

Prologue

McGuire Air Force Base, New Jersey, 40°0'N, 74°35'W
April 1948

The aeroplane, a modified Douglas C-47 Skytrain, is a fat, shining cigar of aluminium, brilliant in the sun. The word *Arcturus* is stencilled on the fuselage in a confident upward sweep. The journalist has done his homework, but there are things he does not know: for example, that grease monkeys spent days polishing the skin, and that the name has been added especially for this trip – a celestial name deemed more heroic and appropriate than the boring clutch of numbers on its tail. The Skytrain was a bomber throughout the war, but now it is carrying an overtly peaceable cargo; there are air force men, it is true – weary-eyed, beribboned and grizzled – but there are also scientists from several universities, a camera crew from ABC, the journalist.

The film crew takes some footage of the scientists standing by the plane. When ordered, they wave and smile, raggedly, never all at the same time. The air force men stand to attention until their commander smiles – then the rest of them relax a little, but not as much as the civilians. There is one last arrival – a special guest – a British woman of advanced years, who was known, for a time, fifty years before, as the Snow Queen.

When the old lady – white-haired, erect and rather forbidding – is introduced to the scientists, the Harvard physicist claims that his

father met her many years ago and had spoken of her to his family. The Snow Queen nods and moves on, giving no indication whether she remembers the father, or was even listening to what he said. The film camera whirs, recording the handshakes. The journalist thinks that, in the resulting film, there will be a graphic of a globe, a tiny plane crawling over it, dragging a dotted line across the world. The thought thrills him.

At last they are ready to embark. Randall is nervous – not of the flight, not really, although it is his first – but because he wants to bag a seat next to the old lady. He has been thinking about this meeting for months. She doesn't look at him as he sits down, but stares out of the window. He buckles himself in, opposite the oceanographer from Harvard, behind the civilian whose field of expertise no one seems quite sure of, who is engrossed in an automobile magazine. They take off with a tremendous roaring, a steep upward trajectory that drags him back in his seat. His scalp prickles. Quite quickly, the nose of *Arcturus* levels off, the plane swings round, and fierce sun stripes the cabin, blazing off one face after another.

Randall turns to his neighbour and attempts to start a conversation, rather hampered by the din of the engines.

'I have some of your old press cuttings,' he shouts.

She frowns, probably because she can't hear a thing.

'Your press cuttings!' he yells.

She frowns some more.

'It was such an exciting time. You knew everybody.'

'Who are you?' she asks, although they were introduced on the ground.

'Randall Crane . . . Crane! Hi! I've been commissioned to write up the trip for *World* magazine.'

'The journalist.'

She might as well have said, 'A cockroach,' or 'A hernia.' Something decidedly unwelcome. She looks away, through the window next to her, to where sunlight burns on a smooth field of white cloud.

'It's beautiful! Is this what the Arctic looks like?' He leans towards her, eager and also moved, made almost breathless by the strength of the light, the hot blue of the sky. After the visceral experience of take-off, it feels as though they aren't moving at all.

'You've never been there.'

'No,' he admits, cheerfully. He can't help grinning. He has been told he has a winning smile. 'I can't wait to see it. I hope you don't mind me saying: I've been reading about you.' Does she cock her ear towards him, slightly? Flattery never fails with these old birds. 'You were a superstar. You knew all the explorers, didn't you? Armitage, Welbourne, de Beyn and the rest? It was an amazing time. All those discoveries. You were a pioneer.'

'Well, yes.'

'And the . . . the controversy – I've always been fascinated by what happened. What was your take on it?'

He could slow down – should, probably – but he's so full of energy; it bubbles up through him like an unstoppable spring.

'What controversy?'

'The Armitage-de Beyn controversy . . . The mystery over what happened to them. You knew them, didn't you?'

'Goodness! It's such a long time ago. They're all dead, except me.' The way she says this – it is impossible to tell whether she feels satisfaction or regret. 'What does it matter now?'

