, but we'll probably have to wait until daylight to inspect the hull.'

There was silence on the bridge for a while, until Steve asked. 'Do you think we should tell anyone of our situation, James? Should we radio for help?'

'We're in no danger at present. I think we should wait until we have some definite information.'

And so it was decided. Pat departed as Pedersen came on watch, and the staff drifted off to bed until only Steve, the captain and Pedersen remained. Every quarter of an hour they received a report on the bilge water, but the situation remained unchanged – a steady inflow into the forrard compartment of eight centimetres an hour,

which was pumped out regularly. They talked desultorily about the situation, but the consensus was that nothing could be done until daylight; by four-thirty in the morning it would hopefully be light enough.

While they were hove-to, the radar had been set to close range to monitor for any ice that might be in their immediate vicinity. However at three in the morning Pedersen reset the range to find out if there was any ice further away.

'Hey, captain.'

'Yes?'

'The edge of the pack, it is only three miles away.'

'Three miles? It can't be.' He and Steve joined Pedersen round the radar.

But there it was, a solid line across the screen indicating heavy pack ice about three miles to their east.

'Where was it when we hit that growler?' asked Steve.

'I'd left the bridge well before it happened, at about ten o'clock,' answered the captain, 'when it was fifteen miles away, and then we were paralleling it. What's the time...'

'Three knots,' cut in Pedersen, 'it's drifting at one hell of a rate.'

'Could be residual drift from the gale we've just had,' added Steve.

'Or drift from a gale that's still to come,' put in the captain, 'the pressure's been dropping steadily over the past few hours. In any case, it looks as if this ice will be reaching us in about an hour.'

'An hour?' said Steve. 'That doesn't give us much leeway if we want to look at the hull at first light. What time did we say we could check it out?'

'Four-thirty,' replied the captain, 'it should be getting light by then. Let me think... Yes, I think we should put a boat down at four, and try and check the hull then. That will be about the time the pack reaches us, but I imagine it will be relatively open when it first arrives. That should give us enough time.'

'It's cutting it a bit fine, isn't it?' asked Steve. 'I mean, couldn't we sail away first, and check the hull later?'

'I wouldn't want to take the *Scotia*, *Isis*, I mean, faster than three knots until we know what's what. And that's the speed the pack's moving, so we'll gain little by setting off first.'

'What if we find that the hull is badly damaged, and we are surrounded by pack?'

'Well, if it's badly damaged we'd have to send out a mayday – we'd have to do it pack ice or no pack ice. If the damage is slight, and above the waterline, we could patch it up, and if it's not too bad we can sail westwards to open water straightaway.'

'Should we send out a mayday now?' Steve wondered.

'I don't think so. A mayday is a serious business, and we don't want to set the ball rolling for a full Antarctic rescue until we know it's necessary. We'll know in an hour anyhow, and an hour won't make much difference here or there. Also, remember this is basically a strong ship, designed to put up with this kind of thing.'

'Right, I'll accept your judgement, of course.'

'We'd better start things moving then.'

Captain Buchan contacted the engine room and asked them to pump fuel and water to the stern of the ship so as to raise the bow higher out of the water. He called the bosun to ask for two zodiacs

to be in the water by four, and to arrange for both a welding team and a diving team to be on standby. He also asked for a platform to be got ready that could be lowered down over the damaged area of hull.

Come four o'clock in the morning, with the beginnings of a brightening in the eastern sky, all was ready. The sea was still a flat calm, and the ship rock-steady, but there was a breeze picking up from the east and a light fog reduced visibility. Captain Buchan and Pat were already in a zodiac heading for the bow, and Arvo was supervising the lowering of a platform down the ship's side.

The captain and the first officer inspected the hull, but the light was not yet good enough to see much. They watched the chief engineer, Grigori, on the platform inspecting the steel plates with a torch.

'It's no good Pat,' said the captain, 'we'll have to wait a bit longer until the light's better. Twenty minutes should do it. Let's go back on board.'

Twenty minutes later it was a different scene. It was certainly lighter, but there were now a few large floes drifting by. Their exact number was hard to determine because the fog was thickening. The captain had told the duty officer, Angus, to keep the ship hove-to, facing the direction the pack ice was coming from, but keeping the ship angled so that the damaged starboard side was in the lee of the ice; he was also told to sail the ship round any larger blocks rather than risk a collision.

This time Pat and the captain could see the hull clearly. There were some new dents, and where previously there had been the hairline crack, the plates were obviously buckled inwards. The captain called Grigori on the radio and discussed with him what to do next. In the end they agreed to carry out some welding of the buckled plates and to send down a diver to check for underwater damage – although most of the damage appeared to be at the waterline itself, currently well proud of the water owing to the temporary trim of the ship.

The crew leapt into action, with the welding team working from the platform and the diver checking the hull from a zodiac. The captain was back on the bridge, where visibility was now so bad that floes more than a hundred metres from the ship could only be seen by radar. Angus spent the whole time checking the screen. 'Two large floes coming up,' he called, 'but there appears to be a large lead between them.'

The captain went over to the screen and looked as well. 'Yes, there's plenty of space between them, but we'd better stop diving operations while they go past.'

He directed the helmsman to the correct course and then radioed Pat who was in the zodiac with the diver.

'Pat, you'd better stop diving operations for a while, there's a big floe coming past which we need to manoeuvre past.'

'Roger. But the diver says he's now finished checking, and that the hull appears sound below water. It would appear that the only damage is what we can see above the waterline.'

'That's a relief. But you'd better take up that zodiac now.'

'Okay. We should be out of the water in a couple of minutes.'

And a few minutes later two large floes drifted past on either side of the ship. These were large, solid floes, with their history visible upon them: they had grown by amassing a collection of small floes, now frozen together as one; they contained pressure ridges fossilised in their positions of torment, and bergy bits captured by the floe months before; their surfaces had been smoothed out by snow, drifted into flowing patterns by the winds of the Weddell Sea, and there were frozen melt pools, and the frozen tracks of penguins, indicating that there was life in this sea however hostile it might appear.

On the bridge they watched these floes glide by, silent and relentless, pushed by an unseen force, and they watched with horror as the gap between the floes quickly narrowed away to nothing, and the floes themselves turned towards each other quickly taking hold of the ship, each turning round slowly to catch the ship behind. And they watched bigger floes beyond appear out of the fog and bear down on them, so that there was no escape. Even their full power, and a hull undamaged, would not have freed them from this. And they saw a greyness approach them, and suddenly it was snowing, large flakes streaming past in a wind that was ever strengthening.

Without hesitation the captain tuned to channel sixteen and called, ‘mayday, mayday. This is the *Isis*, *Isis* calling. We are beset by ice, with a damaged hull, repeat we are beset by ice with a damaged hull. May need assistance soonest, request assistance soonest.

Latitude 63 degrees 52 minutes south, 56 degrees 34 minutes west. Repeat, 63 degrees 52 minutes south, 56 degrees 34 minutes west.'

He turned to Angus. ‘Set off the emergency signal, we'd better get everyone to muster stations.' Then he radioed the chief engineer. ‘Grigori, how's it looking with the welding?'

'We've nearly finished. We're just sealing up the last of the crack. No, hang on... The piece we've just welded is cracking apart again while I watch. It must be the pressure of the ice, the ice is hard against the hull, looks as though it's pushing quite hard.'

'Say that again, is your weld coming apart?'

'Looks like it.'

'If you're sure, you had better stop operations. We've just sounded the emergency signal, and you'd best get to your emergency stations.'

'We'll give it another minute just to see what's going to happen.'

'Okay then, but no longer.'

'Aye, aye, sir.'

The captain turned to Steve. 'This is serious! Can you get all the staff to the bridge as soon as possible? We must plan what to do.'

'Yes captain.'

'Right Pat, can you supervise the muster?'

'What shall we tell the passengers and crew?'

'Just say that this is a precautionary measure while we assess the next steps.'

As Pat went down to the lounge, which was the main muster point, he encountered the crew going to their stations in a well-practised routine and he encountered passengers coming out of their cabins,

looking sleepy, and wearing a motley assortment of nightdress, outdoor wear, and their bulky ship's lifejackets.

'Is this just a practice drill?' many asked.

'No, it's for real,' the chief officer replied.

Chapter 10

The radio officer, Andrev, came onto the bridge, breathing heavily after his dash up the stairs.

'Okay Andrev,' the captain briefed him. ‘I've sent out a mayday – we're beset by ice with a damaged hull. Monitor the replies, and ensure help comes as soon as possible – whether we need it or not.'

'Yes, captain.'

Next the captain contacted the engine room to check the bilge water levels. With the boat trimmed stern-down, the flow of water into the bilges had ceased, but now a slight increase was reported – about two centimetres since the last measurement about ten minutes ago.

While the captain was on the phone, Pedersen took a message from Grigori. There was nothing the welding team could do about the crack in the hull, which were widening, albeit slowly, as the plates were pushed in by the force of the ice. The team were now on their way to their muster stations.

Pedersen appraised the captain of this, who then radioed Pat. 'Tell me when everyone is accounted for, as soon as possible. We need to shut the forrard watertight doors.'

'Roger, James.'

By now the staff were assembling around the chart table, and Captain Buchan addressed them. 'We must be prepared to abandon ship, if necessary.'

There was a gasp around the table. 'How soon?'

'Who knows? Could be soon, could be not at all.'

'But this ship,' cut in Gerald, 'surely it was built for this sort of thing?'

'Yes, but with a damaged hull, and these are massive floes around us. No ship could cut through them. They may well drift away as quickly as they arrived, or they may stay with us. Anyhow, no more discussion please. We must plan.

'You Steve, can you make a list of all the things we will need if we have to decamp onto the ice. We may be able to use the lifeboats, but for the moment plan for an evacuation onto the ice. Have the staff help you, I'll need the list in five minutes.'

'Right. Remind me, what's the total ship's company?'

'A hundred and thirty seven. You, Gerald and AB, can you go to the muster stations and keep the passengers happy. Play down the situation for the moment, but, if asked, don't deny that it is potentially serious. Check their clothing, and report back to me whether what they're wearing is suitable.'

Gerald and AB set off from the bridge to the lounge, while the captain joined Andrev in the radio room.

From those still grouped around the chart table, Steve asked for general headings for his list. 'No details please, at this stage,' and he noted them down as they were called out.

'Shelter.'

'Food.'

'Fuel.'

'Warm clothing.

'Bedding.'

'Radios.'

'Guns.'

'Guns?'

'For shooting seals and penguins.'

'How long will we be on the ice? Okay, I'll put them down, but I don't know if we have any.'

'Rescue flares.'

'Zodiacs – boats.'

'Medical supplies.'

There was a pause. 'Is that it?' Steve asked and, getting no response, continued, 'right, shelter. What do we need?'

'Are there any tents on board?'

'I doubt it. No.'

'Tarpaulins.'

'Good thinking. We can use the canopies that shelter the deck area.'

'Hey,' announced Dill, 'I've an idea. We can use the inflatable liferafts as tents.'

Everyone looked at him. 'Brilliant,' said Steve, 'go and ask an officer how many people they take.'

'Spades,' added Jim, 'they may come in useful to dig shelters, *et cetera*.'

'Right then, food,' said Steve. 'How long should we plan for?'

'Better safe than sorry,' said Jim, 'I think we should plan for a week.'

'A week?' asked Jo, surprised.

'Well,' replied Jim, 'the art of polar survival relies on planning for every eventuality.'

And so the discussion went on. Cooking presented a problem. Although there was plenty of fuel in the form of drums of petrol used for the Zodiacs' outboards, there appeared to be no portable stove on board. In the end they decided to take the welding equipment and some empty drums and design a stove on the hoof. 'We mustn't forget matches,' someone added.

The captain came over to them after a few minutes, asking 'How's it going?'

'I think we've finished,' replied Steve, 'although we'll have to get Garry to determine the exact amount of food needed. We're planning for a week.'

'My God, I hope not.' Just then Pat phoned in to say that all passengers and crew had been accounted for, 'except your wife sir, Ingrid.'

'Ingrid? Oh my God, I forgot all... I'd better go and... No, I must stay here.'

'What's that, James?'

'Nothing. Have you not checked my cabin?'

'No.'

James paused, and looked worried, thinking. 'Can you get the chief stewardess, Heiti I mean, to go to my cabin?'

'Yes sir.'

'Ingrid must still be there, she wasn't feeling very well.'

He was interrupted by the phone ringing, and immediately picked up the receiver. 'Grigori here,' he heard, 'water is now coming in faster, but still well within our pumping capability.'

'Thank you Grigori. Tell me if you think we should close the watertight doors.'

He peered out of the window, but there was not much to see through the heavily falling snow. 'There's not much open water,' he said aloud to himself, 'which is both a good thing if we have to abandon ship, and a bad thing if we want to break free. Hm.'

'What has Gerald had to say about the passengers' state of dress?' Steve asked, interrupting his thoughts.

'He says it's not looking very good. It would appear that many of them would not survive in a tropical sea dressed as they are, let alone a blizzard.'

'Should we ask them to go back to their cabins, and dress properly?'

'Yes, I think we should,' he said, suddenly bucking up and becoming dynamic again.

He briefly discussed with Steve what clothing they should be told to take. 'And there's bedding as well,' added Steve.

'Bedding?'

'Yup, bedding. We thought it best if they each took a duvet from their own bunks.

'But they would get wet.'

'Yes. But if we had a supply of plastic bags available in the lounge, they could each put their bedding in one of these.'

Captain Buchan phoned Pat, and asked him to arrange for the passengers to go back to their cabins, 'in an orderly manner by cabin number,' for them to dress in their warmest clothes and footwear, and to pack a spare set of clothes and waterproof boots, 'as much as

they could fit in a kitbag, of a size allowed as carry-on baggage in an aircraft.' They were also allowed to take any personal possessions that would fit into such a bag. But 'one bag and no more' were the strict instructions, and no more than ten minutes each back in their cabins. When they returned to the muster points they should each bring with them the duvet from their bed. The captain and Pat agreed that the whole operation should not take more than half an hour, after which all watertight doors would be shut.

Jo went to help Garry and Derek get the necessary food from the hold, which was being passed along by a chain of crew all the way up to the open deck. 'It's amazing how much food a hundred people get through in a week,' Jo remarked as he passed what seemed like the thousandth box to his neighbour. Meanwhile the deck crew, supervised by Jim and Arvo, were collecting together the other items on Steve's list.

It had been decided that the best thing to do would be to load their emergency supplies into zodiacs placed on the decks, which would then be lowered onto the ice by the ship's hoist.

The biggest problem was going to be radios. The radio room, although cluttered with radios of all types, had no portable sets with an independent power supply that they could take with them. Likewise, there were radios in the lifeboats, but again these were not designed to be removed.

'How come no-one had ever thought what would happen if a ship's company had to evacuate not into boats, but onto ice?' asked Steve. They had plenty of walkie-talkies, but these had both a limited range

and a limited battery life. 'But at least we can use them when any rescue party is in our vicinity,' he added.

'Could we not,' suggested Dill, 'lower a lifeboat onto the ice, and use the radio in the boat?'

The captain thought about this for a while, and then said, 'it's an idea. No, on second thoughts we'd need the engine running to keep it charged, and they are water-cooled. It might, though, be a good idea to lower a lifeboat in any case. We'll see how it pans out.'

They had no guns.

Within the half hour, the passengers were all back in the lounge, largely silent and apprehensive, each wrapped in their own imagination of the future. The zodiacs were loaded with the emergency supplies, and the captain had given the officers and crew ten minutes to collect their own belongings.

For a short while Captain Buchan was alone on the bridge, pacing the full width of the ship and back. At each turn he peered out over the bridge wings, but the ship was still held fast and no open water was visible within the limited range of visibility. Water was entering through the damaged hull at an increasing rate, although it was still within the scope of the pumps. Help was on its way, but the nearest ship was a day's sailing away, and he doubted whether the first helicopter, due in three hours, would be able to find them, let alone land, in this snowstorm.

Steve was first back on the bridge. 'How's it looking, James?'

'I don't like it. At least we would be relatively safe on these enormous floes, but we'd be on our own. On the ship... I don't know...'

There was a loud crack and simultaneous jolt all through the ship.

'The pressure is certainly increasing...'

The bridge resonated to the sound of the telephone, the captain picked it up, listened for a while, and put it down.

'Water's now coming in faster, and the pumps may not contain it.' He went to the intercom and announced over the whole ship. Watertight doors will be closing in thirty seconds, repeat watertight doors will be closing in thirty seconds.'

'Abandon ship?' Steve queried.

'I think so.' He went back to the public address system.

'This is the captain speaking. I have now decided to abandon the ship, I have decided to abandon ship. However, we are in no immediate danger and have plenty of time for an orderly evacuation. We will put a gangway down from the side entrance, starboard side, and you will proceed by muster station when ordered. We will be putting the inflatable liferafts down onto the ice which we will use as tents, and plan to have these ready for you before you disembark. We plan for twelve people per liferaft, and your group leader will divide your muster in half and allot you a boat. Please wait for further instructions.

'All crew, all crew, please report to your stations and commence the unloading of supplies and liferafts.'

The captain switched off the intercom. 'Well, that's it then! Let's see if we can be as successful as the other infamous captains who

have had to abandon ship amongst the pack ice of the Weddell Sea!' But there was no smile on his face.

He turned as he saw the door open and Ingrid enter, the first time he had seen her since leaving her in her drunken sleep in their cabin; she looked haggard, lines showing on her normally carefully-crafted face. They looked at each other for a moment before he asked, 'are you all packed then?'

'Yes, and I've packed a bag for you. You don't have to worry about anything. Your waterproofs and boots I've left on the bed. If Heiti had not come in just now I would still be asleep – nobody told me…'

'I'm sorry, Ingrid,' the captain muttered guiltily. 'What with one thing and another…'

'I must go to my muster station. See you on the ice. Bye.'

'Bye.' He turned to Steve. 'Can you go onto the floe and supervise the setting up of the camp? I see the crew have started lowering the liferafts onto the ice. Can you make sure they are rolled into position, the centre of the flow I suggest, before they're inflated. I think they may be hard to shift when inflated, especially in this wind. In fact, so they don't blow away, I think they'd better be inflated one by one as the passengers arrive.'

'Right, James. See you.'

At the stern of the ship, under the supervision of Angus and Arvo, the fully-laden zodiacs were being lowered by crane one by one onto the ice. There were crew waiting to haul the laden zodiacs, like sledges, away from the side of the ship to leave room for the next, but this proved impossible as the new snow that was falling caused the boats to stick like glue to the ice beneath.

Angus radioed the captain and reported this. 'What shall we do? We have six loaded boats, and there's only room for three on the ice. Shall we land some on the floe on the other side of the ship?'

'Mm... No, the floes may drift apart again. You'll just have to unload the boats on the ice, and drop the other boats on top.'

'Aye, aye, sir.'

The ship gave another jolt, followed by more loud cracks from somewhere along the hull. The captain looked over the side and saw the gangway onto the ice was now in place. He also noticed that, for the first time since he had trimmed the boat stern down, the ship was back on an even keel – water was beginning to fill up the hull.

He radioed Pat. 'We'd better start. Can you arrange for one group of twelve at a time to leave the ship, and enter a liferaft. Don't let the next group disembark before the previous group is in the liferaft.'

'Roger.'

And so the abandonment of the *Isis*, the old *Scotia II*, the veteran of the Antarctic seas, the abandonment began.

Chapter 11

Bill, Dottie and Annie were in the first group to leave the ship. 'Isn't this exciting, going down the gangway onto the ice,' said Annie, but once down on the floe she became quiet as the wind whipped wet snow onto her face. The contrast could not have been greater; from the secure comfort of a warm, comfortable, brightly-lit ship to an outside world of wind and snow and an uncertain future.

'Why can't we go back on the ship?' Annie shouted above the noise of the wind in her hood.

'The captain says we have to leave,' replied Bill. 'Look over there, they are loading supplies onto the ice.'

Annie and Dottie looked and although it was hard to see much against the blizzard they could see men removing boxes from the zodiacs and piling them up on the ice.

'What are they doing?' asked Annie.

'Those are our emergency supplies, food and what not.'

'Oh.'

Steve was leading them in single file through the wet snow, now ten centimetres deep, towards an orange, tent-shaped liferaft just visible ahead. Dottie, as were some of the other passengers, Dottie was having difficulty with carrying both her kitbag and the polythene bag containing her duvet, the latter catching the wind and blowing around.

'Careful, Dottie,' said Bill, 'don't let any snow in your duvet.'

'I'm doing my best,' she replied tersely.

Reaching the liferaft Steve held the door open for them. 'Try and kick all the snow off your boots, and shake your jackets down before entering. We don't want to get more snow than we have to into these tents.'

They piled in, with most people in spite of Steve's advice taking a lot of snow in with them.

'What a relief to be out of the wind,' said Bill immediately.

'Not much,' said Dottie looking around, 'it's a bit clammy in here.'

'Annie, you'd better put your bag and duvet on the pontoon, not the floor. You don't want them getting wet.'

'Okay. What happens now?'

'We have to wait,' was her grandfather's reply.

'For what?'

'For help to arrive.'

'Another helicopter?'

'I expect so.'

Steve stuck his head through the door and called in, 'everything alright?' but, without waiting for a reply, he withdrew and walked back to the ship for the next group.

Three quarters of an hour later, when all the passengers had been led to their new quarters, those in Bill's tent were surprised to see Melissa stick her head through the door. She had to shout loudly to make herself heard above the flapping of the tent in the wind. 'Ah, Bill and Dottie, there you are. Oh, and Annie.'

'Hi, Melissa, what brings you here?', Bill asked.

