



THE ICE  
REMEMBERS

A  
PARANORMAL  
THRILLER

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The Ice Remembers

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This is a work of fiction. Similarities to real people, places, or events are entirely coincidental.

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## Chapter 1

### Murmansk, Russia. 1933

Ivan fingered the crucifix hanging around his neck and then grasped it in a clenched fist. He squinted through the windscreen. A sudden snowstorm obscured his vision, but it was too late to abort.

Freezing fingers of air strafed the wings of the Kalinin-K5 aircraft and a smooth coating of ice formed on the leading edges as it sped along the runway. It gained speed and lifted into the air, the vibration coursing through the airframe dislodged most of it as the plane steadied itself against the strong north-easterly breeze.

Ivan hated these late-season flights, pitting luck against the onslaught of winter. With just over five hundred kilometres to Kolguyev Island, he prayed the ice stay at bay and not drag them into the icy waters of the Barents Sea.

*The trip will be over tonight, God willing,* he thought. Then he would spend the winter working further south in a more temperate climate. Despite having twelve passenger places, the plane carried only two other people. Yet the cabin was full. On, under, and between seats were provisions for the men for 6 months, plus a margin for safety. An earlier flight had transported their fuel supplies.

Ivan had concern for his aircraft, but the gamble of the return trip seemed better than spending the next half year in the hellhole where those men's destiny.

The older of the passengers was Vasily Primakov. The trip made him anxious too, and the thought of the following months. At sixty years of age, most likely it was his last. He was due for retirement and would play on a fictitious illness if they tried to get him to do another tour. He had been a lighthouse keeper for thirty-five years, and for the past five they had posted him to this same location, the worst of his career.

He had loved the job, the relaxed routine with time to read the great classics and modern fiction. He liked the quiet lifestyle, though this was too much; six months of freezing weather, little contact with the outside world, nowhere to go, and always the same scenery, snow, ice, and sea as black as coal far as one could see.

The landscape only changed during winter storms if the ice became thin enough for waves to develop. Then, the violent water smashed the ice

from the rocks near the water's edge leaving their grey and brown forms exposed, resembling rotten teeth. One year a ferocious storm cast a lump of ice the size of a car into the side of the generator house, missing the power plants by inches. Losing both sets meant likely death for the inhabitants.

Vasily knew he looked old. His clothes matched his long, unkempt beard and grey, shoulder-length hair. A large hoop earring hung from one ear. His colleague, Nikita Bylinkin, was in his mid-thirties and wore a well-fitted suit. He was a relative newcomer to lighthouse keeping but had already accompanied Vasily on two previous tours of duty at this outpost. At least it couldn't get any worse. He didn't mind the solitude as much as Vasily, with it came the opportunity to follow his passionate interests. Like Vasily, he liked to read which was a great way to pass a mass of time, and he loved to paint and draw. Also, he was a keen musician and practised on his violin almost every day. They had an arrangement, Nikita would go up to the lightroom on pleasant afternoons while Vasily would play music on the ground floor with all doors between them closed.

It worked and they got on well, despite the difference in age. Nikita began to see Vasily as a substitute father figure and saw more of him than he ever had his real father. To Vasily, Nikita was like a son. His true son was a Master Mariner who was lost when his ship went down during a violent storm off Valparaiso in the South Pacific. He was only thirty-five, a young age to be a Ship Master, and a young age at which to die. They were looking forward to working together.

Their destination was Lighthouse Number 34, set on the north end of the island, eighty kilometres from the only settlement at Bugrino. The lighthouse had suffered more than its share of disasters over the years. A summer storm destroyed it in 1893, and a fire in 1910 raised it to the ground. The keepers escaped the fire, but it was winter, with nowhere to go. Snow and ice surrounded them. As soon as the last embers of the fire died, so did they; frozen where they stood or fell.

The lighthouse was rebuilt after each incident and it was now one of the most up to date and luxurious lighthouses; if that term could ever apply to such a utilitarian building.

But they weren't the last mishaps. In 1923 one keeper shot the other after a game of poker got out of hand following a drinking binge. Another man died, only two years ago, in 1931, of apparently natural causes. Many said there was a curse on the lighthouse. Others said it was haunted, either by those who died or by more malevolent forces which had caused all the catastrophes. *Bloody nonsense*, thought Vasily. Just bad luck.

He looked out of the cabin window and caught a final glimpse of Murmansk, his hometown. They would be strangers until next year. Snow already lined the streets, and grey smoke from house fires and

industry hung over it like a grey blanket.

Halfway through the journey, another violent snowstorm hit the aircraft and buffeted it up and down, and from side to side. The pilot had no chance to pray or to hold his crucifix this time as he battled the machine with all the strength of his one-hundred-forty kilo frame.

Vasily fought the urge to throw up his last meal. He tightened his seatbelt and then grabbed the sides of his seat. *Sweet Jesus*, he thought. *Is this where it ends, out here on this God-forsaken sea? What comes first, freezing to death or drowning?*

Both scared the shit out of him. He wanted his last moments to be by the fireside with a glass of Vodka, or to slip away painlessly in his sleep. Not a violent, horrible death. He closed his eyes; his fate was not in his hands.

Nikita was also frightened. He had more to lose than Vasily. He was young, whereas his comrade had already lived a full life. He welcomed the loneliness of the lighthouse now, at least it was on firm ground. He would have given anything at that moment to be imprisoned there for the rest of his life rather than this.

The aircraft creaked and groaned, thumped and thudded. How much more could it take? The starboard engine cut out and they began a slow descent. Ivan pumped the fuel levers and igniters, his face staring in terror at the motionless propeller and the foreboding sea beneath them. He stabbed at the start button repeatedly. He was about to ask for redemption from all his sins, whatever they may or may not have been when the engine restarted. He pushed the throttle hard to its stops and the extra power pulled them back into an ascent. It sounded good, perhaps it had been a lump of snow dragged into the air intake. As he regained control of his hands were shaking, they didn't stop until they touched down on Bugrino Island.

"Fuck!" he said aloud. His face was covered with sweat despite the low temperature. Spittle settled on his thick beard.

They entered clear skies and the sea changed from an ominous black to a reflection of the crystal blue sky.

Vasily stepped into the cockpit.

"You're shaking," he said to the pilot.

"Aren't you?"

"Thought we were goners, nearly shat myself."

"All good now. Look. you can just make out the island on the horizon."

Vasily saw the thin strip of grey through the haze. "Home for the next six months."

"Rather you than me."

"I'd rather be cooped up there than in this flying coffin in this fucking

weather."

"It should clear, I'll be okay on the way back."

"I hope you're right, comrade."

Ivan began the descent towards the makeshift runway which served the lighthouse. Flurries of snow were already settling on it and the outgoing keepers had lit flares to mark its edges.

Vasily could see two small figures, Alexei and Viktor, waving at them. I bet they're happy to see us; he thought.

"Buckle up!" Ivan shouted from the cockpit. "Landing in five minutes."

The aircraft began a slow turn as Ivan eye-balled the landing area. The weather was good and the sun illuminated a patchwork of greens, browns, and fallen snow.

Vasily observed the desolate landscape through the cabin windows, he could see no other sign of habitation. As the plane banked again, the lighthouse came into view, a solitary spike against a featureless background. Its fresh paintwork glinted in the sunlight. The summer crew had completed the annual task of painting the structure, something impossible in the winter months.

It looked smart and homely, but Vasily knew that was an illusion. He recalled life from the previous tour of duty. They would see little of the outside of the building in the coming months. Sure, there would be opportunities to get out for a brief walk, but what was the point? They would get enough exercise ascending and descending the many flights of stairs, from the lightroom to the boiler room in the basement. As for fresh air, there was no place better than to stand on the walkway around the light to take a smoke.

This was not like a house, arranged horizontally, but the complete opposite; everything was one on top the next. Even the domestic facilities—the sleeping quarters, kitchen, saloon, washrooms, gym, and laundry room—were each on a separate floor. But at least there was room to move about.

Ivan levelled off onto a straight course and then completed a final one hundred eighty degrees turn. The nose lifted as the flaps lowered and their speed reduced.

Vasily watched the ground grow nearer. It appeared to speed up as they closed in. With what seemed only millimetres to go, the engines slowed and Ivan raised the nose further, flaring out into a landing attitude. Moments later the wheels touched down with a bump. A sudden side wind caught the tail and the aircraft slewed sideways. Vasily gripped the seat arms again.

But he had faith in Ivan, he'd flown with him many times. They snaked their way down the track of the landing strip until he brought the aircraft

back under control. Vasily exhaled a breath of relief. He wished the passage to the station was still by steamship as in the old days. But that entailed less time at home as the bosses took the travelling time off the leave allowance.

They taxied along the snowy ground, the wheels crunching through the frozen grass. Ivan took them as close to the lighthouse station as he dared. They had to transfer a lot of provisions, all by legwork. The engines died and Vasily unbuckled his seatbelt.

"Here we are Nikki, let's get going."

The violence of the journey had unsettled Nikita. Finally, he raised his eyes from the book which had absorbed him for the duration, attempting to escape to another world to avoid the terrors of the flight. He placed a bookmark in the novel, undid his safety belt and rose. "Good book, you'd like it." His voice had a slight tremor.

"Throw it my way when you've finished it then," said Vasily.

As Vasily passed the cockpit, he popped his head in. "Thanks, Ivan." Ivan's contract stated his job was to fly the airplane, nothing else. But Vasily knew what would happen next.

"I'll give you a hand," said Ivan.

Vasily was grateful for the help, his old bones were making life hard, and lifting boxes heavy with food and then carrying them fifty metres was enough to cause him pain for days.

"You take the light stuff, old man," Ivan said with a smile. "I'll take the heavy boxes."

"Thanks again, Ivan."

Ivan picked up the first box containing ninety-six tins of canned food as if it were a newspaper. He took another and hoisted the two boxes up, one on each shoulder, then marched in large strides to the building. Alexei and Viktor joined in. It was practice to help the incoming crew transfer their supplies. Four pairs of hands made the work much quicker, especially when the out-going crew were keen to be heading home. After an hour, the job was complete, and Alexei and Viktor's belongings were on the plane. There was one final task, the formal handover. This comprised a rundown of any events over the previous six months and a list of defects.

"We had a problem with the lens motor a few weeks ago," said Viktor.

"We swapped it with the spare and a new one arrived with your fuel delivery. Other than that, one of the boiler valves has blown a gasket. We've not fixed it yet, best get it sorted before the temperature drops. It only affects the ground floor though. Oh, and there are six lamps to change in the light, we had a spate of them go recently."

"Any traffic lately?"

"Not much, two ships in the past three weeks came within hailing distance. Had a chat with them on the radio. One was a skipper from Moscow, a whaling ship, and the other a Norwegian fishing boat out of

Vardo. Guess you won't see many over the winter."

"That's it?" said Nikita.

"Everything is in the logbook, not much of interest though."

"If that's it we can get on with the pleasantries then," said Vasily.

Alexei brought out a bottle of Vodka. "A drink, gentlemen?"

It was a rhetorical question. At every handover, a bottle of Vodka was drunk.

Alexei laid out five large glasses, they always included Ivan as thanks for his help. He poured a large measure in each then all took hold of a glass. They raised them in the air and spoke the toast together.

"To our health!"

The contents of the glasses were downed in one, then Alexei refilled them.

"Good Vodka, my friend," said Ivan.

"Only the best for this time of cheer, we're going home!" said Viktor.

"Lucky you," said Vasily. "We're only just starting."

"Our time will come again in the spring," said Alexei.

"Let us sit," said Vasily. "and finish this bottle in friendship and comradeship."

They all sat around the small table, smoked, drank, and spoke of drinking and women until the bottle was empty.

They left the last quarter glass of Vodka until the end, then they stood.

With a final raising of glasses, they made the final toast, in unison again.

"One for the road!"

They tilted their heads back, poured the drink down their throats, and then slammed the empty glasses down on the table. Next, the men embraced each other with a slap on the back.

"Alas, we must go," said Ivan. "While the weather holds."

"Try to stop us!" said Viktor.

"Lead the way," said Alexei.

They walked outside and boarded the plane, all except for Vasily and Nikita. With a final shaking of hands, they stepped back as Ivan started the engines. The afternoon was getting cold, even with the Vodka coursing through their veins. Vasily stamped his feet. Within minutes the aircraft was speeding up down the airstrip. The flares had gone out but the tracks from landing were still clear, there was no need for markers. The slipstream swept up a cloud of snow and it disappeared. They caught sight of it again as it began to climb into the sky. It circled the lighthouse and then dipped each wing in a final farewell.

The sound of the engines diminished by the second until the aircraft was only a dot before finally vanishing.

Then there was complete stillness and silence.

The light was fading as Vasily and Nikita stood on the frozen ground and gazed



into the empty sky. Their breaths formed clouds of vapour. Vasily turned towards the welcoming light from the ground floor storage area. They had work to do before they settled in.

In the small, isolated outbuilding one of the two generators throbbed away sending dirty black smoke into the pristine air. The building also held a crusher and incinerator to get rid of most of their waste.

"Hey Nikki, you make a start on putting the provisions away, I'll get those lamps replaced before it's dark. I'll give you a hand when I'm done."

"Sure."

They walked into the store and closed the door. There was no heat in the room because of the defect on the heating system which he would tackle later. But as he climbed the stairs to the next level, he felt the temperature rise. This was the gym and workshop. To one side stood a rowing machine and exercise cycle, apparently unused, but the workbench had seen plenty of use. It was clean and tidy, and they had put away all the tools, but he could see the scuffs and scratches on the worktop which hadn't been there on their last tour. He picked up the box of lamps Viktor had left on the bench.

Up another flight of stairs was the saloon and kitchen. It was just as they had left it. Already, it seemed he had not been away five minutes since their last tour of duty. Judging by the cleanliness, Alexei and Viktor had cleaned the place from top to bottom. They were a good team. Many keepers did the minimum amount of work, including domestic duties, and some billets you wouldn't keep a dog in. They had even polished the solid mahogany table. He could see that the previous crew had performed all their duties well.

The room was a comfortable size, the structure at this stage was about seven metres in diameter but reduced the higher up the building one rose. They would relax here later with more vodka.

He steeled himself for the long climb to the light-room. The next level held Nikita's bedroom and the radio shack. The bedding had been stripped ready for Nikita's bedclothes. His cabin would be the same, another job to do before the night was out. There was one small window in the radio room and another in the bedroom, both circular, like ship's portholes, and less than half a metre in diameter but they provided adequate natural light.

Up the next flight of stairs, he came to the washrooms and toilets; the compartment smelled of bleach.

The vodka had worked its way through his system.

"Ah, time for a piss before I carry on." The urge came more frequently now as he aged.

He unzipped and let out a sigh of relief. When he had finished, he took out a packet of tobacco and rolled a smoke. There was no rush, he was nearly halfway there. Besides, he wasn't as fit as he used to be. In his younger days, he could sprint right to the top from the ground floor, now

he did it in stages. He peered out of the small window above the sinks and blew out a plume of tobacco smoke. The night was closing in and the moon's reflection sparkled on the snow. *Get used to it fella, this is life for the winter.*

He finished his cigarette, flushed the butt down the toilet, and then picked up the lamps and began on the next set of stairs. This took him past his bedroom and to the main breaker room for the light's power. The copper conductors shone brightly in the lamplight and issued a faint hum as the current passed through them.

Next, he ascended to the motor room where a large electric motor passed its power, through complex gearing, onto a shaft. This penetrated to the next floor where it turned the reflector which gave the light its unique signature. He was glad the motor had gone on Viktor and Alexei's shift. It was a beast. The only way to get it up and down was to use the external derrick and manoeuvre the motor through the large cargo door in the wall. Not a job to do in a winter storm. He isolated the power to the motor so he could change the lamps.

Finally, he made it to the lightroom. There was a huge array of high-powered lamps in a stationary cradle, around which revolved the parabolic reflector.

Only six of the lamps were out. It would be a quick task. He replaced them with serviceable items and threw the old ones into a bag. There were more spare lamps in the original box which he left for future use.

Nikita would need a hand, but first, it was time for another smoke. He stepped out onto the circular balcony surrounding the light. After the easy job of changing the lamps, his breath had settled down and he felt relaxed.

It wasn't so bad; he thought. He looked out onto the black expanse of sea, not a ship in sight. These were quiet waters even in summer, now with winter approaching the sea would freeze over. He saw little point in their task of maintaining the functioning of the lighthouse. But the government was now deploying icebreakers in the area and there was the talk of another submarine base in the vicinity.

But he couldn't complain. It paid well and had kept him in comfortable housing and vodka for many years. But there were downsides to so much time away. It had cost him his wife, who disappeared with a diplomat twenty years ago. He had bothered little with women since, other than the occasional whore when the urge arose. He wondered what had become of his ex-wife; he had heard nothing from her since the kids had grown up and left home. It was all in the past, a long time ago. He dismissed the thoughts.

A movement in the snow caught his eye, a half kilometre away. What the hell was that? He could swear it looked like a man. There was no way it could be Nikita. He tried to focus and caught another glimpse, but the figure disappeared almost instantly. It sure looked like a person. He stared into the void but saw nothing more.

