

FAST ICE

1

Research vessel Grishka

North of the Antarctic coast

The present day

The polar research vessel Grishka moved cautiously through the Southern Ocean a hundred miles from the coast of Antarctica. The ten-thousand-ton ship had a gray hull, a reinforced bow and a five-story superstructure painted a faded shade of international orange. She was three hundred feet in length but looked tiny when compared to the mountainous icebergs surrounding her.

Some of those icebergs were flat and broad, tabletop monoliths the size of cities. Others were towering peaks, their Matterhorn-like shapes sculpted by the wind and waves into arrangements as different as they were remarkable. And yet among all the giants, it was the much smaller type of iceberg that threatened the Grishka.

From her position on the bridge, Cora Emmerson gazed through binoculars, scanning the water for automobile-sized chunks of ice that floated low and were almost invisible.

"Growlers dead ahead," she warned.

Unlike sea ice, which the Grishka could plow through, or the enormous icebergs, which were easy to spot and avoid, growlers were hard to see and could be deadly. They varied in size and shape and could weigh thirty tons or more. Worse yet, they were often angular instead of smooth-sided, resulting in a tendency to puncture a ship's hull rather than glancing harmlessly off it.

"We've got another set off the port bow," Cora warned. "Five degrees to starboard and we'll clear them all."

The captain of the ship, Alec Laskey, made the turn without questioning. Cora had been at his side on the journey down to Antarctica and had barely left the bridge since they began traveling north twelve hours before.

She had remarkable stamina, he thought. And a keen eye. "I'm certain you must have been a sailor in a former life."

"I can neither confirm nor deny that rumor," Cora said, "but I've been doing Antarctic research for years now. This is my seventh trip to the continent. And, before that, I worked for the

American nautical agency NUMA. It would be a shame if I hadn't picked up something along the way."

"I'd say you picked up a few things," Laskey replied. "You're vigilant."

Yes, she thought. And I have reason to be.

After months of searching, Cora's expedition had discovered something both unique and dangerous. If she was right, it had the potential to alter the world. In the right hands it could be a salve for the damaged planet, but in the wrong hands it could be turned into a weapon. Regardless of its use, there were those who would prefer such a discovery had never been made at all.

Whether it was paranoia or an overactive sixth sense, Cora had felt they were being tracked even before the discovery. Getting off the ice and aboard the Grishka had eased that fear. Until they reached Cape Town, however, she wouldn't feel safe.

"New heading established," the captain said. "Are we clear?"

Cora swung the binoculars back toward the growlers. They rose and fell as the bow wave of the ship passed, jostling against one another. A foam of bubbles appeared as one of the miniature icebergs rolled over, disappeared briefly and then bobbed to the surface with a different side pointed skyward.

"Ice has been cleared and is falling behind us," she said.

Cora watched the growlers and then turned her attention to the path ahead. What had once looked wide open now appeared less so. A mile in front of them, a midsize iceberg-larger than the Grishka but smaller than the mountains of ice in the distance-was moving into their path.

The iceberg was an odd shape. But, then, no two were ever alike. It had a flat top, like the city-sized bergs that broke off from the glaciers, but its nearest end was sharply angled. Small peaks rose from various parts.

The ice itself was an odd color. Instead of pure white or a ghostly blue, this one looked jaundiced, as if it had been dusted with volcanic ash.

"Is there a current here?" Cora asked.

"West wind drift," Laskey said. "Just like everywhere else around Antarctica."

"But nothing locally?"

"Not that I know of."

"Then why is that iceberg tracking east instead of west?"

Laskey glanced toward the encroaching iceberg. "Optical illusion."

"I don't think so."

The captain seemed unconcerned but motioned toward an old cathode-ray screen. "Check the radar."

Cora moved to the ship's rudimentary radarscope. It was an ancient device, with lines burned into the screen that remained there even when the unit was switched off. She set it to tracking mode and waited for the information to appear. After a dozen sweeps, it confirmed what her eyes were telling her. "That berg is moving southeast at a speed of four knots."

"Wind?" Laskey asked.