'I've checked with Steve, and he says, as long I can arrange it, and as long as it's a one for one swap, he says all us hut people can be together in one of these boats. I thought it would be fun if we seasoned explorers got together again. There's three in my boat willing to swap. Dottie and Bill, do you want to come and join us?'

'And Annie,' put in Annie.

'And Annie.'

Bill looked at Dottie, who nodded. 'Yes, why not?... Now?'

'Yup, now. I'll lead the way. It's the third boat on the right, no, that's going the other way. It's the third boat on the left.'

As they gathered up their belongings, Melissa added. 'I was in the last group off the ship, and the *Isis* was definitely beginning to tip up as we left.'

'List, you mean,' corrected Bill, 'which way was she listing?'

'Let me think... Mm... Bow down. Yes, bow down. I think it's going to sink, and then we really will be stranded. Are you ready? Okay then, let's go.'

As they left through the flap in the door, a cold flurry of snow entered the liferaft and settled onto the slushy pools on the floor.

With the passengers all safely stowed away, Steve had gathered the staff together in the lee of a pressure ridge.

'Is everyone off the ship?' asked Jo.

'The last of the crew are coming off any minute now,' Steve replied, 'apart from the captain, chief engineer, and radio officer, that is. Oh, and the electrician. He's seeing if he can in fact take one of the radios out of the radio room.'

'Are we to join in with the crew in their liferafts, or have one of our own?' asked Dill.

'No. I think it best that we split ourselves up, and each join a passenger tent and try to keep morale up. Do we all agree?' They nodded.

'Right. Each choose a liferaft and go and put your kit in it. The passenger liferafts are the first eight you come to. Oh, and we mustn't use our radios more than we have to. You've all got spare batteries?... Good. Keep them against your bodies to keep warm. Talk to the passengers a bit, then come back here in, say, five minutes.'

'What shall we tell them?' AB asked.

'The truth. We are on the ice as a precaution, and help is on the way. A helicopter should be here in a couple of hours, but if it can't land in this blizzard, a ship will be here in a day at the latest. If the ice relents, we might even board the ship again.'

The staff dispersed, and Steve went to find Pat who was supervising the last of the crew into their three tents.

'Right Pat. I suppose the next stage is to get the stores over here.'

'It sure is.'

'The staff will help.'

'I was expecting that,' answered Pat. We'll need all the help from you we can get as I was only planning to use the deck officers and crew – the stewards and others are not used to being outside in the cold. And there's no point getting everyone wet and exhausted unnecessarily.'

'I'm sure Derek and Garry would want to help.'

'Yes, that's true, and I'll ask for volunteers from the others, but only pick those who are suitable.'

'Right. I've agreed to meet the staff in five minutes over there by that ridge, where there's a bit of shelter. Shall we all meet up there?'

'Good idea.'

'The wind seems to be dropping?'

'Yes, and it looks as though the snow's easing.'

It was in fact nearer ten minutes by the time the work party of staff and crew had assembled and set off back to the *Isis*. Alongside the hull at the stern were the three loaded zodiacs on top of the three unloaded ones, together with a miscellaneous assortment of fuel drums, tarpaulins, ropes and welding equipment. The ship was now noticeably bow down, although only by a few degrees.

As they neared Pedersen noticed a thin strip of water between the floe and the ship. He shouted out to Angus, who was supervising the loading onto the ice, 'was there open water alongside the hull just now? I don't think so.'

'I don't remember any,' said Angus, 'and I've been beside the gangway most of the time.'

'It's getting wider,' Steve observed.

As they watched, a few slight swirls appeared in the water and it certainly appeared as if the lead were opening.

'Yes,' confirmed Angus, 'the ice was certainly hard against the ship before.'

Suddenly they were startled by the sound of scraping, of metal against ice, followed by an almost imperceptible rocking of the ship.

Immediately afterwards the strip of open water widened noticeably, there was more scraping and the ship lurched bow-downwards.

'The floes definitely are moving apart,' said Steve, 'we must tell the captain.'

While Pat was radioing the bridge, the grinding sound intensified as the hull continued to tip forwards. As it did so, the ice that still held the ship in places, caught on and buckled further the already damaged steel plates.

'Will she sink?' one of the crew members asked.

'No,' answered Angus, 'even if the front compartment is fully flooded, with the watertight doors shut she won't sink. List forward, certainly but not sink.'

'Is the captain staying on board, Pat?' queried Steve.

'Yes, for the moment.'

However, as they stood talking, the end of the gangway could be seen scraping over the ice as the floe pulled away from the ship.

'Captain, Captain,' Pat radioed again, 'you had better come quick. The gangway won't be here much longer.'

Another lurch of the *Isis* caused the bow to settle deeper in the water, sending a small wave onto the ice and forcing the onlookers back. After this the ship started pitching slightly, presumably as water in the flooded forward section sloshed back and forth.

A look of horror crossed Pat's face. ‘Oh my God... Captain, captain, this is Pat. Evacuate everyone immediately, abandon ship at once. Do you read me?'

Looking up, those on the ice could see the captain and the three officers who had remained on board come to the bridge wing, and look down.

'What is it?' Captain Buchan shouted down.

'The side entrance,' Pat shouted back. 'If she pitches forward much further, water will start entering the side entrance. And the end of the gangway is about to drop into the water. Come quick.'

It was the captain's turn to look startled, and he could be heard swearing as he commanded the other three to follow him down.

Pat, Pedersen and Angus held a hurried conversation.

'We must get that door shut,' Angus was saying, 'it's in the middle watertight section. If this floods, there's a good chance that the whole ship would go down.'

'But it can only be shut from inside,' Pedersen noted.

'True,' replied Pat.

'Pedersen, you and I better volunteer to be ready to shut that door as soon as the captain's team emerges,' said Angus. 'Once shut we can go up on deck, and throw down one of the ropeladders used for the lifeboats.'

'Are you happy to do this Pedersen?' Pat asked.

'Yes,' and without more ado, Angus and Pedersen ran up the gangway. Just as they entered the side door of the ship the end of the gangway finally slipped off the ice as the floe it was resting on moved away. The gangway had been lowered into position by a rope attached to a hoist on the upper deck and this rope was still attached. Thus, when the end slipped into the water, the whole gangway pivoted on the rope like a see-saw and swung into the side

entrance, catching Angus on the back of his knees. He gave a shout and fell to the deck just at the moment the captain emerged at the entrance. The ship was now noticeably rocking and every time the bow pitched downwards seawater began to enter the door.

The staff and the rest of the crew had been standing around on the ice watching the situation develop but now Steve leapt into action, shouting, 'quick, get a zodiac! Come on!' and he ran back down the ship to where the zodiacs and supplies were dumped on the ice.

He reached the nearest zodiacs, clambered into the one on top and started handing down boxes. With many hands to help, they unloaded its stores, pulled it off the boat below and dragged it into the water, all in a space of a few minutes. Steve jumped in, started the engine with the first pull of the starting cord and ordered Gerald and Jim to join him.

They sped the short distance to the side entrance of the *Isis* where water was entering at an ever-increasing rate, not just when the boat was pitching forward but all the time now. When Angus had been hit by the gangway, as well as having injuries to his knees, he had fallen and knocked his head on the metal decking. He was unconscious and wet-through from the near-freezing seawater that was streaming in. As soon as the boat was alongside, the captain and Pedersen carefully lifted him into it and then the captain ordered everyone else to leave the ship, leaving just Pedersen and himself on board.

'We will stay behind and try and shut the door. If we can't, come back as soon as you can to pick us up.'

Those on the ice watched Captain Buchan and Pedersen fight with the heavy metal double door that had to be shut to seal the hull. They watched them shut one half, but the tilt of the boat and the pressure of water entering made the other one difficult to move. The ship made a sudden list to starboard, increasing markedly the flow of water into the hull.

Pat screamed across to them, 'give it up, you're going to be trapped. Come on, quick, quick. Come on, you'll have to jump for it. Come on, swim over, we'll pick you up!'

At that moment there was a small eruption next to the floe where the crew were standing, and five Adelie penguins landed on the ice amongst them. They shook themselves down, and then stood around unconcernedly to watch.

The captain and second officer continued to struggle with the door, until those watching screamed, 'she's going! Jump, jump!'

Thereafter things happened fast. The ship started to fall towards the group on the ice, who, to a man including the penguins, turned and ran. Captain Buchan and Pedersen dived into the sea, and those in the zodiac, unwilling to abandon Angus whom they had not yet had time to offload, watched in frozen immobility.

The whole floe shook as the top of the superstructure struck the ice, but it was this that prevented the ship turning turtle completely. Instead she came to rest on her side, but as she toppled she created a large tidal wave that picked up the zodiac, and those in it, depositing them undamaged several metres inland. The same wave wet the feet of most of the fleeing crew and also deposited the captain and Pedersen onto the ice.

The crash, and accompanying jolt of the ice floe, brought all the passengers and crew out of the liferafts, who watched in awe the last minutes of the *Isis*, for which event the wind had dropped, the snow had stopped and visibility become perfect. John, having come out of his tent, immediately ran back in to collect his camera and Annie, seeing what he was doing, followed suit. The ship lay on its side for a few minutes, and then slowly righted itself again, albeit heavily down by the bow. Once upright the bow progressed underwater, and the rest of the ship soon followed, the flag at the stern still fluttering until the finality of her floundering. Everyone remained silent and unmoving while the spectacle unfolded, but once all trace of the ship had vanished and they looked instead across to a sea containing nothing but ice, then the enormity and perilousness of their situation struck home. Passengers and crew alike stood around in small groups, silent with their thoughts.

Ingrid was the first to come to life. 'James, James, where's James?' She ran back towards where the ship had been and saw Pat and Grigori administering to two bodies lying on the ice.

Rushing up she leant down beside him and said, 'James, James. Are you alright?' He did not answer. She turned to Pat. ‘How is he?'

'He appears to be unconscious but otherwise there appears to be no sign of damage. We must get him warmed up immediately – hypothermia could set in quickly.'

Ingrid looked across to the other body lying nearby. ‘How 's Pedersen?'

'I'm cold, dammed cold,' was the reply in person.

'Thank God you're conscious.'

'Which means I feel the cold!'

Pat called across to some crew and asked them to carry both victims to the shelter of the liferafts. 'Ingrid, can you please see to them? I'll have the doctor join you as soon as possible, but I think we should see to Angus first – his condition's more serious?'

'Why, is he injured?'

'Yes – unconscious and maybe some broken bones as well. And he's probably got hypothermia by now.'

'Oh no! I'll stay here.'

Pat walked over to the zodiac, now high and dry on the floe, and found that Steve had already called the ship's doctor who was looking Angus over.

'Unconscious, yes. Bad bruising at base of skull, but no broken skin. Legs, um, legs. Let me feel... It's hard to say whether there're any breakages. One knee dislocated, I think.'

'Shall we see to the knee now?' asked Steve.

'No, not yet! First it's essential we get him warm and dry.'

'What's the best way to get him to the liferafts?'

'There was a stretcher with the emergency supplies.'

'Probably not any more,' Steve pointed out. 'Have you seen our supply dump? Or, rather, what remains of it? When the ship went down, it took half our supplies with it!'

Chapter 12

The three suffering from hypothermia were safely ensconsed in the liferafts, stripped of their wet clothes, and put under duvets. Ingrid volunteered to lie with the captain to revive him with her body warmth.

'What about Angus and Pedersen?' AB asked. 'Who should lie with them?'

'Why don't you?' answered Steve.

'Yes, why don't you?' added Pedersen.

'You obviously don't need reviving!' AB responded, 'but I'll keep Angus warm.'

After this Pat and Steve went over to the supply dump to join most of the passengers and crew who were trying to work out what had disappeared and what had been left.

There were four zodiacs punctured and useless, floating listlessly in the water, and the last one had disappeared altogether. When the ship capsized, its stern had caught and broken off the edge of the floe and all supplies left in the boats had fallen out and disappeared, apart from a few boxes floating amongst the debris.

'It's lucky we offloaded some of the boats,' Gerald was saying, 'otherwise we would have lost everything. We'd better make a list of what we've got.'

'Good idea,' said Steve, who arrived at that moment. He looked about him, saw everyone standing around, and called Pat and Gerald away for a brief discussion. 'I think,' he said, 'it'd be best to involve the passengers as well as the crew in this. They can help sort

out boxes, and carry them over. It'd be better to have them occupied and feeling involved rather than standing around, left to their thoughts.'

'But they may get in the way, muddle up boxes, or get injured moving them,' argued Pat.

'No, I agree with Steve,' put in Gerald, 'far better to get them involved.'

'Okay,' said Pat, 'but who'll be in charge? Are they your responsibility as passengers, or mine as crew?'

'Mm... Good point!' Steve considered a moment. 'I think you'd better direct operations. If I were you I would treat them like crew and order them about.'

'I think we should start with a briefing and pep talk,' suggested Gerald, 'telling them what's going to happen next.'

'Great idea,' replied Steve. 'If I do that, will you thereafter organise them into workparties, Pat?'

'Fine, yes.'

Steve shouted for everyone to circle round. 'In the absence of a printed programme, I will now give you the briefing for the day.'

'When's breakfast?' Martin shouted out.

'Over there,' Steve pointed. Everybody looked round and saw the five penguins that had joined them earlier standing in the audience.

'No, please not,' Annie called out.

'I was only joking,' continued Steve.

'And not a very good one,' Annie whispered to Damien. 'Oh, I don't know,' Damien replied, 'shall we catch them now?'

'Shut up.'

'Help should be with us in just under two hours,' continued Steve, 'in the form of a helicopter. Now that the weather has cleared, it will be able to shuttle us to the nearest base, which is only twenty-five miles away on Seymour Island.'

'How many people does the helicopter hold?' Martin asked.

'Twelve, so there will be have to be twelve shuttles to get everyone off, which will take some time. However, we will see how it goes when it gets here. There is also the icebreaker, which will reach us this time tomorrow.

'Meanwhile I think it would be a good idea to find out what supplies we have, and then carry them all over to our camp.'

'Why?' called out Martin, 'if we are about to be rescued?'

'The art of Antarctic survival,' Steve answered patiently, 'is good planning. You should always for any eventuality, for the worst of anything that could happen – especially in the Weddell Sea.'

'You mean, we might be here for weeks?' called out Melissa.

'No, not weeks, but possibly a day until the ship comes. One other thing I'd like to say at this stage is about looking after yourself. Again, the art of polar survival is making sure you look after yourself, and this especially means keeping dry feet. I know my feet are wet, and I can hardly feel them which is a bad sign. If anyone has wet feet, I suggest you change into your spare socks and boots straight away. If your boots are not waterproof, try putting a poly bag over your dry socks, and also try to somehow dry out your wet socks – keep them against your body if need be. If anyone feels cold don't hesitate to go back to the liferafts. Any questions?

'No? Good. Pat is now going to organise us into work parties. Go ahead, Pat.'

'Thank you Steve. In the absence of the captain, I am taking command. The captain by the way appears to be unhurt, but is suffering from concussion. Angus, as you might have heard, is also still unconscious, and in addition has damaged one of his knees. However, the doctor expects them both to come round soon.

'Right then, work! Those who feel up to it should form a chain from the supply dump to the camp, and we will pass boxes along it. Garry and Derek will make a tally of what we have, so please don't move any boxes until they have been ticked off. Leave anything heavy for the crew, and be careful – some of the boxes that have got wet may split open. Any questions?... No?... Let's get going.'

Everyone, except the penguins, set-to with a will and in a short time boxes were being passed up the chain at a steady rate. People were glad of the warmth the exercise gave them, particularly as a breeze was picking up from the west. Half an hour later the camp was looking organised with piles of boxes sorted by contents. Steve arranged for the liferafts to be put in a semicircle, with their entrances facing away from the steadily increasing wind. Pat had the crew building walls of snow blocks, placed in such a way that with a tarpaulin over the top it would make a three-sided kitchen building. The blocks were being cut to shape with a fire axe and the one spade they could find, and the structure was sited in the centre of the semicircle.

The welding equipment had survived intact and the engineering officers and crew were discussing the design of a cooking stove to

be made out of the two empty oil drums that had also survived. For fuel, they had only one drum of petrol, the other drums having disappeared with the ship.

The staff were discussing with Garry and Derek the situation with regard to the supplies.

'How's it looking, Garry?' Steve asked. 'What've we got left?'

'Unfortunately it's mostly food that's been lost. For a start we have no meat...'

'What about cheese?' interrupted Dill.

'Let him finish,' said Steve.

'We've no meat, but about day's supply of cheese,' continued Garry. 'Plenty of biscuits, sweet biscuits that is, and quite a lot of chocolate. It depends how much we give them, but probably about a packet of biscuits per day per person, and two bars of chocolate – about three days at that rate. Next, tinned fruit... That reminds me, has anyone seen the tin openers?'

There was silence from the group until Jim said he thought he had one on his penknife. 'Yes I have,' he added after checking.

'Well, let's hope we don't have to open any tins – it'll take a long time with one knife.'

And so the tally went on. They discovered they had enough food to keep their stomachs full for four days, even if not on a balanced diet. For drinks they only had tea and coffee – as long as you liked it black or with sugar.

At Garry's suggestion Derek went round giving out two chocolate bars and a packet of biscuits to all passengers and crew alike.

'Breakfast,' he told them. 'Hot drinks, I hope, will be here shortly – I think the engineers have almost finished their Mark 1 stove.'

While the officers and crew were finishing off building the kitchen area, the staff went to look for the best place for the helicopter to land.

'Any suggestions about what we can use to mark it?' asked Steve.

'Boxes,' suggested Jo.

'No, I don't think we want to move those again.'

'I know,' said Derek, 'coffee.'

'Coffee?'

'Yes. We can sprinkle it on the snow to make an "H".'

'Good idea, but we mustn't use it all up!'

'Uh-uh,' said Jim, 'I think its starting to snow.'

'It's not just snow,' added Gerald, 'I think there's a mist coming in as well.'

They looked around and noticed that the horizon had reduced significantly, indeed there was no horizon at all, the grey sky having merged imperceptibly with the pack ice. The gentle snow now falling was barely visible, only felt as minute pinpricks on the face.

'Maybe we'd better wait until the helicopter's due,' suggested Jim, 'otherwise the snow may cover the coffee. When do we expect it Steve?'

Steve looked at his watch. 'In about half an hour, but I might as well try and get them on my radio now.'

'Hang on, hadn't we better tell them exactly where we are?' questioned Jim. 'Who has the portable GPS?'

'We haven't drifted far since the ship went down,' Steve responded, 'and they had our position only minutes before she sank. But it's a good point. Who has the GPS?'

As nobody knew for sure, Steve went to ask Pat, who replied that the captain had said he would take it from the ship.

'Right, I'll go and see if he's got it.'

Entering the hospital tent, Steve encountered the ship's doctor.

'Hi, doc, how're your patients?'

'Improving, thank you.' The doctor turned to Pedersen. 'How're you feeling?'

'Fine thanks, although I'd like to stay here a bit longer to get more of AB's body warmth!'

'Huh!' responded AB.

'So Pedersen persuaded you to sleep with him after all?' remarked Steve.

'Angus is recovering,' the doctor continued, 'thanks to AB as well. He's regained consciousness but I've sedated him.'

'And his knee?' asked Steve.

'Well, it's not looking too good, and I'm not sure if it's a dislocation, fracture or torn ligament – or a combination. We'd better get him off in the first helicopter.'

'What about the captain? Has he regained consciousness?'

'Yes, I think so. What do you think, Ingrid?'

'Yes, I'm sure he's recovered consciousness, but he still seems to be cold. I don't think he's fully recovered from his hypothermia.'

'Has he spoken yet?' queried Steve.

'No,' replied Ingrid, 'he's said nothing.'

'Well, I'm glad things seem to be improving,' continued Steve, 'although it's a pity about Angus' knee. Anyhow, the reason I came in here was to see if the captain had brought the GPS with him. Where's his jacket?'

'Over there,' pointed Ingrid.

'Ah yes, here it is,' he said after checking the pockets and pulling out an object the size of a mobile phone. 'Thank you.'

Leaving the liferaft Steve walked back to the helicopter landing site, noticing as he went that there was the beginning of a hiss of spindrift, of snow blowing over the ice.

'I've got the GPS,' he announced to the staff on his return, 'and the captain seems to be recovering, as do Angus and Pedersen.'

'Thank God!' said Gerald. 'Now what's our position?'

Steve turned on the hand-held satellite positioning system. 'No, nothing.' He tried a few more times before announcing, 'no, it's not working, it obviously didn't survive its swim! Oh well, let's try radioing the helicopter in any case.' He turned his radio to full volume and called, 'this is *Isis*, this is the *Isis*. To rescue party, do you read me? Do you read me?'

Everyone listened intently on their own radios, but there was no reply.

'It's probably still out of range,' suggested Jim, 'let's try again in ten minutes.'

Meanwhile the kitchen was nearing completion, already providing enough shelter to test out the makeshift stove. The engineers had

cut an oil drum in half and designed and welded on a burner that prevented the highly inflammable petrol from exploding.

'What do you think?' Grigori asked Steve as he came up to inspect progress.

'Will it work? It looks a bit Heath-Robinson!'

'Heath-Robinson? What is this Heath-Robinson?'

'Mickey Mouse!'

'Huh! State of the art! We are just about to light it. Stand back, everyone.'

Grigori bent down, lit a wick made out of some cotton waste, touched it to the stove and then stood and watched it for a few moments.

'There, what did I tell you. Perfect! We can put that pan on now. Hot drinks within the half hour.'

A large cooking pan that had survived the capsize was placed on the stove, having already been filled with melt water from pools on the ice floe.

While everyone was standing round watching for the pot to boil, Jim suddenly called out. ‘I've got a signal, I think it's the helicopter trying to contact us. Quiet please!'

'Isis, *Isis*, do you read me?'

'Yes, go ahead,' said Jim.

