

Northern Sea Route, Murmansk

Russian Sea Port, Midnight, 13 April 2030

‘Jesus! If this boat had a brass monkey, its balls would’ve frozen off by now and the crew would be playin’ marbles with them.’ Lieutenant William Steel tried to blow on his gloveless fingers to warm them but his white, steamy breath seemed to condense and freeze before even reaching his sluggish blood supply. ‘Ah, bugger it,’ he grumbled to himself, clumsily pulling his gloves back on.

He looked out over the endless glistening blue-black sea, surveying for any defect in its near-tranquil surface. It was so peaceful, so serene, with the half-moon casting its meagre glow on the small, rippling waves.

He had expected to be in for an easy, quiet shift tonight. But now he couldn’t escape an annoying prickling sensation he kept feeling, like a spider creeping up his neck and barely disturbing the fine hairs there.

Bloody hallucinating, cock; nothing a good night’s sleep wouldn’t fix. William hadn’t had a decent night’s sleep in weeks though. Ever since leaving Murmansk they had all been on full alert. Extremists had seen to the destruction of other tankers; whether from jealousy — a childish *if we can’t have it, why the hell should anyone else* mentality or perhaps simply greed — provocation leads to war, always a good money spinner. It had become like an amusement park game, where tankers were ducks being picked off randomly. The cargo they carried was just too precious, to become complacent. He suspected they were the one remaining oil tanker in service. If only the money wasn’t so good — but it was, so here they were.

He pulled out his thermos, removed the cap and with great pleasure inhaled the alluring scent of roasted coffee beans. As he began to pour out a hot mugful, he caught a flash of light out of the corner of his eye. Turning back, he saw moonlight reflecting off a small, shiny object along the horizon.

He stood staring and puzzled, until the hot coffee overflowing from the cup in his hand snapped him back to his senses. When he looked back to the sea, it was gone. The prickling on his neck grew worse. The spider was back, and she had company.

Swearing at the burn and his own stupidity, he hastily wiped his hand on his icy overalls. The skin began to stick painfully to the ice, almost tearing a layer of skin off in getting free. William grabbed his binoculars for a better look at the horizon – still nothing he could make out.

With a growing sense of unease, he picked up his hand radio. ‘Captain? Lieutenant Steel here. I don’t know if I’ve been awake too long ... maybe it’s nothing ... but I thought I saw something along the horizon off the port side Sir. I think you should try the radio lines and see if there’s someone out there; maybe they need help. Over.’

‘Roger that, Steel. Look lively then. Out,’ replied a mature, gravelly voice.

Lieutenant Steel heard a whooshing sound below him and suddenly the deck shook violently, knocking him off his feet. He looked up from the icy deck and all around him was chaos. A series of massive explosions rocked the tanker, and sirens wailed superfluously. Crewmen appeared on the deck. Some were smouldering and screaming in agony. Others were jumping overboard, in panic.

Steel grabbed the side rail and looked out onto the sea. Yet another strange v-shaped wave was racing towards them. He clung on to the icy bars to brace himself for the impact this time. He knew he had to get off fast – they’d drilled emergency evacuations and simulated attack, but hoped never to have to put the training to the test. Fuel, explosions and fire were an unforgiving mix

Lifeboats were hastily being dumped over the sides — the crew knew they didn’t have time to muck about lowering them properly.

With heart pounding, he climbed, slipping and banging his shins on the rails. Balanced on the edge and feeling nauseated with vertigo, Steel took a deep breath and... As he dived the ships bowels were ripped asunder in a crescendo of explosions thrusting him forward into the smoke-filled darkness below. The

cold water slammed into his chest, forcing the air from his lungs. Gasping for breath, and coughing up seawater, he fought his way up to the surface and broke through a slimy, black soup. Around him were burning bodies thrashing, and a highpitched ringing in his head threatened to burst his eardrums.



New Zealand, South Pacific ***Arrow Valley, 14 April 2030***

The huge dust cloud lingering behind obscured the beautiful valley vista as the old, grey Chrysler rumbled up the driveway, scattering chickens madly in all directions.

‘Wonder what she’s got ya this time?’ Allie snickered, jabbing her brother in the ribs.