Cora checked the ship's anemometer. It registered five knots, coming from due north. A quick check of the pennant on the bow confirmed this. "Perhaps the back side of the iceberg is oddly shaped. It might be catching the breeze and acting like a sail."

Now the captain grew concerned. He cut the throttle and the Grishka settled and slowed to a crawl. "Too dangerous to try rounding it," he said. "God knows what's hidden under the surface. We'll stop here and wait for it to pass."

But the iceberg didn't pass. Whatever combination of currents and wind were moving it, the floating monolith lost its eastward momentum and began to move due southward, directly toward the Grishka.

Cora felt her chest tightening. "It's coming toward us."

"Impossible," Laskey said.

"Look for yourself."

He didn't bother. He cut the throttle to full stop and then placed it into the reverse position at quarter speed. The old ship responded slowly, shuddering and seeming to rest before it finally started to withdraw.

"You're taking us back into the pack ice?"

"Better than getting too close to this one," the captain said. "It could rupture our hull with the slightest impact. It could crush us if it tumbled."

The Grishka picked up momentum, putting some space between itself and the encroaching iceberg. But it wasn't long before a grinding reverberated through the hull.

Laskey stopped the engines. "Those would be the growlers," he said. "Must have drawn them into our wake when we passed. I need eyes at the stern if we're going to keep moving."

"I'll go," Cora said.

Picking up a handheld radio, she left the bridge. She took a ladder down five levels to the main deck and then went aft. She passed no one, as it was early morning and most of the crew were asleep.

Stopping near the aft hatchway, she grabbed a heavy parka from a storage locker. Slipping it over her shoulders and zipping it up, she pushed out into the elements.

The bitter cold hit her instantly, the wind stinging her face and hands. She pulled the fur-fringed hood up around her face and slipped her free hand into a pocket.

With the radio in the other hand, she crossed the helicopter pad, where the expedition's EC130 was tied down. The helicopter's windows were frosted over but its rotors were covered by specially heated sleeves.

Passing the landing pad, she reached the stern, where a pair of large winch housings stood. Moving between them, she glanced over the aft rail.

To her surprise, they were already moving backward and picking up speed. Deep baritone reverberations told her they were ramming small chunks of ice with the stern's blunt end.

The nearest sections of ice were not too threatening, but larger growlers lay directly in their path.

She brought the radio to her mouth and pressed transmit. "White ice directly astern, Captain. At least three separate chunks. I wouldn't take them straight on. The last thing we need is a damaged prop or rudder."

The propellers continued churning, the ship vibrating as it picked up momentum.

Cora pressed the talk button again. "Captain, did you hear me?"

The ship's horn blared, sounding three times, to announce a collision warning. The captain's voice came over the loudspeaker. "Brace for impact. All hands, brace for impact."

With the hood surrounding her face, Cora had zero peripheral vision. She spun around, shocked to discover a shadow looming over the ship as a wall of ice approached from just off the starboard bow. It was closing rapidly despite the Grishka's momentum. It hit the ship with a glancing, angled impact.

The Grishka rolled with the blow, heeling over fifteen degrees. The iceberg slid along the side of the hull, dumping thousands of pounds of dirty snow onto the deck.

Cora was knocked off her feet, hitting the deck beside the nearest winch housing. She dropped the radio and grasped her ribs, which had taken the brunt of the blow.

The grinding sound of ice on steel peaked and then subsided as the Grishka and the iceberg became locked together and moved as one until their momentum faded. The engines cut out. The ship rolled back to level and more snow and ice tumbled onto the deck.

The moment struck Cora as surreal. Instead of the ship hitting the iceberg, the iceberg had struck the ship. Then an even stranger sight followed.

All at once, a half-dozen ropes were thrown over the tip of the iceberg. They unfurled in midair, dropping and hitting the deck of the Grishka with dull thuds.

Before the ropes even landed, men in winter camouflage began rappelling down them. Cora saw assault rifles strapped to their backs, knives in sheaths strapped to their legs. They wore white hoods and goggles. They hit the deck in rapid succession, fanning out, while reinforcements dropped in behind them.