'Isis, *Isis*, do you read me?'

'Yes, go ahead.'

'Isis, *Isis*, do you read me? We will be arriving at your last stated position in thirty minutes.'

'Although we can hear them, they can't hear us,' Jim concluded. 'They must still be out of range of our radios, but it's good news. They'll be arriving just as we've finished making our camp – in time for us to take it all down again!'

'Let's hope they don't arrive before the kettle boils,' said Grigori. 'I want to test out my stove.'

'What about mugs?' asked Garry. 'I haven't seen any, In fact, I don't remember loading any in the first place. Were they on our list, Steve?'

'Now you mention it, I don't think they were. Damn! Have we anything we can use instead?'

'Tins!' suggested Jim. 'I'll just have to get out my penknife and open tins after all!... Which tins shall we open? What does anyone fancy? Grapefruit? Baked beans? Rice pudding?'

Half an hour later two-way radio contact with the helicopter had finally been established and the landing area laid out. However by now there was a strong wind from the west which, as well as snow, had brought in a thick fog. Visibility was now so poor that Steve had, after all, arranged for piles of boxes to be placed at intervals to guide people along to the landing pad. There was now a continuous drift of snow over the ground which obliterated the coffee-stained landing-mark as soon as it was made.

No-one ever saw the helicopter, although they all heard the characteristic throb of its engine somewhere above. The pilot agreed to stay with them for an hour, but was adamant that it was unsafe to land in such a whiteout – being unable to distinguish fog

from ice was a sure way to disaster. He might have tried if it had been calm, but the buffeting wind and lack of visible features on the ground made it impossible.

When the hour was up, he flew off to the base at Seymour Island, but at least was able to confirm the location and condition of the marooned party to the outside world.

'Well, what next?' Bill asked Steve who he had poked his head into their liferaft to tell them that the helicopter had left.

'It'll stay at Seymour Island until there is an improvement in the weather,' Steve said, 'and then come back out to us.' He withdrew his head and went to pass on the news to the next liferaft.

'I bet the ship doesn't reach us either,' said Melissa.

'Why not?' queried John.

'It'd be too easy. Explorers have to suffer a bit before they are rescued.'

'Don't be silly,' said Miss Edelston, 'we are suffering enough already. This liferaft is cramped, damp and pretty miserable, and my feet are freezing.'

'Are they wet?' asked Annie.

'Yes.'

'Well,' continued Annie, 'remember what Steve said?'

'What was that?'

'The importance of keeping dry, particularly your feet.' As if to emphasise the point, there was a light rain of condensation off the roof as a particularly vigorous gust of wind shook the liferaft.

'Yes,' said Bill, 'you must keep your feet dry. Have you some dry socks?'

'Yes.'

'Well, put them on. Where's you bag?' and Bill began to help Miss Edelston change into her dry footwear.

'I always thought it would be fun to try out one of these liferafts,' said Martin, 'but I never realised how damp they would be. Do you think we could cut a hole in the floor to let the water out?'

'No, don't,' said Melissa, 'we may need them as liferafts.'

'What?'

'If the floe breaks up, we may have to launch the boats. Floes always break up.'

'And sail to Elephant Island?'

'No, Paulet Island,' said Bill, 'where Nordenskjøld ended up. It's nearer.'

'But we've no lifeboats to tow us,' Martin pointed out.

'Maybe the wind would blow us there,' suggested Bill. 'Which way is it blowing?'

'I know, I've got a compass,' said Annie. 'Let's see, the door is facing downwind, that is east. That means the wind must be coming from the opposite direction, from the west.'

'And the land is to our east,' added Bill. 'At the moment we are getting blown further out into the Weddell Sea.'

'I just hope that ship does come,' sighed Dottie.

'It will,' said Bill, giving her a hug. 'At least we know where we are, and we can always radio our position. Is your GPS working, John?'

'I think so,' he replied, taking it out of his pocket. 'Yes, it is. Let me see, we've drifted about three miles since the ship went down.'

'Which direction?'

'East.'

'As we thought, away from land.'

The door opened with a flurry of snow and Derek announced, 'hot drinks everyone. There's a choice of tea by itself, or tea with sugar.'

'Nice mugs,' said Bill, 'I'll have baked beans please!'

'Careful,' added Derek, 'they are hot. I suggest you keep your gloves on.'

After they had all taken a drink, Derek asked if anyone was hungry.

'What's for lunch?' queried Martin.

'Baked beans, of course,' said Bill.

'You're right,' Derek confirmed. 'Baked beans and cheese followed by grapefruits and rice.'

'I was hoping for rice and dried beef,' put in Melissa, 'when's that going to be on the menu?'

'We'll see.'

'Oh yes please,' said Annie. ‘Damien and I will help you cook it!'

After Derek had left, Averil noticed that Arthur was not drinking his tea, but just sitting there hunched up.

'Are you alright?' Melissa asked, but Arthur gave no reply. 'I'm worried about him, he hasn't said anything all morning.'

'Has he been drinking?' asked Martin.

'I don't think so... Do you want to lie down, Arthur, we can make space for you on the seats?'

Again, Arthur did not reply. 'Liam, can you have a look at him?' said Piers.

Arthur let himself be laid down, while Liam checked him over.

'What's the matter?' asked Bill

'I think we'd better send for the ship's doctor,' was Liam's reply.

Chapter 13

There was little activity that afternoon. It was too much of a blizzard for people to want to go out, so most stayed in their tents and sat moodily and talked or dozed. The ship's doctor had come in to see Arthur and had noted that his pulse was irregular. 'Keep him lying down and keep him warm,' was his instruction.

'It's alright for some,' complained Piers, 'but where are we going to lie down?'

'You'll have to doze while sitting,' Bill suggested.

'And you'll have to lean against me,' said Melissa. 'Hey doc, how's the captain?'

'Much better. He's now sitting up and had a hot drink.'

'Is he injured?'

'I don't think so.'

'What about the other two?'

'Well, Pedersen is fully recovered, and Angus is now conscious, although his knee is not looking too good.'

'Poor Angus. Is there anything we can do?'

'No thank you, Melissa, except of course to keep an eye on Arthur.'

A blast of cold air entered as Jim came in. 'I think it's getting colder, but at least the snow seems to be easing,' he said. 'I'm afraid I've been allotted to you lot, and have come to keep you company.'

'Great,' said Melissa. 'What did Arctic explorers do when holed up in their tents in a blizzard for days on end?'

'Not much. Read mostly, or wrote in their diaries, or perhaps just talked – about food mostly.'

'I'm bored,' said Damien.

'Can we go out and build a snowman?' suggested Annie.

'No, its far too windy, almost blowing a gale,' Jim replied.

'Aw! How about a game then?' continued Annie.

'I know,' said Martin, 'sardines!'

'Huh,' said Melissa. 'I've got this great game, though, a Victorian one, I think, that I read in book once and have always wanted to play. You have all got to imagine you are marooned in a lifeboat, but it is sinking, so as a group you have to decide which of you to throw overboard. That person is then out, and then the group goes through the process again. The last person left in the boat, the survivor, wins.'

'Really, Melissa,' said Piers, 'I don't think it appropriate. It would be too upsetting.'

'And we are upset enough already,' added Miss Edelston.

'Well, I've got another game,' Melissa suggested...

The afternoon passed into the evening with little change in their predicament and the evening meal was little different from lunch.

After supper the staff and crew brought the dirty plates and mugs to the kitchen area for washing up, which was being done by the galley crew and stewards in a corner of the kitchen building.

'Hey, Jim,' said Jo as he came in with his load, 'you're turning white.'

Jim looked at his ventile jacket. 'So I am, it must be the fog starting to freeze on me.'

'That's a good sign,' said Steve. 'If it gets colder it will be less slushy underfoot, and we should be able to keep our feet dry.'

'More tea anyone?' asked Garry. 'The kettle's about to boil again. By the way, it's an excellent stove your team have made, Grigori.'

'Thank you.'

'Is there any coffee?' asked Steve. ‘I could murder one.'

'A little,' replied Garry, 'but not enough to go round everybody, which is why I haven't been issuing it.'

'Any whisky to go in it?'

'Afraid not.'

'Oh well, it can't be helped.'

Garry ladled out hot water into their tin mugs, they helped themselves to tea or coffee, and then stood around the stove talking.

'Have we used up much fuel, Grigori?' Steve asked.

'Not a lot. There's plenty for a day or two.'

'Well, Pat,' Steve asked, turning to him, 'how do think the day's gone?'

'I've known worse. No, on second thoughts, I haven't. I'm sure even Dill has not been through this.'

'No, I haven't,' responded Dill, 'but it'll make a great story for later years – if we get through it, that is!'

'At least we're all safe,' said Gerald.

'For the moment,' added Jim. 'I think it could get worse.'

'Why?'

'Haven't you noticed? The floe's moving a bit.'

Everyone stood silent for a moment, before AB spoke. ‘You're right, it's rocking slightly. I presume it means there's a swell coming in.'

'Yes,' said Pat, 'we're at the edge of the pack ice with a lot of open water to our west. If this wind continues the swell could increase.'

'It's lucky we're in the centre of the floe, then,' added Steve. 'Let's hope it doesn't get any worse.'

AB went over to Steve and hugged him, whispering in his ear, 'and so do I, and I love you Steve.'

Steve woke in the middle of the night, realising immediately that the movement of the floe had increased and something was amiss – there was a violent flapping sound. He leapt up, found his torch and, as he exited, noticed that the wind now blew straight into the door. He ran over to the officers' tent, put his head through the door, and called gently 'Pat, Pat, are you awake?'

'Yes.'

'Come out immediately, please.'

'Okay.'

'And I'm coming to,' said the captain.

Once out, they ran over to the shelter of the kitchen area and saw the cause of the violent flapping – the tarpaulin roof had almost blown off.

'Pat,' ordered the captain, ' go and get Arvo and the deck crew – immediately.'

'Yes, James.'

'The wind must have gone right round,' shouted Steve.

'No,' the captain replied, 'the wind's still in the west, it's the floe that's swung round. It could start breaking up in this swell.'

'What should we do?'

'Where's the remaining zodiac?'

'About a hundred metres over there.'

'Go and check it out. The mist seems to have cleared, so you should find it easily. I'll stay here and supervise the tying down of the tarpaulin.'

'Will you try and put it back over the roof?'

'There's no point, it would just blow off again. Now get moving.'

'Yes captain,' and Steve set off.

The bleary-eyed crew were instantly awake once hit by the cold wind. 'Right,' the captain ordered them, 'grab the loose end of the tarpaulin and roll it up towards the wall.'

This proved more difficult than it looked, the strength of the wind making it both difficult and dangerous to grab hold of. Before they had finished, Steve came rushing up.

'Come quick, everybody, come on.'

'What is it? asked the captain.

'The zodiac, its almost washed away, we must haul it up.'

The crew were reluctant at first to leave the half finished job of rolling up the tarpaulin, but the captain ordered them to follow Steve.

Waves were breaking onto the floe, and the backwash had almost floated the zodiac into the sea, its bow already over the edge.

They grabbed its stern just as the floe tilted, causing the zodiac to slip and pull them all seawards. However, as the floe pitched the

other way the captain yelled, 'heave', and they managed to edge the boat back a little. With a few more heaves it was brought to safety, although their feet and legs became drenched in the process.

'Phew, that was a near thing,' shouted Pat. 'Did the sea get nearer the boat, or the boat nearer the sea? I mean, has some of the floe broken away?'

'I don't think so,' Steve shouted back. ‘I think a big wave must have come all the way up, and the zodiac got sucked back, possibly helped by the pitching of the floe.'

'Take the boat all the way up to the camp, this time,' ordered Captain Buchan.

They dragged it up over the sea-drenched snow at the edge of the floe and over the frozen snow nearer the middle.

'Leave it there for the moment,' was the captain's next command, 'and back to the tarpaulin.'

The tarpaulin had unfurled itself in the short time they had been away and broken free even further, now being held by only one corner. This made its rolling up all the more difficult, but the task was achieved in the end, after which they all huddled in the lee of the kitchen wall.

'We need to be prepared for the floe breaking up,' shouted the captain, 'although it doesn't appear to be doing so yet.'

A sharp cracking sound from under their feet made him instantly re-asses his diagnosis.

'It could break up anytime. We must tie together all the liferafts, and include the zodiac. Each liferaft has its own tow rope. Set to!'

'All tied in one long line?' queried Pat.

'Yes.' Pat and the crew went off. 'Steve, you stay here. We must decide what supplies to take if we have to evacuate in an emergency. Right, what's essential?'

'Let's see. The stove, the fuel, food.'

'How much?'

'As much as possible.'

'What else?'

'The tarpaulin, the axe, the spade. Pans, mugs, plates, knives. That's all, I think, that's essential.'

'Medical supplies?'

'They're all in your tent.'

'We'd better load the zodiac now. How much can we put in?'

'Well, the fuel drum, stove and tarpaulin would fill most of it, and there'd be room for the plates, mugs and things.'

'We'll put the food in the liferafts, then. They are, after all, twenty-man boats with only about twelve people in each.'

'Should we load them now? It might wake up and alarm the passengers.'

'Remember Shackleton,' the captain pointed out, 'he didn't kill enough seals and penguins when they were plentiful so as not to alarm his crew, not wanting them to think they would be stranded a long time. Of course in the end they were stranded a long time, and almost starved because of Shackleton's concerns. Better to have alarmed passengers than starving passengers.'

'Point taken. We'll load the food now.'

Once the crew had finished tying the liferafts together, they loaded the zodiac and put the food boxes amongst the startled passengers.

'What next?' asked Steve.

'We'd better reinstate the watch system,' replied the captain. 'I'll stand in for Angus. Let's see, it's two *am* now, so this would be Pedersen's watch. Pat, can you organise this? Tell Pedersen to contact me immediately if there is any change in our position. I'm off to my pit.'

'Yes, James.'

'I think one of the staff should be on watch as well,' added Steve. 'I'm awake, so I'll start, followed by Gerald, and then perhaps Jim.'

'Good.'

Come first light, things were looking serious. The captain's watch had taken over from Pedersen's, and instead of turning in at the end of his allotted time, Steve had elected to stay up with Gerald. Although the wind appeared to have eased slightly, the sea had increased noticeably, changing from a smooth swell to large waves breaking onto the floe with loud crashes. The floe was also smaller, one particularly large fragment having broken off only fifty metres from the camp.

'When do we abandon ship, captain?' Gerald was asking.

'When we have to.'

'If we did launch the liferafts, wouldn't they be dashed to pieces against the pack ice with this swell?'

'Quite probably.'

'So we should stay put as long as possible?'

'Yes.'

There were further ominous cracking sounds from within the floe.

'How much longer will this floe last?' asked Gerald.

'Stop asking the captain so many questions,' snapped Steve. 'He doesn't know any more than you do.'

They fell into silence, although it was anything but silent with the roar of the wind on their hoods, the roar of the waves breaking onto the floe, and the soft rattling sound of the associated brash ice rising and falling with the waves.

There was a sudden shout from Arvo. ‘Captain, come quickly.' Running over to where Arvo was pointing, they saw a crack in the ice opening out, separating the end-two rafts from the others.

'We must keep all the rafts together,' the captain shouted. 'Pat, get everyone out of the two rafts at the end, as quickly as possible, before the tow-rope breaks. We can then haul the two rafts across the crack. Steve and Gerald, you go and help Angus get across.'

The rafts in question happened to contain crew, not passengers, and it was not long before the crew were all safely out, had crossed the crack and were hauling on the tow rope. The rafts were reluctant to move.

'We'll have to send people back to the rafts to push as well,' the captain shouted. 'All you to my right go back to the liferafts.'

They had to jump over the crack, which was in fact no longer a crack but a lead of open water a metre wide. When in position at the first of the stranded rafts, the captain shouted, 'heave.'

There was a tearing sound, and the reluctant raft finally shot across the lead.

'Oh no,' said Pat, 'we've torn its bottom. It must have been frozen to the ice.'

'Yes,' said the captain, 'it can't be helped. Leave it for the moment, and try and move the other one. We'd better be more gentle this time.'

However, the second raft also tore in spite of careful pushing and lifting by the crew.

By this time the lead was two metres wide, and not safe to jump, although it was still possible to detour round its end. The captain made a quick decision.

'Okay, everyone. If you're in one of the torn rafts, go back, collect your possessions and the other supplies, and then distribute yourselves evenly amongst the other nine boats – two or three to a boat. Quick, the whole floe could break fully in two anytime.'

The crew rushed off to do this, after which Captain Buchan, Pat and Steve got together for a hurried conference.

'We'll have to get everyone out of each liferaft in turn, and try and ease them free without tearing them,' suggested Pat.

'But how do we that?' asked the captain. 'Besides, if we free them, they will only freeze to the ice again – it's still below freezing.

'But only just,' said Steve, 'which gives me an idea. We could pour seawater under them – that should melt them free.'

'Good thinking!' said the captain. 'I'll get the crew to use the cooking pans for that. They may as well start now; you never know, we might have to launch them soon.'

'Have you noticed something?' asked Steve.

'What?' the other two said together.

'The floe seems to be rocking less, although the wind's as strong as ever.'

'You're right,' said the captain after a moment's pause, 'maybe there's some pack drifting by that's breaking the swell.'

They had been so busy dealing with the break-up of the floe that they had not lifted their eyes to the horizon. They did so now and noticed that visibility was much better than the day before, with the fog having lifted and the snow reduced to occasional minuscule pellets.

'No, ' said Steve, pointing, 'it's not pack ice, it's an iceberg, see, a large tabular berg that's giving us some lee.'

'You're right,' said the captain.

'Maybe we should take this opportunity to launch the boats?' suggested Pat.

'Maybe...' replied the captain noncommittally. 'Let's get the boats free first.'

It was a slow job to free the liferafts as there were not many pans available for carrying sea water, but the system worked. When it was the turn for their tent, Melissa and Bill stood together watching the operation.

'God, it's cold,' Melissa said.

'Yes,' agreed Bill, 'it may feel cold in the tent, but it's tropical compared to out here.'

'Look at that big iceberg, was it there yesterday?'

'Difficult to say, it was hard to see anything.'

'Will it be moving?'

'Probably, they drift around quite a lot.'

They stood in silence for a while watching the huge, flat-topped iceberg drifting by – apparently a law unto itself, detached,

inhospitable, as if from a distant planet. Suddenly Melissa exclaimed, 'hey Bill, isn't our floe smaller than it was? I'm sure the sea's nearer our tent.'

'You're right! It must have been broken up by the waves, although it seems calmer now – I'm sure we're not rocking about as much as we were. But I'm sure we won't be able to stay on this floe much longer.'

'What did I tell you? I said we'd have to take to the boats sometime.'

'Are you enjoying this, Melissa?'

'To be truthful, yes. I've never had so much fun in my life.'

'Fun?'

'Well, excitement.'

'But we're in dire straits, and we may not survive. I'm frightened, for myself, for everyone…!'

'Well yes, that's what makes it so exciting, not knowing what the outcome will be. Do you realise, for the first time in my life I'm not in charge, none of us are here – nature is. Isn't that great? Knowing that somewhere in the world, here, the Antarctic, is still wild.'

'I'm not so sure. Dottie, she's terrified, and what about Damien?'

'There's nothing we can do about Damien. If he comes through it, it will be the best thing that's ever happened to him. He seems to have improved this trip, I think he has even been enjoying himself at times, not least thanks to your enthusiastic granddaughter. If he doesn't come through, on the other hand, well then, none of us will...'

There was a shout from one of the crew members. ‘Your boat's ready, you can get back in.'

'Thank God,' responded Bill, who then shouted out. 'Come on Dottie, come on Annie. Time to get back in.'

'I think I'll stay outside a bit longer,' said Melissa.

'You know,' said Jim to Steve, 'we could probably get on that berg. There seems to be a platform not far above the waterline with what looks like an easy ramp up to it. It would certainly be more stable than here.'

Steve studied it intently with his binoculars for a while. 'You could be right. Let's discuss it with James.'

They went over to the captain, and Steve started saying, 'James, we have an idea...'

'I know,' he replied, 'you're going to suggest that we transfer to that berg – I was watching you look at it.'

'Well?'

'I think we should at least reconnoitre it, from the zodiac, that is. It's hard to tell from this distance how difficult it will be to get on. But we haven't got a lot of time as it seems to be drifting by quite fast.'

'How long, do you think?'

'Let's see. The berg's about a mile and a half long, drifting northwards at about one to two knots. It's about half a mile off, so we'll be in its lee about, say, three quarters of an hour, maybe a bit longer... Get going, take Pat with you. I'll arrange for the liferafts to be taken to the water's edge while you're checking it out. It might

be best to take this breathing space to launch them whether we can land on it or not.'

The captain called on the crew to empty the zodiac of its load and launch it, which was easy to do as it was not frozen to the ground – probably as a result of having recently been washed by sea water. Steve and Pat jumped in, Steve opening the choke, pumping the fuel and pulling the starting cord. The engine did not fire, not the first pull, not the twentieth pull. Arvo, whose job it had been on the ship to maintain the outboards, immediately jumped in, took the cover off, fiddled with a screwdriver, and started the engine first pull.

'Thanks Arvo,' said Steve, 'I'd be grateful if you could stay with us for a bit.'

'Okay.'

The zodiac sped off at full speed, reaching the berg in a couple of minutes.

'It's bigger than it looks, close-up,' Steve remarked.

'Yup, they always are,' replied Pat, 'and there appears to be no easy way up – the ice is too steep and smooth.'

They cruised along its length, but it was smooth all along the waterline.

'The swell's not too bad here, so if we can only find a way up the first two metres we could reach the platform without difficulty,' said Steve. 'I suppose we could always cut steps.'

'How easy would that be?'