'Doesn't the truth matter?' He gazes hopefully at her eyes, which avoid his, and give nothing away. 'No one seems to know what really happened. I'd love to know what you think, as someone who was there.'

'"What really happened"?' She smiles, not at him, but for herself. 'You flatter me if you think *I* know the truth.'

'I'd like to know your opinion. Could I talk to you about it?'

'It's very noisy here.'

'Oh, yes – not here, of course. It is noisy, isn't it?'

The Snow Queen leans her head back against the seat, her eyes angled out of the window. She looks tired – but, to Randall, from his unasailable vantage point of twenty-seven years, old people always look tired. She must be – what? – seventy-seven. Older than his grandmother, Lottie. Her hair is as white as the clouds outside; her eyes, dark grey, unreadable, like boring pebbles. She wears discreet make-up, so she cares what people think. That gives him hope. He has done his homework on her, too: read her books on the north and trawled the archives for contemporary accounts. Newspaper reports from the 1890s described her as beautiful, although he found this hard to verify from the accompanying photographs – usually blurred and tiny; she tends to be one of a group of white-faced people staring at the camera, wearing hats. Lined up at the gunwale of a ship. Standing on a quay. At the front of a lecture theatre. But there was one portrait, taken when she was in her early twenties: it is a studio-based fantasy, wherein the girl known as the Snow Queen poses stiffly in front of a painted icy landscape, her round, smooth face emerging from a halo of furs, lips closed, her eyes fixed on an imaginary horizon. A thick snake of hair winds over her shoulder. Handsome, rather than beautiful, in his opinion. If Randall stared at the picture for long enough, he felt he could discern something in the wide-open eyes, but what was it? Arrogance? Ambition? Alarm? Almost any emotion, once he thought of it, could be imputed to those frozen features. Like most old portraits, it tantalised and revealed little.

In the seat next to him, the Snow Queen's eyes are closed. He cannot see the girl she was in her face. He suspects she is not asleep. His grandmother claims never to sleep – says you dispense with the need when you get old. Randall looks around him. Some of the scientists are dozing; some reading magazines (not *World* magazine, he notes).

He is not in the least discouraged. They have hours to go before they reach their destination.



Flora Cochrane (her name has been many things, but this is the one she will have when she dies) awakens with a jolt. She was dreaming about places and people she has not dreamt about for decades. Her mouth tingles with the remembered pressure of warm flesh. A surge of erstwhile feeling has washed through her. Years since she had such a dream. For a moment she cannot think where she is. An infernal noise hammers her brain. The surroundings are distressingly bright. Then the lissom feeling in her body evaporates, and she remembers that she is old. A juddering – ah, yes, she is on the plane. *Arcturus*. She looks round to see the absurdly young man next to her; he turns towards her, too quickly. She keeps her eyes unfocused as she scans the cabin, wondering if she moaned in her sleep. No one is looking at her. They couldn't have heard her anyway.

'We're just coming down to Newfoundland, now.'

He leans towards her and shouts in her ear. Flora nods minutely without meeting his eye, hoping he won't start another conversation. She would like to go to the bathroom, but doesn't remember anyone mentioning whether there was one on board. Although she was once used to it, it is still tedious to travel in all-male company. As they descend through a layer of clouds, the plane performs a series of bumps and bounds, like a small ship in a crossing sea. All very interesting, this mode of travel. They have come over a thousand miles in just a few hours. Think of all the walking that would have entailed. Even sailing, travelling at the speed of the wind, it's a distance that would have taken days. Now she leaves the wind far behind. It is as well she is speeding up, she thinks. At her age. The thought slots into her head: how he would have loved this. He would have laughed with delight . . .

'What's funny?'

The young man is smiling, tenacious. But his familiarity is less irritating than she would have thought. There is something charming and puppyish about him; perhaps it is his brown eyes, or his hair, which flops across his forehead, untamed by the pomade he uses; or his slightly buck teeth, eager to show themselves.