"Going mad already Vasily, you've only been here an hour," he said to

himself.

He flicked his glowing cigarette butt into the breeze and followed its trail as it fell in a gentle arc towards the ground.

Vasily ambled back down the stairs to the ground floor where Nikita was busy storing their supplies. He was emptying a case of canned tomatoes into a cupboard.

"You've been a while?" Nikita said.

"Sorry, long way up for these old bones now, my friend. What can I do?"

"Carry on putting all these cans away, then you can start loading the fridge. I'll take the ready-use stuff up to the kitchen. Save your legs." He smiled at Vasily.

"Not so old I can't do one flight of stairs easily."

" don't want you overdoing it and having a heart attack, leaving me on my own with your rotting body for the winter."

They both laughed.

"Hey, Nikki. You didn't go outside a little while ago did you?"

"No. Why?"

"Oh... nothing. Just thought I saw someone out there in the distance."

"Don't be daft. You must be seeing things."

"That's what I thought."

The memory was vague and elusive; it seemed ridiculous now. But at the time? *Forget it.*

It took an hour before they had put away all the food and the kitchen and storeroom were tidy. Vasily took the empty boxes out to the generator shack and left them by the incinerator which they fired up once a month or when there was enough waste.

It was dark now and he rolled another smoke. He stood out of the wind by the side of the shed and puffed away. He was hungry and looking forward to eating, grateful that Nikita had offered to cook. Nikita did most of the cooking when they were on duty. Not that Vasily couldn't, in their job they learned to cook well. They had the time and food was one of the main attractions of the day. But Nikita said he enjoyed it and produced a menu which was far more varied than his own.

He took a final drag from his cigarette and drilled the stub into the half-frozen ground with his boot.

Then he heard something.

He craned his neck.

Just the wind, surely?

But then he heard it again. It sounded like a person moaning.

Where was it coming from?

He cocked his head back and forth trying to get the direction.

It came from where he thought he saw a figure earlier. *This isn't*

*happening, there's nothing there. Can't be.*

He strained to listen and remained where he was for a few minutes, but the sound was gone.

The wind, or... or what? What else could make a sound like that? *The vodka, that's it, playing tricks on my mind.*

But his hands were shaking. He rolled another cigarette and moved closer to the comforting light from the open door to the storeroom. The sound didn't come again.

He finished his cigarette and his boots crackled on the icy ground as he made his way back into the lighthouse. He closed the door behind him. A shiver ran through him. He locked and bolted the door.

As Vasily climbed the two floors from the storeroom to the saloon, the smell of cooking bombarded his senses and the sound of sizzling from a frying pan; he knew he was in for a good feed.

Nikita was busy at the stove, so Vasily made himself comfortable on the sofa after picking up a bottle of vodka and two glasses.

"A drink Nikki?"

"Sure. One of your favourites tonight; knish followed by my version of zharkoye, and chak ckak to finish with. I've made some pirozhki for lunch tomorrow too."

"How did you do all that in an hour?"

"My mother taught me well."

Vasily poured the drinks, stood up, and walked over to Nikita to give him his.

"Smells good Nikki." he patted him on the back. "You'll make someone a great wife." He chuckled.

"Nah. I want to run my restaurant."

"Really?"

"Yeah, this lighthouse business is okay, but I can't see me doing it all my life like you. So, I've got another plan."

"Don't blame you. How are you gonna fund it kid?"

"Trying to save what I can when I'm out here and my family has good contacts."

"Ah, always the way. Nobody gets anywhere without knowing the right people."

"That's right, unfortunately. I'm lucky. Another five years should do it. So, in the meantime, I'm teaching myself new dishes and the finer points of cookery."

"I wondered what you were up to. Thought you just enjoyed it or used it to stave off the boredom."

"Well, they are both reasons, but not the main ones."

"So, I get to enjoy being fed well. A future master-chef."

"Fingers crossed."

"Good luck to you."

They clinked their glasses together.

"Cheers."

"You know," said Vasily, "I think I must be going crazy, or perhaps it's the vodka. When I was up in the lightroom, I thought I saw someone outside, a long way off, as I told you. Then, when I took the garbage out, I heard what sounded like a voice, from the same direction."

"A voice?"

"Well, a moaning sound."

"That's not exactly a voice then, more likely the wind. Your mind's playing tricks, the light is different out here. Then there's the sea, the land, and the ice, all moving against each other. Thought you would have rationalised it. You've spent enough time out here."

"That's what I tried to tell myself. But it put the Willies up me, I even locked the door."

"That's paranoid." Nikita laughed. "Day one and you're already losing it, old man."

"Yeah, stupid. More vodka?"

The meal was a welcome way to soak up the vodka they'd drunk already, though Nikita had been drinking slower. By the end, Vasily felt full.

"Thanks, Nikki, my compliments, even better than last time."

"Glad you enjoyed it."

"Fancy listening to some music before bed?"

"Okay, none of your old revolutionary stuff though."

"I promise."

They sat down on opposite seats and relaxed. Vasily poured more vodka.

"Not for me," said Nikita. "You'd better take it easy or the supplies won't last the winter."

"Don't worry, I slipped in an extra two cases."

"How did you pull that off?"

"The good old-fashioned Russian way, bribery. For a few rubles, the company man looked the other way."

Nikita looked surprised.

"Looks like I must teach you some old traditions." Vasily smiled.

"I've been insulated from that kind of thing," said Nikita.

"Privilege, eh?"

"I wouldn't say that. If it were the case, I wouldn't be out here. No, it's just my family has never needed to use unorthodox methods."

"I would say my ways are the orthodox ones," said Vasily.

"It's a matter of perspective."

"No, it's the lottery of birth."

Nikita laughed. "You're just a cantankerous old revolutionary, Vasily."

Vasily smiled and took another slug of vodka. "That may be so, young man. To your health!"

Nikita raised his glass and drained the contents in one mouthful. "And you Vasily."

"Enough for me, I need to make my bed. I'm turning in," said Vasily.

"Sound idea," said Nikita. "I'll tidy up down here first."

Vasily went up to his bedroom. As he stepped in, a shadow passed across the wall, like a person moving. His heart almost missed a beat. Too much vodka! He shook his head as if to clear some water from his ear. He could hear Nikita clearing the dishes and pans a floor below. He turned and switched on the light. The familiar feeling of claustrophobia, which plagued him for the first few days on duty, struck him. The electric light, combined with that from the half-moon, cast confusing shadows around the room. Then he noticed the kit bag which he'd left at the end of the bed was missing.

Confused, he looked around the small room and saw it perched high on top of the wardrobe. Full as it was, neither he nor Nikita could easily have lifted it there. He stared at it, trying to make sense of the situation. A shiver ran through him. He had a feeling that they weren't alone. He took a deep breath and heaved the kit bag from the wardrobe. It fell to the floor with a heavy thud as he stepped aside to avoid being injured by it.

With a troubled mind, he made his bed then went down one floor to the washrooms. As he brushed his teeth and looked in the mirror, he saw his eyes were bloodshot and circled by dark rings. Partly this resulted from the heavy consumption of vodka, but mostly it was his age and the lifestyle he lived. It was how he looked most of the time.

*This will be my last trip.*

He dried himself off and returned to his cabin. The bed looked inviting and the heating was working well, so he stripped off and lay down. His mind began to chew over the strange events as he tried to make sense of them. Were they real? Could there be someone else? Then he began to question his faith in Nikita. It could have been him out in the snow, and it could have been him who put his kit bag on the wardrobe - maybe he had hidden strength - and he had the opportunity. But why, and what about the noise he heard? And the shadow on the wall? What was real and what had he imagined?

He fell asleep and plunged into strange and disturbing dreams.

## Chapter 2

Vasily awoke with a headache and his mouth was dry from the previous evening's vodka consumption. He also had shadowy recollections of dreams which he tried to recall. As usual, the memory wouldn't return, the dream had slipped away into some subconscious realm which he couldn't access.

The feeling remained that something wasn't right and his last thoughts before falling asleep, of Nikita being responsible, had taken hold in his mind. It was the only rational explanation. Perhaps it was all a first day set of pranks and they would now settle down to the normal routines. But he would keep a close eye on him today.

He dressed and washed, then went down to the saloon where Nikita had breakfast waiting, still hot on the table. He devoured the sausages, eggs, and bread, and washed it all down with cups of strong tea. He felt better, almost normal.

Normal was how he could also describe Nikita. Watching him clear the table, he began to doubt how he could even consider blaming him for the odd events. He needed to keep an open mind.

"I'll do the radio check this morning," Nikita said.

"Fair enough, I'll pop up and check the light and breaker room again, then give the generators a once over." Vasily switched on the domestic radio and searched for a station on which music, not propaganda, dominated.

"I'll do the generators if you like?" Nikita said.

"No, you can fix the heating valve and check the system down there."

"No problem."

Neither was in a rush to start. There was little to do each day. A few checks, a bit of cleaning, food preparation; other than that time was their own. Vasily washed up, made a fresh pot of tea, then sat down with a book. Nikita was reading too, and they relaxed until they finished the tea. After an hour Vasily stood up. "I'm gonna get the jobs done before I lose the will."

"Yeah, might as well get into the routine of having not a lot to do."

"You bring your violin with you?"

"And my drawing supplies. I won't be bored." He grinned.

"Books and vodka will keep me going," Vasily chuckled. "Time for my exercise."

He set off for the lightroom, which was not too onerous from the saloon, a mere five floors. He still couldn't achieve it in one hit so stopped again

in the washroom for a smoke and thought about Nikita. A nice young guy, from a different background to his own, but unpretentious and likeable. He was one of the best light keepers he'd ever worked with; professional, competent, and good company. They worked as a team and had almost a second sense for when the other need to be alone, and when they needed company. There had never been a moment of stress before, just friendship, jollity, and a good working relationship.

He flushed the stub down the toilet and carried on with his ascent. The breaker room appeared normal. He opened the bus-bar connectors for the main light and examined the contacts; a little scorching on the copper surfaces, but nothing to worry about. That would be dealt with in the monthly service routine. He would make good the pitting and burning with abrasive paper. If he recalled the log correctly, which Alexei had handed over, the routine was due in two weeks. He remade the contacts and there was a muted *buff* as all the lamps in the main light re-lit.

He climbed the final level to the lightroom.

All the lamps were burning bright and he set about cleaning the windows. It was then he noticed the box of spare lamps were absent. He looked around but they were nowhere to be found.

Perhaps Nikita has moved them,

He thought no more of it and continued his task. Using an anti-static cleaner and cloth, he worked his way around the many panes of glass. As he sprayed the cleaner onto one pane, he saw marks in the droplets. No, not marks, they formed a word as if drawn on by a finger – 'Watching you!'

Vasily stepped back in shock.

If this was Nikita, it was getting beyond a joke. He could understand, perhaps, the jolly jape of putting his kit bag on the wardrobe, maybe even hiding the spare lamps. It could even have been him he saw in the distance yesterday. But this!

It was in bad taste.

He composed himself and carried on cleaning. He resolved to confront Nikita later.

When he had polished the last pane of glass, he stowed the cleaning gear away and sat back for a smoke.

*He's done nothing like this before, it makes little sense. He didn't even have much of a sense of humour.*

He would put a stop to it right away.

A banging sound reverberating through the building, Nikita must be working on the heating system.

*I'll finish my jobs while he does that, then we'll see.*

He walked back down. No need for a stop now. It was easier going, and he was fired with a little extra energy; Nikita's behaviour was annoying him.



He opened the outer door and began walking to the generator shack when something caught his eye. He moved over to investigate.

It was the spare lamps, smashed after having fallen, or been thrown, from the top of the building.

That was it! No more messing about, they only had a limited number of spares and a dozen were destroyed.

The noise from the basement indicated Nikita was still busy, so, with mounting anger, he pursued his last maintenance task for the day.

He donned the ear defenders, which were hanging in a protective box beside the door and entered. Even with the protection of the ear defenders, he could hear the noise from the generator and feel the vibrations in his bones. The smell of diesel and hot engine oil was strong and floating above those scents was that of rotting waste coming from the unburnt ash of the incinerator. He switched on the light.

All appeared normal and he read the limited number of gauges for the generator and its engine. Temperatures, oil pressure, fuel level, generated power, all were good. He checked the standby generator set, the oil level, cooling water, fuel tank, drive belts, exhaust and air intake. All were as they should be. He pushed the start button for a test run and it burst into life. The din from the room now doubled but still comfortable under his ear protectors.

He allowed the engine to reach normal working temperature and then shut it down. He moved the power selector switch back to automatic. If the main set failed, or the power dropped, the standby unit would start automatically and synchronise its output with that of the main set.

He moved towards the door, switched off the lights, and stepped outside. The snow was falling, but something else was on his mind and dominating his thoughts.

He replaced the ear defenders in their stowage and went back to the lighthouse.

Vasily climbed the stairs back up to the saloon where Nikita was brewing up.

"All done?" said Nikita. "Thought you'd be ready for a brew, I sure am. Got that heating valve sorted and all the maintenance done, radio checks done too. I had a quick listen, but no shipping around."

Vasily waited for him to stop and then struck.

"What the fuck are you trying to do, Nikki!?"

"What!?" Nikita looked stunned.

"Some things which happened yesterday might have been my imagination, but now I don't think so. I'm not seeing things when I find the spare lamps thrown from the top of the building, my kit bag not where I left it, and graffiti scrawled on a lightroom window. Putting two

and two together, I'd say it was you I saw out in the distance yesterday, and the one making strange noises too!"

"Vasily... what are you talking about? Lamps smashed?"

"I left a box in the lightroom yesterday, they weren't there this morning. I found them smashed on the ground outside. I left them secure, I shut the doors, there was no wind. You could have moved them. You would have had the opportunity last night. Nobody else could have done it!"

"I didn't, honestly."

"How then?"

"I... I don't know. Perhaps you left them where the wind could have blown them over?"

"There was no wind last night."

"There may have been a gust we didn't hear later, where exactly did you leave them?"

"I don't remember."

"There you go. Too much vodka Vasily."

"I wasn't drunk!"

"What about the graffiti, what's that all about?"

"I was cleaning the windows, and someone had written the word 'Watching you!' with their finger, it showed through when I applied the cleaning solution?"

"Can you show me?"

"No . . . I . . . cleaned it off."

"Vasily! You're not making sense."

"Look there's only the two of us here, these things happened, and it wasn't me, so . . ."

"So?"

"It must have been you!"

"This is ridiculous! Whatever you've seen, or think you've seen, I had nothing to do with it."

"What are you saying, I'm seeing things?"

"I'm not saying that I'm just trying to say... hell, I don't know!"

They faced each other, silent for a few moments.

"I need a drink," said Vasily.

"It's only lunchtime."

"Just one. There's bugger all to do for the rest of the day, anyway."

"Suit yourself. I'm going to do some drawing this afternoon. If that's OK with you?"

"Whatever."

They drank the tea without saying another word until Nikita finished his cup and stood up. His face was expressionless. Vasily poured a large glass of vodka.

"There's some pirozhki in the oven. I'll eat later."

"Fine. Thanks." Vasily said without lifting his eyes from the book he was reading.

But he wasn't reading, he couldn't concentrate.  
Nikita had denied it all.  
Everything!

Nikita went to his cabin and opened the suitcase he used for his art equipment. The smell of old leather assailed his senses, then the aroma of pipe and cigar smoke. They brought back memories of times spent listening to his father's tales of adventure in front of a roaring fire. The suitcase had belonged to his father, Sergei, who used it for years. He was a member of the Constitutional Democratic Party and travelled the country aiding the cause. The Kadets, as they were informally known, played a role in the revolution of 1905 which was sparked by the Bloody Sunday massacres in St Petersburg in January of that year.

But many of its members, like his father, were upper-class and wealthy. They urged restraint and the use of political power, not armed confrontation. Tsar Nicholas II eventually issued the October Manifesto, somewhat reluctantly. Slowly the nation returned to peace, though not before terrorists murdered hundreds of officials, and the government executed a much greater number of terrorists in retaliation.

The State Duma was formed, and in 1906 the first elections saw the Kadets and their allies dominating it. But Sergei was not interested in a life of politics and returned to business. With his modest fortune and powerful contacts, he used his influence to build a company dealing in imports and exports, mainly with the French with whom Russia had formed a new alliance.

Sergei's business interests took him far and wide. With him always was his favourite suitcase. Later in his life he gifted it to his son when he started his career as a lighthouse keeper. He said it would bring him good luck.

Nikita was set on a different path, to find solace in the wilderness and pursue his passions in art, music and cooking until he was ready to start on his own. Now he wondered if he should have accepted his father's offer of a role in his business, stuck as he was with what? A mad man? Vasily's behaviour unsettled him, first his drinking. He always liked a drink, but this time he started as soon as they arrived and hadn't stopped. Now there were these bizarre allegations. What had got into him? He was old and crotchety for sure; he had always been that way. But now there was another edge to it, a sense of unpredictability. He had seen a strange, almost devilish glint in his eyes more than once.