'Well, with the axe it would take, say, half an hour to make some good enough to get all our passengers up easily. We'd need a rope,

of course, to help people. And it might take another half hour, say, to get everyone up.'

'And then we'd have to haul up the liferafts,' Pat added, 'but I suppose we're not short of manpower for that.'

They sped back to the floe, Steve at the same time radioing to the captain with the news. Arriving back, they found all the liferafts lined up at the water's edge.

'That was quick work,' Steve shouted as they came up. A crew member grabbed the boat and he and Pat leapt ashore to speak to the captain.

'We could probably get everyone up, but it would take time, more time than we've got,' Steve told him.

'Is there anywhere we can moor the liferafts while the steps are being cut?' asked the captain.

'No, the ice is totally smooth.'

'Could you cut an ice bollard?'

'An ice bollard? I suppose we could.'

'Right. You and Pat take the axe, and go straight back and, where the swell's least, cut a bollard. With the rafts moored to that, we would then have all the time in the world to cut steps and get everyone up. Can you guarantee you can get us all up?'

After hesitating a moment, Steve answered, 'yes.'

'Are you sure?'

'Yes, I'm sure.'

'Well, go for it. Radio me as soon as it's done.'

It was only ten minutes later that Pat called back saying they were ready for the liferafts.

'Okay, we'll get the first one loaded,' answered the captain.

The crew edged the first liferaft into the water, and held it in place while its occupants entered. By the time it was full, the zodiac was back.

'Shall we tow one or two at a time?' asked Steve.

'Only one, I think, with this wind you'll make relatively slow progress as it is,' replied Captain Buchan.

'Roger.'

It took nearer ten minutes to get back to the iceberg and moor the raft to the bollard.

On the short return journey Steve pointed out, 'this is taking too long, Pat, we'll never get all nine rafts to the berg before the swell picks up again at the floe.'

'I know. Maybe next time we should try it with the passengers in the zodiac – it may be quicker when towing an empty liferaft.'

'Right, we'll give it a try. Radio the captain.'

It certainly proved to be quicker this way, but time was still slipping by too fast to guarantee the safe transfer of all the rafts. Captain Buchan studied the iceberg for a while, and then did some quick mental arithmetic. As the zodiac returned for the third raft, he announced that they would have to leave at least another two rafts behind. This would mean they would be reduced to seven boats in total – twenty people to a boat – which, the captain pointed out, was their design capacity, albeit added to by their supplies.

'We'll carry on as at present,' the captain called out, 'but those in the last two boats be prepared to abandon your liferaft if need be. We'll rush you across at the end – but without your rafts. For the moment, please put your belongings and any supplies in one of the other rafts.'

By the time the zodiac came back for the sixth boat there was a noticeable swell picking up which made loading more difficult, and the iceberg had also moved further away, lengthening the journey. Those with the seventh and, as it turned out, the last liferaft had a wet and slow ride.

The last two shuttles consisted entirely of crew members. Although they had a quicker journey, because, there were no rafts in tow, spray with every wave they hit they were drenched in ice-cold until they reached the welcome lee of the iceberg.

The captain, together with the bosun and two crew members, had stayed behind on the floe to help load the final items – the stove, fuel and tarpaulin, the other sundry items having been squeezed onto previous trips. By the time Steve and Pat came back for them, they had moved the equipment to a side of the floe where there was a degree of calm water, but even here waves were still breaking onto the ice. Getting the oil drum on board proved particularly difficult and they all got soaked in the process. They could not really get much wetter as the zodiac fought the waves and spray on its way back to the iceberg for the last time.

Chapter 14

'To think I once wanted to try out one of these things,' Martin Carruthers was saying, 'they are cramped, damp, they throw you about, and are without any saving graces.'

'Apart from saving us!' put in Bill.

'It's too early to say even that,' Martin responded. 'Here we are, I don't know where, nobody does, moored to some iceberg which is heading off into the unknown, and any sign of rescue as far as way as ever. At least camped on the ice floe you felt that you were somewhere; here, floating on the ocean you feel nowhere.'

'But we hope to be on the iceberg soon.'

'So it is said, but I'll believe that when I see it. Have you looked at it? It's a wall of vertical ice, smooth and quite unclimbable. The staff and crew are all soaked to the skin, and probably all hypothermic, unable to wield a teaspoon, let alone an axe.'

'Well, we have a few days food with us.'

'But nothing to drink. Have you thought of that?'

'We could chip ice off the iceberg.'

'Have you tried that? Do you really think we'd get enough to drink by sucking little pieces of ice?'

'I don't know.'

'Well, nor do I. That's just my point.'

'Stop it you two,' interjected Melissa, 'there's no need to make us all miserable.'

'Why? Are you happy, then?' persisted Martin.

'No, of course not. But everyone who has foundered in the Weddell Sea in the past has survived.'

'Wow, you have been listening to the lectures then! I thought you were always at the bar.' Melissa glowered at Martin. 'In any case, I thought one of Larsen's men became ill and died, and we have Arthur with his heart murmur.'

'Cut it, Martin,' interrupted Jim crossly. 'Melissa's right. There's every chance of rescue. The icebreaker should be here any time now.'

'How will they find us? We have no decent radio.'

'The helicopter will be back as well, and our orange liferafts show up from a long way.'

'If they're looking in the right place!' Martin continued. 'Will they be looking at every iceberg? Or, more likely, checking the area of pack ice where the ship went down? They'll certainly see liferafts there as well. Seeing no-one in them, and seeing also the wrecked zodiacs, they'll probably think we've all foundered, give up, and go home.'

'I doubt it.'

'Anyhow, where is the helicopter? It's been light for hours, visibility's not too bad, so why hasn't it been back?'

'I don't know. Maybe it's broken down.'

'Exactly. None of us knows.'

'Martin,' said Melissa crossly, 'what you're saying may or may not be true, but what are you going to do alleviate the situation? Anyone can complain, but is your complaining achieving anything? Do you agree, Miss Edelston?'

Miss Edelston, caught by surprise with this direct question, paused a while before answering.

'Melissa's right, you know. Martin, what are you going to do to help us survive?'

All faces turned to Martin.

'Um.'

'Yes, come on Martin,' put in Piers, 'what are you going to do?' Melissa immediately elbowed Piers in the ribs, whispering, 'don't be so aggressive, you're as bad as him.'

'Um.' carried on Martin. 'I could... I don't know.'

'Exactly,' said Melissa, 'it's easy enough to complain, but far more difficult to be constructive. I think we should all tell each other what we're each good at, what our individual strengths are. We can then build on our own strengths to help us get through this.'

Jim stared at Melissa, perhaps with a hint of admiration. 'She's right. That's an excellent idea. Why not start with you Martin? What are your strengths? Tell us what you're good at.'

Martin was silent for quite a while before answering.

Once Steve had returned to the iceberg for the last time, he insisted that the zodiac's occupants tracked down the liferafts that contained their own kitbags and changed into a dry set of clothes. 'After all,' he pointed out, 'we're no longer in any immediate danger, and it would be silly for any of us to suffer from exposure from want of a little care.'

'But the sooner we're on the berg the better,' the captain insisted.

'Agreed, James, but, to survive, we must look after ourselves as well.'

About quarter of an hour later the captain, Steve and Pat were back in the zodiac. Pat had the boat at full throttle directed at the side of the iceberg, and Steve was at the bow chipping away at the ice. Cutting a staircase in the ice was straightforward but time-consuming and tiring, and also resulted in showers of ice-chips raining down on them. Steve and Pat took it turn and turn about.

'We might as well make a good job of it, as we'll have all the supplies to pass up as well,' Steve had concluded.

In the end it took about an hour to make the stairway, complete with handholds on each side, good enough, as Pat remarked, 'for even Miss Edelston to climb without help of a rope.' Before it was finished, the captain climbed up the steps and onto the platform to inspect their future campsite. He came back pleased.

'There's plenty of space to walk around and it appears to be sheltered from the wind. There might even be an easy ramp onto the top of the iceberg as well. From there we would be in a good position to keep a lookout and fire rescue flares when necessary, and we should also get good radio reception up there.'

'Is the ground level?' asked Steve.

'Yes, there will be no problems in placing the rafts, although it's all hard ice. We'd better cut ice bollards, and tether the rafts to these in case of gales.'

'Shall we unload people direct from the liferafts, or get them into the zodiac first?'

'I think we'll try unloading direct from the rafts, it'll save time. If we cut a couple of bollards at the top, on either side of the steps, we can put the painters round them and have crew up there holding the liferafts in place.'

'Shall we get all the stuff out of this zodiac first?'

'Yes. It would be good to get the stove alight, and hot drinks available all round as soon as possible.'

Thus, before the disembarkation began, Derek, Garry, and some crew members were collected and hauled the equipment up to the platform. They had the stove alight, and ice being melted, within five minutes of its being in position.

Disembarkation, once it had started, was straightforward, and there was general relief to be out of the rafts and on solid ground once more – ground that was not wet or slushy but dry and firm underfoot. Apart from Angus and Arthur who both had to be carried, everyone made it under their own steam. Once the passengers had disembarked from each liferaft, the crew passed up their personal belongings and supplies before unloading of the next began.

It then only remained to pull the empty rafts onto up to the platform, again a straightforward operation because they slid easily over the smooth ice of the berg. As on the floe, they were placed in a semicircular pattern with the stove at the centre, and tied down to ice bollards as the captain had suggested. Their insides were then wiped dry with towels. The food supplies were once more arranged in orderly piles, and, as it was no longer snowing, Jim had organised

ropes to be tied as washing lines between the liferafts and he insisted that anything wet be put out to dry.

Setting up camp kept everyone occupied so, by the time it was finished, Derek and Garry had rustled up hot tea, biscuits and chocolate. Once everyone had had a chance to relax, the captain called the staff, officers and bosun together for a meeting.

'Congratulations, everyone,' he started, adding as he looked around the camp, 'you've all done an excellent job. I think this is the first time we've been really safe since we abandoned the *Isis* which, long ago though it seems, was only yesterday Now, though, we have to plan the next steps. First of all, who's still got a radio that's working? Please can everyone check.'

There was a hubbub of 'testing, testing, testing,' and 'do you read me? do you read me?'

'Well then, what's the tally?'

The answer was not too good. Of the twenty or so radios, two had been lost altogether in the excitement of the previous four hours, three had become waterlogged and were inoperable, three had run out of batteries, and all those remaining were down to their spare batteries. As expected, the rechargeable batteries had not kept their charge well in the cold.

'We must look after our radios better,' Captain Buchan concluded, 'we must conserve our batteries. From now on, I think it would be best if we kept only two turned on at a time. We will position someone at the top of the berg, if they can get there – no, it'd better be two people – we'll position one radio at the top of the berg, and keep one turned on down here.'

'I'll go up the berg,' volunteered Gerald.

'And I'll come with you,' added Pedersen.

'Good. But wait until we've finished this meeting,' said the captain.

'Whose radio shall we keep on down here?' asked Steve.

'Well, it should be mine, but it got waterlogged!'

'It's alright, captain, you can have mine,' offered Jo.

'Are you sure?'

'Yes.'

'Thank you. Now, we'd better consider our next steps. The helicopter could turn up anytime.'

'Why do you think it hasn't already?' queried Gerald.

'I don't know, but it's only nine-thirty. Maybe it's still foggy at Seymour Island.'

'It looks like visibility's getting worse again here,' put in Steve. 'A while ago you could see the edge of the pack ice in the distance, but not anymore.'

'That's true,' agreed the captain, 'and the wind seems to be dropping as well. It could get foggy again.'

'What about the icebreaker, when's that due?' Gerald asked.

'Any time now, that's why we need someone with a radio up the berg.'

'What range do you think our radios have?'

'Mm... Even with their batteries a little bit flat we should get about ten miles, line of sight.'

'How fast is this berg drifting?'

'I'd say just under two knots, to the north. Of course the floe we've just left is also drifting downwind, eastwards that is, probably about

the same rate. That'd make us about eight miles from the floe already.'

'Why's the berg drifting in a different direction to the pack ice?' asked Ingrid.

'Well, an iceberg as big as this is more subject to currents than wind, and the current here is trending north. Even if the wind does catch it, it has so much momentum that it might take days to change direction.'

'Yes,' added Dill, 'it's probably a part of the Larsen Ice Shelf which is breaking up. The fragments, tabular icebergs, that is, tend to be drifting north and running aground at the tip of the peninsula.'

'Where exactly?' asked Pat.

'Around Joinville Island – the Danger Islands in particular.'

'Is that where we'll end up?'

'If not rescued, very probably.'

'Let's not worry about that now,' put in the captain, 'let's consider the present. Have we any rescue flares?'

'In the zodiac, certainly,' said Steve.

'Any more?'

'I haven't seen any – has anyone else?' asked Pat.

As no-one had, the captain asked Gerald to get the ones out of the zodiac, which had been left moored in the water, and then Gerald set off with Pedersen to the top of the berg. 'If you see or hear a helicopter or ship, then fire a flare,' was his instruction.

'Even if the mist is down?'

'Yes, it might get above the mist. Off you go... Right, Garry and Derek, can you rustle up some food? Everyone else please circulate

amongst the passengers and crew, tell them what's happening, and try to keep morale up generally.'

'Shall we mention the possibility of not being rescued today?' queried Steve.

'No, better not.'

Gerald and Pedersen easily found their way up the icceberg, a climb of about seventy metres, to find themselves at the edge of a huge white plateau.

'On a thing this size, it's hard to realise we're floating and drifting along at two knots,' remarked Gerald.

'I know, it's incredible, isn't it.'

'Okay, we'd better turn on the radio and start listening.'

'Should we send out a message as well?'

'We might as well. What did the captain say, we're eight miles from the floe?'

'Yes.'

'Okay then... Mayday! Mayday! This is the *Isis*, this is the *Isis*. We are on a large tabular iceberg one and a half miles long, drifting north at about two knots. We abandoned our ice floe at six *am*. We are no longer on the floe, but eight miles northwest. Everyone is safe.'

They sent out a message every fifteen minutes, listening in between-times. Staff members joined them on and off, bringing provisions, or just coming up to see what it was like.

'Will passengers be coming up as well?' Gerald asked Steve on his visit.

'No, I don't think so, I told them it was not very safe getting up, but we'll see. It's quite an experience – I've certainly never been on top of a tabular iceberg before.'

Just before twelve, Gerald was chatting with Pedersen when he suddenly exclaimed 'Shhhh! I think we may have something.'

They listened intently and heard a faint voice speaking above the crackle of the static, which was hard to make out at first. However, the message slowly became clearer and after about ten minutes they had worked out what was being said, although, in return, it became obvious that their own message could not be heard.

As the news of contact with the outside world spread, other staff members and officers joined them, although the captain elected to stay below. Pat set off a couple of rescue flares in quick succession.

'Captain, captain,' Pedersen radioed down once it was clear what was being said, 'this is the message we've received. The helicopter is over the position where it found us yesterday, but visibility is not good and it has so far found no traces of us. Of course we will now have drifted well away from there. It was delayed this morning both by thick fog at Seymour Island and because overnight it became iced-up with wet snow which subsequently froze. The ice has only just been cleared off. The icebreaker was also delayed by ice and bad weather, and is now due at three pm. However, the icebreaker says it is tracking us using the *Isis'* emergency beacon whose signal it is receiving loud and clear – it should easily find us, it says. Oh, and an aeroplane will start searching for us as well, but we couldn't quite work out when it would be here.'

'Of course,' said Steve, 'the emergency beacon.'

'What's that?' asked AB.

'Well, all ships have them nowadays. They are activated by seawater, and if a ship sinks they float clear, beaming up the position to a satellite.'

'But that will be leading the rescue effort away from us,' noted AB.

'That's right.'

'Oh shit, Steve! What are we going to do?'

A short while later, Steve and Captain Buchan went to find Garry and Derek who were preparing lunch.

'What's the menu?' asked Steve. 'Baked beans and cheese again?

'No,' Garry replied, 'at least not baked beans. Mixed vegetables, which we will be heating up as a kind of broth with some rice, and cheese.'

'How's the food lasting out, Garry?' asked the captain.

'Well, a hundred and thirty people get through quite a lot. I would say about two days at full rations, maybe two and a half. After that we would have enough chocolate and biscuit for, say another two days.'

'Enough to keep our stomachs feeling full? Or just enough to keep hunger away?'

'The latter, I'd say.'

'If we tried to make the food last twice as long, say a week, would that be possible? How hungry would we feel?'

'Mm, let me see. There'd be enough calories perhaps, enough to keep us going. What would you say Derek?'

'Yes, that'd probably be about right, but you'd probably not feel satisfied after meals. A week would be the maximum, I'd say. But, captain, you're not suggesting we'd be here a week?'

'No, of course not. I'm just assessing the situation. How's the fuel doing? How much of the drum have we used so far?'

'I'm not sure,' replied Garry, 'let's check.'

They all went over to the petrol drum, shook it a bit, then peered inside.

'Okay, thanks,' said the captain, 'see you at lunchtime. Come on Steve, we must talk.' They walked over to the edge of the iceberg and peered out over the ice-free sea.

'Visibility is only about a couple of miles at most,' the captain started, 'and we must by now be a good fifteen miles from our camp on the ice floe. By the time the ice-breaker arrives we'll be nearer twenty-five – probably well outside their search area. And they'll be looking eastwards, imagining, of course, that we're drifting downwind with the pack ice, not on this damned berg! It's not looking good.'

'Do you think, if they don't find us in the pack, they will work out what has happened?'

'Hard to say. Our direction is counter-intuitive, but someone who knows the Weddell Sea well could perhaps speculate. However, there're a lot of icebergs around and we'll only be found if they come upon us by chance. And, until the weather clears, there is little chance of that. There is also the debris we left in the pack, torn liferafts and zodiacs. They are more likely to think we have foundered.'

'But they'd find no bodies, and we wouldn't all sink, would we? Not wearing lifejackets? You can't lose over a hundred people that easily, can you?'

'Probably not,' replied the captain. 'But would they know if we had been wearing jackets or not?'

'Maybe we should have stayed on the floe?'

'Did you think so at the time?'

'No.'

'Well, there you are.'

'We should have left some message, perhaps.'

'Yes, perhaps.'

They both stood for a few minutes staring out at the empty sea. Steve was the first to speak.

'Do you think Dill was right? Is this berg likely to run aground at the Danger Islands?'

'Very probably.'

'When?'

'It's about seventy miles, say two days.'

'Gosh, that's a thought. What happens when a berg this size runs aground? Does it stop suddenly and shake us off? Or slowly grind to a halt?'

'I have no idea, probably no-one has.'

'That's true. I doubt anyone has been on a berg before as it grounds. And when it has grounded, what then?'

'We'd better make for shore, the nearest island.'

'And set up camp there?'

'Yes,' answered the captain. 'A berg can always break-up and drift off again. Best to be on land where at least we all know where we are, and there'll probably be a source of food.'

'Seals and penguins?'

'Of course. This berg's no good, it's too steep ever to be used by penguins, but I'll bet there are some rookeries on the Danger Islands.'

'And from there we could send off a rescue team in the zodiac – I suppose Hope Bay would be the nearest base. How far is it from there?'

'About eighty miles, I'd say.'

'My God,' Steve exclaimed, 'fuel! Have we enough? We need it for cooking as well.'

'Why do you think I was checking the barrel just now?'

'What was your conclusion?'

'Touch and go.'

'And another thing, what about oil? – the outboard's a two-stroke. Have we got any?'

'I don't know. We'd better check.'

'And the worst-case scenario? What if we miss the islands altogether, and set off into the South Atlantic? Do we send out the boat to the nearest land, the Danger Islands, to try to raise the alarm? Or keep it with us on the berg?'

'We can't if we find we have no oil.'

Once more they lapsed into silence, broken finally by Steve, 'I suppose we should let the passengers know what's happening. Which scenario do we give them?'

'The most optimistic, always the most optimistic,' responded the captain. 'While at the same time we ourselves prepare for the worst.'

'Should we cut down rations, then?'

'Yes, perhaps – come tea tonight.'

'And should we tell them that we might end up on the Danger Islands?'

'Mm. I'm not sure. What do you think?', queried the captain.

'I think that telling them that, if we're not rescued, we will at least end up near land would be a good thing. Otherwise they might have visions of forever drifting in the southern ocean, slowly starving to death.'

'You're right, I'm sure.'

Soon after, Steve assembled everybody and briefed them on the facts, finishing with, 'any questions?'

'Can we be sure, if we are not found,' asked Martin, 'that we will run aground rather than drift away into the ocean?'

'Pretty certain. However, as we don't know our exact course...'

'Yes we do,' interrupted John, 'we're heading on a bearing of forty-five degrees at a rate of one and a half knots.'

'How do you know that?'

'I've got a GPS.'

'Have you? That's fantastic! We didn't know and ours got waterlogged. Could you loan it to us? In fact, why don't you give it to the captain now, and he can tell us where we're likely to end up.'

'Certainly,' said John, walking over to where he was standing. 'Here you are, captain.'

There was general silence for a minute or so while the captain made his calculations, and then announced, 'good news. Our current course will take us right into the middle of the Danger Islands, and we are unlikely to deviate much before then. And we should arrive about midday the day after tomorrow – if we are not rescued before then, of course.'

Chapter 15

After lunch Annie and Damien asked Bill if they could climb up the iceberg.

'I don't know,' he replied, 'you'd better ask Steve.'

'Do you think it safe, dear?' put in Dottie.

'Well the crew have been going up and down all morning and I've been watching – nobody has fallen.'

'Damien and I would like to go up,' persisted Annie, 'there's not much to do here.'

'Go and ask Steve.'

'Okay.'

'And I'll come up with you,' Bill added.

They found Steve talking with the ship's doctor.

'How's Angus?' asked Annie impulsively.

