

Devour

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In memory of Marie Colvin and
Rémi Ochlik

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Lake Ellsworth, Antarctica,
78°58'34"S, 90°31'04"W

On the flat, featureless ice sheet, katabatic winds swoop down the mountain slopes, whipping up ice particles and hurling them at a solitary British camp. The huddle of red tents, blue shipping containers, grey drilling rig, and yellow water tanks are so tiny on the vast expanse of white, they resemble pieces on a Monopoly board. Three kilometres beneath the camp, subglacial Lake Ellsworth, and whatever secret it may hold, is sealed inside a frozen tomb.

In the largest tent, used as the mess and briefing room, Kevin Knox stands before Professor Michael Heatherton, the director of Project Persephone.

'So how the hell did this happen?' says Heatherton, dragging his fingers through greying hair.

Knox brushes away a drip running down his cold cheek, as ice, frozen to his ginger beard and eyelashes, melts in the tent's comparative warmth. Outside it is minus twenty-six degrees Celsius but the wind chill makes it feel more like minus forty.

'Mike, we don't know exactly. The boiler circuit's broken. It'll need a new part.'

'Don't know?' Heatherton scoffs.

Knox clenches his pudgy fists. What a thankless little twat! For the last hour he and Vitaly Yushkov, the two hot water drillers, have been struggling to fix the damn thing.

A strong hand squeezes his right arm and Knox glances at

Yushkov standing beside him, whose penetrating blue eyes warn him not to lose his temper. Knox gives the Russian an almost imperceptible nod and Yushkov releases his grip.

Their leader gets out of his plastic chair and paces up and down behind one of three white trestle tables. A marathon runner of average height, he is lean, wiry and exceptionally fit for his age. But, next to Knox and Yushkov, he appears fragile. Knox isn't tall but he is chunky, and likes to describe his wide girth as 'love handles' even if the Rothera Station lads pinned a photo on the noticeboard with his head photoshopped on to the body of an elephant seal. Not that it bothers him.

Yushkov is six foot one. His neck, almost as wide as his head, meets powerful shoulders, and his hands are so large they remind Knox of a bunch of calloused Lady Finger bananas. Knox knows little about Yushkov's past – conscription, ship's engineer, mechanical engineer – and the taciturn Russian doesn't care to share. He is now a British citizen and the most talented mechanical engineer Knox has ever worked with, and that's all that matters.

'The eyes of the world are upon us,' Heatherton says, his Yorkshire accent softened after years working with the British Antarctic Survey in Cambridge. 'Everybody wants to know if there's life down there.' He momentarily looks at the rubber flooring beneath his boots. 'And we're only a kilometre away from the answer. We have to get the drill working again before the hole freezes over.' His voice is high-pitched with agitation. 'So what I need to know is, can you fix it?'

Yushkov speaks, his accent as strong as the day he last set foot in Mother Russia, sixteen years ago.

'Boss, we built the hot water drill. We did not build the boiler. So, we need time to understand the problem. We will talk with manufacturer, get advice. We have spare parts at

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Rothera. If we are lucky, we get new circuit in a day or two and all is hunky-dory.'

Yushkov grins, revealing surprisingly perfect white teeth given his heavy smoking. Heatherton opens his mouth but Knox jumps in.

'It's going to be okay, Mike. We'll get it running on a backup element and keep the tanks warm. Stop worrying.'

The taut skin around Heatherton's eyes is getting darker each day. He plonks down into a chair and rubs his hands up and down his face, as if trying to wake up. He looks exhausted.

'Look, Kev,' he says through his splayed fingers, then drops his hands to his sides. 'I'm a geoscientist, not an engineer. But to do my bit, I'm relying on you to do yours. I'm frustrated, that's all.'

That is as close as Knox has heard their leader get to an apology.

Heatherton cranes his neck towards them, frowning, and speaks quietly so nobody can hear through the canvas walls. Not that anyone could anyway, given the blustering winds.