Perhaps things will settle down, Nikita told himself.

He took out a drawing pad and a selection of pencils and then made his way up to the lightroom where he could be alone. He usually preferred the comfort of the saloon, but he didn't want to cross swords with Vasily again just yet. Let him come to his senses.

He rested the drawing pad on his knee and waited for inspiration. At home, he painted and drew from life. But out here there was nothing other than the possibility of still-life drawings from the contents of the lighthouse. Outside there was only the sea, the rocks, the lighthouse and snow.

On past tours he had painted the sea in its many moods frequently and he would again. But for now, he wanted another subject, something from his imagination.

Vasily reclined in his chair with a footstool to support his legs and nursed a second glass of vodka. As the alcohol began to dull his senses, disturbing thoughts began to form images in his mind. His allegations so shocked Nikita that he now began to think he was telling the truth. But if not Nikita, then who? He had seen something out in the distance, or had he? Was he imagining it all? The lamps, perhaps he left them outside, on the edge of the balcony. The graffiti on the glass pane. Did he imagine it? Did he form the words from a random pattern of marks? Like the way light and shadow patterns can make a face appear in rocks or sand, leading some to proclaim, with an absolute lack of logic and rational reasoning, that it is the face of Jesus? Was he suffering from similar delusions?

Sure, he'd drunk some vodka, and the climb to the top had left him dizzy with stars spinning in front of his eyes. And why would Nikita have done such things, he was never the practical joker? Vasily now began to feel guilt over accusing him. There were so many questions.

*Perhaps I should apologise*, he thought. No point getting off on the wrong foot and causing bad feeling when they had only just started the tour. It could make for an unbearable six months. Perhaps I was hasty in not looking for other explanations.

The more he thought about it, the more it seemed he was out of order. And yet... he had the feeling something was going on. The memory of the figure in the distance came to the fore again. He was sure it had been a person, no matter how crazy the idea was. Was someone else playing games with them?

Ideas whirled in his brain, leaving him confused. As the second glass of vodka hit, he did not understand what to believe, other than doubting his senses and rationality. He poured another glass and placed it on the small table next to his chair. His eyes grew heavy and he drifted off into a light sleep. He didn't know how long he was asleep but woke abruptly as a loud noise came from outside.

Then the lights went out.

"Fuck!" Vasily said to himself. "The generator has tripped. Why hasn't the standby started?"

The dim battery-powered emergency lights came on. There was only one per room and the amount of light they produced was almost useless. He searched around for one of the many powerful torches and found one just as Nikita entered the room.

"What's happening, why hasn't the standby generator kicked in?"

"That's what I want to know, let's go find out."

They descended the last two flights of stairs and went outside. The door to the generator shack was wide open.

"I swear it was bolted securely," said Vasily.

"Whatever, let's look and find out what's gone wrong."

Nikita found another torch and they began their inspection.

"Here, look. You didn't leave the changeover switch in automatic."

Vasily furrowed his brows. He knew he had left it in the right position; he was sure. Further doubts entered his mind.

"I tell you I did!" he told Nikita.

"The switch says otherwise, my friend. But why did the main set fail?"

They searched around the set until Vasily came upon the problem.

"The fuel cock has been turned off!"

They stared at each other for a few seconds, bewildered.

"What the fuck!" said Vasily. "I left it on after I test-ran the stand-by set."

"Well, it wasn't me this time. You know I was several floors above you, no way I could have got out here without you knowing. The fuel cock could only have been turned off ten minutes ago, allowing it to run on the fuel left in the delivery pipes."

Vasily knew that, and it disturbed him even more.

"Look, Nikki, I've been thinking while you were upstairs. I want to apologise. I don't know what's going on, but I was wrong to blame you so quickly. Now there's this.... what can we make of it? Somebody turned the fuel tap off and I know it couldn't have been you. I'm sorry."

"Apology accepted Vasily."

"Thanks."

"So, what the hell is going on!"

"Your guess is as good as mine. We'll put this right first and get the generator back on."

"Agreed."

Vasily switched the fuel back on and restarted the generator. Then he made sure the auto changeover switch was in the correct position. They both gave the sets a check over and when they were happy, left the shack and bolted the door.

Both walked back to the lighthouse deep in thought.

## Chapter 3

Vasily and Nikita reached the saloon and sat down. Vasily topped up his glass of vodka.

"Pour me a large one too," said Nikita.

"Sure, what do you want in it?"

"Neat."

"Wow, that's unlike you."

"I need it."

Each took a large slug from their glasses, Nikita grimaced as the fiery liquid seared down his throat.

"Steady on my friend, you're not used to it," said Vasily.

"I don't get how the fuel cock could have been turned off. You know I couldn't have done it, maybe it was you."

Vasily sat up in his chair. "Don't go turning this around! I've apologised to you already, don't make the same mistake!"

"Sorry, it's just there's no explanation."

"I know. But I was asleep, the lights going out and the banging of the generator shack door woke me up."

"Okay. So how do we explain it?"

"Maybe there's someone else around."

"That's ridiculous, Vasily."

"I told you, I thought I saw somebody in the distance, shortly after we arrived, and that voice too."

"Nobody could survive out there, not without a substantial shelter and supplies. It's nearly 80 kilometres to the only settlement on the island."

"So, tomorrow, if the weather is good, we go look, prove it. If there is somebody else, they can't be that far away."

"Assuming there was someone, I have to ask why? Why would they be playing tricks on us? And if your story about the lamps being thrown from the light balcony was true, and down to them, how the hell would they have got into the building unnoticed?"

"I know, it's mad. But we have to look."

"Okay, I agree. If only to rule out these ridiculous ideas and only if the weather is fair."

"Agreed. More vodka?"

"Why not?"

Vasily put a record on the turntable. Tchaikovsky's Piano Concerto Number 1 filled the room. Vasily's choice was always Tchaikovsky, Stravinsky, Khachaturian, or his favourite revolutionary songs.

"Is that okay with you?" he asked Nikita.

"Sure, good music."

Nikita liked Vasily's choice of music, but Vasily didn't care for Nikita's

alternative tastes. He had a large collection of American jazz music, frowned upon by the State, but which he had smuggled into the country through one of his father's business contacts.

They both sat in silence as they drank. Vasily's mind digested all the impossibilities of the situation. No doubt Nikita was doing the same. He was clutching at straws so much he even considered the possibility that he had been sleepwalking after he fell asleep and had done it himself. But the idea was preposterous. How could he have been unaware of descending two flights of stairs and going out into the cold? Then opening the generator shack, turning off the fuel, and moving the auto change-over switch to the off position? Then returning to the saloon and only regaining waking consciousness after the power failed? He dismissed the thought as being in the realms of fantasy.

No, tomorrow they would know more, perhaps.

But for now, the music mixed with the vodka and all their concerns drifted away.

Nikita felt he had enough vodka in his system to kill a dog. As he rose from the chair, his legs almost gave way under his weight. He steadied himself until he was fit to move.

"Enough for me, I'm going to bed, Vasily."

"Sure, okay. One more for me, then I'll hit the sack too."

"See you in the morning."

Nikita staggered up the stairs, stopping for a piss in the washroom. He cleaned his teeth and then made his way to his sleeping quarters.

He sat on the edge of the bed and picked up the piece of artwork he had been working on during the afternoon.

He stared at it quizzically. It was a pencil sketch, images from his mind, which now shocked him. The picture was dark and foreboding. Stormy skies set against the lighthouse, but there was more. Faces loomed from the small windows, and figures, with demonic eyes, gathered around the outside. Flames were coming from the generator hut, and at the top of the lighthouse, fire engulfed the lightroom. Where had these ideas come from? He recalled starting a picture of the lighthouse, but how it had developed into this?

Despite the alcohol in his blood, he was disturbed. There was something wrong about it all. A mere couple of days had passed and yet so much had happened. Now this, a drawing so far from what he would normally produce he could barely believe it came from his hand.

He placed the drawing on the bedside table, stripped off, and lay down.

He pulled the covers over himself, but for now, he left the light on.

Shadows in the room formed a sinister feeling of foreboding in his mind.

Vasily concerned him, his drinking foremost. Though he now believed he

could not have sabotaged the generators, some doubt remained. He could have done it. He was in the saloon while Nikita was drawing in the light-room. The fuel could only have been turned off minutes before the generator stopped. Maybe he had been sleepwalking. Or was there a worse scenario, one he could hardly bring himself to consider? That Vasily had been out there with the full knowledge of what he was doing. It was unthinkable.

Vasily had been seeing and hearing things, by his admission. Maybe the old fart was going mad this time. Too many years behind him, too much time in this frozen wasteland, and too much vodka.

Nikita felt vulnerable.

Sleep was drawing him ever closer to its grasp. He switched off the light and fell asleep almost instantly.

He awoke with a throbbing headache. He felt he had only fallen asleep a moment before, yet now the sky was already lighting up with the dawn. A storm was building, hammering against the building structure, and he could hear the crashing waves pounding the shore a hundred metres away. There would be no chance of their planned reconnoitre of the surrounding area if the storm lasted. It was an irrational plan, but one he knew they had to pursue, if only to put their minds at rest.

After dressing, he went down to the saloon where Vasily was already cooking breakfast. Nikita wondered at his ability to consume vodka with no ill effect.

"Ah, you're up at last. Thought I'd let you sleep, you downed a fair bit last night."

"My head tells me I did, that's for sure."

"Get this down you, you'll feel better."

The smell from the plateful of fried food almost made Nikita retch, but after the first mouthful, he devoured it hungrily. Whatever else Vasily cooked, he knew how to cook a morning-after breakfast. Almost immediately his stomach felt better and his headache began to dissipate.

"We'll not get out there today if this storm continues," said Nikita.

Vasily poured a second cup of steaming tea. "I know, but I want to look around."

"Far too dangerous, and visibility would be minimal."

"Maybe it'll clear later."

"Perhaps. But we're better off having a whole day to do it. Wait for a good day and take some provisions. We could cover a lot of ground."

"I don't want to wait, this is all playing on my mind. I need to be sure whether there is anyone out there. But you're right, there's no way in this weather."

"It's getting to me too, you know."

"Sure, there are things neither of us can explain."

Vasily was agitated. Nikita watched the way he stirred the sugar into his tea, moving the spoon around much more than usual and tapping it on



the bottom. When he stopped, he drew a flask out of his pocket and poured a large shot of vodka into the tea.

"Early for that isn't it?"

"Fuck it, this storm is driving me crazy already."

The wind howled and caused the building to vibrate. Nikita had looked at the anemometer reading in the radio room before coming down. It had hovered around 55 knots. They could expect worse through the winter, but it was their first taste of bad weather this trip. It rattled him too.

"We could do some planning," said Nikita. "Is there still a map of the island lying around somewhere?"

"I saw one in the workshop last time."

"I'll look."

Nikita descended the stairs to the storeroom, warm now they had repaired the heating system. He searched the various cupboards and draws for over half an hour before he found the map. It was old, faded, and torn at the edges, but still usable. He took it up to the saloon.

"I've found it."

"Great, let me look," said Vasily.

Nikita spread the map out on the table. It covered the whole island down to the town of Bugrino. There was no other habitation shown on the island. The printer's mark in the bottom left corner showed it to be twenty-five years old, but they knew there had been no other settlements in that time; they flew over the island twice a year.

The lighthouse was situated on the northern tip of the island on a rocky peninsula, about fifty metres from the water's edge and at a height of fifteen above sea level. To the south, the topography was almost flat for nearly four kilometres before becoming hilly. The highest point on the island was the central region rising to one hundred sixty-six metres which obscured the lighthouse beam from a substantial portion of the seventy-kilometre-wide channel between the island and the mainland of Russia. This was of no consequence to the authorities as they built the light to guide offshore shipping; only local craft used the channel and their skippers had intimate knowledge of the waters.

"What do you know of Bugrino?" said Nikita.

"Not much. It's mainly populated by Nenets, indigenous folk that occupy a lot of this region. They're fishermen and reindeer herders mostly, simple folk."

"They wouldn't have much interest in us then."

"Unlikely," said Vasily.

"Let's plan a route then. How far do you reckon we can cover?"

"If there's snow cover, I'd say I could do perhaps thirty kilometres in a

day."

"So, how about this?" Nikita drew a triangle starting off southwest from their position, then heading east an equal distance before returning. "If we could make a little further, we could get to higher ground. In good visibility, we could view nearly half the island."

"Looks good. It'll be a long day though."

"Dawn until dusk should give us time to do it. That's if your legs will hold out." Nikita smiled.

"I'll be OK on level ground, I can go for miles. It's just hills I find difficult."

"I'll see if I can get a weather forecast on the radio. There should be one coming up soon."

"OK, I'll get the kettle on," said Vasily.

"Good idea, see you soon."

Nikita went up to the radio room and noticed it was off. He always left it switched on, tuned to the emergency channel. *That's odd*, he thought. He sat down at the desk and then saw that it was switched on but there was no power. *Bugger, it's gone on the blink. Maybe it's just a fuse or something else simple.*

Nikita was the electrical and electronics expert of the two of them. Vasily looked after the mechanical equipment such as the generators and the light reflector gearbox. Nikita opened a cabinet and withdrew his toolbox, then reached around to the back of the radio set to open the casing. After taking out a few screws, he removed the cover. He turned the set into the light and began a visual examination. It took only moments to see the loose wire. But something didn't seem right.

He grabbed a magnifying glass and inspected the end of the wire. There was no doubt. It had been cut!

He sat back, dumbfounded. The set was working yesterday; it was a daily check to confirm its operation. *How the hell. . .!*

His first thoughts turned to Vasily. Though he no knowledge of electricity, he wouldn't need it to cut a random wire. But when did he have the opportunity? Yesterday they spent the day together and ended up drinking the night away. Perhaps today, yes! When he had gone down to the workshop in search of the map. He had taken quite a time, Vasily could have done it then. A chill went through him. What is he trying to do? And why?

But he wasn't sure. Vasily's reaction to his previous accusations was aggressive, maybe he was telling the truth. There was so much going on which defied explanation.

He took a non-confrontational approach.

He walked to the top of the stairway. "Vasily!" He shouted. "Come up here a minute."

Vasily appeared after a minute. "What's up."

"Look at this." He showed him the cut wire. "If you look through the

magnifying glass, you can see it has been snipped. Look at the marks and the shape of the end of the wire."

Vasily followed Nikita's instructions. He held the end of the wire in his stubby fingers and turned it while looking through the magnifying glass.

"Bloody hell, you're right!! He paused for a moment. "Hey, you're not accusing me of this, are you?"

"No, I'm not. Though I would have grounds to."

"What the hell are you talking about!?"

"I'm not saying it was you. But it wasn't me so ... "

"So, you are saying it was me then!"

"No!" Nikita shook his head uncertainly. "There's something not right about all this. Something weird is going on. If you tell me you didn't do it, I believe you."

"I didn't."

"Right. We've got to find out who did."

"Or what." Said Vasily,

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"I don't know, maybe this place is haunted."

"Oh, come on! You don't believe in all that shit, do you?" Nikita said.

"It's a possible explanation."

"Well, I will look for a rational explanation first. I'll fix this set then we'll carry on planning for a walkabout tomorrow, weather permitting."

Vasily left Nikita on his own to repair the radio.

Nikita warmed up a soldering iron and re-attached the wire to its connection. Then he fired up the set. It worked. He had missed the weather bulletin he had come to listen to, but another would be along soon.

To pass the time, he trawled through the frequency bands to see if he could pick up anything of interest. It wasn't likely, but occasionally he would pick up transmissions between fishermen or cargo vessels, and sometimes warships on non-encrypted channels they used for general communications. Some days he was even luckier; he would see a vessel through the binoculars and call them up. Most welcomed a chat with him, and it often led to interesting conversations.

But today there was no one else around.

Eventually, the weather forecast came in and it promised clear and settled weather for the following day.

The next morning, they awoke to find the sun shining on freshly fallen snow. There was little wind and the sun gave a gentle warmth to the air. They had prepared everything the night before. They had agreed the route plan and filled two rucksacks with food supplies and clothing. They were ready for any eventuality. Both had a pair of binoculars, sunglasses

and compass, and had attached crampons to their walking boots to aid their grip in the snow. There was only one map, which Nikita carried. As they set out, they didn't know what they were looking for. Probably, there would be nothing. But they had to be sure. If the search was negative, then where that would leave them, they didn't know. They would face that problem when it came.

As planned, they started the walk in a southwesterly direction. If the going was easy, they planned to cover just over ten kilometres in this direction, giving a total walking distance of over thirty kilometres for the day.

They settled into a steady walk with Vasily, being the elder, setting the pace. There was only a light dusting of snow over the ground which, other than rocky outcrops, comprised sparse vegetation and tundra. Wetland cover much of the island and there were many large areas of bog, especially in the south.

After an hour they took a break for coffee, they had covered a good distance already. Nikita took out the map.

"We should be about here," he pointed out their position. "Not much further to go, and that will take us past this area of bog in the centre. Look over there." he pointed to the left of the track they had been on. "That hill is our last turning point. it's one hundred metres high. Think you can manage it?"