Kyle pulled his black beanie down over the tips of his reddening ears. ‘Shut up,’ he mumbled to his porridge.

‘Come on you two; respect your Nana, eh?’ I chided them while dragging the brush through a stubborn knot in Olivia’s sleep-tangled blonde hair. She broke loose from my clutches to press her nose up to the glass of the front door, breathing a big circle of steam in which she proceeded to draw a wee heart and initials O R M with her fingertip.

Kyle paused from shovelling his porridge in quickly so he wouldn’t be late for school. ‘Yeah Allie, it’s not her fault she’s a bit batty. Probably got no money left so she’s giving away some of Granddad’s old stuff.’

‘What’s she got? Let me see.’ Olivia jostled her big sister aside, eager to get the first glimpse of Nana’s mysterious gift.

The car had pulled up outside the front porch of the old farmhouse. A small, yet sturdy woman with buttery-white hair smiled up at the waiting children as she climbed laboriously up the wooden stairs, clutching the handrail with care. I opened the kitchen door in welcome. ‘Hi Mum, back already?’

Puffing a little, she stopped a moment catching her breath; then beamed a huge, mischievous smile. ‘Hi love. Where’s my birthday boy? I’ve got a surprise for him,’ she said, angling to look into the kitchen for Kyle as she hugged Olivia and Allie.

With an inward groan, Kyle downed the last of his porridge and obediently trudged out to his Nana for a hug. He smiled grimly — he just knew her odd present would be the source of weeks of teasing from his sisters. Still, he loved his Nana very much and wouldn’t dream of hurting her feelings.

‘Hi Nan.’ He stooped to hug her. She was a little over five foot tall and he was almost six foot now.

‘Oooh, seventeen eh? Happy birthday love. Come with me, I think you’re really going to like this one.’ Kyle glanced back at me over his shoulder and raised his eyebrows as if to say *Sure, I’ll like it Nan, cos I’ll get my butt kicked by Mum if I don’t.*

I walked outside behind Kyle. The valley was a beautiful place surrounded by soft rolling hills of green, varying from shades of emerald to almost navy blue in the shadows. It was dotted with trees; mostly evergreen pines with the odd eucalyptus here and there, but also some deciduous trees – poplar, willow, maple and even walnut – amongst them. The leaves ranged from yellow, orange and red, to deep purple; and were currently growing naked as the autumn chill set in.

It was home to an abundance of bird and wildlife, with a noticeable absence of traffic, sirens, airplanes and crowds of tired, rushing, irritable people.

Heather reached into the large boot of the car and came up slowly, grinning from ear to ear. She looked like a disturbing cross between a Cheshire cat and the Grim Reaper, for in her right hand she held the long wooden handle of a very menacing-looking scythe. The sun glistened off the shiny blade and disturbed a flock of yellow-crested cockatoos, which exploded from the trees across the paddock, screeching and shattering the silence.

‘Wow, cool Nan!’ Kyle exclaimed with complete sincerity and face transformed, as he almost tripped down the steps in his haste to get his hands on the gruesome-looking gift. For once, his dear old Nana had given him something he *actually* thought was awesome. I, on the other hand was a little more reserved given a brother’s tendency to use his sisters as target practice, whether from frustration at being provoked, or simply mere boredom.

‘Where on earth did you find that, Mum?’

‘Oh, just a little old antique shop I found one day while taking a Sunday drive through the gorge.’ Apart from her garden, op-shop trawling was Heather’s favourite pastime.

In the past, his Nana had given Kyle a rather unorthodox repertoire of gifts, including saws, drills, an old hand-powered radio, an even-older Scottish claymore (actually, he had really liked that gift too), a hunting knife, a compass and fishing gear. One year they’d all received bullet-proof vests; Lord knew where Heather had got those from, but he really liked wearing his because it made him feel a little like he was Batman. He was always being given strict instructions from his Nana to take good care of all the paraphernalia she gave him.

He usually found it difficult to look pleased at the time when all he had really wanted was computer games like his friends. But, seeing Heather’s sweet smile on her tired, wrinkled face, he never had the heart to complain and would thank her graciously.

The strangest item she ever came home with was a windmill that could generate power for the house. Heather had brought the kitset home on the back of Granddad Dave’s old ute, and enlisted my husband Nate to help her take it up the hill a bit and assemble it.