'Okay,' the doctor answered, 'no better and no worse. I'm having to give him painkillers for his knee, and he has to stay put.'

'Which makes him frustrated,' added Steve.

'What about Arthur?' queried Bill.

The doctor glanced at Annie and Damien. 'No. Go on,' said Bill, 'news travels so fast amongst us that they would find out anyway.'

'Well, Arthur's not looking too good. His heartbeat is still irregular and he's lapsing in and out of consciousness. He hasn't spoken a word all day.'

'He never did say much,' put in Damien, 'he was always too drunk.'

'That's enough, Damien,' said Dottie crossly.

'But it's true!'

'Thank you doc,' cut in Bill. 'What we're really here for is to ask Steve if Annie and Damien can go up to the top of the iceberg? In fact, I wouldn't mind having a try myself. What do you think, Steve?'

'Mm. It's probably a good idea to keep the troops happy, it's certainly a bit limited down here. However, the route's steep and slippery in one place, and I don't think it would be safe for everyone.'

'Could you put up a rope?' asked Bill.

'Probably...' Steve paused. 'We'll have the crew cut steps, and put up a rope where necessary.'

'Does that mean we'll have to wait? I'm sure we can manage the climb now,' Annie pleaded.

'I'll tell you what, then. I'll take you two up now, and I will make an announcement when we are ready for everyone else. It might take a bit of time to cut the steps as we have only one axe.'

'Thanks,' said Bill.

Steve asked Pat to set up a work party for the route, and then took Damien and Annie up to the top.

'Gosh, this is scary,' said Annie half way up, 'if I slip I'll slide straight into the sea – and probably squash a penguin!'

'Don't be silly, scaredy-cat,' Damien responded, 'it's easy.' But he took Steve's hand all the same.

'Wow, this is fantastic,' gasped Annie as they crested the top, 'it's huge. I'll race you, Damien, over there, to where Gerald is standing.'

'You're on.' They ran at full speed, both reaching Gerald at about the same time.

'Me, I won!' shouted Damien.

'No I did, didn't I Gerald?'

'I think it was a dead heat,' laughed Gerald diplomatically.

'This would make a great football pitch,' suggested Damien, 'have we got a football?'

'No, I'm sure we haven't.'

'We'll have to make one, then.'

'What out of?' asked Annie.

'I don't know. We'd have to be careful not to kick it over the side, though.'

'That's true,' said Steve as he finally caught up with them, 'and don't go too near the edge.'

'Can we walk anywhere we like?' Annie queried.

'There may be some crevasses, so we'd better be careful until we've checked it out. In fact, let's do that now, let's walk round the berg together. Don't run too far ahead... Any more radio messages, Gerald?'

'No.'

Unlike the platform below which was mainly hard ice, the top of the berg was snow-covered, with the possibility that the snow was hiding deep crevasses. After walking about a kilometre they came to a slight depression cutting across their path.

'Stop,' called out Steve, 'that's a crevasse. Don't walk on it – it could be only a thin bridge of snow with a deep drop below.'

'All the way down to the sea?'

'Possibly.'

Annie backed off carefully.

'But don't worry,' Steve continued, 'we're quite safe here. We'll follow it along, and see if we can get round it.'

But the crevasse appeared to go almost the full width of the berg, a distance of about five hundred metres, so they decided to turn back.

'Hadn't we better mark it, Steve, so nobody falls in by mistake?' asked Annie.

'Good idea, we could build a line of cairns out of snow. Do you want to start doing that?'

'Yes, we could make snowmen, or, better still, snow penguins!'

'Right then, we'll build them, let me see... About this far away from the crevasse, say ten metres, and make them about a metre tall.'

'How far apart?'

'About thirty metres.'

'How much is that?'

'Oh, about fifty of your paces. Get started, I'll go and get you some help, and keep well away from that hollow!'

After Steve had left, Damien suggested that they test out the snowbridge over the crevasse. 'Maybe we can get to the other side.'

Annie stared at him. 'Don't be stupid, you heard what Steve said. You could fall all the way down to the sea.'

'I was only joking!'

Steve and AB had volunteered for the midnight watch listening-in to the radio. There had been great excitement earlier in the evening, soon after supper, when an aeroplane was heard flying overhead. A flare was fired from the top of the berg and they all watched it disappear up into the mist. Although the sound of the aeroplane

soon died away, not to return, this first concrete sign of the outside world that day cheered them all up, making the group feel that they were no longer alone in the Weddell Sea. Everyone had gone back into their liferafts with comments such as, 'we'll definitely be rescued tomorrow,' 'It will not be long now,' and 'Only one more night!'

It felt eerie on the platform as Steve and AB set off up the slope. There was not a breath of wind, and mist was swirling around the ice cliffs that soared above them, with a faint glow coming down from above. As they climbed, this glow increased and they saw the moon ebbing and flowing through the fog. Broaching the summit, the mist had cleared completely, revealing a stark, cold scene, as if created by the Snow Queen herself. The surface of the berg was roughly etched a harsh black-tinted white, cold and aloof as only frozen places can be, and the sky above, gently hissing with stars, was a deep, finely etched, white-tinted black. But it was the moon that held the eye and it dazzled the surface of the sea of fog all around them above which the iceberg soared, it covered the fog with a frozen whiteness.

AB gasped, and Steve felt a tightening of her hand in his. 'I just don't believe it,' was all she whispered as they crunched across the now-frozen snow, walking with delicate care as the sound of their steps was unseemingly loud. Few words were exchanged as they relieved the preceding watchkeepers of their duties, and it was not long before the whole world before them was theirs alone.

'Let's go for a walk,' whispered AB, for it was a night of whispers.

For a long while they walked slowly without talking, before AB surprised Steve by saying, 'I saw you with Annie and Damien today. You seemed to be having fun.'

'Yes.'

'Steve, what are our chances?'

'Our chances? I have no idea, but we could probably survive the winter if we had to. Others have.'

'The winter? Everybody?' and she lapsed into silence.

'Why, AB, are you frightened?'

'Of course I'm frightened. Oh Steve!' and she turned round and gave him a tight hug. They remained clasped together a long time, allowing the great iceberg beneath them to continue, unmoving, on its northward journey.

Steve whispered, 'I love you', followed by a light kiss on her lips. He felt her body respond immediately, 'I love you Steve, I really love you,' and she pulled his head towards her. It was not long before they were both on the ground, oblivious to the frozen snow below…

They lay side by side on their backs, their hands gently clasped, looking up at the stars.

'AB?'

'Yes Steve?

'If we get through this, will you marry me?'

'Yes, I will. Yes, Steve, I will.'

She burst into tears and he rolled over to comfort her... Steve awoke with a start. 'The radio, we've not been listening to the radio.'

Steve hauled AB to his feet. 'Come on, let's walk a bit more.'

'Are we formally engaged?' she asked.

'Yes, of course.'

'Shall we announce it generally?'

'Why not? But I'm afraid the ring will have to wait!'

'That's not good enough!'

'Huh!'

'When shall we get married?'

'As soon as we are home.'

'Yes. And I've been thinking.'

'What?'

'Would you mind if I asked you to call me Annabel from now on?'

'Why?'

'Well, AB has sort of stuck, but I'm not sure if I like it.'

'Do you want everyone to change?'

'No, just you.'

They continued on through the moonlight, on top of the world.

'You know,' said Annabel, 'tonight is so beautiful, so perfect, so aethereal, and yet yesterday, bobbing up and down on that floe, the gale howling and waves crashing...'

'Yes, the Antarctic's like that. It is wild, wild nature, beautiful and cruel, beautiful and cruel at the same time. Have you realised snow is the same? One minute it is soft, soft as down, gentle, delicate; the next minute it is as hard as ice, avalanching down on top of you.'

'Good and bad at the same time.'

'Like God, a totality of opposites.'

'How do you mean?'

'Well. God encompasses all the goodness and beauty of the world, but also all its terror and cruelty – I've often thought that the devil, Satan, must also be part of God – perhaps good can only exist in relation to its opposite. Why else, in the Lord's prayer does Jesus ask God "to lead us not into temptation"? Who is doing the leading – surely it must be God, the devil, himself?'

'I hadn't thought of that... Do we want a church wedding?'

Next morning most people awoke early because of a feeling of stuffiness in the liferafts, which were glowing inside a brighter orange than normal. Bill was the first to stick his head outside.

'My God, sunshine, and it's really bright out here.'

He brought his head in, blinked his eyes, and asked 'Dottie, did we pack any sunglasses?'

'I don't remember.'

'Well, we'd better check.'

'I've got mine,' said Annie.

'So have I,' added Damien.

It turned out at breakfast, which consisted of tea, biscuits and chocolate, that about a third of the people had no sunglasses – an item not considered during the hasty packing in the last minutes of the *Isis*. Jim pointed out that, with a clear sky and the intense reflection of sunlight off the berg, snowblindness could become a problem even after half an hour of exposure to unprotected eyes.

'There's three things you can do to protect your eyes if you have no glasses,' he said, 'and whatever you do, you don't want to get snowblindness – I know from experience!

'Firstly you can stay in the liferaft on a shift system, arranging to share sunglasses with somebody who has a pair. Secondly you can stay sitting near the edge of the berg, looking out over the sea. Thirdly, anyone who's interested, I can show you how to make a pair, using an old Inuit design. This will involve making a slit in a piece of cardboard, and there's plenty of that from the food boxes, and wearing it like a mask, using string or shoelaces or whatever to hold it on.

'I will now hand over to Steve, who has something to tell us.'

Steve called AB over to him. 'I suggest everyone make full use of this sunshine to dry everything out – you'll find that in the Antarctic air things dry very quickly. Also you'll be interested to know we are roughly in the place where Captain Larsen's boat, the *Antarctic*, went down. The small, dark island you will see in the distance from the top of the berg is Paulet Island, where he and his crew wintered. Meanwhile, I have an important announcement to make. Last night I asked AB if she would marry me and,' he turned to kiss her, 'we are now engaged.'

Cheering and clapping broke out spontaneously. 'What's more, you are all invited to the wedding.'

'When's the happy day?' someone shouted out.

'As soon as we can get hold of a vicar and book a church!'

All morning AB found people coming up to her, kissing and hugging. ‘Congratulations,' they all said. And likewise Steve found people shaking his hand, and clapping him on his back, and hugged by some.

After Steve's announcement, it had been Gerald's turn to address the group. 'I have a suggestion to make, although it was Damien who gave me the idea. Yesterday most of you made it to the top of the berg, and you all saw how flat it was. When Damien first went up, he said it would make a great football pitch, and I agree.

'Well, I propose a football tournament today, a football tournament. We could have four teams: the Estonian crew, the staff and officers, and two passenger teams – or more if enough you are willing. What do you all think?'

'What about a football?' called out Bill.

'We'd have to carve one out of ice, perhaps smaller than a normal ball as it would be hard on the feet. In fact, I would recommend that each team make their own to practice with, and we use the best one for the tournament. We could practice this morning – there's plenty of space for every team to do this – and have the tournament in the afternoon.'

The idea was accepted with enthusiasm, and Gerald concluded with, 'remember what Jim said about snowblindness – every player and spectator will need sunglasses. Oh, and I also suggest that each team choose a colour and you swap clothes about to achieve this. I would also like volunteers from those not playing to help mark out and level the pitch. Any volunteers for that meet me at the top of the path in half an hour, and anyone who wants to try making sunglasses should join Jim now.'

While cutting up cardboard for the improvised glasses, Martin suggested, 'couldn't we burn some of these boxes to raise smoke to draw attention to ourselves?'

'Good idea,' said Jim. 'We should get together everything flammable, carry it to the top and burn it.'

'Not quite everything, I hope. We need to keep some for loo paper.'

Jim called Pat over, who fully agreed with the plan. ‘Okay, I'll arrange it.'

However, it turned out there was not really a lot to burn, and they did not want to waste too much of the valuable petrol on the fire. Although a lot of smoke was produced with the wet cardboard, it did not rise high in the air as expected, but only rose so far and then spread sideways, mirroring the fog bank to the south that they had emerged from that morning. 'There must be a temperature inversion,' Pat concluded.

To any onlooker it would have been a surreal site to see Gerald's volunteers stamping the snow flat with their feet, walking in close line across the flat top of an iceberg alone in the middle of the Antarctic Ocean. 'It reminds me of those pictures of prisoners of war being forced to walk line abreast,' remarked Steve.

The carved ice-football worked well, and the football tournament was judged to be a great success. They had snow cairns marking the corners and goalposts, and lines of food tins marking the boundary of the pitch. At Annie's insistence, the cairns at one end of the pitch were in the shape of penguins, and the other end in the shape of polar bears. 'The penguin and polar bear ends,' she explained, 'to match the alternating penguin and polar bear cairns we have made in front of the crevasse.'

The four teams played a round robin (or 'a round penguin' as Annie insisted), each match consisting of two ten-minute halves. The captain had volunteered to be the unbiased referee and the spectators were vociferous in their support. As the end of the afternoon drew near, it became clear that the Estonian team were destined to win the 'Iceberg Championships' and the shouting from the crew at the touchline became ecstatic.

The captain was pleased to present to Grigori, the captain of the winning team, the 'Iceberg Cup', carved out of a piece of ice by the ship's carpenter. 'My team will treasure this cup as long as it lasts,' he responded.

That evening the cup was placed centre stage while Grigori had everybody learning Estonian songs, 'all decent,' he assured, and thereafter conducted the singing where virtually everyone joined in.

The next day was as fine as the one just passed, not a cloud in the sky, not a ripple of wind on the matching blue sea – although there were plenty of ripples from porpoising penguins. In the distance, appearing as a bank of cloud to the uninitiated, could be seen the featureless ice cap of Joinville Island.

The captain had everyone together for a briefing after the now standard breakfast of tea, biscuits and chocolate. 'First of all,' he said, 'Dill has some facts to tell us. Go ahead Dill.'

'I've calculated that this iceberg could contain almost a billion tonnes of ice: it is about three kilometres long, and half a kilometre wide, and about three hundred and fifty metres – a thousand feet for the uninitiated – about three hundred and fifty metres thick. This

last figure is based on a height of seventy metres above the water, and about four fifths of an Antarctic berg are below water. That all makes a total weight of seven hundred million tonnes. In practice it could range from half a billion to a billion tonnes.'

'Pretty impressive, don't you think?' continued Captain Buchan. 'The trouble is that none of us, perhaps no one in the world, knows what it feels like to be on such a berg when it runs aground at nearly two knots. We know that they don't break up, but we don't know whether it will feel like a feather landing or like an earthquake. It may depend on whether the seabed is mud or rock, and I don't know what it's like just here.'

'How long until we ground?' shouted out Martin.

'Hard to say exactly, it depends on how the bottom shoals. But I've been up top this morning, and the Danger Islands are visible about five miles off with the first bergs grounded only about a mile away, so it could be anytime now. Until we ground, I don't want anyone on top of the berg, or using the path up, and I don't want anyone within thirty feet, ten metres, of the edge, or under the ice cliffs in case bits break off. In fact, I think it would be best if you stayed sitting in your liferafts, although I am afraid it could be for anything up to three hours.'

Chapter 16

In the liferaft, which was becoming hut and stuffy owing to the sun beating down on it, John was complaining to Liam of sore eyes. 'They feel a bit gritty, and are particularly sore when I'm outside in the sunshine.'

'Sounds like you've got mild snowblindness,' said Liam.

'What can I do about it?'

'Nothing, except keep them dark – wearing a blindfold's probably best. Weren't you wearing sunglasses yesterday?'

'Well my cardboard ones kept falling off and they got in the way of my camera, so I probably didn't wear them as much as I should have. Does this mean I can't do any filming today?'

'Yes, definitely. You must keep your eyes in total darkness if you want to get better.'

'How long for?'

'Until they stop hurting, a day or two maybe.'

Annie burst in, 'I can film for you, John, if you show me how.'

'I've seen you take lots of photographs, but have you used a video camera before?'

'I have,' interrupted Damien. 'Please, John, can I film for you?'

'Yes, I don't see why not. But don't take too much film, there's not much left. Annie, can you keep an eye on him, and make sure he doesn't waste the film?'

'Yup, I'll do that.'

'Hey, John,' said Bill, 'can you play us back some of the scenes you've taken so far? Such as the ship going down, and our life on the floe?'

'I thought you weren't interested in filming?'

'Not particularly, but it would be interesting to remind ourselves what we've been through. It seems ages ago since we were on the floe.'

'Do we need reminding? It seems too horrible to contemplate,' put in Miss Edelston. She had recently taken to sitting next to Henry and, putting her arm through his, adding, 'and this crash thing, what are we to expect?'

'You heard what the captain said,' remarked Martin, 'it could be light as a feather.'

'He also said it could be an earthquake.'

'Well,' continued Martin, 'that might only entail a bit of shaking. I can't see that we would come to any harm.'

'It might cause the ice cliff above us to crash down,' added Damien, 'that would be exciting!'

'Damien,' said Melissa, 'don't frighten Miss Edelston.'

'Or me,' said Averil.

'Or me,' added Dottie.

'Maybe we should put all the liferafts in the water,' suggested Martin, 'and sit it out in safety.'

'But,' replied Bill, 'one zodiac couldn't hold onto them all and we might drift away.'

'We could keep them moored to the berg,' Martin continued.

'That would be worse. Bits of ice might fall off on top of us, or the whole berg might tip up underneath us, or bits of ice float up and hit us from below.'

'If the berg tipped up, we might be better in the water rather than up here.'

'Stop it,' interrupted Melissa. 'You are letting your imaginations run riot. I think this iceberg will just drift gently to a halt, and we will not even notice it. And I don't think, Bill, it would be good at this stage to have reruns of our experiences to date on John's camera – it would be too traumatic for some. Let's talk about something else.'

The conversation lapsed into silence for a while, broken by Bill asking if anyone had seen Arthur today.

'I have,' said Liam, 'and his condition is unchanged – barely conscious, with an irregular heartbeat.'

'Do you think he'll survive?'

'There you go again,' cut in Melissa. 'Can we have a more cheerful conversation, please?'

Again there was a long silence, this time broken by Martin. 'I have an idea. You remember, and it seems like months ago now, that we all told each other stories one night in the hut, our most embarrassing moments I think it was, well why don't we go round everyone in turn and we each tell the story of the most exciting thing that has happened in our lives to date.'

'I think that would be what's happening now,' put in Piers.

'I'm sure that's true of all of us, but this story hasn't finished yet. What do you think of my idea?'

There being no answer to the contrary, Martin went on to say, 'okay I'll start. Once, when on assignment in Hong Kong...'

About two hours later Jim poked his head in the tent to find everyone dozing gently in the heat.

'Psst,' he said quietly, 'we've arrived.'

Annie was the first to open her eyes. 'Hello Jim. What did you say?'

At the sound of her voice most of the others awoke as well.

'I said we've arrived.'

'Where?' somebody called out.

'We've reached the Danger Islands, we've grounded safely. The captain says we can all come outside now.'

'But I didn't feel anything,' said Melissa.

'Neither did I,' added Damien.

'No,' responded Jim, 'none of us did. But Captain Buchan and Pat have been up top and confirmed that we are definitely stopped, only about a mile and a half from the nearest island.'

'Well, that's great news!' said Martin. 'It looks like this might be a successful disaster after all – we may all end up being famous!'

'Famous,' perused Melissa, 'I never thought of that. John, take good care of that camera, and you Annie – you may yet become famous photographers, selling your pictures for a fortune!'

'And me,' put in Damien, 'John said I could do some filming.'

'Well, whatever you do, Damien, don't drop the camera! It could be all our ways to a fortune.'

'But we've already got a fortune,' replied Damien.

'That's true... Well, fame then!'

'If I may interrupt this fortune telling,' cut in Jim, 'I've a bit more to say. The captain said that, while the weather's so good, he'd like us all to set up camp on the Danger Islands, the nearest island, as soon as possible...'

'Camping on the Danger Islands,' Damien interrupted, 'that sounds spooky! Why are they called the Danger Islands? Are they haunted?'

'No, but they are probably so-called because ships rounding the end of the Peninsula could easily run into them. As I was saying, though, Captain Buchan would like us all ashore as soon as possible. However, it will take a bit of time to break camp and get the boats in the water. While this is being done, he suggests you all go up to the top of the berg as this will be your last opportunity to do so. Before doing this, though, could you empty the liferaft and put all your kitbags into an orderly heap. The crew will load them into the boats once launched, and you will be called down by boat when ready.'

'How long, would you say?' asked Bill.

'I think you have at least half an hour.'

'Hey, Annie,' suggested Damien, 'shall we take up the football and have a last knock-about on the pitch?'

'Yes, lets. You be goalie, and I'll shoot.'

'No, you be goalie, and I'll shoot!'

The football pitch was as they left it the day before, although the touchline of tin cans had been removed. There was, though, more to see from the top than the day before for around them lay a graveyard of huge tabular icebergs the same as their own.

'It must be virtually the whole of the Larsen Ice Shelf,' said Bill, 'what a sight!'

'And the Danger Islands look like tabular icebergs as well with their flat tops, even though they're black,' added Martin.

'Pinkish, mostly, it looks like. That means there must be lots of penguin rookeries there, the pink coming from the krill they eat, of course. Quiet, a moment, I think we may even be able to hear them.' They both listened intently for a minute or so.

'Yes,' agreed Martin, 'you can hear a faint cackle, even from this distance.'

'In fact, I think you can smell them as well!' added Bill. They both sniffed.

'You can, and we will soon be camping amongst that smell, how horrible! At least this berg's been clean and fresh.'

'That's true. There doesn't seem to be much penguin-free space on the nearest island. We'll probably have to camp right amongst them.'

'At least we won't starve!'

'Hang-on, Annie seems to be signalling to us. She and Damien certainly seem to be having a good time up here. Let's go and see what they want.'