"I'll let you know when we get there," said Vasily.

"If you're not up to it, you can wait at the bottom while I go up. We'll get a good view from up there."

They rinsed out the coffee cups with snow and carried on walking.

Neither spoke much as they saved their breath for the long trek. Both paused occasionally to scan the horizon with binoculars, but all they saw was more of what was beneath their feet.

Another hour passed and they reached the first turning point. Now they were heading almost due east towards the hill. They had planned the course well and passed only a short distance from some boggy ground which would have been impassable.

The weather held good and as midday approached, the temperature rose slightly. Combined with their physical exertion, both needed to remove their outer jackets before continuing.

Nikita was enjoying the walk. He had never travelled so far on the island before. The landscape was similar in every direction, but the hill was yet to come. He was looking forward to a good view of the island. Other than their intended purpose, he wanted to see more of the land. He loved wild places and wondered why he hadn't bothered getting out for a long trek before. They had only been here a few days, but he already felt the benefit of the exercise, fresh air, and the freedom from being trapped in the lighthouse. As the winter progressed, and the weather deteriorated there was little opportunity to get out and make long-distance walks.

As he took in the vista, including the higher central hill, it gave him ideas for a future picture to draw or paint. At the next stop, he took out his drawing pad and made some quick sketches.

"I don't believe you thought to bring your art stuff with you!" said Vasily.

"That's because you don't understand the creative process, it never stops.

It's important to have something available all the time to make notes."

"If you say so." Vasily smiled.

Nikita smiled too. *That silly old fart hasn't got a creative bone in his body.*

But Vasily was good company, despite the rocky start this time around.

"Let's get moving again then," said Vasily.

*Eager to get back for some vodka,* Nikita thought.

Nikita's legs felt the effects of the long hike, not that he had any doubts he could complete it easily. Though he wondered how Vasily was bearing up. He seemed okay, but then he was tough old sod.

Eventually, they arrived at the foot of the hill which Nikita intended to climb. It didn't look that bad, but it would take some effort.

"You coming up?" He said to Vasily.

"Think I'll pass on that. You go ahead and I'll wait here."

"Okay. It's not far, I'll leave my rucksack here, be easier without it."

"Sure, you take care though," said Vasily.

He sounded like he cared, Nikita thought. "You can watch me, I shouldn't get out of your sight."

All Nikita took with him were his binoculars as he began the climb.

Vasily watched Nikita begin his ascent. *Rather you than me, kid.* Concern was in the back of his mind. It was a long climb, there would be loose stone and rock, snow and ice, slippery vegetation perhaps. If something happened to Nikita, such as falling and injuring himself, what the hell would he do? He was worrying unnecessarily. He had more pressing things to think about - he was getting cold.

The temperature had dropped a little and now he was at rest he was cooling down. It surprised him how much he had sweated and that was now adding to the cold. He delved into his rucksack and took out his fur-lined coat, hat and gloves. Soon he warmed up again.

He took the binoculars and focused them on Nikita. He was doing well but could not gauge how far from the summit he was, distance and perspective were uncertain.

It looked like this would be a wasted trip, there was no evidence that anyone had ever set foot out here. But it had been a good day out, away from the routine. He relaxed and rummaged in his rucksack again. This time he extracted a flask of vodka. He knew he shouldn't really, that alcohol would cool his body even more. But the sun was still out, and they would be on the return leg once Nikita returned. Just a small one.

He poured a small measure into a glass he had brought with him and then re-sealed the flask. He lay back and used the rucksack as a pillow to enjoy the drink.

He took another look at Nikita. He had stopped and was looking through his binoculars. Had he reached the summit already? He saw Nikita swing his binoculars around slowly, then he stopped and held them in one direction. What's he seen?

Then he disappeared.

Nikita's legs were aching, but the end was in sight. He carried his coat in his left arm; he had removed it shortly after starting the climb and his binoculars swung from his neck. Just a few more paces.

He reached the top. The view was magnificent; the difference in the panorama from a relatively small increase in elevation surprised him. He sat on a rock and rested. In the distance, he saw the central hill of the island and the valley between it and his hill. Even from this distance, he could see the abundance of boggy ground.

He took up his binoculars and looked around. He couldn't see Bugrino, perhaps a hill obscured it or just it was too far to see. As his eyes roamed the surrounding land, he realised this was not a landscape fit for human habitation. Whatever the natives of Bugrino did, they must stick close to their hometown. But what beauty there was before him!

Then his eyes struck upon something which did not fit. A pattern. He focused the binoculars. "What the hell is that!"

It looked like a cave, but something outside the entrance caught his eye. He couldn't make it out, but he was sure it was man made.

He faced a dilemma. The object of his interest was down the other side of the hill, perhaps a kilometre distant. Should he carry on down or return to Vasily? If he went down, he would not need to re-climb the hill, or he could skirt around its base to return to Vasily. But he had no map, Vasily held it, that was a risk. If he went back to Vasily first, would they have time to return? It concerned him that there may not be another opportunity. And what would Vasily think once he went out of sight? He wouldn't know what the hell was happening.

He tried to weigh up his choices

Curiosity won. If he went back to Vasily first, they may never know. He had to forge ahead, fired now by a sense of adventure and discovery. Descending the hill was easy but too often he picked up speed and had to slow down. Even something as minor as a twisted ankle could be disastrous. He had to take care of himself. For his own sake and Vasily's. He fell into a steady walking pace, safe and controlled and found the distance to the anomaly to be not as far as he first thought. As it came into the range of his naked eyes, he still could not make it out, but he

was convinced now, beyond doubt, it was man made.

After another small rise, he descended into the mystery area and stopped. What he saw stunned him.

It was a cave and what he may find in there made him nervous. But he was scared, for it wasn't the cave which intimidated him.

Arranged in a pattern, like a star, he counted eighteen wooden poles driven into the ground. They covered an area of about twenty metres square and were each about three metres tall. Atop each pole was the skull of an animal or bird, below which either fur or feathers had been attached. It was bizarre, both because of what it was and where it was. Who could live out here?

Where had the birds and animals come from? He had seen none all day, except for a few small birds. He wasn't sure what creatures the skulls had come from.

There was an utter and eerie silence about the place. It gave Nikita the creeps. It didn't look like anyone had been there for a very long time.

*There's nothing to fear*, he tried to reassure himself.

He had come this far; he had to finish the task. He moved towards the cave entrance.

A pungent smell almost knocked him off his feet. It was a mixture of decaying flesh and something sweet, or floral. Lavender, or something like it, but sicklier.

He got used to the smell and advanced. The cave was pitch black only a few metres in from the entrance. He searched his pockets. He was glad he had the foresight to bring a small torch and was fortunate that he had not left it in the rucksack. He switched it on.

Slowly he made his way into the cavern. It went back further than he expected and to begin with there was nothing but rock and damp earth. Then something flashed in his torch beam. He made a sharp, involuntary intake of breath.

Someone had been here, living in this cave. The torchlight had reflected off a shard of broken mirror, next to which was a bowl. Further investigation revealed a rudimentary bed and the remains of a fireplace. Food scraps littered the floor and there was a pile of tattered clothes lying in a heap. Gingerly, he began to search among the items and came across a piece of clothing with a faded insignia.

He shone his torch on the motif and tried to identify it. With a shock, he realised it was the old emblem of the Northern Lighthouse Board. Was it one of us that was here! But if that was the case it was a long time ago, that insignia had been replaced by the current one on 1921.

There was more to investigate, though to what end he wasn't sure. He made a mental note of everything he had seen and then went back outside. He took a pen and sheet of paper and drew the layout of the wooden posts. It would have to be enough, for now, it was time he got back to Vasily before he started panicking.

Vasily was furious. "Where the fuck have you been? Anything could have happened to you, what was I supposed to do!"

Nikita expected him to be angry, understandably so. But he knew Vasily would calm down when he gave him the news.

"I'm sorry. But I had to do what I did. I've found something."

"Go on then."

Nikita relayed his discovery to Vasily.

"Fucking hell! What do you make of it?"

"Your guess is as good as mine at the moment. It's getting late, we ought to be heading back. I've got it all my head and I made a small sketch of the poles I saw. When we get back, I'll draw it all out properly, then we can think about it."

They began the last leg of the journey which would take them less than two hours. Nikita kept the images running through his mind. It made little sense.

"Anyway," said Vasily. "Whatever happened out there was a long time ago. So, it has nothing to do with what we've been witnessing."

"Probably not."

"What do you mean, probably? You said the clothing showed it was years ago, like pre-1920."

"That only tells us the origin, not anything about what's happening now."

"But you said it looked like it hasn't been inhabited for a long time."

"It looked that way."

"So?"

"I don't know. All this stuff is weird. There must be a connection with what is going on. I've got some ideas, but you won't like them."

"Try me."

"Not yet, I'm clutching at straws. First, I need to sort it all out in my head."

"You can think all you want to, but I'll have a very large vodka when we get back."

Soon the lighthouse came into view, but the distance was deceptive, and it took what seemed like an age to make the final part of their journey.

The light was fading.

"Hold on!" said Vasily.

"What is it?"

"I thought we switched the lights off?"

"Yes. I did it."

"You sure?"

"Absolutely."

"Well, the lower door is open, and the workshop lights are on!"



## Chapter 4

Nikita and Vasily returned to the lighthouse and made a thorough examination of the interior on all floors. They found nothing unusual. The discovery of the cave still stunned Nikita; it was playing on his mind. He kept telling himself it had not been used for years, he had a deep feeling they were not alone in this desolate northern region of the island. They had shut the door upon entering but he returned to the workshop and bolted it firmly; there was no one else but himself and Vasily in the lighthouse and he intended for it to remain that way. While he was there, he took one of the pair of rifles from the gun cabinet and loaded it. Now he felt safer.

He returned to the saloon with the gun over his shoulder.

"What the hell are you doing with that?" said Vasily.

"I'm not taking any chances."

"Fair enough. Now, are you going to tell me more about this cave you found?"

"I will, but first I'm going to sit down and draw everything out while it's fresh in my mind."

He sat down and took out a proper drawing pad along with the scribbled sketch and notes he had made out there.

"You want a vodka while you do that?" said Vasily.

Nikita wasn't a habitual drinker, but he needed something to steady his nerves. "Yes, make it a large one."

"Don't get too much into this drinking; I didn't bring enough supplies for two of us." He laughed.

Nikita knew the laugh, it sent a mixed message. Vasily was generous in the extreme and would not begrudge giving Nikita the drink, no matter how much he wanted it for himself. But he was no doubt also concerned to make his stocks last the tour of duty. Nikita would respect that, though right now he needed that drink.

They clinked their glasses together.

"Cheers!" said Vasily.

"To your health my friend," Nikita replied.

Vasily sat down with his drink and left Nikita in peace to put his memories down on paper.

Nikita closed his eyes and let the images of the cave and its surroundings form in his mind. He referred to his sketch of the poles and drew them out. As he did so he realized they formed a perfect pentagram. He knew the symbolic reference of the six-pointed star and its use in magical

circles. A chill went through him. A coincidence? He then made a schematic drawing of the cave itself, showing the positions of the articles he encountered and annotated them for Vasily's benefit.

When he was content that he had included everything that his memory permitted he showed the results to Vasily.

"Here it is."

"Let me see," Vasily said. So, what do we have here?" he pointed to the layout of the cave.

"Simple, almost primitive equipment provides basic habitation. As you can see, a bed, which was very rudimentary, a simple wash station, a cooking area, the remains of a fire, food scraps and little else."

"What are those?"

"They were oil drums. One was part-filled with some unctuous oil. I think the resident was boiling down blubber from seals or something, judging by the skulls. The others were half drums, cut up into melting or cooking pots."

"Skulls? You mentioned them earlier."

"Yes, the poles outside, each had a skull on top. Some were mammals, perhaps a wolf and a couple of seals. The others were birds."

"Was the pattern so accurate?"

"I hadn't realised until I drew it out, but yes, it has been precisely placed, geometrically and cardinally."

"How do you mean?"

"Does the pattern mean anything to you?"

"No, should it?"

"It's a pentagram."

"What's that?"

"A six-pointed star shape. It's commonly used in rituals of magic, rather interesting."

"Is it?"

"Oh yes. I don't know what the person constructing it was thinking, but it's not a random pattern. This was done with precision and intent."

"Why?"

"I don't know."

"What about this theory you had? You wouldn't tell me earlier."

"I've been thinking about it all day. It's a bit far-fetched."

"Go on."

"Something left from the past, a spirit or something."

"You can't be serious! Ghosts?"

"You've heard of poltergeists? Usually they are unsettled spirits, and we have known them to move things in the physical world, such as slam doors, and throw furniture about. Documented records exist of families being tormented. Think about it, there have been several unpleasant deaths here over the years. Perhaps they're still here, or one of them."

Vasily appeared to be perplexed. "This is getting into the realms of

fantasy."

"But it fits with what we've been experiencing. That's all I'm saying, it's a possibility we shouldn't dismiss."

"Well, I'm going to be looking for more rational explanations. In any case, I want to see this cave for myself. If we go straight there it's an easy walk, what's the weather like tomorrow?"

"I suppose we could, I'd like to have a proper look around. I'll check the weather forecast, but according to the one this morning, tomorrow should be fine too."

"Everything is ready after today's trip, all we need is to replace the food supplies."

"Okay, I'll get up to the radio, a forecast is due soon."

"Can I top up your glass?"

"Sure, thanks, see you in a while."

"Would you mind leaving the rifle with me? Just in case, you know."

"Just in case of what?"

"Hell, I don't know. But there's nothing up there, we've checked. If anyone comes in through the door, they'll get to me first."

"Okay, I guess you're right."

Nikita took his glass and walked up to the radio room.

Vasily nursed a glass of vodka in his left hand and held a cigarette in his right. He inhaled the tobacco smoke and then took a mouthful of vodka. He swirled the drink around his mouth producing a pleasant combination of flavours as it mixed with the tobacco.

Nikita, what the hell was he thinking? Vasily was concerned enough with events, but the way Nikita was behaving; the loaded rifle, double bolting the main door, talking of ghosts and spirits; it all seemed paranoid.

Vasily asked for the gun, not for any fear of an intruder but because he didn't like Nikita walking around with it his present state of mind.

Nikita had changed since finding the cave; the details obsessed him, the way he had drawn the layout and made notes. Though he didn't let on, Vasily knew of the significance of the pentagram. He had dealings with a magic circle many years ago, a long acquaintance with the 'black arts', and knew all too well the powers that could be raised.

So, who inhabited the cave? Could it have been a shipwreck survivor?

Why the effort to construct this arcane symbol in the snow and ice?

What became of him?

He had to see for himself, and now more than ever he wanted to get out there tomorrow.

Yet there was still Nikita. Though they had been friends and work colleagues for several years, he was distrustful of him, but he couldn't put his finger on why.

Nikita had almost accused him of being responsible for the early odd events. The allegations affronted him but thinking back he began to wonder again if Nikita himself was the culprit. The smashed bulbs, the supposed writing on the window, the generator going down while he was asleep, and the radio: Nikita was possibly responsible for them all. Now he was trying to cover it all up with this ridiculous story of ghosts or poltergeist activity. It was all beginning to fit together. Vasily continued drinking and dwelt upon these thoughts. After about half an hour Nikita reappeared. He looked pale.

Nikita had entered the radio room. The set was switched on and some sort of transmission was coming through. He settled down in the chair and looked at the tuning dial and listened. It was a garbled message which he couldn't make out. He tried re-tuning the radio to the weather station, but the same voice came through.

That's odd, he thought.

The voice was deep and seemed distant; it spoke the words in a slow monotone. Gradually the message became clearer - "I'm still here watching you. Your end will be like mine. I'm watching and waiting." The words kept repeating, over and over again. Then there was a change, the voice became harsh and aggressive - "Death is in this place, death, death, death, for all."

Nikita's hands were shaking as he tried to re-tune the radio set and get rid of the message. Eventually, the voice disappeared and he picked up random chatter among far away ships. He found the weather station channel and waited.

The voice had unsettled him, it reminded him of the inscription on the lightroom glass days ago, 'death'. Vasily had accused him of that, and he had turned it around and blamed Vasily. But there was no way to explain what was happening now; this wasn't Vasily's doing.

The weather forecast came through on time, settled weather for the following day with some light snow and broken cloud. They could visit the cave again and make a thorough examination.

The radio reception became distorted with interference, then he recognised the same voice - "Get out, leave me in peace before you are trapped here like me."

The message repeated three times before the set became silent. He waited a few minutes, but nothing more came through. There was no evidence for Vasily to listen to, the voice may, or may not, come back. He doubted whether he would believe what had happened. He couldn't believe it himself. He needed a drink.

He stood up and his legs felt weak, they were shaking, like his hands. He was scared.

He entered the saloon, Vasily was still sitting down, drinking and smoking. He turned to Nikita and his eyes opened wide, he said: "you look like you've seen a ghost."

Nikita couldn't speak. To begin with, his throat was closed in the grip of fear. Then he found a voice, weak, but clear. "Give me a drink."