'Could it be sabotage?'

Yushkov shifts from one battered boot to the other.

'Pardon?' Knox says. He can't have heard right.

'Has the boiler been sabotaged?'

'Jesus, Mike!' says Knox, flinging his hands in the air. 'What's got into you? We're in the middle of bloody nowhere trying to do something that's never been done before. Things go wrong. It's inevitable.'

'Yes, quite right.' He sighs. 'But a lot of things are going wrong. Too many. And we all know the Russians are trying to beat us.' Heatherton flicks a look at Yushkov. 'No offence.'

'None taken,' Yushkov replies, but the low rumble in his voice says he is not being entirely honest.

At that moment, BBC science correspondent, Charles Harvey, steps through the door, his black parka covered in snow, like dandruff. He's as blind as a bat without his glasses, which means he's constantly wiping ice off the lenses or cleaning them when they steam up.

'Hear you've had a spot of bother. Mind if I join you?'

Heatherton hesitates. Harvey continues.

'I see a great story here. Engineers struggle in howling storm to save project. That sort of thing.'

'An heroic angle?' Heatherton's hazel eyes light up. He runs his fingers over his smooth chin, the only team member who bothers to shave. Knox knows why: Heatherton wants to look dashing in Harvey's documentary. 'I see. Okay.' He looks at Knox. 'Well, let's get on with it.'

'Fine,' says Knox. 'But if that blizzard gets much worse we'll have to stop work and wait for it to pass.'

'Yes, yes, health and safety and all that,' Heatherton says, 'Quite right. But if you don't get the boiler working soon, this whole project is done for. Ten years down the toilet.'

Knox raises his eyes in exasperation. 'No pressure then.'

As he zips up his black parka sporting the Lake Ellsworth project logo, tugs inner and outer gloves on to his hands, pulls on his beanie and hood and places snow goggles over his eyes, he thinks for the thousandth time what a stupid colour black is for Antarctic clothing. Should have been red, yellow or orange so they can be spotted easier. Through the flimsy door he hears the wind has picked up speed. It will be near impossible to hear each other above the roar.

'Okay, mate,' Knox says to Yushkov. 'Let's get this done as quick as we can. Stay close. Use hand signals.'

Yushkov nods.

'Vitaly, a word,' says Heatherton, gesturing him to stay.

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‘Right. I’ll get started then. But I can’t do much without him, so make it quick, will you?’

Annoyed, Knox leaves, letting the fifty-mile-an-hour wind slam the door for him. The field site is a swirling mass of snow. He grips a thick rope, frozen so solid it feels like steel cable, secured at waist height between poles sticking out of the ice at regular intervals. Only thirty feet to the boiler. He carefully plants one boot after another. He staggers a few times. Head down, body bent, he throws his weight into the storm like a battering ram. Where the hell is Vitaly? That bloody Heatherton is probably wanking on about loyalty and reminding Yushkov, in his unsubtle way, that he now works for the Brits. The man is bloody paranoid.

Someone takes him in a bear hug from behind. He thinks Yushkov is mucking about, but when a cloth is held hard over his nose and mouth, he begins to panic. It has a chemical smell he can’t place. Confused and disoriented, he tries to turn. He feels light-headed and his eyelids droop.

Knox wakes. He hears a high-pitched buzzing, then realises it’s the retreating sound of a Bombardier Ski-Doo. Soon, all he can hear is the buffeting wind. He wants to sleep, but his violent shivering makes it impossible. He opens his heavy eyelids and sees nothing. Just white. Where is he? The hardness beneath his cheek tells him he’s lying on one side. Knox tries to sit up, but his head pounds like the worst hangover, so he lies back down. He blinks eyelashes laden with ice crystals, trying to take it all in. Of course. The boiler. He must have fallen. Maybe knocked his head?