Kyle had been a bit peeved at his Nana because when she tried the windmill out, it shut down half the house’s power supply. He lost a game he’d been playing on the computer for hours, without saving it!

Sister Allie had received a number of Nana’s special presents as well. Over the last few birthdays, she had been given a type of Swiss Army knife, a flint fire-starter, a small camp-cooker with gas cylinders, an extensive first-aid kit including thermal blankets and a crossbow that came with lessons, which Allie excelled in. When she received a slug-gun and rifle range practice, her accuracy was dangerous – as Kyle found out one summer’s day when he annoyed her and ended up with a pellet in his ear lobe. But best of all, the three children had all been given GPS-phone earpieces. I could track them down, much to their disgust, and call them wherever they were as long as they wore them. Often they didn’t.

The children wondered why their Nana seemed to be preparing them for the end of the world, but they had been brought up to respect their elders. So they humoured her and thanked her politely, no matter what they thought of their gift. My dear old Pa, when he was alive, had lovingly called her his survival crackpot.

Olivia, for her eleventh birthday, received an old set of binoculars that Nana had used at rock concerts in her younger days.

On his way in from the workshop one day, Nate spotted Olivia absorbed in watching something over at the neighbours.

‘What’s up, Livy?’ he inquired casually. She nearly jumped out of her skin and hastily hid the binoculars behind her back. Her face became an alarming red shade and she began to fidget – definite signs she was up to no good. Nate asked firmly for the binoculars and after a short hesitation, Olivia reluctantly surrendered them.

Nate peered through them in the general direction she had been looking. Almost immediately, the neighbours’ bedroom came into view complete with occupants in a compromising position and state of undress.

‘Ahem.’ He coughed to clear his throat and hide his embarrassment. He made a mental note to plant some bushy trees in front of the neighbours’ bedroom, on our side of the fence.

‘Olivia Rose MacGregor! You should be ashamed of yourself.’ She looked down at her feet, and he knew she was on the verge of tears. He handed the binoculars back to her. ‘How about you leave Kate and John to their...um...to their...ahh...*origami* and find some other wildlife to observe,

hmm? Otherwise Dad may have to put those,’ he tapped the item of disgrace lightly, ‘away until you turn sixteen, at least.’

Olivia was relieved to get off so lightly. She’d been sure she was in for a much worse punishment; she wasn’t really sure what she had observed, but figured it was in the forbidden category. And, it wasn’t origami! She thanked her father, took the binoculars and scampered towards the opposite side of the farm in search of bunnies, birds or some other benign, but boring, creature.

Once she was a short distance away Nate buried his face in his hands, shaking his head and chuckling to himself. ‘Lord, save me from daughters.’



Nathaniel appeared at the front door, casually resting his forearms up above on the doorframe. He had been busy in his workshop, and had a small black smudge across his forehead. Ruggedly handsome – though certainly no Pretty Boy, Nate was six foot four in height, with wavy, sandy-blonde

hair almost to his shoulders and a twinkle of Irish mischief in his light-blue eyes.

'Hi Heather, spoiling your grandkids again I see.' He loped down the stairs, two at a time, and cuffed Kyle playfully across the top of his head. 'Come on lad; go put that away someplace safe. We better get cracking if you want to get there on time.'

Kyle shot back up the steps, mindful that the long scythe didn't hit the top of the door. He reappeared shortly after with his schoolbag slung over one shoulder.

'Thanks Nan! It's awesome.' He hugged her goodbye on his way to the car.

'You're welcome hun; just don't let me catch you using it on your sisters, hmm?'

'Ha! Would I do that?' he answered, munching on what looked suspiciously like *my* toast.

'Yeah, he would do that,' said Allie and Olivia together, their identical pale-blonde heads nodding in unison.

'See you soon,' Nate bent to kiss me goodbye, taking time to rub his scratchy, short stubble back and forth across my cheek deliberately to irritate me. Then he kissed me, lingering just a second to bury his nose in my thick tresses of auburn hair, 'You've been baking scones again, yum! Save me some for when I get back, I'm famished.' He smiled, smacked me smartly on the bum and followed his lanky son to the car.