They walked the length of the football pitch and beyond, to the line of cairns marking the edge of the crevasse.

'I thought you were going to play football, Annie,' called Bill.

'We are, but we're playing tig first. Come and look at this.'

Bill and Martin walked to the edge of the crevasse, or at least as near as they dared. Along much of its length the snow-bridge had disappeared, to reveal a gaping blue gash disappearing down out of sight.

'That's incredible,' said Martin.

'It must have been when we ran aground,' suggested Bill. 'The crevasse, or at least the ice either side of it must have flexed, causing the collapse of the snow-bridge. It's beautiful, though. What a colour, what a wonderful deep blue!'

'The whole berg looks as though it could split in two just here, don't you think?'

'Yes, I suppose it could. If it did it might cause the whole berg to tip up and drop us into the sea. Maybe it's just as well we're leaving, smelly penguins or no! Let's go and find the others, I'm sure they'd be interested to see it. Come on Annie, come on Damien, I don't think it's safe here.'

As Annie and Damien headed back to the football pitch, Annie whispered to him, 'see, I said it would be stupid to try and cross that crevasse, you could have fallen all the way down.'

'I was never going to!'

The contrast could not have been more great between their arrival on the iceberg during the storm and their journey off. With mirror calm seas and no pressure of time, they could go ashore at their leisure. While the liferafts were being launched down the side of the berg, Steve, Gerald and Jim set off in the zodiac on a reconnaissance mission to the nearest island.

'That's strange,' said Gerald, as he went down the ice-steps to the zodiac, 'the bottom step's under water.'

'So it is...' Steve responded. 'The berg must have tipped over a bit a bit without us noticing. Certainly time to be leaving!'

The engine started first pull and they sped off to the island, but, as the zodiac drew near, the noise and smell became overpowering. ‘We'll probably soon get used to them both,' Gerald remarked.

They landed easily on a shingle beach, and made their way up through the Adelie penguins who took absolutely no notice of them. 'Look,' called out Steve, 'there're some seals over there – elephant seals.'

'That's good,' commented Jim, 'but there doesn't seem to be anywhere just here clear of penguins for our campsite.'

'True enough. Let's gain some height and prospect from there.'

'Good thinking!'

They clambered up a rocky slope, choosing a route through the rookery that was relatively clear of birds owing it to be an access route used by the birds themselves. From a vantage point they looked down and took stock of the situation.

'I suppose the ideal site would be a flat area clear of rocks near the sea, with an easy landing, clear of penguins and with a some shelter from the prevailing wind,' said Steve – to which they all agreed.

Having spotted some potential sites, they set off to investigate them, but, after looking at a few, Gerald concluded that finding a campsite was like buying a house: 'You have list of criteria you're looking for, such as a good view, nice garden, good location, so many rooms, and so on, but always have to compromise on some of them in the end.' It was the same with their campsite.

They did find a relatively flat area, albeit stony, where a late-lying snow patch, now gone, had obviously discouraged penguins from nesting, but it was not particularly sheltered. 'We'll have to clear

some stones before we place the rafts,' said Steve, 'and, if need be, we can always build some stone walls for shelter.'

'What about those?' said Jim, pointing to a few late-breeding penguins, 'they'll be in the way of the tents.'

'We'd better move them. In fact, let's do it now before the passengers arrive.' They walked over to the birds, shooed them off their nests of pebbles, and threw the eggs away, putting up with pecked ankles in the process.

'It's too late in the season for these eggs to have any chance,' noted Gerald, 'and the skuas will enjoy them.'

'What shall we do about these chicks?' asked Steve.

'We'll move them to those now deserted nests over there,' replied Gerald, 'and let's hope the parents follow. Again, because it's so late, these small ones probably wouldn't survive anyway.'

As they walked back to the zodiac, Jim pointed out that there was not a lot of ice about on the shore to use for drinking water, 'and I haven't seen any clean freshwater either.'

'Well,' suggested Steve, 'we'll just have to collect ice from where we can, and take it by zodiac to the beach.'

They cruised back to the berg and, once there, found the first liferaft was ready for towing. Thus began the third disembarkation of recent days.

Each round trip took about half an hour so it took about four hours to get everyone ashore. The sun still shone, the air was calm and many people were down to their shirtsleeves.

'It's hot, isn't it?' remarked Bill. 'And the feel of solid ground beneath our feet after three and a half days on ice is great.'

'It sure is,' said John, 'but feel it is all I can do because of this damn blindfold.'

'Well, that's your own fault!'

'I suppose so, but it makes it no better! Has Damien been filming?'

'He's hardly stopped. In fact, he's filming the setting up of the campsite at the moment.'

'Well, please stop him doing too much – I want some film left!'

'Okay. Do you fancy a cup of tea, John? Garry has some on the go.'

'Yes, why not?', and Bill guided John over to where the stove had been set up. Some distance away, sitting on some rocks by the shore, Bill could see the officers and staff gathered together for a briefing. 'I wonder how they're going to get us out of this one?' he remarked.

'I wonder,' replied John.

'At least being on dry land again makes you feel that we are at least getting somewhere.'

'I suppose so.'

'Right, what next?' queried Steve.

'What next indeed?' Captain Buchan responded.

'At least we will not be short of food,' Steve continued.

'You mean, we're going to be eating penguins and seals?' said Ingrid.

'Well,' replied Steve, 'if we're not rescued in the next day or two, what else are we going to eat? Each other?'

'And there doesn't seem to be much sign of rescue,' put in Pedersen. 'Since that aeroplane, we've seen or heard nothing.'

'Time for the boat journey, then,' said Jim.

'What boat journey?' asked Ingrid.

'To get help, of course,' replied Steve, 'in the zodiac. I've been discussing it with Jim, and we have enough petrol left to get the eighty miles or so to Hope Bay – as long as we stop using petrol for cooking.'

'You mean, eat raw meat?' interrupted Ingrid.

'No, of course not. We'd have to fall back on using the traditional blubber stove – burning animal fats. Have you not seen the elephant seals over there?'

'You mean we'd kill those seals, and burn their blubber?'

'Yes.'

Ingrid fell silent.

'What about oil for the outboard?' queried Jo. 'Surely without oil the engine would seize up well before Hope Bay? And you can't row or sail those boats.'

'That's true, but Jim and I have discussed that as well, and I've also discussed it with Arvo. We'll use penguin oil.'

There was a gasp from around the group. ‘Penguin oil?'

'Yes, penguin oil. If we boil down a few penguins we can collect the light oil from the surface, and mix it with the petrol.'

'Are you sure that it would work?' asked Jo.

'No, but there's no reason why it shouldn't.'

'And do you know the way to Hope Bay?'

'Near enough, it's quite straightforward. We head west between Dundee and Joinville Island until we reach the Antarctic Sound, and then head northwest up the Sound to Hope Bay. If we average, say, ten knots, quite slow to save fuel, we could do it in seven hours – weather permitting.'

'So you'd better head off as soon as possible while the weather holds?'

Steve looked up at the sky before answering. 'Yes, especially as there's high cloud coming in from the west. But it will take a little time to get the blubber stove set up, and melt down some penguins. We can't set off until the safety of everybody left behind is guaranteed – in case the zodiac doesn't make it.'

'You say "we",' noted Dill, 'does that mean that you'll be going for help? Who else?'

'No, not me. I've talked it over with the captain – over to you James.'

'Yes,' said the captain. 'Steve and I have discussed it. I think that navigation and seamanship will be critical to the journey, and the job falls to the ship's company. On the other hand, looking after the passengers is the role of the staff, and I think it best if Steve and Gerald stay behind.' Steve nodded, while Captain Buchan continued. 'We don't want too many people in the boat, so it will just be me and Pedersen, and Arvo – to look after the engine which, of course, is also critical.'

'So when will you be leaving?' asked Dill.

'First light tomorrow. We'll use the rest of today to distil and try out the penguin oil.'

'We'll need a try pot for that!' said Jim.

There then followed much discussion on which penguins to go for. Gerald said that ideally they should kill non-breeding penguins, so that no young would be left to starve to death, although non-breeders might be hard to identify amongst the throng. Steve suggested killing chicks, as these would be fat and, presumably oily – good for the engine, but possibly not good to eat. In the end they decided to kill experimentally both some chicks and adults, testing both for food and fuel value. Garry volunteered the galley crew to kill them by wringing their necks.

A lot of blubber would be needed as fuel to cook food for so many people, but how to catch and kill seals proved problematical. They realised why sealers used clubs for the purpose but, having nothing solid enough they could use as clubs, they decided on using a kitchen knife instead.

Unfortunately the seals were grouped within sight of the passengers and Steve thought it would not be good for morale to have them witness the seal killing. However, as there appeared to be no other seals in the vicinity, in the end Steve told the passengers what was about to happen. ‘It's our survival or theirs,' was how he put it, and suggested the squeamish go for a walk in the opposite direction.

Pedersen volunteered to wield the knife, as he said he was used to gralloching deer in his native Norway. However, although he managed to get one straight away, the others, alerted, lunged at him before heading for the safety of sea. Staff and crew tried to head them off, but it is difficult to change the mind of a lumbering

elephant seal, and all but one small one escaped; and even this small one gave Pedersen a nasty bite on the hand before it was killed.

No-one was quite sure how much blubber would come from the two seals, and how much cooking could be done with it, but, as Garry pointed out, at least they now had enough meat for a day or so and would not have to kill so many penguins.

By the end of the day the party were in a jovial mood. The weather remained dry and warm, the blubber stove appeared to work, albeit very smokily, they had all eaten as much seal meat as they could stomach, those who wanted had had an appetiser of penguin, and they had obtained enough penguin oil for the outboard – oil declared suitable by Arvo.

The zodiac would set off at dawn.

Chapter 17

Next morning was very different. Instead of the glorious sunshine of the day before, a cold, dank greyness permeated everything. The top of the island, albeit low, was lost in mist, with a damp wind blowing down interspersed with pellets of sleety snow. The horizon out to sea, where white horses were visible, had reduced to only a mile distant.

The zodiac had been loaded the day before, including enough food for five days, and was ready for launching. At first light, Captain Buchan with his crew of Pedersen and Arvo were standing around the boat talking with Ingrid, Steve and Pat.

'Are you sure it's sensible?' Steve was saying. 'You'll be in the open sea with no lee for the first thirty miles, heading straight into the wind and probably getting soaked. What is it? Force four?'

'Four to five,' said the captain. 'It will certainly be choppy out there.'

'And it could increase. What do you think?'

'I think we should get out of the lee of the island and see what it's like. The sooner we get help the better, and the weather could stay like this for days.'

'Are you sure, then?'

'Yes.'

'Right, let's get this show on the road.'

They slid the zodiac down the beach into the water, and Steve and Pat held it for Captain Buchan and his crew. The captain was the last to board and, before he did, Ingrid gave him a long hug.

'Good luck, and we hope to see you back here this evening with your rescue party,' said Steve.

'It may take longer than that with this headwind,' replied the captain, 'so we'll see you when we see you, but hopefully within a couple of days. Goodbye.'

'Goodbye and good luck.'

Steve, Pat and Ingrid stood on the shore watching the cat's paws of grey wind-rippled sea racing the boat to the horizon, and it was not long before the boat, with Captain Buchan standing proud at the tiller, looked increasingly small and vulnerable and disappeared out of sight.

Pat was the first to speak. 'Well, we're on our own now.'

'Yes,' added Ingrid, 'do you think we'll ever see them again?'

'I hope so, I sure hope so. But if anything goes wrong – the engine breaks down, the penguin oil causes a seizure, the boat is swamped... then they'll be blown eastwards into the Weddell Sea and no-one will ever see them again.'

'And we'll be left here...'

'Yes,' said Steve, 'everything is now out of our hands and all we can do is wait.'

'Have you the patience?' queried Pat.

'Probably not.' They lapsed into silence for a while, watching the wind making its patterns on the sea, before Steve continued. 'I suppose our job is to keep everyone occupied, to keep everyone busy so they are not just sitting round making each other miserable.'

'Which, on a miserable day like this, will be difficult,' added Ingrid.

'Absolutely,' agreed Steve. 'If they are outside too long they will get damp and cold, as well as walking penguin shit in and out of the tents, and if they stay inside all day they'll probably be at each other's throats by the evening.'

'And over everything hangs uncertainty.'

'And over everything hangs uncertainty. But we can't do anything about that, we'll just have to live from day to day.'

Breakfast still consisted of biscuits and chocolate, but the hot tea was late in coming that morning. The last of the petrol had gone off with the zodiac and the blubber stove in the damp, breezy conditions was reluctant to get going, and slow to heat things up when it did. Other than for calls of nature (there were designated toilet areas) passengers were rarely seen outside their liferafts until mid morning when Steve announced a programme of activities.

Various staff would be leading excursions: Gerald would take a party to study penguin behaviour, Dill to look for interesting rocks, Jim to see if they could find any signs of earlier human activity on the island, and Steve himself would lead an expedition of general interest to the top of the island. However, only about half the passengers elected to join these trips.

Meanwhile Pat kept the crew busy. The deck crew were employed building stone walls around the cooking area, something they regretted not having done the day before when the weather was better. They planned to use the tarpaulin for a roof, as on the floe, but using rocks proved harder than snow because their irregular shape made it difficult to build up the walls to the necessary height.

When finished, you could not stand upright in the kitchen, but at least the tarpaulin gave shelter from the wind. The other crew members were employed finding and collecting ice from along the shore for drinking water, and also looking to see if they could find any more seals.

Lunch consisted of a seal broth, which at least was hot, and in the afternoon the same excursions were offered again – this time with more takers. Seal-meat, cooked with baked beans, was the evening's offering.

Arthur died during the night. Together with Angus, Arthur had been staying in the liferaft with the ship's doctor and other officers and crew. In the morning when the doctor went to check on Arthur, he found him cold with no pulse.

'He's been dead a few hours,' the doctor said, 'and probably just faded away without feeling a thing. He's been barely conscious these past few days in any case, and his heart probably finally gave up. It must have been struggling for years.'

'What shall we do with him?' asked Pat.

'How do you mean?'

'Well, shall we cover him up and leave him in here until we are rescued? Or shall we go outside and bury him? And what about a funeral service? Do we need one? And who leads it?'

'I don't know.'

'No, nor do I. On a ship I think the captain is entitled to do the last rites, but we're not on a ship, and the captain's not here... Do you think he's reached Hope Bay yet?'

'I've no idea, although I hope so. We'd better hold a meeting to discuss the problem of Arthur. I'll go and find Steve.'

Pat left the tent, to find the great outdoors much as the day before, with a chill, damp wind, a wind that allowed no shelter, and low cloud and sleety rain. He went to Steve's tent and called him out and they both walked through the muddy guano to the shelter of the kitchen area. Once Pat had apprised Steve of the situation, Steve said that it was an issue that needed discussing in a wider forum.

'Do you mean,' asked Pat, 'that we should discuss what to do with Arthur with all the passengers and crew, or just the staff members?'

'I don't know, what do you think?'

'What do I think? I think we don't want a dead body lying around any longer than we have to. You know how superstitious sailors are about having a body on board. I think we should bury him as soon as possible, with a short service involving everybody. You never know, we may have an ex-vicar or lay reader amongst the passengers.'

'And what if we're rescued soon after?'

'Well, then we would have to disinter him. We'd probably have to in any case to take him home as relatives nowadays always insist on having the body to grieve over, although personally I can't see why. It should be no problem as the body won't decompose in this climate.'

'You're probably correct... So you think we should bury him as soon as possible?'

'Yes.'

'In that case we'd better clear an area of stones. Can you find a suitable place and arrange the crew to do that? Meanwhile I'll see if

I can find someone to do the funeral service. What do you say? Mid morning?'

'Yes, that sounds about right.'

As it turned out, there was a lay reader amongst the passengers and he led a brief memorial service for Arthur. Everyone attended, standing quietly and perhaps listening more to the sound of wind and sleet against their hoods than the words of the minister, and wondering, without admitting it to themselves, if Arthur's fate was to befall them all. Everyone saw his body being lowered onto the ground and the stones piled over, the ground being too frozen to allow for a grave to be dug. They filed quietly back to their liferafts.

'I've not seen a body before,' said Annie, 'have you Damien?'

'No I haven't.'

'It's funny. It looked so like Arthur, and yet wasn't at the same time. Do you understand, grandad?'

'Yes Annie. You may look the same when dead, but you're not really there. You've left your body.'

'To heaven?'

'Yes.'

'I wonder what Arthur's doing now?'

'Drinking, probably!' put in Damien. However, he received such dirty looks from everyone in the tent, that he shut up. After a pause, Annie continued.

'He probably didn't feel anything when he died, did he? He just faded away. That's the way I would want to die. But he probably had

been ill a long time, hadn't he grandad, and would have died whether he had come with us or not?'

'I expect so,' replied Bill and gave Annie a big hug. The tent, or rather its occupants, lapsed into silence, the tent itself flapping in the unceasing wind and the cackle of penguins remaining ever-present outside.

'The flapping of the tent will be something I'm sure I will remember for the rest of my life,' said Melissa. 'In fact, I do not think I'll ever want to stay in a tent again, not that I intend to – it would remind me too much of this God-forsaken island.'

'It's the uncertainty, more,' said Martin. 'Just not knowing how long we will be here, whether the whole winter – and that must be possible – or merely a few more minutes.'

'I've been thinking that too,' added Bill. 'Everyone admires Shackleton for his boat journey to South Georgia, but at least he was doing something. It must have been far more difficult for those left behind on Elephant Island, four months, wasn't it? – not knowing when rescue would come or even if it would ever come. Ernest Wild, who kept the group together in mind, body and soul for the miserable four months is, in my mind, much more of a hero than Shackleton.'

'That's true,' Martin added, 'we always value as heroes the outgoing, the go-getters. But these people do not make the best leaders, though they generally end up as such owing to the force of their personalities. More fool us, I suppose, we get the leaders we deserve! What I'm saying is that I agree with you Bill, Wild must have been a better leader than Shackleton.'

'Yes, but looking at it another way, it was Shackleton who organised the whole expedition in the first place, not Wild. There would have been no group for Wild to lead if it weren't for Shackleton! The same goes for Scott. Whatever you may say about Scott, he at least got off his backside and went to Antarctica. Most critics of his expedition probably hadn't or haven't the gumption to organise anything themselves.'

'Talking of organising things themselves,' cut in Melissa, 'I don't want to spend the whole day sitting in this tent listening to you two talking about the philosophy of expedition leadership. What can we do today? I saw enough of this island yesterday not to want to spend the whole day traipsing around learning about penguins, rocks, or whatever, and I'm sure that, after yesterday, we are all up to date with writing our diaries which seems to be the traditional occupation of trapped arctic explorers...'

'You're right, Melissa,' interrupted Martin, 'we do need to be doing something, rather than sitting around in this damp tent all day waiting for somebody to organise us. Any suggestions? You, Miss Edelston, what would you like to do today?'

'I don't know,' she replied. 'I don't really want to go outside in this weather; neither do I want to stay all day shivering in this liferaft. I do think, though, that it would be a good idea to build some memorial to Arthur.'

'That's a great idea,' said Melissa. 'We should build a monument in his memory. Let's all go outside and build a tower of rocks, so that future visitors to this island, if there are any of course, and we seem

to have discovered that there haven't been any in the past, at least they left no sign, so that future visitors will see it.'

'But before we dash outside and start heaping rocks on each other,' put in Martin, 'we need a design to work to. Any suggestions?'

'I think it should be in the shape of a whisky bottle,' suggested Bill. 'No, only joking!'

'Not a bad idea, all the same,' Melissa responded, 'although it might be hard to get the shape right.'

In the end, after much discussion, they agreed on a simple beehive-shaped cairn. Martin left the tent to discuss the concept with Steve, who agreed wholeheartedly with the scheme. Thereafter everyone left the liferaft, including John whose eyes had recovered enough for him to go about unaided. Oblivious to the grey weather, they decided on a prominent location for the cairn, laid out its base with a ring of rocks, and began its building. Martin and Bill, by default, ended up supervising the others, learning the skills of dry-stone walling as they went along. Stones could be heaped haphazardly in the centre, but the outer wall had to have its rocks neatly placed, interlocking so as to support the whole structure.

'I feel like a penguin,' remarked Bill. 'You know how they can spend a long time just looking for the right pebble for their nest, even though to you and me every pebble looks the same, well I feel the same when looking for just the right stone to fit into a particular part of the wall! It's satisfying in a way.'

'I agree wholeheartedly,' said Melissa. 'It's like looking for a piece of a jigsaw. Only one piece will do and there's pride in finding it!'

To everyone's surprise, therefore, they found building the cairn a surprisingly all-consuming and satisfying task, and folk from other liferafts, as well as various staff and crew members, joined in spontaneously to help. Miss Edelston and Henry wandered amongst the builders, giving unhelpful advice as needed.

While the cairn-building was going on, Steve, Gerald, Pat and Garry were discussing the food situation. 'The seal-meat's all but finished,' said Garry, 'and I hear there are no more seals in the vicinity at present.'

'That's true,' said Pat, 'and how's the blubber for cooking doing?'

'Getting low. In fact, probably not enough for lunch today.'

'I know it sounds horrible,' put in Steve, 'but we could always burn penguin oil. If we use the rest of the blubber to boil up penguins, we could drain off the oil, like we did for the outboard oil, and burn it for cooking. After all, we are not short of penguins, at least not at present. What are there, about a million on this island?'

'I'd say so,' answered Gerald, 'if not more.'

'If we are not rescued for a week or so,' continued Steve, 'we would seriously have to consider laying out a depot, probably a huge depot, for the winter. What was it? Larsen put a away a thousand penguins for twenty five people for a winter?'

'That's about right,' Gerald confirmed.