She shakes her head and points to her ear – the engines are roaring harder. He nods and gives her his pretty smile, bidding his time.

RCAF Station, Gander, Newfoundland, 48°57'N, 54°36'W

They have landed at an airbase by a crooked-finger lake in Newfoundland, which, though far from luxurious, is designed to cater for women as well as men. They even rustle up a woman for her, to show her to her quarters and explain how to put on the extraordinary padded garment they expect her to wear tomorrow; it looks as though it were designed for giant babies, or lunatics. The woman, who has solid-looking hair and a smear of lipstick on her teeth, shows her how to put it on. There is a flap that zippers open and shut around the bottom, 'For, y'know, emergencies? We recommend you practise while you're here, to get the hang of it.' She is tactful enough about it, but still.

'How long is it since you were up there?' the woman asks – someone did introduce them, but Flora has forgotten her name.

'Oh, hundreds of years. During the last ice age.' She smiles to show it is a joke rather than a put-down. The woman laughs, mechanically, without humour. Flora has never been good at humour. She tried it for a while, in her twenties, then gave it up. She decides to make amends. 'I'm surprised they asked me. That there wasn't anyone more . . . important.'

'Not from that time. You've outlived them all,' says the woman, smiling. 'Good for you.'

Flora is annoyed.

'You know,' the woman goes on, 'When I was young, I read about you and your expeditions. It was so inspiring to think that a woman could do that, even then.'

'Well . . .' Perhaps she has misjudged her. 'It wasn't easy. I'm sure it's not easy now.'

'No. Things changed a bit during the war, but since then, when all the men came back, we've kinda had to get out of the way, if you know what I mean.'

She does up the zipper with a noisy flourish. Flora isn't sure she does know what she means, but nods.

'Thank you. I think I can manage now.'

'We're having dinner in an hour. I expect you'd like to get some rest before then. If you need anything, just holler.'

As she closes the door, she finally remembers the woman's name – Millie . . . Mindy . . . something childish like that. She is aching to lie down. Sleep. Perhaps recapture that feeling from the plane . . . Then, afterwards, maybe she will allow herself to have a cocktail. One of those sweet, deceptive things she had in New York. She stretches out on the bed with a sigh of relief.

It will be twilight for hours. The clouds have gone. The air is very clear and still. She hasn't seen air this clean for years, but then it is years since she has been this far north. Through the window, she acknowledges the faint, familiar stars as they rise. There is Arcturus, which the Eskimos call the Old Man, *Uttuqalualuk*. She cannot remember the names of the people she met earlier today, but those names learnt so long ago, she has never forgotten. There, just above the horizon, is the Old Woman – Vega. The Caribou, known to others as the Great Bear. Cassiopeia: the Lamp Stand. And, just rising now, with its faint hint of red, the ghoulishly named *Sikuliaqsuijuittuq* – the Murdered Man.

She opens the window and leans out, inhaling the chill blue air. She cranes her neck to look for Draco, coiling around Polaris, and searches for Thuban, its once and future Pole Star. She stares until her eyes

water, but it must be too early, too light, or perhaps her eyes are too tired, and she cannot find it.

Since she knew she was coming on the flight, she has been thinking again of that time. She closes her eyes and can see the valley spread out in front of her: duns and greens and greys; minute jewels of colour; the lake of breathtaking blue. Impossible Valley, they called it. But it was possible, if only briefly.

Recently, her old friend Poppy fell ill and Flora had managed to see her, before it was too late. Lying in bed, looking tiny and somehow both sexless and ageless, she had talked calmly about her approaching death. She believed in heaven. She knew that she would meet her sons there: reluctant soldiers, unwitting martyrs.

Flora nodded but could not in her heart agree (though who was she to say what Poppy did or did not know, or which of their beliefs was true?). She would like to believe in heaven, of course, but that has always seemed too easy, too trite; if it were true, why would one go to all this bother down here? Besides (she thought, but did not say), heaven is here on earth. She knew; she had been there.