Vasily poured him a glass. "My God, man! What's the matter?"

Nikita drained the glass in one gulp. Then he began to stammer some words out. "The ... radio ... a ... v ... voice. it's all f ... fucked up."

"What's fucked up, what voice?"

Nikita proffered his glass to Vasily who got the message and refilled it.

Nikita sat down, his head was spinning, not just from the effects of the alcohol. He had spoken of spirits earlier, now this weird voice, across all channels! Therefore, it wasn't a radio broadcast, that was not possible. Another chill went through him. The place was haunted, he was right; it must be, and it had something to do with the cave he'd found. Had he disturbed something? But the strange events had begun long before finding the cave.

"Nikita?"

Vasily's voice broke through his thoughts.

"The weather is good for tomorrow."

"Nikita, what's getting to you?"

Nikita drained the second glass. He gathered his thoughts and explained to Vasily what had happened with the radio.

"Is it still there, the voice?"

"No, it disappeared."

"Maybe if I listen, it might come back."

"Go if you want to. I'm going nowhere near that thing."

"I'm going to take a listen."

"As Vasily left the room Nikita poured another drink, Vasily had left the bottle with him. He cradled the glass in both hands, they were only shaking a little now. He watched the reflections in the fluid and tried to calm down. 'I'm watching you.' The words repeated in his mind.

He looked around the room, there was a menace in every shadow. 'Get a grip!' he told himself. His eyes passed the window and he noticed snow falling, it was hypnotic. Then, briefly, a face appeared. He spilt half the vodka on his trousers and when he looked again the face had gone. 'Your imagination is running wild,' he told himself. But it wasn't all imagination, he knew that.

A few minutes later Vasily returned.

"I couldn't hear anything."

"I told you it had gone." He decided not to tell him about the face in the window, perhaps it was his mind playing tricks; but not the radio, that was real.

"You okay now?" said Vasily.

Nikita nodded. But he wasn't okay. They had to find out more about the

cave, it would give answers, he could feel it in his bones. He couldn't get the words from the radio out of his mind, so he drank more vodka.

"It's good to have a proper drink with you, lad. Makes a change from drinking on my own," said Vasily. "So, we go walkabout again tomorrow, yes?"

Nikita nodded. "Yeah, the weather will be good."

By the time they had finished drinking, Nikita's mind was more settled. He staggered up the stairs and crashed onto his bed. Sleep came quickly. It gave a temporary, welcome reprieve.

Nikita's hangover dulled the shocking memory of the voice on the radio. But it all came back to him in detail. Whatever was going on he had to hold himself together. He looked out of his window to a bright day with freshly fallen snow on the ground, a good day for a walk. The fear he was feeling was tempered by his spirit of adventure as he knew they would be setting off for the cave today.

Vasily had cooked breakfast by the time Nikita got down to the saloon. Once again, he demonstrated his ability to function normally after drinking a bottle of vodka, a far cry from Nikita's abilities.

Nikita's stomach felt like it was performing somersaults as the hangover fought with his apprehension and confused mental state.

"Get this down you," said Vasily. "You'll feel much better."

He sat down and devoured a selection of preserved meats, fried potatoes and eggs, then washed it all down with strong tea. The food eased the turmoil in his stomach, and he relaxed.

"Thanks," said Nikita, "I needed that."

"We'll let the food go down then get out, eh?"

"Yeah, sounds good to me."

"I'll get the kettle on then. Looks like you need another pot of tea."

"The weather has held up, should be easygoing."

"Yes, it's not far to walk, we should be there by mid-day."

About a two-hour walk was all it would be by Nikita's reckoning. Less than a third the distance they walked yesterday. Despite the late start after their drinking spell, it would give them plenty of time to explore. By the time they had drunk the second pot of tea, they were ready to go. Down in the workshop, yesterday's excursion meant their gear was ready with the simple addition of a few more food supplies would see them through. They made sure the torches had good batteries and took with them a small spade for any excavations they may need.

They opened the lower door and stepped out into a bright morning, their boots crunching through about ten centimetres of snow. Nikita carried the map but the hill before the cave was visible. The map and compass

were a precaution against a sudden loss of visibility, anything could happen with the weather out there.

Nikita's spirits lifted as soon as he was in the fresh air and striding towards their destination, perhaps it was escaping the oppression of the lighthouse that made him feel better. Had it become more oppressive over the past days? He thought so, but perhaps it was all in his mind. The scenery was as beautiful as the preceding day as the sun rose towards its zenith and cast attractive shadows across the landscape breaking up the bare features.

"This is quite nice isn't it?" Vasily said.

"Yeah, it's good to get out for the fresh air and exercise," said Nikita.

Vasily rolled a cigarette as he walked giving it a final roll with only one hand.

"How do you manage that, while walking as well?" said Nikita.

"Years of practice, lad." Vasily smiled through yellowing teeth.

"Not far now, how about we go around the hill rather than over?"

"That's well with me, easier on my old legs."

"The ground is good around to the east, the way I came back yesterday."

"Lead on," said Vasily.

As they rounded the last part of the hill the cave and its surroundings came into view. Vasily halted, his mouth was open.

"Shit!"

"I told you, weird isn't it?"

"It's bizarre, all this in the middle of nowhere."

"That's exactly what I thought. Come on then."

Over the last one hundred metres, Nikita's eye ranged over the strange set-up of poles adorned with animal remains. Although he had only seen them yesterday, they still struck him with the same awe and feeling of otherworldliness as they had then. What had gone through the mind of the constructor?

They stood in the centre of the arrangement and slowly turned around, each trying to make sense of what they were seeing.

"Just as you drew it out, Nikita. But I wasn't prepared for the level of accuracy and detail of the real thing, amazing!"

"Well, we've got plenty of time to look around. I'm heading into the cave."

At the entrance, they both switched on powerful torches and stepped forward into the interior. At first glance, it was the same as Nikita had remembered it, but with more time to examine the place they soon unearthed more.

The smell Nikita had first noticed was traced to a steel oil drum. As they lifted the lid, the aroma was overpowering causing them to recoil. With a scarf wrapped around his face, Nikita approached again.

Using a stick, he stirred the unctuous mixture. "It's some kind of oil, whale or seal maybe." The scarf muffled his words, but they were clear enough. He backed away and removed it.

"Look at where the fire was. There are more than ordinary cooking implements there. I think whoever lived here was melting down blubber." "That seems like a good survival tactic if one can get the raw materials," said Vasily.

"I've seen the occasional seal around these parts. But you'd have a devil of a job catching or killing one."

They carried on their search. They found that the occupier not only fed his fire with oil but had made a basic oil lamp for light. They reached the centre of the cave.

"You know," said Nikita, "if this guy had a plentiful supply of oil and food he could survive indefinitely here. See how sheltered it is? Now imagine a powerful heat from the fire, light, and food. All you need."

"What about the company?"

"Well, of course, that is another thing. But the basics of survival are there. Whoever this person was, he was resourceful and intelligent, with a strong will to survive."

"What's that over there?" said Vasily.

"The pile of clothes I told you about."

They walked over to it and Nikita picked up an item. "This is the piece I told you about, see the old company logo? It's our old one, from years ago."

"So, he was from the lighthouse."

"Might have been. Or he could be a shipwreck survivor who found these items in the burnt-out remains when it was destroyed in the fire."

"Bit of a coincidence there, they rebuilt it almost straight away."

"It was down for almost an entire winter," said Nikita.

"Perhaps we'll never know. What tools did he have?"

"A few bits and pieces I found yesterday, but there are things scattered all over the place. In some ways, he was not very organised."

"I wouldn't say that," said Vasily. "He was organised in the important things."

"True."

They searched further and Vasily rummaged around the bed. "Hey what's this?"

"What?" said Nikita.

"It's a box."

Nikita went over to Vasily. He had pulled out a box the size of a large cigar case. They looked at each other before Vasily opened it.

Inside were several sheets of paper, a small book, a pen, and a bottle of ink.

Vasily pulled the pages out gently and examined them in the light of his torch beam. He said: "Hey look! These are his plans for making the



boilers, light and cooking stove." Then he opened the book. "Look what we've found." He read the top of the first sheet. "The Last Journal of Boris Toscovic," he read. "It's dated November 28th, 1910!"

"Wow! This may explain some things."

Vasily read more quietly to himself.

"What does it say?" said Nikita.

"The writing is difficult to read... he talks about survival ... and the lighthouse burning down ... it looks like he was from the lighthouse, he was one of us! There are loads of pages here, we must wait until we get back to read through it all."

"I agree. Put it in your rucksack and we'll see what else we can find."

They continued their search for another hour. But other than everyday utensils and paraphernalia there was nothing else of interest.

Nikita was keen to read the journal. He was a lighthouse keeper! He could think of nothing else on the return trip.

The leisurely investigation of the cave compared to the previous day's rushed examination gave Nikita a better idea of how this man had survived. But many questions arose in his mind and he hoped the journal they had found would answer them.

The sky was still clear and the walk back to the lighthouse was enjoyable.

Nikita decided he should get out more when the weather was fair. As he looked across at Vasily, he wondered what secrets he was carrying in the journal in his backpack. He also noted an odd expression on his face.

What was it? There was no sign of exertion, the ground was flat and the snowfall light; it was no effort to maintain a good walking pace.

Something appeared to be troubling him.

He had learned not to question Vasily when he was in a pensive mood, he was best left to himself. Such occasions weren't rare, and he knew the signs; but something was different in his demeanour, something Nikita didn't recognize.

He passed it off. Whatever it was, Vasily usually got it off his chest later in the day and confided even the most personal thoughts with him. They had become close, like brothers, or father and son, and learned it was best not to bottle up problems in the solitude of this lifestyle. It was the only way to avoid going mad.

Nikita said: "I'm looking forward to reading whatever is in that book, over a good glass of vodka."

"You seem to be getting a taste for the stuff; we'll have to bring extra rations on the next trip."

"Don't worry, you won't run out. It's just with all these odd goings-on it's a way to relax."

"I know what you mean."

They approached the lighthouse and although the walk had been relatively short, Nikita was looking forward to putting his feet up. They passed the generator shack and then Vasily halted.

"What is it?"

"Look at these footprints!"

They had just crossed their outgoing tracks. But instead of two sets of footprints, there were three.

Nikita bent down for a closer look. "There are three different tread patterns!"

Nikita stood up and looked at Vasily whose face had gone pale.

"You okay, Vasily?"

"What do you think?"

Nikita's mind frantically tried to come up with an explanation. There was none. The all too familiar chill went through him. Was this definitive proof they weren't alone?

"You didn't come out earlier in different boots, did you?" Nikita was clutching at straws.

"Not me. First time I stepped outside was when we set off," said Vasily.

"Let's see where they go."

"Do you think that's wise? We can't go far, it's getting late and we've walked a long way already today."

"We'll just go a little way," said Nikita, "see if we can work out what direction he was heading at least."

They followed the footprints for about two hundred metres. Then they disappeared.

Nikita scanned the ground in the vicinity, nothing. It was as if whoever left the prints simply floated away.

"It doesn't make any sense," said Vasily.

"Shit!" Nikita's hands were shaking. "Now I need that vodka."

## Chapter 5

The footprints in the snow had set them both on edge, but they wouldn't be the last things troubling them this day.

They entered the lighthouse cautiously, a somewhat irrational attitude as the only footprints, other than their own, were heading away from the building.

Nikita surveyed the boiler room and store. He found nothing amiss, not even the hint of someone walking in with wet snow-covered feet. Then, with increasing anxiety, he ascended the stairs to the workshop. Vasily was following close behind and had picked up a rifle. They searched carefully up to the saloon, but nothing was out of place.

"It doesn't look like anyone has been inside," said Vasily.

"I don't like it, we didn't even lock up."

"There has to be an explanation."

"If you find one, let me know," said Nikita. There was no hint of humour in his voice.

"There's nobody out there. The only thing we've found is the cave, and that hasn't been inhabited for years," said Vasily.

"They were fresh footprints, and they weren't ours!"

"I know," said Vasily

Neither spoke for a minute.

Eventually, Vasily said: "I'll get the glasses." He came back from the drinks cabinet and then filed the glasses to the top.

Nikita took a mouthful and cringed as it went down. "That's better."

"Here's the journal. Do you want to read it out? You're better at reading than me," said Vasily.

"Okay, better we both hear what it says at the same time."

They settled down into the comfortable chairs and sipped their drinks as Nikita began to read.

" ... The Journal of Boris Tosovic, the last survivor of Lighthouse 34, dated November 28th, 1910.

I have now survived, alone, for a month in this forlorn wilderness. I do not know how. But I think it unlikely I will last until the next shift arrives in the spring. I am trying to survive for my wife and baby daughter, but I am thinking it is beyond me. So, it is time I put my story on paper for posterity, something to leave for them if ever it is found.

It seems an eternity ago now that fire destroyed the lighthouse. We don't know how it started, but there was a succession of strange events which I can't explain. The generators kept suffering from fuel starvation, objects disappeared from where we left them, reappearing days later somewhere else. There were strange noises in the night, and so much more...'

"He's saying they had odd things happen too!" said Nikita.  
"I know," said Vasily. "Carry on."

"... It was late at night when we discovered fire rising from the workshop. Fortunately, it was before we went to bed as only a few minutes after attempting to fight it we had to evacuate. Any longer and we could not have escaped the inferno.

We grabbed what we could in the way of clothing and food, then we stood powerless in the snow and freezing air as the fire swept through the rest of the building. Such was the intensity of the heat that the generator shack started to burn. We extracted what we could before it burst into flames, though all we retrieved was some extra clothes and a few tools.

Peter suffered a fractured leg as a beam fell during our escape. There was little I could do for him. I tried to keep him warm and set the leg, but he passed away in the night. I think he had internal bleeding. By morning, his body was frozen solid. He was my friend. I felt wretched; I was so alone. If he had survived, I would have had company, and perhaps I would not have been in the state I am now.

I survived the night by building a fire from the burning remains. I kept it going as the lighthouse burnt itself out. The remaining embers kept me warm and in desperation, I searched for anything of value.

I recovered more food supplies which had miraculously survived. I gathered what unburned wood I could for fuel and weighed up my precarious situation. I found a rifle and ammunition too.

I had limited food and ability to generate heat. There was no contact with the outside world. The only hope would be shipping reports telling the authorities the light was out. Perhaps they would send a team out to investigate. But I knew that could take weeks, even months with the weather at this time of year. I would not survive more than a day or two without shelter...'

"Poor bugger!" said Nikita.

"Yeah, difficult to imagine how he must have felt," said Vasily.

'... There was one slim hope. I had taken a walk on a past tour of duty and found the cave in which I am now writing, a few kilometres from the lighthouse. Perhaps from there, I could make it onward to Bugrino, if I survived until spring.

I set about building a rudimentary sledge to carry the supplies of firewood and food and half a day later arrived at the cave.

The cave would give shelter from wind, rain and snow, but little else. I needed heat and food. The supplies I had brought with me would not last indefinitely; the food a month, the fuel a week or two at most.

Each day I took the rifle and went out hunting. Each day I returned with the same number of bullets I set out with. There was no abundance of wildlife in

this forlorn place, just a few birds. Other than them, nothing. How was I going to survive?

After two weeks of watching my supplies diminish, and almost out of firewood, fate smiled on me at last. A group of harp seals took sanctuary on the beach about two kilometres from the cave. I shot three and dragged the bodies up the shore. They would be safe, I had seen no predators. Fortunately, I had not yet committed the sledge to the fire and with renewed energy I returned to the camp to fetch it. Then I went back to the beach and recovered the carcasses.

Elated, I now had a source of food, and, if I could render the blubber down to oil, a source of fuel. I ate a good meal and set off back to the remains of the lighthouse. I returned with two oil drums and the means to machine them into vessels for boiling the flesh.

Exhausted, I built a large fire and retired for the night.

The next day I fashioned the boiling pans. The seal flesh was now frozen; at least it would remain fresh. It took considerable effort to cut the first body into manageable pieces. In time I had parted a quantity of blubber and some fatty meat. Although I had a few rations remaining, I needed to taste it. I placed a portion on my makeshift stove and cooked it slowly. While waiting, I placed the blubber in a large drum set over a separate fire and began to melt it down.

Half an hour later, I placed the meat on a piece of metal I used as a plate and cut it. At least it was tender. I took a mouthful and almost spat it out; the taste was vile. But I had to eat it, I needed the nutrition. In the time it became more palatable, I guess I got used to it, and the edge of starvation dulled the poor taste.

I had success in extracting oil from the blubber and manufactured a simple oil-burning stove; a shallow pan for the oil formed the basis of the burner. In time I refined the system to create air flow to feed the flame, this gave a more intense heat making it even easier to extract the oil.

I had the means to survive long term, at least physically. The existing carcasses would last several weeks, and so long as more seals appeared, I could replenish my stocks. With the seal meat, it meant I could extend the lifespan of the stocks I had retrieved from the lighthouse; at least that would give me a little variety for a time. I think if I rebuild my strength, perhaps I may plan a journey to Bugrino where I could find sanctuary and a ship home. The distance though at this time of year would be perilous, could I carry enough food and fuel to make the journey?