'Well, for a hundred and thirty we'd need a lot more. When will the penguins disappear out to sea, Gerald?'

'From here? Not long now, mid to late February I'd say.'

'Well, let's hope it won't come to that, but we'll have to kill a lot of penguins today for food and fuel. How many penguins per person would you say, Garry, from yesterday's experience.'

'Oh, I'm not sure. Perhaps about one penguin for three or four people.'

'We'd better get going then,' concluded Steve, 'I make that about thirty penguins. Including some for fuel, shall we go for about fifty? Which ones should we go for, Gerald, to have minimum impact on the population?'

'As I said the other day, ideally non-breeders, although these can be hard to spot, and also chicks.'

'What do you say, then? Fifty-fifty of each?'

'Sounds about right.'

Annie and Damien, who were getting a bit bored with heaving stones around, spotted a group of crew setting out from the camp area and ran over to them.

'What are you doing?' asked Annie.

'We going to collect some penguins for lunch,' replied Gerald.

'Can we come with you?'

'Certainly. Can you help us identify non-breeding penguins? Look for pairs standing around an empty nest and not involved in looking after crèches.'

'Okay.'

Annie and Damien proved particularly adept at identifying such birds and from then on were given full responsibility for finding them.

The memorial cairn was finished before darkness fell, and once completed, the builders stood around admiring their handiwork, reluctant to return once more to the tents.

'I enjoyed building that,' said Melissa.

'So did I,' said Bill. 'What shall we build tomorrow?'

'I've been thinking about that. How about a stone wall around our liferaft to give us shelter? In time we could make it into a hut.'

'What would we use as a roof?'

'I don't know. Maybe flat stones.'

'Have you seen any round here?'

'No, I don't think so.'

There was no change in the weather on this, their fourth day on the island, and neither was there a change in the menu from breakfast through to supper – penguin in various guises. There were no complaints about this monotonous diet, it all being eaten lustily. As Bill pointed out, meals were the high point of the day, and there was much discussion as to whether, when they were rescued, they would smuggle away some penguins to take home and offer their friends for dinner.

'I could appear on television,' suggested Melissa, 'in some cookery programme showing how to prepare nourishing penguin broth followed by delicate *escalopes de pinguin*.'

'I thought rice and dried beef, was your speciality,' said Martin.

'Well, that as well! Maybe this trip will result in the launch of my new career as celebrity chef!'

Derek, meanwhile, was having a difficult time cooking enough for everyone, it being a slow process extracting the penguin oil and getting the food hot enough.

'I couldn't keep this up all winter,' he admitted to Steve.

'Well, there would be plenty of people to help you, and I'm sure we'll find some more seals, which would be easier to cook and supply better fuel.'

'Let's hope so.'

'By the way, what supplies have we got left?'

'Plenty of penguins! But not a lot of our original food. I've saved up some goodies – it's mainly biscuits and chocolates we've got left – for a rainy day or some special occasion. We have enough tinned vegetables for a day or so, otherwise it will be living off the land from now on. When do we start hoarding penguins?'

'Not yet. We've still got a bit of time in hand.'

'What about fishing? Have you asked yet if anyone has a fishing line yet, or at least something that would do for one?'

'No, although maybe we could make one out of penguin gut, with a bent pin for a hook. Or perhaps we could uncoil a strand of rope.'

AB came up to join them. 'Did I hear you say fishing? Have we a line?'

'No,' replied Steve, 'but we were just wondering if we could make one.'

'This weather is depressing, isn't it Derek?' she said, 'but at least you can keep warm slaving over a hot stove.'

'Or not so hot, AB! It's giving out very little heat. On the other hand, if you want warming up...'

'Stop that, Derek, I know what you're going to suggest. Come on Steve, let's get away from this maniac!'

'Okay Annabel. Where shall we go?'

'Good question,' interrupted Derek, 'there're no bushes here to hide behind!'

'Shut up!' said AB.

Steve and AB walked slowly along the shore, stopping now and then to let a penguin pass, or just to stare out over the sea.

'What has happened to James?' she asked. 'They should have reached Hope Bay a day or so ago.'

'I know, I know.'

'Poor Ingrid. And if they are lost, who is going to look here for us? Do you think they are still searching?'

'The zodiac looked so small as it disappeared out to sea. It's unlikely to sink, those boats are virtually unsinkable...'

'Unless a ship lands on top of them!'

'Unless a ship lands on top of them. The weak point is the engine. If that breaks down, they will just go where the wind takes them, and it's been pretty constant from the northwest these past few days.'

'Steve, I don't think I could stand a winter here, even if we had enough food.'

'It'll be alright, Annabel,' he replied as he took her into his arms. They stood still hugging each other for a long time, Annabel sobbing gently.

'And poor Angus,' she said eventually. 'We don't have much painkiller left, and I would go mad if I had a broken knee like that all winter. He needs to get to a hospital urgently.'

'Yes.'

'In any case, why are we here? Whose fault is it?'

'Fault? It's nobody's fault... The Antarctic's a wild place and if you play with fire I suppose you get burnt eventually. Come on, let's go back.'

'No, not yet please. It's too crowded back there. Let's walk on some more, just you and me.'

Come the morning of the fifth day on the island it had become a bit cooler, although the raw wind still blew out of the northwest. The sleety snow had turned to snow proper, not heavy snow with large flakes but small, hard, widely-spaced icy pellets more typical of Antarctica, and this was adding a hint of whiteness to the ground.

By lunchtime, the wall round the liferaft had reached waist height all round. Pat walked up to the builders. ‘My God, you are doing a good job. Come on, it's your turn for lunch now. Best penguin stew I'm assured.'

'Ah penguin, my favourite!' said Bill.

'And mine,' added Melissa.

'I certainly prefer this snow to the rain,' continued Bill.' And the ground seems to be freezing too, hopefully it will become less muddy... Hey, what's that noise?'

Chapter 18

Soon after those on the shore had watched it disappear into the mist, with the captain at the tiller, the zodiac left the lee of the island and encountered a heavy swell. Spray started breaking over the bow, and the captain had to reduce speed.

'What do you think?' Pedersen shouted back.

'It's okay,' Captain Buchan shouted. 'If it gets no worse than this we'll be alright.'

However, as they ventured further into the open sea with the wind and waves off their starboard bow, the boat corkscrewed violently and they became drenched with every wave they broached. The captain took the boat round to face the wind, thus significantly reducing the spray.

'We'll have to keep head to wind,' he shouted. 'It'll mean doing a dogleg, but if we head straight for Joinville Island we can then use its lee to get back on course.'

The waves were too big for the zodiac to plane over the water, which would have kept the spray out when going upwind, so she had to go along like a conventional boat, pitching up and down over every wave. They took it in turns to hold the tiller, where the tension of standing-up and driving the boat helped them keep warm, although this was counterbalanced to some extent by having to face into the spray and suffer a cold hand from holding onto the throttle.

'When you are driving you want to be a passenger,' shouted Pat to the captain one time when they were both off-duty and sitting at

the front of the boat to keep some weight at the bow, 'and when you are a passenger you want to be driving.'

'I know what you mean. It's the lot of a sailor to be always discontent – when at sea you long for home, and when at home you long for the sea!'

They took shifts of twenty minutes each and after five hours took shelter in the lee of the last of the Danger Islands. Looking at the GPS, Pedersen informed the captain that it had taken them five hours to cover a mere ten miles – an average speed of only two knots.

'But at least we're getting somewhere, if slowly – faster than the iceberg, at least!' was his reply.

They spent twenty minutes enjoying the relatively calm sea before setting off again, taking the opportunity to eat some biscuits and chocolate and stretch their muscles.

It took another five hours to reach Joinville Island for, contrary to their expectations, the wind increased as they got nearer. The wind was racing down the smooth ice cap that makes up this part of the coast, taking williwaws of cold spindrift off the sea and into the boat. By mid-afternoon, however, when close-up to the ice cliffs, they could finally head back on their originally planned course, westwards between Joinville and Dundee Islands, both bleak, drab and lifeless.

Three hours later, though, they were forced, by a band of ice that was blowing across the channel, to change course and head southwards. It would have been impossible for the boat to have forced its way through, as the ice was being jostled tight together by

the wind. However, when travelling parallel to the ice, the sea was smooth in its lee.

'At least we are making good speed now,' shouted Pedersen, 'even if it is in the wrong direction! I would say about ten knots.'

'I've been thinking,' said the captain, 'I think we should head round south of Dundee Island. It's obvious we'll get nowhere near Hope Bay tonight, but at this rate we could get to Paulet Island in an hour – and we know we can land there whatever the conditions. If we stay sitting in this boat much longer, we'll all get hypothermia. I, for one, am not sure if I have any feet left, they've not been with me this past hour, and my back's killing me sitting crouched like this.'

At Paulet Island, when trying to pull the boat up out of reach of the waves and tides, they found they had no strength in their arms and legs to pull it far, but did manage to leave the boat securely tied to a boulder. At Arvo's suggestion they took the outboard off and the three of them just managed to carry it out of reach of the waves.

Thy walked stiffly up through the penguins to where stood the remains of Captain Larsen's stone hut, the broken wall of which provided the only shelter that they could see. However, the hut was occupied by penguins, which they cleared out, and they also shifted a few stones off the floor to make it more comfortable.

'We're breaking two Antarctic regulations at one go,' said Pedersen, 'disturbing both wildlife and a historic site!' to which the captain and Arvo gave no response.

They took off their clothes, most of which were wet through, waterproofs or no, and put on the dry sets they had brought, stored safely in the waterproof box in the bow of the boat.

'Before eating our supper I think we should go for a walk to get our circulation back,' suggested Pedersen. ‘What is it, seal meat and chocolate?'

'Yes,' replied Arvo, 'although hot food and drink is what I'd really like.'

'Me too, but we'll have to go for a walk instead,' replied Pedersen.

They all slept fitfully that night, close together to share warmth, and were up at first light, awoken by the dawn chorus of penguins. Pedersen slept particularly badly as his hand was throbbing from the seal bite two days before.

'Are you changing back into your wet clothes?' asked Arvo.

'I can't face the thought,' answered Pedersen.

'Neither can I,' added the captain. 'In any case, we should be at Hope Bay before the day's out as we've already covered half the distance in difficult conditions, and it looks no worse today. By the way, Arvo, how's the fuel looking?'

'I think we should have enough left, even though we used a lot more than planned yesterday.'

They breakfasted quickly on chocolate and biscuits and then headed down through a light drizzle to the zodiac. It was full of water, waves having broken over the stern into the boat, making it too heavy to lift up to tip out.

'What shall we use to bail?' asked Pedersen.

'What have we?' asked the captain.

They looked in the box at the front, but found no bailer, the boats normally relying on the self baler when underway.

'This will have to do,' said Pedersen, holding up a box containing the first aid kit. They emptied it of its contents and began the slow task of baling. Pedersen also took the opportunity to bandage up his hand.

After about twenty minutes they had emptied enough water out to be able to lift up the boat and pour out the rest. Next came the tasks of putting the outboard back on, launching, clambering aboard and pushing themselves out through the waves with the paddle. As soon as it was deep enough, Captain Buchan opened the choke, pumped the fuel and pulled the starting cord. The engine did not fire, not the first pull, not the twentieth pull. Arvo immediately got up and went over to the engine, while Pedersen paddled furiously to stop the zodiac being blown out to sea by the strong offshore wind. The wind, though, was too strong for him to be able to hold the boat so he quickly grabbed the anchor and flung it overboard. Luckily it held, the zodiac uselessly bobbing over the waves while Arvo fiddled with the engine.

'Do you think it's the penguin oil, Arvo?' asked Pedersen after he had been tinkering for half an hour, a job made more difficult by the movement of the boat.

'Well, the plug was certainly oiled-up, but I've cleaned it,' he replied. After another twenty minutes he said that they would really have to take the outboard ashore for him to look at it properly. By dint of pulling themselves along on the anchor chain, and then

throwing the anchor forward, they got the boat near enough to the shore to be able to leap into the water and haul it up the last few metres, getting wet legs and feet in the process. The engine was taken off once more and propped up against a suitable rock. The captain and Pedersen went for a walk while Arvo continued his examination.

'I suppose, James, a tourist ship could come here and find us,' said Pedersen.

'It's possible, but I hope all ships in the vicinity are still out looking for us.'

'They could look here – it would be an obvious place for us to come.'

'Maybe they've already been and gone.'

'Possibly, but there are bound to be a few more ships visiting here before the end of the season.'

'I hope so.'

By mid-morning, after extensive dismantling and cleaning, Arvo had the engine firing again, but it was not until midday that they were once more underway.

'Don't give it full revs,' Arvo told them, 'it will cause the engine to cut out. There's still a problem with the fuel supply, but I don't have the tools to fix it.'

'At least we will use less fuel this way, even if it does take us longer,' Pedersen remarked.

They made good progress for the first few miles, gaining some lee from Dundee Island, but once they rounded the corner into the

Antarctic Sound the zodiac was once more head into the wind with a choppy sea.

The engine cut out a few times, so that they lost valuable distance being blown quickly back the way they had come while Arvo struggled to get it going again. As dusk was falling they had reached the western end of Dundee Island, having covered a distance of only twenty miles. Owing to cliffs, both of ice and rock, they could not land, but anchored for the night in a sheltered bay, spending a restless night in their wet clothes. None of them dared sleep for too long at a stretch in case they got hypothermia in their sleep, so periodically throughout the night they had to move around to keep their circulation going.

Their third day at sea was much the same, although they gained temporary respites by sheltering behind large icebergs in the channel. Pedersen was having to take shorter shifts at the tiller as he could no longer hold it with his right hand, which was now swollen.

At about midday they heard an aeroplane fly overhead, but could not see it in the low cloud. The captain advised against the firing of their one flare on the off-chance of it breaking through the cloud to be seen by the high-flying plane. 'We need to save it up for a better chance of success – ships often use this channel.'

'Do you think it was sensible to leave our one other flare with the shore party?' asked Pedersen.

'Probably not, but they certainly felt happier having it.'

There was little conversation in the boat that day, and they were all nervous that whenever the engine cut out it might not restart. But thanks to Arvo it always did, and another twenty miles had been covered come nightfall, including a successful crossing of the Antarctic Sound. It was now only a few miles round the headland to Hope Bay, but it was touch and go as to whether their fuel would last out.

They had had to anchor in the lee of an ice cliff and it was the coldest night yet with a hint of snow in the air. None of them slept and they had to spend most of the night stamping their feet and flailing their arms.

At one point, Pedersen asked, 'James, will you ever come back to the Antarctic after this?'

'Will you?'

'I think so.'

'I don't know, I don't know. It's been my life up to now, and now almost my death. I think Ingrid would prefer it if I didn't.'

It was barely light when they set off on what they hoped would be the last leg of their journey. It was snowing lightly, with a dusty covering on the boat, and this snow somehow made it feel less cold than the drizzle and sleet of the previous days. Cruising along under the towering ice cliffs in a relatively calm sea, the snow gently caressing their faces, this brought back to them some of the Antarctic magic that had recently been lost. Even, later, when they were more exposed to the wind, with snowflakes rushing out of the air straight towards them, they appreciated the intensity of the

greyness that is only found when there is snow over the sea and which, perhaps, evokes Antarctic days more than anything else.

It was Arvo's turn at the tiller, and it was he who spotted the pinpricks of light away to the their starboard. 'A ship, captain, a ship,' he called out excitedly.

'Where?' shouted the other two, but they had spotted it before he had time to answer. Pedersen and the captain looked at each other, and then simultaneously went to the forward compartment.

'After you, James.'

'No, after you, I insist.'

Pedersen found the flare and, holding it away from his body, pulled the trigger. There was a blaze of red light, the falling snow increasing the intensity of its brilliance and causing the whole sky to light up.

'They must see that, they must see that,' cried Arvo, 'even an idiot on the bridge would see that.'

They watched the lights of the ship intently, which must have been a good two to three miles away, and then saw its lights begin to dim.

'Oh no,' cried Pedersen, until he realised the ship must have turned towards them, thus revealing less of itself.

Chapter 19

As the ship drew nearer, Pedersen called out, 'it's the *Polar Challenger*.'

'I know,' replied Captain Buchan. ‘I wonder what she's doing over here – she should be down the west side of the peninsula.'

'She's probably been looking for us.'

And so it turned out. She had diverted from her planned cruise to join a flotilla of ships, planes and helicopters that were scouring the Weddell Sea, but after the two days of fruitless search she was heading westwards again as the search was now concentrated in an area of pack ice too heavy for her to withstand. All this they learned later from Hans, the cruise director.

The ship hove-to about a mile from the zodiac, and before it had even stopped, Hans and the first officer were speeding towards them in one of the *Challenger's* zodiacs.

'Hi there,' shouted Hans. ‘Captain Buchan I presume! We'd all given up hope. Where's...'

'Everyone's safe,' interrupted the captain.

'We're on our way to Hope Bay to get help,' cut in Pedersen.

'Well, help's here!' said Hans. 'By the way, what are you doing here? We've all been looking way out east. And where is everybody? How's Steve?'

'Steve's fine – just got engaged to AB in fact...'

'Wow!'

'And everybody is near Joinville Island...'

'Joinville Island? How on earth did you get there?'

'On the Danger Islands.'

'The Danger Islands? You must tell me the full story.'

'Later. Can we come aboard?' asked Captain Buchan.

'Of course. Shall we give you a tow? – you're not moving very fast.'

'It's the penguin oil,' put in Arvo.

'Penguin oil?'

'We wouldn't be here at all if it weren't for Arvo,' explained Pedersen. 'He's been running the engine on penguin oil.'

'I don't believe it!'

'It's true.'

Owing to their weakened state, when they arrived at the ship they had to be helped up the gangway and accepted thankfully the hot chocolate waiting for them at the crowded entrance.

'Our first hot drink, or hot anything, for three days,' announced Pedersen.

They heard a voice shout, 'clear some space, leave them some space,' followed by, 'ah, Captain Buchan, welcome aboard. I'm Captain Jan De Wit.'

'How do you do,' replied the captain. 'I'm Captain James Buchan. Thank you for coming to our aid. Captain, can you do me a favour? I've an injured officer who needs to be evacuated to a hospital immediately – we need to arrange helicopter support.'

'That shouldn't be difficult, there are plenty in the vicinity at present. Where is he?'

'On one of the Danger Islands, with the rest of our party. Everyone is safe, with shelter and enough supplies, but Angus, my third

officer, probably has a broken knee and has been in pain this last week.'

'I've already given directions for the ship to head for the Danger Islands, we're on our way and we'll be there in about seven hours. We are probably the nearest ship and can evacuate your whole party – our passengers will love it, if you don't mind my saying so. Do you realise you are history in the making? Probably not. Come on up to the radio room, and we'll see what we can do about finding a helicopter. After that breakfast, followed by a shower. You'd better have breakfast with us in the officers' mess, otherwise I'm sure the passengers will gape at you like zoo animals.'

'Thank you.'

A South American helicopter arrived at the *Challenger* just before midday, by chance the same one that had come to the aid of the *Isis* a week previously. The three *Isis* crew members were hoisted on board and the helicopter immediately headed up and away to the Danger Islands.

About half and hour later it emerged through the low cloud to land adjacent to the campsite of liferafts, scattering penguins in the process. As the rotors slowed and the noise subsided, Captain Buchan, Pedersen and Arvo climbed out of the cabin to the cheers of the whole company who were streaming out of their rafts, smiling and laughing. Spontaneous applause broke out, followed by Steve shouting out: 'To the captain, hip, hip, hooray,' and the assembled company responded with three 'hip, hip, hoorays'.

All the couples, including Bill and Dottie, John and Averil, Melissa and Piers, Steve and AB, hugged each other, some bursting in to tears, and the other people hugged and shook hands at random. Damien and Annie started a game of tig with some surprised penguins.

Once the emotion had died down a little, Captain Buchan called for silence. 'The helicopter will be leaving shortly, taking Angus who will be flown to Seymour Island, and thence out by plane to a hospital in South America. But don't worry, the ship the *Polar Challenger* will be coming to pick us all up, arriving in only about an hour's time, and taking us onward direct to the Falkland Islands – which we should reach in about three days' time.'

Spontaneous applause and cheering broke out once more. Pat went over to the captain and whispered something in his ear. The captain nodded, and they both wandered off away from the group, to be shortly followed by Steve and Gerald. 'James,' Pat started, 'we do have some bad news. Arthur died the day before yesterday, a heart attack, we think, and he is buried over there, under that pile of rocks. We think we should take the body with us. What do you think? By helicopter? Or on the ship?'

Captain Buchan thought for a while, before replying. 'Yes, I think we should take him with us, so his family can give him a proper burial. It would be good to get him onto the helicopter – nobody likes being on a ship with a body on board. Leave it to me. I'll discuss it with the helicopter crew.'

The helicopter crew, surrounded by passengers, were being shown round the camp by Melissa. 'This is our cooking area, with our special stove made by the engineers. A work of art, isn't it, Grigori?'

'Yes my dear.'

'It worked well enough, and cooked us penguins and seals, using penguin and seal oil as a fuel.'

'Penguins and seals?' queried the pilot.

'Yes,' replied Melissa, 'very tasty. Now would you like to see inside one of our tents, liferafts, I mean?'

'Wait while I take a photograph,' the pilot replied.

Captain Buchan came up to him. ‘Can I have a word with you, please?'

'Certainly.'

It took a lot of discussion over the radio with the South American authorities, but eventually they agreed to take Arthur out by helicopter, to be flown onward to Ushuaia where he would be dealt with by British officials. Disinterring Arthur and carrying him to the helicopter changed the mood of the group from celebration to sadness, although this did not last once the helicopter had gone.

'Right,' said Melissa to Bill, 'we haven't long now until we are rescued. What shall we do with ourselves during the last half hour of our marooning?'