This time, Knox manages to sit up and waits for the dizziness to pass. He can’t see the horizon or the surface he’s sitting on, or

even his legs. Like being buried in an avalanche; there is no up or down. He's in a white-out – the most dangerous blizzard. He sucks in the ice-laden air, fear gripping him. Ice particles get caught in his throat and he coughs. His heart speeds up and, instead of energising him, it drains him. He racks his brain, trying to remember his emergency training. But his mind is as blank as the landscape.

Think, you fucking idiot. Think!

It's pointless shouting. He doesn't have a two-way radio. Nobody can see or hear him. Christ! What happened? His jaw is chattering, his body wobbling, and now he can't feel his hands or feet. He lifts his right arm so his hand is in front of his eyes, but it doesn't feel as if it belongs to him. His fingers won't flex and the skin is grey, the same colour as his dear mum when he found her dead in her flat. Frostbite and hypothermia have taken hold of him. What he can't understand is why he isn't wearing a glove. He checks the left hand. No glove and no watch, either. Nothing makes sense.

Knox attempts to bend his knees. His legs are stiff and movement is painful. He manages to bring them near enough to discover he wears socks, but no boots. The socks are caked in ice and look like snowballs. His shivering is so violent that when he tries to touch them, he topples over.

Stunned by his helplessness, Knox stays where he fell. He places a numb hand on his stomach but he can't tell if he's still wearing a coat. He can't feel anything. He blinks away the ice in his sore eyes and peers down the length of his body. He sees the navy blue of his fleece. No coat. The realisation that he will die if he doesn't find shelter very soon is like an electric shock and his whole body spasms. Terrified, he scrambles to a sitting position, battling the blizzard and his own weakness.

'Help!' he shouts, over and over, oblivious to the pointlessness of doing so.

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For the first time since he was a boy, he cries. The tears are blasted by the gale and shoot across his skin and on to the woolen edges of his beanie, where they freeze, as hard and round as ball bearings.

Knox struggles on to his hands and knees like an arthritic dog, sobbing, a long string of snot hanging from his nose. Shelter. Must find shelter. Despite his numb extremities he crawls on all fours, around in a tight circle, hoping to see something, anything that will tell him where there's a tent or a shipping container. Any kind of shelter. But there are no shapes of any kind. Nothing but whiteness. The desperate man decides to go in one direction for ten steps, then turn to his right for ten, then again and again until he returns to his current position. The gusts are so powerful, it's pointless trying to stand. So he stays on all fours.

He tells himself that Robert Falcon Scott walked thousands of miles to the South Pole with frozen feet. Then he remembers Scott never made it back. Knox's head is tucked into his chest and the patches of hair sticking out of his beanie are stiff and white. He peers into the distance every now and again but the view doesn't change. Where is the rope, for Christ's sake? When Knox thinks he's done a full circuit, he stops, but there's no way of telling if he has returned to his starting point. He pants, exhausted. Perhaps he should build a snow cave, as all deep-fielders are trained to do, but he doesn't have a shovel or ice axe, and his hands are useless. Suddenly, he feels on fire all over and claws at his fleece, trying to remove it. But he can't even grip the hem.

Like a match, his strength flares ever so briefly and then vanishes.

He wakes with a start. How long has he been lying here? Minutes? Hours? The snow build-up is now a blanket over him. He pulls his knees to his chest, curling himself painfully into a foetal position.

He chuckles. What a tit! He's going to get such a ribbing when they find him, lost only a few feet from the camp. He'll never live it down. Oh well. Story of his life: always the butt of jokes. He isn't shivering any more and feels warm and cosy. Yushkov will know he's missing. They'll be looking for him. He's so tired. Tired and numb. He can't hear the wind any more.

When he closes his eyes, everything is peaceful. Knox hears his mother tell him it'll be all right. She's reported his bullying to the headmaster. His school blazer is ripped, but she's not cross. His head in her lap, she brushes his long fringe from his eyes. As long as she keeps holding him, he isn't afraid.