But all these plans rely on more than physical strength, it is my mental health

which concerns me.

I am tired now. I will continue this journal tomorrow...'

"A resourceful fellow, wasn't he?" said Vasily.

"Under the circumstances, he was."

"I can understand his mental state though, it must have been awful."

"His next entry was two days later," said Nikita. He continued:

'... November 30—I think. Yesterday was a bad day. The loneliness and sheer struggle for survival, which occupies almost every moment of my waking hours, torments me. I know this situation could reach a positive outcome, a rescue party must come eventually. But I fear they may come too late for me. The image of my family fills my mind, only the memory of them remains as the fire consumed all my photographs. I fell asleep crying one night, thinking of them. I am not ashamed of this and have no hesitation in admitting it. They should be my rock, my reason to survive, and they are. But the challenges of my situation are overwhelming.

I have discovered there are predators here, probably foxes or wolves. Most likely something big; they mutilated a seal carcass yesterday, little remains of it. I must protect them. But it means there is another food supply. I must hunt again. . .

Returned empty-handed. I found tracks. From what creature they belonged, I am not sure. Wolf, or even a bear maybe. I tried to shoot a large bird nesting in a shrub. Disaster, the cartridge in the rifle failed to fire. The bird spooked. With a moving target I could not afford to try another shot, I must now have my doubts over the remaining bullets, of which there are only twelve. Perhaps the heat of the fire affected them or the cold? It worries me as I have no other means of hunting. But I still have a whole, untouched seal carcass for food and oil . . .

December 1. Hunted again today, and oh, joy! I bagged a solitary reindeer, a stag. It took most of the day to recover the animal to the camp. Now I have good meat. Not only that, but the skin for clothing and bedding, and the antlers—I must be able to do something with them. I used four bullets to kill the beast, only one fired, one out of four. This is serious...'

"Then there's a gap of five days before he continues," said Nikita.

'... December 6. Missing my family, there is a pit of emptiness in my soul longing for their love. It is this which makes my position so difficult, the thought of never seeing them again. I am trying, I know there are things I can do, but my fate is only partly in my hands. Disaster may strike at any moment. I heard a wolf howling last night. I am on a knife-edge...'

"He sounds desperate," said Vasily.

"Yeah. A big gap in the diary next," said Nikita.

'... December 20. More seals on the beach. Killed two. NO MORE BULLETS LEFT. What am I to do?

December 22. Began manufacturing a simple bow and a set of arrows. Also, a spear. I'm regressing from modern man to caveman.

December 25. According to my reckoning of the days, it is Christmas Day. Very melancholy and lonely. Other than this one-way conversation through these words, I am now talking to myself. The first sign of madness they say. Who cares? It has snowed non-stop for three days.

I am under attack, creatures of the night are getting closer. Sounds and voices in my head. The cave entrance is unprotected. I will deal with tomorrow ...'

"Creatures in the night? What does he mean?" said Vasily.

"I don't know, it's an odd phrase," said Nikita.

"It sounds like he's losing the plot a bit."

"I think I would be in his circumstances, I mean, there's been no rescue party sent out."

"They'd be lucky to get here at this time of year."

Nikita was already scanning the next entry. "He is losing it by the sound of this." He read on:

'... December 26. Using recovered ships spars and other flotsam from the shore I have erected my defence against the creatures or spirits of the night. I have driven six of the poles into the ground, each has a skull on the top, those of the two seals and that from the reindeer. Two more have found skulls, I'm sure one is a wolf. I have decorated the poles with feathers and fur. I don't know where the idea came from, and the intent of forming the poles into a magical pentagram. Why this desire to symbolise arcane magic symbols? I am a Christian, why not a cross?

Because my God has failed me!

First signs of frostbite on my toes. How could this happen when I have kept myself warm and dry?

What have I done to deserve this? Why this painful struggle for life, knowing, almost for sure, that I am merely prolonging the end? But then isn't that what everyone does, try to defy the inevitability of death?

The futility of it all.

But this is not fair, not right. I am only thirty-two years of age. I have a lovely wife and a beautiful daughter. Why am I being put through this? The 'dark night of the soul' is rapidly approaching.

January 1. Two months have passed. I am cold. I am eating vile food. I am cursed.

No! No! I will curse! I curse this ground, this land. I curse the lighthouse that once was and will be again!

January 2. I am almost resolved to give up. My heart breaks when I think of my family, but I cannot go on. I have nearly finished the protection around the cave entrance. I found more skulls, and after some practice, I made a kill with a bow and arrow when I felled another reindeer. Maybe I can survive!

Who am I kidding?

There has been no rescue attempt.

I could spend another three months like this; it has been two so far. But I cannot see three months ahead, it is unacceptable.

January 3. Tonight, I will hold a ceremony in my garden of skull poles. I shall compose my requiem in readiness.

God mocks me, he has won. Bah! I will go when I decide, not him!

I have set oil fires ready, each at a point of the pentagram. I have made a skull cap of horns; I wish I had a good mirror, the small piece I have does give me some idea. My word, how my beard and hair have grown. The antlers suit me. If I had the strength, I would be the match for any animal out there. To kill with my bare hands and sink my teeth into warm flesh, to rip through muscle and sinew, to crack bones, wouldn't that be something!

Nightfall, it is time to begin. I have memorised the words.

'In the name of all malevolent spirits and all that is of malcontent nature, I lay a curse upon those who have forsaken me, upon my God, upon this land, and upon the building which robbed me of my life. I curse all and everything, except my wife and daughter, the only purity in this bastard world. I curse to the East, to the South, to the West and the North. I damn all the winds in my name, to bring destruction upon the earth. I leave this life owing it nothing, for it owes me nothing, I am finished ...'



Vasily said: "Bloody hell!"

"Grim isn't it? The poor fellow is losing his mind," said Nikita.

'... It is time to light the fires.

This is the end. I have performed my ceremony. Many more words came forth from my mouth than those I memorised, words of bile and hate and magical incantations. Where on earth did I find those words? I am scared. How did I come to curse and damn my own God? Yet I feel a release, 'if it were done when 'tis done, then 'twere well it were done quickly'. So said Shakespeare in Macbeth. Now, in echo, comes close my own tragedy.

I know what I must do. I will take away the choice. I will go out into the wilderness, I shall take no food. If I walk far enough, there will come a point of no return, I will know not when I take that fateful last step. To freeze to death surely is not the worst way to go? There will be tiredness and the feeling of cold, the slowing down, and then darkness will set in. By then there will be no discomfort or pain, so I have heard. Merely the dawning of an endless sleep as consciousness ebbs away, well before death. Peace from suffering at last.

I have reached the end now. All hope has left me.

If ever these words fall into another's hands, I wish only that they pass them on to my family. They will then know what happened to this lost soul. There can be nothing worse than not knowing, even if the truth hurts.

Natasha and Olga, I love you to the ends of the earth. Until we meet again, your loving husband and father. Farewell.

XXX

I sign this with tears and blood.

I am going out for a walk ...'

Nikita placed his palms on the pages and looked at Vasily. "Jesus!" he said. "He just walked out into oblivion!!"

Nikita and Vasily sat and pondered the content of the journal and Vasily asked Nikita to read again some passages.

Vasily refilled their glasses then said: "It doesn't answer the questions, does it? It's interesting and rather poignant, but it doesn't help our present situation."

"I agree, except for one point. Boris said they experienced strange and unexplainable events too."

"Yeah, but that's it, there's no more information."

Nikita had other thoughts brewing in his mind. Suppose he haunted this place? Perhaps, considering Boris' state of mind before he died, he too left something behind with his curse? But ghosts, or spirits, don't leave footprints, do they? Or move things around? Then again, as he told Vasily, poltergeists had affected objects in the material world.

"What about the curse he made?" said Vasily.

"Oh, you don't believe that was anything more than the ramblings of a madman, do you?"

"I haven't told you this before. A long time ago I had an involvement with the 'black arts'. I joined a group who practised various forms of magical rites, nothing too wicked mark you. But don't underestimate the powers that can be wielded. A curse performed the right way, is one of the simplest things to do. Going by what Boris did, he had some knowledge of the arts, though he professed to be purely a Christian."

"You're a dark horse, Vasily."

"It was in my youth, but I studied in depth."

"So, you're saying a curse could work?"

"Certainly."

A knocking sound suddenly reverberated through the heating pipes.

"What's that?" said Nikita.

"Probably an airlock in the system after you fixed the valve. I'll look, it should only need bleeding."

"Okay."

Vasily descended the two flights of stairs down to the boiler room. The noise was louder down there. He traced the pipework and identified the line causing the problem. He knew there was a bleed-valve somewhere close and squeeze around the back of the boiler. He found it, but his eyes were drawn to a pair of boots on the floor. He remembered now; they were Nikita's old ones from the last tour of duty which he'd thrown in the corner. He picked them up as they were in the way.

Something made him turn the boots over. The tread pattern was familiar, it looked like the one from the mysterious set of prints they had found. And the boots were damp. He put the thoughts aside and bled the pipework. The noise stopped. "That's sorted," he said to himself.

He took the boots and walked to the door. "Let's see if they match."

He walked outside and searched for the prints but a heavy fall of snow since they returned had obscured them.

"Bugger!"

Could it have been Nikita again? He was sure they were a match but now he had no proof.

"I'll nail him if it is him," he said to himself. "Drinking all my vodka while denying everything and making up ghost stories!"

Vasily's revelation created new suspicions in Nikita's mind. So, he knew about

curses and magical rites. Was he using this knowledge to play these games? Nikita held the opinion that Vasily was withholding information. Perhaps that explained the strange expression on his face as they were walking back from the cave. Yes, that could be it; he was planning his next move, the devious old fucker.

But he had only circumstantial evidence and he lacked the knowledge of whatever powers Vasily could be using. Was he capable of creating the voices he heard from the radio? He could have cut the wire without specialist knowledge of electronics; any random cut would suffice. He would keep a very close watch on him from now on.

Vasily came back to the room and sat down with his glass. "As I thought, a pipe needed bleeding."

"Ah, good," said Nikita.

He watched Vasily drinking, there was a faraway look in his eyes. What was going through his head?

Vasily turned his gaze on Nikita. "I found something down there."

"Oh?"

"Yeah. A pair of boots, your old set from the last tour of duty."

Nikita thought for a moment. "Ah, yes. I remember them, the uppers were leaking, so I took out a new pair."

"Well, I'm sure the tread pattern matched the extra set of prints we found."

"What are you trying to say?"

"And they were damp."

"So? Let's find out then, see if they are the same."

"Already done it. It's been snowing since we came back, it has covered over the footprints."

"Well then, we'll never know."

Vasily narrowed his eyes, Nikita didn't like what he was seeing in them. Then he said: "Hey! You don't think I made those footprints, do you? When would I have had the chance? They weren't there when we left, they must have been made while we were away."

"I don't know. Maybe I'm putting two and two together and making five."

"I think you are."

"So, what about those footprints, what are your thoughts?"

"You don't want to know."

"Try me," said Vasily.

Nikita spoke again about hauntings and poltergeists. He told Vasily that the journal backed up his ideas and that possibly it was the ghost of Boris, along with others who had met violent deaths here, which was the cause of the strange happenings.

"So," said Vasily. "You don't think it's me then?"

The question caught Nikita off-guard. He still had doubts about Vasily, sure. It

caught him in a dilemma. On the one hand, he was trying to convince Vasily it was supernatural causes and on the other, he still held the belief that some of it were Vasily.

"I never said it was you," said Nikita.

"Oh, come on! You accused me right from the start!"

"No! You made the first accusations, about the smashed lamps."

"So, I think it's you and you think it's me, or these ghosts," said Vasily.

Vasily was right, Nikita thought. There was growing distrust between them, and Vasily's suspicion about him were probably much the same as his own about Vasily. Nikita held up his hands and said: "Okay. So, let's look for another explanation. That's what I'm trying to do. You say you are familiar with the supernatural, you can't dismiss the idea."

"No, some of what you're saying makes sense. But in my experience curses, hauntings, psychic phenomena, they all occur on a mental level, very little manifests as physical events."

"But some do, you agree?"

"Yes, some does. There are plenty of records of physical events," said Vasily.

"Voices from the radio, the writing on the light-room window, things being moved about, even the footprints; these are typical physical manifestations. Correct?"

"Yes," said Vasily.

"What can we do about it?"

"I don't know."

"But you've had dealings with similar things, surely?"

"It was all a long time ago," said Vasily.

"But you said you studied in depth."

"I don't have any reference material, you know, like books which give the right incantations," said Vasily.

"What if we do nothing? Can these forces hurt us?"

"Physically, unlikely. But mentally yes. Look how we're behaving now."

"We just ignore it then, put up with it?" said Nikita.

"Perhaps that's the only way to deal with it."

"If it doesn't get even worse," said Nikita. "I'm worried about the radio."

"Why?"

"Maybe it's a way in for these spirits."

"What do you mean?"

"The voices, whatever is behind them; what if they can transcend the boundaries between their world and ours, through the radio?"

It was getting late and Nikita felt tired but Vasily refilled their glasses.

"Last one for me," said Nikita.

"Me too, it's been a long day for this old body," said Vasily.

Their talk of blame, ghosts, and the journal had abated. There were no answers,

but Nikita knew they could not afford to become distrustful of each other and he tried to steer the conversation away from confrontation. He said: "It was a good walk today, putting all else aside."

Vasily took the prompt. "Yeah, it was good to get out in fair weather. I enjoyed it, but my legs ache."

"We ought to do it more often," said Nikita. "get some decent exercise."

"It would do me good," said Vasily. "These old bones need a bit of stretching." He laughed.

"Short days, gales, and snowstorms we won't get many opportunities, but we ought to grab whatever chances we get."

"I agree."

The conversation continued touching only on light topics while they finished the drinks. Nikita drained his glass and said: "I'm going up."

Vasily said: "Go ahead, I'll follow."

For a second night, Nikita staggered to bed after too much vodka. He was getting a taste for it but would make a stop to it; he knew it was a slippery slope to go down, he only had to look at Vasily to see what the future would hold.

He completed his ablutions and made his way to bed. It had been a good day; the exercise and the vodka had tired him, and the sheets were warm. He curled up with a content mind as he heard Vasily make his way to the washroom. Nikita drifted off into a light sleep but was Vasily's voice jolted him out of his slumber;

"What the fucking hell is this!" he shouted. "Nikita!"

Nikita took no pleasure in sliding out of the warm bed. He threw a dressing gown on and made his way to Vasily's cabin. The light was on and Vasily was standing by his bed, shaking.

"Bloody hell!" said Nikita.

Laid out on Vasily's bed was a full set of clothes as he would have worn them. From the hat on his pillow to the shoes at the bottom of the bed. What got to him most though was Vasily's combat knife, driven through the clothing and the mattress, right where his heart would be.

Both stood in silence.

Eventually, Nikita said: "Are you all right?"

"What do you think?!"

"It's freaking me out, that's what I think. You said it was unlikely we could be harmed physically, this puts some doubt on that."

"It does," said Vasily. "I don't mind admitting to you, this is scaring the shit out of me."

Nikita had snapped out of his drunken stupor and was now sober as a cow. A thought came to him. Whatever, whoever had done this had left no trace on the lower levels. But they had checked nowhere else. The radio room suddenly came to mind.

"Just a minute. I need to check something."

Nikita walked back down to the level of his cabin and tentatively opened the

door to the radio room.

"Oh, no!" he exclaimed.

The radio had been completely smashed and without looking further he knew it was beyond repair. A fire axe lay on the floor.

He went back up to Vasily's cabin and gave him the awful news

They were cut off from the outside world.

Compared to the peaceful slumber Nikita had started half an hour before, his mind was now in turmoil. Sleep eluded him for an hour or more. He went over and over all the unexplained events of the past days, the discovery of the cave, Boris' journal, and the latest occurrences which were the most direct and intimidating of them all.

One thing seemed certain; the pace and seriousness of the events were increasing. Where would it lead? Was there reason to still suspect Vasily? Rationally, that possibility was reducing. What of Vasily's thoughts towards him? Surely, he couldn't believe he had trashed the radio himself? Yet there were the seeds of doubt in his mind, Vasily could have done it all. As much as he half-believed the stories of ghosts and the paranormal, he favoured an earthlier explanation.

Slowly, tiredness came over him and he drifted off into a restless sleep, interspersed with nightmarish visions.

Vasily too had difficulty sleeping. The dominant image filling his mind was the knife through his clothes. He had suspected Nikita may have been responsible for some, if not all, the actions. But this was beyond the pale; unless Nikita was becoming mentally unstable. It could happen and had happened in this job. But Nikita had shown no other indications that something was wrong, other than his incessant rambling about the place being haunted. Maybe that was it, the only sign he was becoming unhinged, and yet, Vasily knew the reality of such possibilities, it wasn't mad.