'Good question,' he replied. 'Carry on building our wall?'

'No, I've had enough of moving rocks. My gloves are ruined!... I know, we haven't decided on our eight records, the eight we would have brought if we had known there'd be a record player...'

'No,' cut in Martin. ‘In the last few days we've had enough of going round the group discussing our lives. I'm going to pack up my few belongings, and then sit patiently watching penguins.'

'Me too,' said Bill.

'And I'm going to finish my filming,' added John.

As the initial euphoria subsided, and the expected half hour of waiting extended into an hour, a restlessness permeated everyone, perhaps tinged with apprehension.

'I'm not sure I'm looking forward to going aboard this *Polar Challenger*,' admitted Bill to Dottie.

'Don't be ridiculous,' Dottie replied. 'We can get properly warm for the first time in days, get clean, sleep properly lying down, eat something other than penguin...'

'No, I agree with Bill,' cut in Martin. 'There will be crowds of people on board this ship, and they will be asking questions, I'm sure, asking us questions all the time.'

'Bound to,' said Bill. 'We'll probably have to answer the same questions a hundred times over the next few days, and all I'll want is a bit of peace and quiet. But you, Melissa, you will be in your element, won't she Martin?'

'Absolutely,' agreed Martin, 'she'll love every minute of it.'

'Can I say something?' Melissa said. 'But you're probably right – we have a great story to tell.'

'Shall we appoint you our spokesman, sorry spokeswoman, then?' suggested Bill. 'If anybody asks us questions, we just send them in your direction?'

'Certainly, if you buy me the drinks!'

'That's a point,' said Martin, 'our first alcohol for a week, though it seems a lot longer than that. Does the *Challenger* have a good bar on board?'

'Sure,' said Bill, 'but they probably only take Dutch money!'

'Oh my God,' gasped Melissa. 'Will they?'

'He was only joking, dear,' put in Piers. 'I've still got my cards.'

Soon after a ship's siren was heard in the distance, followed by the sight of a zodiac coming out of the falling snow and streaming at full speed for the shore. As Hans, standing holding the tiller, brought the boat up to the beach at full speed, only throttling back at the last minute, another zodiac came into sight, followed in quick succession by four more.

'Hi,' shouted Hans, 'here we are!' There was another round of spontaneous cheering as Hans leapt ashore, rushed up to Steve, and hugged him. 'Hi Steve, congratulations! Where's AB?' Seeing her immediately, he rushed up and kissed her. ‘Congratulations! So it took a disaster to finally bring you together?'

'Huh!' replied Steve.

'Well,' continued Hans, 'how anxious are you all to get aboard? Extremely, I would guess. But our passengers would love to be shown round your camp. We've all been looking for you for these past days, and now we've found you, we would like to see how you've been living. Eating penguins, I suppose?'

'Yes. I'm not sure... Some of us, I know, would probably like to get aboard straight away, but others I'm certain,' he said, looking at Melissa, 'would be delighted to show people round. You're not the first group today to have had the pleasure!'

'Who? Oh, of course, the helicopter crew. No, we can take on board straightaway anyone who wants to. As you can see, we have the transport!'

'Great.' Steve turned round to face the crowd and shouted out 'Did you hear all of that? Hans can take anyone who wants to go back to the ship straightaway. Remember your kitbags. Those who want to stay to the bitter end can show the passengers from the *Challenger* round the camp.'

'I'll go now,' said Dottie to Bill.

'And me,' added Averil. Henry and Miss Edelston also decided to leave the island there and then, but there was a surprising reluctance from many.

'I'm not sure if I want to leave yet, Dottie,' said Bill. 'I want to stay until the last possible moment.'

'That's fine,' she replied, 'but I can't see why you would want to. See you on board!'

'I agree with Bill,' said Martin, 'there's a certain finality in leaving, and I'm not sure I can face going back to civilisation, if that is what it is, just yet. Knowing that we can leave whenever we want adds a new dimension to being here. Let's stay. What if you and I, Bill, go for a last walk along the shore, leaving Melissa to show round all the grockles?'

'Good idea! Let's go!' replied Bill, and they both walked off across ground now grey with new snow, not talking much, but stopping now and then just to feel the hard crystals of snow being blown onto their faces, or to watch penguins intent on some serious business of their own, or just to watch the wind rippling the sea.

'Come forth, the sky is wide, and it's a far cry to the world's end...' spoke Martin quietly after they had walked for a few minutes.

'What's that?' asked Bill.

'Oh, nothing.'

'Are you going to shave your beard off once we're aboard? You've grown quite a good one.'

'No, at least not straightaway.

'Me neither.'

'This is the monument we built in memory of Arthur. He sadly died of a heart attack, but has now been taken away by helicopter. And over here are the stone walls we built to shelter our tents. As you may notice, there's not much shelter on this island.'

'Can you say that again a bit louder,' shouted a voice from the tourists, 'I didn't quite catch it on my camcorder.'

'Certainly,' and Melissa, and repeated her little speech. 'Now if you follow me I will show you our kitchen. This is our cooking area, with our special stove made by the engineers. A work of art, isn't it, Grigori?'

'Yes my dear.'

'It worked well enough, and cooked us penguins and seal, using penguin and seal oil as a fuel.'

'What, you ate penguins and seals?' called out a tourist.

'Yes, and they're delicious. Everything is delicious when you're marooned.'

'How many penguins did you have to kill? Isn’t that against regulations?'

'I'm not sure exactly, hundreds. But as you can see around you, there are still plenty left. They may be cute if you see them occasionally, but if you live among them for weeks you get put off by some of their habits, particularly the noise and the smell. Now if you follow me, you can look inside our liferaft. This has been our home for a whole week, and it's taken us many places – on pack ice, on the sea, on an iceberg, here on land....'

Hans wanted to see the iceberg that had been their home for two days, and thought that his tourists, once they had heard the full story, would be keen to go on the berg themselves and see the football pitch. However, when he and Steve went in the zodiac to check it out, they could find no sign of the steps up to their platform or even the platform itself. Indeed, Steve was not even sure if it was the same iceberg at all as it appeared a lot smaller.

'I think, Hans, our berg must have split in two, and the other half floated away. There was a crevasse across the middle.'

'The half with the football pitch?'

'It looks like it.'

'That means there is a football pitch floating around the Weddell Sea. Useful for the penguins, yes?' and Hans roared with laughter.

The snow had eased and the weather was clearing as everyone came on deck to watch the *Polar Challenger* pull up anchor from the Danger Islands.

The spirit of goodwill was such that the *Challenger's* passengers were happy to cut short their Antarctic cruise to take the *Isis*

passengers back to the Falklands, and there was a festive mood, a kind of end-of-term feeling on board. The *Challenger* was about the same size as the *Isis* and, the voyage being fully booked, passengers and crew had had to give up their bunks to the rescued party. They volunteered their berths willingly, though, with most people agreeing to sleep on blankets and cushions in the lounge and messes.

Once they had had a chance to take a shower and have a meal, Steve called for a meeting of all Polar Adventuring staff, inviting Captain Buchan and Pat along as well.

'Right,' started Steve. 'Congratulations, everyone, this will be week to remember, even for you Dill! Well done, and thank you for all your hard work in getting everyone through with the minimum of fuss. And the captain, I think we must particularly thank you for getting the whole ship's company, Arthur excepted, of course, for getting the whole company through the ordeal without mishap, and we must applaud you in particular for your boat journey – a remarkable piece of seamanship that I am sure will end up in the annals of polar history!'

There was spontaneous applause, which the captain interrupted to say, 'don't forget Pedersen and Arvo. Without Arvo's work on the engine we would still be adrift in the Weddell Sea!'

'Yes, of course,' continued Steve, 'our heartfelt thanks to all three of you. Now Hans has managed to rustle up some beers, so I think we should all take one, and drink some toasts. First to our captain and his crew, then to Hans and his team for coming to our rescue,

then to the passengers, and finally to ourselves. Okay everyone, grab a beer!'

After the toasts Hans offered a second beer all round and then made a short speech.

'Welcome aboard the *Challenger*, we are very pleased to have you. And I mean that! I don't think you realise how excited our passengers are by the whole thing, and I don't think you realise how big news you are. I want to warn you that this is a big story, and the whole world is interested. Ever since we picked up your captain, all our communications systems have been buzzing, and I think our radio officer can take no more and is about to suffer a breakdown!

'We already have had requests for journalists to come aboard from helicopters when we are nearer the Falklands, which we have so far turned down. And I think we'll find that, when we get to the Falklands, it will be more busy than even during the war! I suggest, Steve, that you need to think how to manage the media – which will be difficult with a hundred and thirty of you.'

'We may be able to sell all our stories, and make enough money to buy a new *Isis*,' joked Dill.

But Hans took him seriously. 'You may be right.'

'Stories sold to the tabloids,' continued Dill, 'exclusive magazine coverage, book rights – by the way, who's going to write it? TV rights, film rights – I'll play me!... The musical... We'll all be rich!'

'You see what I mean,' said Hans, 'this all needs to be organised. I think you should consider employing a publicity agent.'

'And he'll...'

'Or she,' put in AB.

'Or she will take most of it as commission,' added Dill. 'I'll be our agent, Steve, at a commission of only ten per cent!'

'I think we'll need to discuss this with our Oxford office,' said Steve. 'Come on Gerald, we need to start sending emails to Sandra.'

After dinner, even though the ship was rolling heavily to the large swell that perpetuates around the furthest reaches of Southern Ocean, the lounge was full to bursting. By popular request, John had agreed to replay over the lounge's television screens his videos of the last voyage of the *Isis*, although half way through, again by popular request, he was asked to jump on to the actual sinking and their subsequent time on the ice. Melissa added a commentary, although Martin and Bill often shouted out corrections to what were, charitably, mere minor errors of fact!

'Melissa never lets the facts get in the way of a good story,' Martin whispered to Bill.

'True, but it's a good story even without her embellishments!'

By next morning Steve and Gerald had been in contact with the authorities in Stanley, the capital of the Falkland Islands, and arranged for a service of thanksgiving and remembrance (for Arthur) in Stanley Cathedral. This was to be held the day after their expected arrival.

Later that morning, as AB was standing on the stern deck watching the albatrosses watching her, feeling a tap on her shoulder, she turned round.

'May I have a word with you?'

'Certainly, Miss Edelston. I've been just watching albatrosses this last half hour. Aren't they beautiful? At least they don't keep asking me questions!'

'Oh dear! I was going to ask you a question, but if it's not convenient...'

'No, of course not. By the way, are you fully recovered?'

'I was never unwell! I was wondering if you and Steve would mind Henry and I joining you in Stanley Cathedral?'

'Of course! But why Steve and I in particular?'

'I beg your pardon, I am not being clear. Henry and I would like to get married at the same time as you...'

'The rat!' and without another look at Miss Edelston she dashed off. She tracked down Steve who was, as expected, busy at the screen of his computer. She flung her arms round him, shouting, 'why didn't you ask me?'

'Ask you what?'

'The wedding of course.'

'You've found out? How? I wanted to keep it a surprise.'

'Miss Edelston told me.'

'Miss Edelston?'

'Yes.'

'How did she find out?'

'I don't know, but you can never keep a secret on a ship!'

'I did promise that I would marry you as soon as I could find a vicar and a church, didn't I?'

'Yes.'

'Well, I'm a man of my word.'

'You might have told me! No, I don't mean that. My God, getting married in three days time. What will I wear?'

'Just come as you are! Only joking! Your mother will be coming with a choice of three outfits.'

'She's coming?'

'Yes. We're negotiating a contract with Transworld Television so that they will charter two planes from the UK and fly down two friends or relatives per passenger and crew at their expense.'

'The catch being?'

'The catch being that they will have exclusive rights to come aboard the *Challenger* before we get to Stanley, and interview whom they choose.'

'Will they have exclusive rights to our wedding, like some tawdry magazine?'

'No, of course not! The deal we're planning will only give them this first access to us, and we are also considering emailing them some stills from John's video. Once we're ashore, though, we'll probably be at the mercy of everyone.'

'Why don't you email my mother and ask her to send some designs to me?'

'Designs?'

'Yes – wedding dresses. It will save her having to bring down a selection. Which reminds me, I think Miss Edelston and Henry would like to get married at the same time as us?'

'What?!'

Chapter 20

The first plane to fly over the ship arrived on the second day out from Danger Islands. It flew a few low circles round the ship, and then was seen to head south back the way it had come. Three planes arrived on the following day, and early the next morning, the day they were due at Stanley, a helicopter arrived and lowered the Transworld film crew onto the deck. Many other helicopters appeared that morning, but were all refused permission to land. Instead they hovered beside the ship, cameras sticking out of the windows and the passengers all on deck waving.

Port Stanley, when they arrived, was re-living its heyday as an important port for ships who were Rounding the Horn. Two large cruise ships, ugly, floating apartment blocks, which normally plied the Buenos Aires to Valparaiso run, had diverted to Stanley to witness the homecoming. Three smaller cruise ships, mere tenders in comparison, had made a detour from their normal Antarctic cruise to do likewise. Additionally, there were deep sea squid jiggers and Antarctic supply boats who, either by luck or design, were also in port. There were a few yachts from the intrepid round the world brigade and also a flotilla of local boats. Helicopters were hovering overhead.

To prevent the ship being swamped by journalists and onlookers, the *Polar Challenger* did not dock but anchored off the town, opposite the cathedral, and passengers were to be ferried back and forth by zodiac.

'I don't think I can face going ashore,' said Bill to Martin as they both stood on deck observing the action.

'I don't think I can either,' replied Martin.

'What have we done to deserve all this?'

'Nothing! We've just survived! It's always the disastrous expeditions that makes history, the successful ones we never hear about – and we're a disastrous expedition!'

'But exciting, at least in retrospect.'

'Well, exactly. It's the human interest aspect that has brought everyone here. They are not interested in the Antarctic, they haven't a clue what it is all about, but lose a shipload of men, women and children, who just disappear mysteriously into the unknown, and then equally mysteriously appear unharmed a week later. Well, it adds drama to a mundane life!'

'I suppose so. But most of us have not done much to deserve it. Just sat around and done what we were told.'

'There was a bit more to it than that! We kept each other's morale up, at least much of the time, and we have been tested in extraordinary conditions.'

'Stood up well, d'you think?'

'I think so.'

'And a wedding and a happy ending to cap it off! The media will love, are loving it.'

The media did love it. The landing at the pier had to be kept clear of crowds by the local defence force, and none of the passengers could wander anywhere in town without being cornered by journalists and

camera crews of multitudinous nationalities. The journalists were looking for all angles on the story, looking for the passengers' view, which Melissa was only too willing to give, the officers' view, where Pedersen came across well, the crew's view, where Heiti starred, and the staff view where they focussed on the romance between AB and Steve.

Annie managed to get her photographs developed, and colour pictures of the events were soon being wired around the world.

The media had the liferafts inflated again and towed to a beach at the east end of Stanley Harbour where the passengers were filmed both inside and out. In accordance with Antarctic regulations, apart from the stone structures they had constructed (future archaeology!), everything had been taken off the Danger Islands including their makeshift stove; this was now reassembled on the beach, and Derek was filmed cooking hamburgers – cooking penguins would have been frowned upon!

Next morning the whole of Stanley's population – which had more than quadrupled with the international media circus, the cruise ship passengers and crew, and friends and relatives of the expedition – lined the route to Stanley Cathedral for the combined thanksgiving, remembrance and wedding. There was little room in the cathedral for those above and beyond the *Isis'* complement and friends and relatives, but a makeshift relay system allowed those on the street outside to follow the service.

There was cheering as AB and Steve, and Miss Edelston and Henry emerged out of the church, the wedding dresses fluttering about in the breeze that is ever-present in Falkland Islands.

There were similar crowds at Gatwick Airport when the planes touched down two days later, and the event crowded the front-page headlines.

The newspapers in Britain were still running the story a week later, only the headlines had changed. Now there was 'Estonians win Iceberg Championships!' and 'Football Pitch Left for the Penguins!' After this there was 'Captain Puts Passengers at Risk by Carrying On with Damaged Ship,' followed by 'Secret of Captain's Love Life!'

EPILOGUE

Nine months later, in early November, Annabel and Steve went to visit Captain Buchan and Ingrid at their cottage in Cornwall. It was a beautiful clear autumnal day as they opened the gate through the hedge and walked down the short garden path to the front door, which was surrounded by an awning of roses.

'This is beautiful,' said Annabel as they waited for a reply to their knock.

Ingrid opened the door almost immediately, and then threw her arms round first Annabel, and then Steve. 'Let me see him,' she cried, 'come in.'

James was there to shake their hands as they entered. 'Now where's the little bergy bit?' he asked.

Steve put the carry-cot down on the sofa for them to admire the baby. 'Have you decided on a name for him yet?' Ingrid asked.

'Yes,' replied Steve, 'James. In honour of you, of course, captain, but also in honour of James Weddell, his namesake, as he was after all conceived in the Weddell Sea!'

'A good name,' added James.

'When was he conceived?' queried Ingrid, 'in the Weddell Sea, you say? You never told us!'

'It's not a thing you shout about!' replied Steve.

'Yes,' put in Annabel, 'it was on top of the iceberg. You remember, that beautiful starlit night?'

Ingrid turned to James. 'Why did you never do anything so romantic? It would have been...' She paused. 'Instead, look what happened to us…'

'Or didn't happen,' interrupted James.

'Or didn't happen,' continued Ingrid. 'The media have been terrible, saying he abandoned me and that I almost went down with the ship. If Heiti had not found me... Poor James, he was so busy, so much responsibility, of course he did not have time for me. I should not have drunk so much that night.'

'Are reporters still bothering you?' asked Steve.

'There haven't been any for the past week or so, let's hope it's finally all blown over.'

'Those dammed tabloids,' cut in James, 'the journalists haven't the imagination to think beyond football and sex – and I suppose it applies to the readers as well.'

'I suppose it was my fault really,' said Ingrid, 'I shouldn't have expected so much from James in the circumstances.'

'I don't know,' said James. 'If I hadn't been so wedded to that goddam ship, and paid more attention to you Ingrid...'

'And I suppose I shouldn't have tried to be demanding attention all the time. I probably shouldn't have gone south at all, it's not that I like snow and ice particularly. All the time I must have been giving you split loyalties, James. Anyway, what happened, happened and being wise after the event isn't much help! Enough of this, though. I expect you are all dying for a cup of tea after your journey? And toasted tea cakes and jam? Will that do you?'

'Toasted tea cakes,' said Steve, 'that's the way to anyone's heart. Yes please!'

'Can I help you?' asked Annabel.

'Yes thank you,' replied Ingrid.

'Keep and eye on the baby, will you Steve?' asked Annabel as she and Ingrid went through to the kitchen.

'Well, James,' said Steve, 'are you sad not to be going south again?'

'Yes and no! I don't think I would want to go back without being captain. Maybe I should sit back while Ingrid and I see what the rest of the world has to offer.'

'Do you think you were treated fairly at the inquiry?'

'Probably.'

'But it was a joint decision of ours to carry on.'

'Ultimate responsibility does rest with the captain, though. We should have turned back at Deception.'

'And not become famous!'

'I've had enough of being famous!'

'Will you ever get your master's ticket back?'

'I don't think I'd want to. As I've said, I'll put my seaboots away – apart, that is, from pottering around the Cornish coast in small boats. Anyhow, what's been the outcome of your inquiry, I've not heard?'

'As good as could be expected. Polar Adventuring has been fined for not keeping aside its insurance bond, but we've enough money to pay it off without damaging our prospects.'

'But your licence to operate has not been revoked?'

'No, as long as we guarantee funds.'

'That's lucky.'

'And business is booming...'

Ingrid and Annabel came in with the tea just then, Ingrid asking, 'did I hear you say, Steve, that business is booming?'

'Yes. Polar Adventuring's cruises are booked up for the next five years. We've decided not to have our own ship, though, but will be chartering the *Polar Challenger* for our Antarctic voyages.'

'All debts paid off?' queried James.

'Amazingly yes! We've still got money pouring in, thanks, mainly, to our publicity agent.'

'It's lucky the lawsuit from Arthur's relatives failed,' said Ingrid. 'What were they suing the company for? Two million pounds?'

'Three million, in fact. Luckily, with his heart in the condition it was, it was quite easy to suggest that he would have died irrespective of whether the *Isis* sank or not.'

'And how did Melissa's lecture to the Royal Geographical Society go down?'

'We haven't heard,' answered Annabel, 'but knowing her, she will have pulled it off!'

'Bound to have,' agreed Steve. 'To have a fossil named after you, a genus of bird new to science, that's incredible – immortality indeed!'

'What's it been called?'

'There's talk of it being named *Melissa antarctica*. It's thought to be the ancestor of the sheathbill, and fills a missing evolutionary gap. Melissa, of course, will be coming south with us on our cruises that retrace the last voyage of the *Isis*.'

'And Piers?'

'No – I'm not sure if they're still together. But Bill will be joining us on two of our trips.'

'She'll be in her element,' put in Ingrid. ‘"And this is where I picked up my now famous fossil – the geologist on board, Dill, had no clue as to what it was. If we now move over to the hut where, for days on end, we ate nothing but dried beef and rice..." And you, Annabel, will you mind being left behind with young James?'

'Yes, terribly! Steve's away next week, and I'll be left holding the baby.'

'Well, you probably can't have it both ways.'

'I suppose not. Now tell me what plans you and James have...'

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the British Antarctic Survey who, by employing me, first introduced me to the Antarctic; and also Lindblad Expeditions who, many years later, allowed me to go back. I would like to dedicate this book to my wife, Sue, who finally managed to visit Antarctica after waiting patiently for twenty-five years, and to my daughter Mairi who was lucky enough to visit the continent at the age of nine.