'Bottomless pits, the pair of them,' I joked, shaking my head. 'Allie, you and Olivia get started on your schoolwork now that all the excitement's over, ok?'

'Awwww, Mummmm,' Olivia whined.

'Come on,' Allie gently steered her sister's shoulders towards the bedroom while giving me a tolerant older-sister look, 'I'll help you.'

The girls were homeschooled these days because of the price of petrol skyrocketing over the last five years. We only took Kyle in to school three days a week now, and wouldn't be doing that except he loved his engineering classes. The teenage girls at the school also held a certain motivation, not that he would admit that to anyone.

'Cup of tea, Mum?' I asked, raising the teapot.

Spontaneous avian chatter resonated from our old extractor fan. 'I swear they're going to wind up going *poof* in a big ball of feathers one of these days,' I mumbled to myself as I gave the casing a thump to try and scare off the inhabitants who had stopped for a brief moment. Being used to this type of communication from me, they ignored it and took up their incessant chattering once more.

Heather settled herself in a comfy armchair and stretched her legs closer to the slowly burning log fire. 'That'd be nice, dear.' I assumed she meant the tea and not the concept of exploding baby birds in the extractor fan.

Our smoky-grey cat Bob immediately took up residence in her lap, asserting his proprietary rights to the armchair. He turned around two or three times and plucked her legs a bit before settling for the duration. Heather looked at him with mock astonishment. 'Ooooh, and would you jump into me grave just as fast?' she asked him. His eyes became slits and he proceeded to purr. Ever the animal lover, Heather melted, gave him a warm grin and a scratch under the chin.

With her grin fading, she asked in a more serious tone, 'Now tell me love, have you got your supplies in the cave organised?'

'Yes Mum, and I've checked and rechecked at least a dozen times,' I assured her, a little impatient as I carried the tray of tea into the lounge, split scones with cream and homemade strawberry jam - its homely, familiar scent wafting happily up my nostrils. 'Though I can't really believe we'll ever need ...'

'Believe it!' Heather snapped at me, rising suddenly to her feet. Bob was abruptly deposited on the floor. He scrambled sideways for a second, piling the edge of the mat into a wave before gaining traction and exiting the room in a hiss and a huff.

Placing the tray on the coffee table, I looked away a little hurt and surprised at her reaction. She came up beside me and put her arm round me, 'I'm sorry love. But you know why I feel it's so important. My family is everything to me. I need to know you will all be safe when ...'

'If ...' I interrupted cautiously, as though approaching a ticking time bomb.

'*When*,' she replied firmly but softly, '... when the time comes.' She wandered over to the window, which looked out across the front drive to the beautiful view of hills and trees, and in the distance, tiny neighbouring farms reduced to the size of matchboxes.

'You've seen the price of petrol go through the roof.' She came back over to me, a look of calculated determination on her face. 'There have been people queuing for hours, sometimes overnight to get their gas. Then there are those greedy sods that have started stockpiling it, so it runs out all the time.' *Like me,*

Heather thought with more than a little pang of guilt. We both reached for our cups of tea; a temporary truce whilst we mustered our thoughts.

‘Ok, yes, I guess you’re right. But the Government says that the tankers are coming; that there’s plenty more on the way. It shouldn’t run out for years yet, and by then technology will be more widespread and we should be fine,’ I pleaded, desperate to believe my own words. ‘Won’t we?’ I added weakly.

Behind me, the radio on the serving cabinet had been playing unobtrusively in the background, but now – in the uncomfortable silence that crept in between us – something the news announcer was saying caught my attention.

‘... last oil tanker in use worldwide has been targeted off the north-east coast of Russia ... static interrupted ... in a mass of explosion and flames. This is speculated to be the action of terrorists or pirates, who have methodically targeted tankers using this route in recent years. Apart from the environmental impact, which in itself ...’

‘Gen, listen to this,’ Heather erupted from her seat again with agility defying her years, to turn up the volume on the radio.

‘... considerable delay in getting supplies out to world markets. It means potential disaster for an already-strained world economy.

*Civil Defence advises households will need to be prepared for...’*The report broke up into static again.

‘My God. It’s happening.’ Heather shot me a look that chilled me to the bone.