Now the radio was smashed and irreparable. It isolated them from the world. If something happened to either of them, such as a serious illness, there was nothing to be done beyond their abilities. The fact scared him; he wasn't in the best of health. He knew such risks were part of the job, that help may not be forthcoming because of their remoteness and the vagaries of weather. But there was the knowledge that someone knew, that help would come as soon as possible, that there was hope. Now, in an emergency, there was no hope. They were alone.

## Chapter 6

When Nikita entered the saloon the following morning there was a look in Vasily's eyes which warned him of confrontation. He had seen it before.

"Tell me you didn't smash the radio."

"What!" said Nikita.

"I was thinking last night. You talked about it being the way for spirits to get in. So, one thought leads to another."

"Why would I do that, cut us off from the world?"

"Well, did you, or didn't you?"

"No, I didn't!"

"That's an end to it then."

"That's it! You make an allegation like that, and that's it!"

"It was a question, not an allegation."

"Don't play on semantics, Vasily."

"I just wanted to hear it from you, that's all."

"Well, I've told you, I didn't."

"Okay, I believe you."

If Vasily wanted a rational discussion about what they could do next, he had gotten off on the wrong foot. They should face this together, but Nikita felt a growing chasm between them.

Vasily said: "So what are we going to do, can you fix the radio?"

Nikita looked incredulously at him. "Have you seen it? It's smashed to pieces, it's useless!"

"This is a fucking shit-hole!" said Vasily.

"It's getting that way. We're just going to hold out until spring, or maybe they'll send a plane out if they don't hear from us."

"I wouldn't bank on it."

"No, you're right," said Nikita.

"We carry on then. Sorry for my comments about the radio."

"Okay. Is there a pot of tea going?"

"Sure, I brewed up a few minutes ago."

They drank the tea in silence and then Nikita cooked breakfast. Preparing the meal gave him time to think. What the hell were they going to do? Was there a need to protect themselves and if so, against what?

Vasily broke his train of thought. "I'll tell you what we'll do. After breakfast, we start at the top, in the lightroom, and we search the lighthouse from top to bottom. When we're happy there's no one else here, we lock the door and keep it locked. If we must go out to the generator shack then one of stands guard at the door, armed."

"It sounds like a good plan, I don't see what else we can do."

They started the search after eating and climbed to the top, then rested in the light-room. Vasily was taking no chances and carried a loaded rifle.

The day was clear, and they looked out over a beautiful sunlit landscape while Vasily had a smoke. The view calmed Nikita; it was as if he was looking out on a different world. The darkness evaporated from his mind. Perhaps this tied in with what Vasily said, that most paranormal events took place on a mental level; it was all in his mind and what he was seeing now was a normal reality. The thoughts of being persecuted by some unknown force and the vision of Vasily holding the rifle with a cigarette hanging from his mouth seemed incongruous with the present moment. Yet he knew this was only a fleeting gap in the blind battle they were fighting.

Vasily threw his cigarette butt over the parapet and said: "ready then?"

"Let's do it," said Nikita.

The light-room had no hiding place, so they descended to the switch room. There were few places to hide in the entire building. Narrow as it was, most levels were open plan. But they had to be sure. They searched all nooks and crannies by torchlight, and they opened any cabinet large enough for a person to cram themselves into.

As they moved down to the washrooms, a noise came up from the saloon area as if someone had broken a glass.

Both stood still, shocked by the sudden sound.

"Stay," said Vasily. "We carry on the search. Whatever that was we deal with it when we get down there, we mustn't get diverted from this and leave a space unsearched."

"I agree," said Nikita. He was in tune with Vasily's thoughts. If they rushed down and missed areas then whatever, or whoever, they were searching for could slip past them and make their search futile.

They searched the final sleeping quarters, Nikita's cabin. Nikita searched, going through his wardrobes, and then he checked the radio room. Vasily stayed outside with the gun to guard the entrance and exit to the level. All was clear. They looked at each other. The next task was the saloon from where the noise had emanated.

Nikita said: "You've got the gun, you go first."

Vasily looked uneasy for a moment then shrugged his shoulders. "Let's go," he said.

He led the way slowly, keeping the gun raised as he negotiated the spiral stairway. He would not get a view of the saloon until the final steps.

At the last moment, he stopped and panned the gun around the room, then he stepped forward. Nikita was right behind him. There was no one there, but there was a broken window.

"Shit, you see that, Nikita."



Judging by the debris, someone had thrown something through it; from inside! His eyes darted around the room.

Vasily moved slowly. He looked behind the settee, then the kitchen counter, under the table, and inside the larger food cabinets. He lowered the gun, then said: "all clear."

Two more levels remained. They were now at the widest part of the building; it held more opportunities for concealment and would require a careful and coordinated search. Nikita picked up the other rifle which was propped up in the corner and checked it was loaded.

"I'm not taking any chances," he said

A fleeting thought passed through his mind. If someone had been in here, which seemed likely, why had they not taken the gun, it was visible?

Vasily said: "you can lead the way this time before my heart gives out from the stress." He gave an anxious smile.

Nikita didn't relish the task but felt safer armed than hiding behind Vasily with nothing to protect himself. He steeled himself for the task and gave Vasily a nod. Then he began the descent into the workshop. He was disconcerted by the lack of vision the spiral stairway gave until the last moment. With his heart in his mouth, he stepped into the room, far enough that Vasily could enter too.

Both stood still as Nikita held the raised rifle. There wasn't a sound other than their own heavy, nervous breathing. Nikita's heart was pounding in his ears.

Vasily moved left and Nikita to the right as they began their search. Once again, they declared the area clear.

"Ready for the last one?"

"Sure," said Vasily

"I'll go first again," said Nikita."

"Cheers, pal."

The storeroom held no surprises, but they found the main door unlocked.

Nikita was sure they had secured it the night before.

"The generator shack to finish with then?" Vasily said.

"We've not done a full job otherwise," said Nikita.

Vasily said: "One of us needs to stand guard at the door."

"You do it," said Nikita, "I'll look around."

"Suits me," said Vasily.

They opened the door. The morning air was cold but there was no wind and the sun gave the illusion of warmth. There was a banging sound coming from the generator shack, an irregular sound as if someone, or something, were hammering.

The generator hut door was open, they had shut it last night. Nikita walked towards it, the hammering sound still coming from within matched the thumping of his heart. He reached the door and searched for the light switch while holding the rifle with one hand, still pointing into the shed.

The light came on and Nikita took tentative steps into the shack. He picked up a set of ear defenders, but before donning them he shouted out: "who's there?" The banging stopped.

Nikita took a deep breath to calm himself and moved forward. Before him was the fuel tank, either side of which were the two generators. Other than those items, the only other things were two storage cabinets for spares, a tool cupboard, and a workbench. Ominous shadows taunted him from behind the fuel tank. Everywhere else was well lit.

He moved to the side of the left-hand generator and crept around it until he could see the backside of the fuel tank. There was nothing there. He continued a circular tour of the shack, checking everywhere around the generators. He kept a regular lookout behind himself in case someone should double back on him. Finally, he looked in all the cabinets.

There was no sign of where the hammering had come from, but he found a gap in the wall behind the fuel tank, big enough for a man to squeeze through. The wood had rotted away, but there was no sign that anyone had gone through. He was happy that the place was empty, but not content; they had heard hammering and it didn't seem as if there was any reason to believe it had been coming from the machinery, the duty generator was running sweetly.

He hung the ear defenders back on their hook, switched off the light, and bolted the door. There was one final task.

He went around the west side of the main building, where the broken saloon window faced. When he was opposite the window he looked around and found what he was looking for. As they had suspected, someone had thrown something through the window. It was a large glass jar. There were large pieces of windowpane scattered nearby. No more evidence was needed, neither of them could have done it. The breaking of the window happened while they were together. Someone else had been inside!

He carried the glass jar back to Vasily who had remained standing at the entrance door to the lighthouse. "Here it is, this is what smashed the window. As we thought, someone threw it from inside."

"I guess there was no one in the generator hut?"

"No. Weird though, the banging stopped as soon as I called out. I tell you, it was spooky in there. All in the mind, I suppose, the tension and fear of the unknown."

"Glad it was you and not me. It was bad enough waiting here, not knowing who or what might come from where."

"What do we do now?" said Nikita.

"I don't know. Go inside and lock the door, and I'm hanging on to this gun."

They returned to the saloon and Nikita put the kettle on the stove. While waiting for it to boil, he began to think about how different their lives were from

what they should be. The events had supplanted a relaxed daily routine—no, not supplanted; it had never even started. Instead, it had been a constant battle between the two of them, and now, against what? An unknown intruder is all Nikita could think of. Ghosts don't throw glass jars through windows. But how could a real person be so elusive in such a small environment as the lighthouse?

"What are you thinking, lad?" said Vasily.

"Oh, I don't know. I'm just trying to make some sense of it."

"Well, it beats me."

"There had to be somebody in here," said Nikita.

"It's the only logical explanation."

"But that's the point, it isn't logical. If an intruder had been responsible, how the hell could they have done it unobserved? There's no way we wouldn't have seen then."

"I saw a shadow, and what I thought was a figure outside when we arrived," said Vasily.

"That's all, a shadow and a possible figure in the distance. Someone has been in here, in the building, while we've been here. There's only one way up and down, how can you explain that?"

"I can't."

Nikita made a pot of tea and allowed it to steep. He was still on edge from hearing the sounds from the generator hut; he had been sure he was about to encounter the mystery person. They were armed now, and they had locked the entrance door. But did he feel safe? If he was honest with himself, he would have to say no.

There were too many odd aspects. They cast doubt on whether a locked door would keep this intruder out. He thought again about a paranormal cause, against which there could be no defence. He let the thought drop.

"Tea, Vasily?"

"Yeah, make it strong or I'll be on the vodka soon."

Nikita handed him a cup and then sat down with his own. "I need to get my mind off this; it's time we got back to some routine jobs. We haven't done the daily checks for two days."

"You're right. We can't sit around waiting for something else to happen. It'll give us something to do for two hours."

"Maybe nothing will happen."

Vasily raised his bushy eyebrows and gave him a look of doubt; there would be more, and Nikita knew it.

As they drank their tea, the wind began to increase and sent a draft through the broken window. Nikita realised that now they had no way of forecasting the weather since the demise of the radio. They would have to rely on the old ways of observing the skies, temperature fluctuations, and pressure changes. Then it began to rain. At least they had enjoyed good weather for their trips out to the cave. Nikita sipped his tea.

Vasily said, "I'll put a board over that window so if the wind swings around it'll

come howling through it."

"It will cut down the natural light in the room a lot."

"It won't make much difference as the days shorten."

"I guess not," said Nikita. Usually, Nikita slipped easily into the winter routine and lack of daylight. The lighthouse was cosy and brightly lit with artificial light and he knuckled down to the brief daily chores, filling the remaining hours with his pastimes of reading, drawing, painting, and listening to music. Now he viewed the coming months with a sense of dread. An unexplainable fear gripped his chest.

Vasily finished his cup of tea and made a move before he succumbed to the vodka bottle. He said: "the first job, I will fix the window."

"Okay," said Nikita. "I'll do the light checks."

Vasily descended the single flight of stairs to the workshop and searched for a sheet of plywood. He paused for a moment as a wave of dizziness overcame him. The feeling continued and he sat down on a stool.

Vague memories came to his mind. He tried to focus on them, but they were elusive. Images formed of an axe swinging high over his head. He realized he was recalling a time long ago when he was chopping firewood at home. Then the image changed to one where he was swinging the axe at the radio. "No," he said to himself. "I didn't!" He shook his head trying to shake the vision. Another came to him, of him throwing something from the top of the lighthouse. "No!" he said again, this time aloud. "It wasn't me, it couldn't have been!"

But he had doubts concerning his memory. He hadn't told Nikita, but he had realised there had been gaps over the past few days; gaps where he couldn't remember what he had been doing for an hour or more. He put it down to too much vodka addling his brain. It worried him; he had only been experiencing the issue for a few weeks. He just needed to get through this last tour of duty. Perhaps it would give him an easy way out if he played on it, early retirement with a medical discharge.

He cleared his head and carried on. As he did so, a noise came from below, from the storeroom. It was a ticking sound like someone gently tapping a pipe with a small metal object.

"Damn! The heating system again," Vasily said to himself.

He walked down to the storeroom and heating plantroom to find the noise wasn't coming from the heating system. Confused, he swung his head from side to side to find the source. It was coming from the main door. His heart began to race, and he realized he had left the rifle in the workshop; he felt suddenly vulnerable.

The lights flickered; he took a step back and stumbled over the stool. The noise changed to a rhythmic, dull thumping on the wooden door. His hand reached out and found a crowbar as he stood immobile with fear.

The light went out completely; all that remained was a dull glow from the light

in the workshop. Why didn't that go out as well? It wasn't a total power failure. Then the thumping stopped, and the lights came back on.

Vasily remained motionless and licked his lips; they were dry, as was his whole mouth.

He listened carefully; there was nothing, until a moment later there was the sound of someone, or something, shuffling in the snow outside. Even if he held the rifle in his hands, he would not have ventured out. His curiosity was crushed by terror.

The shuffling sound diminished as if the cause of the sound was moving away, until it ceased altogether.

Shaking, he sat back down on the stool.

Nikita made his way up to the lightroom and, though it wasn't logical, he carried the rifle. He stopped on the way to view the radio set. He still couldn't believe it was destroyed and had to see it once again to make sure he hadn't imagined it. Sure enough, it was almost cloven in two. Damaged wires sprung exposed from the cover and components littered the desk and floor.

He shook his head in dismay and carried on. The thought flashed through his mind again. It could have been Vasily. But no, what about the breaking of the window? Vasily was not responsible for that. Surely it was final proof, despite his doubts, that someone else did it. If so, it let Vasily off the hook for everything.

He reached the lightroom and examined the window lenses and the lamps. All were in order and he went out onto the balcony. A cold wind was blowing, but the rain had eased. He raised his collar and made his way around to the leeward side to avoid the worst of the wind. He looked all around and saw nothing other than the all too familiar features of the landscape. The cold seeped quickly through his jumper and he returned inside. He shut the door and rubbed his hands together and then his face. The few minutes out there had been refreshing, but more than enough.

Nikita descended the stairs to the switch room and examined the contacts. All were clean and bright. He greased the motor gears and bearings. The light was fading already, so he re-energised the system, first powering up the turning motor before making the breakers for the lamps. The familiar '*buff*' came from above as the current made its initial surge into the two-hundred-fifty lamps and they began to cast their beam far across the grey sea.

Nikita was happy with the equipment; no lamps were out, and the turning gear was running smoothly. This was their job, to keep the light burning. Simple, but somehow fulfilling, knowing the essential service they provided.

A noise came from below in Vasily's room, the sound of furniture being moved. Surely, he hadn't finished yet and made it up here?

"Vasily?" he called out. There was no answer. He repeated his call. "Vasily, is that you?"

Nothing. The old goat must be deaf, he thought.

Nikita descended to Vasily's quarters and as he did so, the lights began to flick on and off. He thought it may be the generators again.

When he reached Vasily's cabin there was nobody there, yet he had heard sounds only moments before. "Vasily?"

There was still no answer.

The lights failed altogether. The dim emergency lights came on, emitting an eerie, dull red glow.

A movement caught his eye, he turned, but there was nothing there. A creaking sound came from the side and he saw the bed moving. All by itself!

Nikita had to look twice, but it was true. Then it stopped.

A trick of the light, he told himself.

But it was not over.

Vasily's wardrobe fell to the floor with a loud crash.

Nikita's first instinct, after his initial icy fear, was to get out. He moved towards the stair and a shadow moved in front of him, it too moving towards the stairway. He couldn't make out the form in the dim light, but it was not Vasily. He raised the rifle at the figure, or whatever it was. If it was a person, he had no intention of killing them and aimed low where, if he was lucky, he would get their legs. He let off two rounds, but the shadow kept moving. Then it stopped. Nikita was about fire another shot but held his fire, it sounded as though the figure was speaking.

There was the sound of deep and heavy breathing. Then, in a low, rasping voice, it said, "I warned you. You didn't listen." Then the figure seemed to slide down the stairs.

Nikita was shaking and he lowered the rifle. "What the fuck!" he said aloud. He was terrified and his immediate thought was that his ideas of either a ghost or paranormal causation were coming true. If so, what could they do? You can't shoot a spirit, he told himself.

*Vasily, where was he?* Probably at the other end of the lighthouse. He needed to get to him. Then the lights came back on. Alone and scared, they provided him with a crumb of comfort.

As Vasily rose gently from the stool, the lights came back on. Where was Nikita? He had to find him. He began to climb the stairs back to the workshop.

Halfway there the lights began to flicker.

"Oh no, not again, please!"

He reached the storeroom and went straight for his gun; it provided little succour. Whatever it was he had heard, it was outside. He pulled himself together. There was no imminent danger. But if the generators were playing up and he had to go outside? That was a different matter.

The lights went out again, but he could still hear the generator running. His mind was on a knife-edge and, as he swung the rifle at imaginary shadows, he

realised he couldn't trust what he was seeing; in the dim light, forms could take shape which wasn't there.