Cora knew instantly what was happening. She snatched the radio from the deck and tried to warn the captain, but gunfire broke out before she could make the call.

Ducking behind the winch housing in horror, she called out. "Captain, we're being boarded," she warned. "Men with guns are on the aft deck. They came from the-"

More gunfire drowned out her words. The captain's voice came next. "They're on the bow as well," he replied over the radio. "Take cover, I'm calling for-"

The staccato sound of machine gun fire came through the radio and the transmission cut out.

Cora stifled a scream and looked around. Shouting and screams erupted. The muted thumping of small-arms fire rose from inside the ship and the decks beneath.

She considered any possible avenue of resistance. With no weapons of any consequence to fight back with, the best she could hope for was grabbing a fire ax and charging into the fray.

Before she could move, a member of the Grishka's science team stumbled out of the aft hatchway. He ran toward the helicopter but never reached it. A sniper perched on the edge of the iceberg shot him down with merciless accuracy.

Another colleague came running out seconds later, fleeing whatever carnage was going on inside the ship. He ran for the stern, heading directly for the spot where Cora was hiding.

"Get down," Cora shouted.

The crack of a rifle sounded and the man's body jerked forward and tumbled to the deck ten feet from where Cora hid. He lay prone but looked up directly at her. He saw her preparing to help and shook his head.

It was too late to hold back. Cora was acting on instinct now. She lunged forward, grabbed him by the arm and pulled with all her strength.

She dragged him halfway before the sniper fired again.

The bullet crossed the deck at three thousand feet per second. It flew on a nearly straight line, slightly affected by the wind and diverted microscopically by the rolling motion of the ship, which was still caught in the embrace of the iceberg.

The combination was enough to push the bullet a half inch off target.

It hit the back of Cora's hood, blasting goose feathers, fabric, fur and blood into the air. Cora fell like a sack of flour, landing facedown on the body of her dying friend.

She lay there not moving, her head covered with the remnants of the hood, its tattered white fabric soaked with a growing stain of crimson blood.

Up on the precipice of the iceberg, the sniper studied the results of his efforts.

A spotter beside him did the same. "Headshot," he said. "That's two kills."

The sniper nodded and scratched a pair of marks into the stock of the rifle. They joined a dozen other scratches, some old, some new.

With the deck cleared and his kills marked, the sniper picked up a radio and sent a message to the commandos. "Aft deck clear," he told them. "What's the status inside?"

"Bridge cleared," a voice replied. "No resistance from crew. Looks like most of them were already put down. We're down in the vault now. Be advised there's a significant amount of material here. This is going to take a while."

The sniper nodded. He'd been told to expect as much. "Begin bringing it up. And be quick about it. We need to set the charges and send this ship to the bottom before anyone knows we're here."

2

Blinding pain filled Cora's body to every extremity. No, not pain, she realized, but the utter lack of sensation.

She opened her eyes and saw nothing but a dark, blurred image of the deck beneath her. She tried to move. It took great effort and felt tremendously clumsy, but eventually she twisted her body into a more natural position and managed to sit up.

For a moment, that seemed like a drastic mistake. Her head throbbed like a drum, her eyes went blind and she felt as if she were about to throw up.

Shutting her eyes and allowing the cold air to caress her face helped. She sat completely still as one by one her senses came back online.

First, she heard the wind whistling through the ice-covered wires and then she felt the reverberation of the ship's engines. She sensed the Grishka rolling gently as it moved through the swells. It dawned on her. We're under way.

She pulled the hood of the parka back and risked opening one eye. She saw pale skies and dark water. The day was waning. The iceberg was gone. The ship was alone.

She went to push herself up and noticed her hands were covered with blood. She saw the body she had been lying next to and partially on top of. Only now did the memory of what happened come back. The iceberg, the men with guns, the shooting.

She tried to stand, but that was too much. On her hands and knees, she crawled across the deck, reaching the aft hatchway. She pulled it open and squirmed inside.

Out of the wind and the subzero temperatures, her skin began to thaw. It felt strangely painful. Her face tingled, but her hands and feet remained numb.