He began to creep up the stairs to the saloon.

Nikita, too, felt charged with energy as adrenaline flooded his bloodstream. He paused as the lights went out again.

"Shit!"

He reached the washrooms and panned the rifle around the space, knowing it was probably useless against the entity he suspected was taunting them. It was all clear, apart from the fleeting image of a face he kept seeing in the mirrors. He was sure it was all in his mind.

He continued down to his floor and all appeared normal. Then sounds began to come from the saloon. First, the sound of pots and pans scattering on the floor, then what sounded like the other window being smashed.

This was their home! He had reached a breaking point and determined to put an end to it, whatever the cost.

He walked down the final set of steps with renewed confidence but fear still buzzed through every cell in his body. He stepped into the saloon.

It was a mess. Everything movable was upturned and the floor was covered with paraphernalia. In a corner, he saw the vague outline of a figure he didn't recognise approaching the stair which led to the workshop. He opened fire, this time aiming at body height.

Vasily couldn't believe what he saw as he stepped into the saloon, pots and pans were flying, cast by some unseen force.

Then, words came to him from no specific direction. "I warned you, you didn't take heed."

A deep, guttural moaning came from the other side of the room. He had heard the sound many, many years ago, and knew the likely source. The gun would be powerless, yet he still fired out in desperation before remembering the crucifix around his neck, the only source of true power under the circumstances. He wrenched the chain from his neck and was about to approach the entity with it clasped in front of him when he felt a sudden excruciating pain in his side. He couldn't make sense of it but continued to lunge forward with the crucifix held at arm's length. As he began to lose consciousness, he thrust it at the apparition like a dagger.

Outside, the air was crisp and cold. The snow had replaced the rain and was casting the landscape in a white blanket which reflected the full moon. Two shots rang out from the confines of the lighthouse as a shadow drifted across the snow.

Then all fell back to the preceding silence, broken only by the gentle hum of the

generator and the almost imperceptible whir from the turning machinery as the light cast its beam far across the ocean in its lonely search for shipping.



## Chapter 7

### Two days later - Office of the Northern Lighthouse Commission, Murmansk

Commandant Petrov was perturbed. Three reports had come in from ships in the Barents Sea that Lighthouse Number 34 was not showing its light. Any more reports could land him in trouble with the Party. He had sent out orders in the morning for his staff to contact the facility by radio and had yet to hear from them. His patience was wearing thin when an officer knocked on his door. "Enter."

The officer saluted, which annoyed the Commandant as it required him to stand and return the salute. He sat down again and eyed the officer with concern. He also had the appearance of intending to admonish the officer if he gave him information he didn't want to hear.

He raised an eyebrow. "Well?"

"Sir, we have been attempting to contact Facility Number 34 all day. We could not make contact."

"Keep trying, I have to know what's happening out there."

"Yes, sir."

It was obvious to the Commandant that the officer had more to say. "Well?"

"There is a radio call from a ship in the Barents Sea wanting to speak to the man in charge."

Petrov sighed. It was nearly time to go home. "Very well."

He followed the officer out into the main work area where many minions worked at their desks. He led him to one of the radio operators.

"Sir!" the operator stood and saluted. Petrov returned his salute.

"What do you have for me?"

"One Captain Grekov, Soviet Navy, from the Destroyer Minsk."

*Shit*, thought Petrov. He donned the headset which the operator proffered him.

"Captain Grekov," said Petrov.

"Who am I speaking to?"

"Commandant Petrov, head of operations, Northern Lighthouse Commission, sir."

"About bloody time, I've been trying to get in touch with you lot all day!"

"What can I do for you, sir?"

"This morning my ship passed close to the Island of Kolguyev. As dawn broke, we realised how close we had come to running aground. Your bloody light is out!"

"I'm aware of that sir; we are trying to deal with the situation."

"Is that so?"

"So far we can't contact the facility."

"May I remind you of the consequences should any vessel, let alone a Soviet Naval Vessel, comes to grief in those waters?"

"No, sir, you need not remind me."

"My ship will pass the island again in four days. I suggest you get your house in order before I escalate this issue to Naval Command."

"I will address the matter immediately."

"Good day to you, Commandant."

The receiver went dead.

The Captain's attitude riled Petrov and he wondered if he should have stood his ground more. In their different careers, they were of similar rank, officially. But the Captain was a military officer and Petrov was merely a civilian pen-pusher; he wouldn't have stood a chance against him.

He turned on the radio operators. "Get hold of that lighthouse before the day is done! They should have attended their radio by now; we allocate them three slots a day for a listening watch. If they don't answer, there will be disciplinary action!"

He now faced two choices; to take out his anger on a bottle of vodka, or his wife. The first held more promise of pleasure and less danger.

Commandant Petrov spent the night drinking with a colleague, then checked in at his office before returning home to his wife. There was still no contact with Lighthouse 34. Other than incompetence or disobedience, the only other possibility was just as appalling. A crisis had, or was, taking place. If there was no further news, then he would form a plan of action in the morning.

He awoke with a hangover. Sebastian Yashkin was a hardened drinker and a good conversationalist. To Dimitri Petrov he was the ideal drinking partner. But whereas Sebastian could hold his liquor through two bottles of vodka, Dimitri had a far lower tolerance. He held his own throughout into the early hours, eventually insisting on having one glass for every two of Sebastian's. Though it still hurt in the morning.

"Another night led astray by your drinking buddy, I suppose!" his wife complained.

Olga Petrov had lived with Dimitri's habit of returning home inebriated three or four times a week throughout their ten years of marriage. She put up with it. First, because there was no choice. Where was a middle-aged woman to go? Second, because on the days he returned home sober he was kind, considerate, and a good lover. She viewed his drinking bouts as a harmless diversion: it kept him content, eased the stress of his job, and gave her time to see the friends he didn't like.

Her words pierced through his aching brain. "Look, I've got enough problems at

work without you whining! We've got a potential crisis on our hands."

Olga mellowed. "As long as you enjoyed yourself, that's all. Do you want me to get something for your head?"

"Yes, please."

Olga rattled through some drawers in the kitchen, jarring Dimitri's head even more. She returned with a glass of water, stirring whatever pill she had put in it.

"Drink this." She offered him the glass and kissed the top of his head.

"Thanks. I'll be home on time tonight, I promise."

"Whatever."

"No, I will. I'll make it up to you."

Though it was the last thing he could think about at this moment, he still found Olga attractive and pursued the physical side of their relationship with vigour when he was able. She shared his enjoyment of making love, without which he was sure she would have left him years ago. They were compatible, in a way. They both got out of the marriage what they wanted; not perfect, but what marriage was?

The potion began to work its magic. Olga gave him a cooked breakfast, and after drinking a pot of tea he was ready to return to the office and face whatever strife was heading his way.

Dimitri opened the door of his car in the private parking space behind his office. It had been an arduous journey, thick snow-covered streets, but he lived close to the office. He could have walked, but he rarely did. The wheezing from his lungs as he strode the few paces to the building told him he ought to; it wasn't only the result of the heavy imbibing of alcohol and cigars with Sebastian the night before. He needed to take better care of himself.

The lift took him to the third floor and the only dominion in this world where he held the real power. He held his briefcase and walked past the desks of his lackeys, most of whom worked in the great open expanse of the main office hall with no privacy. The few who were not busy acknowledged his passing with a wave or a 'good morning, sir'.

In contrast, walls enclosed his office and a large window overlooked the city. Another small window enables him to monitor his juniors in the main office area. He seated himself in his sumptuously upholstered chair behind the large hardwood desk and scoured the overnight correspondence. There was still nothing from Lighthouse 34.

He pressed an intercom button and spoke. "Lieutenant Brovsky, my office, now!"

A minute later the officer walked in.

"Well," said Dimitri. "What are we doing about Lighthouse 34?"

"Um, sir, we were waiting for instructions from you, sir."

"Am I the only one who can make decisions around here!"

"No, sir, but ... "

"it's all right," he sighed. He knew the political climate didn't engender creative thought or decisive action. Most were too afraid to stick their necks out for fear of ridicule or censure from higher authorities who might ask awkward questions. So, it was down to men oblivious to criticism or who held high enough office to avoid questions, men like Dimitri.

"I want to speak to Air Reconnaissance as soon as possible."

"Yes, sir. Will that be all?"

"Yes. No! Where's my morning coffee? Where's Anna?"

"I think she has just walked in."

"Then get her to make my coffee before she does anything else."

"Yes, sir."

The breakfast Olga had made had done the trick, but he still needed a continuous dose of caffeine to function at this hour of the day.

He had authority but there were still those who had yet higher power. To prevent himself getting it in the neck from them, he had to sort this problem out and fast. He looked out of the window and saw the snow falling heavily. It would be no easy task to make a flight out to Kolguyev Island in these conditions, and few pilots would even consider such a request.

First came his coffee as Anna, with her curvaceous body, laid it on the table in front of him. As he took in her delightful shape, he thought of the many times he fantasised about her laying more than just a cup in front of him.

"Sorry, it's late, sir."

"Thank you, Anna."

She left his office with a sexy wiggle of her behind, which was not for him, it was the way she always moved.

He took a sip of the dark, strong and sweet beverage and tried to focus his thoughts. He had to come up with a plan. But he knew he needed the help of another department, one he had no power over. He would have to barter with other officials to get what he wanted.

Lieutenant Brovsky knocked on his door again and entered. "Sir, we have Colonel Sokolov on the line from Air Reconnaissance."

"Then what are you waiting for? Patch me through."

Dimitri picked up the telephone. "Colonel, thank you for getting in touch. I'm sure you've heard, we have a situation ... that's right, there's been no contact with them. I want a flight out there as soon as possible."

"It's difficult at this time of year, sir. We need to wait for a window in the weather."

"I'm aware of that. Just make a plane and pilot ready and let me know as soon as a flight is available."

"Yes, sir. We'll get some detailed weather reports together and see what we can do."

"Don't go all namby-pamby on me waiting for perfect weather. I need to make progress on this before I get it in the neck from the Navy, do you understand?"

"Yes, sir. I understand."

"Very well, then get on with it." Dimitri put the handset down. The call from the Destroyer Captain was still clear in his mind. *He's gonna be wanting my ass if I don't get some answers soon.*

Much as he didn't enjoy flying or going to that Godforsaken island, he felt he had to be personally involved. He would have to go, but he would not suffer alone.

Dimitri pressed an intercom button. "Brovsky, come to my office."

Lieutenant Brovsky appeared a moment later.

"Take a seat. Two things, first you're coming with me to Kolguyev Island."

Dimitri noted the brief flinch in Brovsky's eye, and the dismay written on his face. "As soon as the flyboys are happy, we're making a quick return trip, out in the morning and back in time for your usual rendezvous with vodka. Go home and pack a bag so you're ready to leave at short notice."

"Yes, sir."

"Before you go, the second thing; I want you to dispatch one of our cutters there too. They are to sail immediately and are to take a team of technicians and engineers with them. I'm not taking any chances on what's wrong out there. No excuses, unless there are any storms brewing. Got it?"

"Yes, sir. I'll get on to it straight away."

"Dismissed, Lieutenant."

Brovsky rose from his seat with a heavier burden on his shoulders than he had entered with.

Despite Brovsky's lack of enthusiasm, which was understandable, Dimitri knew he could rely on him. He was a man who got things done and would not let the marine boys pull the wool over his eyes.

There was nothing else he could do. He rarely had to do anything, he was merely a figurehead for most of the time. But Grekov's call had made it personal.

By the end of the day, Brovsky brought news that the cutter Vostok was preparing to sail and would depart in the afternoon. Onboard, other than the crew, were two maintenance technicians, a mechanical engineer and, to cover all eventualities, a doctor.

"Well done, Lieutenant."

The minor words of praise surprised Brovsky. Dimitri was not in the habit of being magnanimous with his underlings but was feeling generous, and Brovsky had earned it.

Dimitri continued: "any word from the air unit?"

"Not yet, sir. I've called them repeatedly but they're waiting for a clear weather window for the flight."

"Brovsky, get me the weather report for the next three days. They seem to be dragging their heels; I'm not taking any bullshit from them. Is that pilot, what's his name... Oh yes, Ivan Grozny: is he available? He's a good fellow, a handy pilot and not picky about extreme conditions."

"No, sir. They redeployed him for the winter. They have a good pilot ready; it's his boss who's being indecisive."

"We'll see about that."

"I'll get the weather report for you, sir."

"Get Anna to bring me another coffee while you're at it."

"Yes, sir."

He knew the Air Unit boss, Alexander Mikhailov quiet well, a fellow graduate of the Maritime University in Murmansk. His opinion of him had not changed through the years, a spineless prick. Unlike his conversation with the Naval Captain this time he would be top-dog, and he was looking forward to it. Anna brought him a cup of coffee then he sat back and lit a cigar. There had been no word from Lighthouse 34 for three days now and Dimitri was curious. Radio failure was uncommon. There was always one lighthouse keeper who was an electrical technician and the facilities carried plenty of spare parts. Failing that, there would have been passing ships which they could have signalled with Morse code. But on top of the lack of contact, reports stated the light was out. It was as if the place was dead. Other than serious injury, illness, or even death, he could imagine no scenario which would give rise to such circumstances.

His curiosity was tainted with concern. He knew both men out there, especially the old guy Vasily for whom he had great respect; a true man of the sea. As he drained the last dregs from his cup, Lieutenant Brovsky returned carrying several large sheets of paper.

"The weather reports, sir."

"Good, let me see."

Brovsky laid the sheets out on Dimitri's desk, holding them flat with a few books.

Dimitri perused the charts, carefully analysing the isobars and wind flags, and how they changed over the next few days. There was no reason, as far as he could see, to hold back the flight, some brief periods of wind pushing into Force 7, occasional gale Force 8, but he had been through worse in the aircraft they used.

"Right!" Dimitri picked up the telephone and dialled. After a few moments, the call was answered. "Alexander? Good, this is Dimitri Petrov... good day to you too. Now, why the delay in getting this flight to Kolguyev island?"

"Well, the weather is not looking favourable at the moment."

"Nonsense man, I've got the forecasts in front of me right now. There is no reason we can't fly."

"I beg to differ, the conditions in the region can be far worse than forecast at this time of year, you know that. It's a long flight over open water."

"I'm aware of both points, Alexander. I want to fly out tomorrow."

"You're going personally?"

"Yes, that is how confident I am; I will not risk my own life."

"I suppose not. But I would strongly advise against it."

"Some of us are made of sterner stuff than you are. We make that flight, do you understand?"

"Well, if you insist."

"I do. Is your pilot happy about it?"

"Oh yes. He's seen it as a challenge, so he says. He has a reputation for being a suicide jockey."

"Who is it?"

"Igor Kuzmich."

"Ah, I've flown with him before. He's a bit of a maverick, but he sure knows how to fly. Tomorrow morning then."

"I'll see what I can do."

"No, that was a demand, not a suggestion, Alexander. We will fly in the morning and be back for the evening, the weather is reasonably fair."

"Very well, Dimitri, as you wish."

Dimitri replaced the telephone receiver on its hook, with a smile of smug satisfaction on his face.

Igor, he thought to himself. He was a character. They had first met at the Marine Academy before Igor became a pilot. He enjoyed a drink and had a well-earned reputation as a lady's man. But when he gained his wings, he came into his own. A fearless, yet utterly competent pilot, he would go where no others would. On one occasion when Dimitri flew with him, he brought the aircraft into land with a sixty-knot side wind. On the final approach, he whooped like a kid as he struggled to line the bird up with the runway. He turned to Dimitri with a look of glee in his eyes and took a slug of whiskey from a hip flask. The aircraft slewed sideways across the runway once the wheels were down. A tyre blew out and then the starboard undercarriage strut gave way.

"We're coming in sideways!" he screamed at the control room. There was no fear in his voice and Dimitri was sure he detected a touch of mirth.

As a fire truck came skidding across the runway Igor smiled and lit a cigar, then said, "that was fun, wasn't it?"

The experience shook Dimitri, but a bit of Igor's bravado rubbed off on him. Igor had survived many scrapes, through luck or skill it didn't matter; Dimitri was more than happy to trust his life to him.

## Chapter 8

Dimitri met with Lieutenant Brovsky at a military aerodrome on the outskirts of Murmansk. The snow was falling, and it covered the runway, though he didn't know how deep it was. He hoped it wouldn't jeopardise their mission.

"Have you seen our pilot yet, Lieutenant?"

"No sir," said Brovsky.

"We'll find him in the bar if it's open, otherwise he'll be drinking coffee to ease his hangover from last night."

Brovsky looked startled. "You're joking, right?"

Dimitri gave a wry smile. "Only in part, but don't worry, he's a good flyer. I've seen him fly after a heavy lunchtime session, he's a natural, could do it in his sleep."

Dimitri's comments did nothing to ease the look of concern on Brovsky's face.

"Come on, the tower will probably know where he is. But we'll look in the crew's quarters first."

They walked past the administration building and arrived at the briefing room.

Dimitri stuck his head inside. "Ah! Igor, there you are my old friend!"

Igor ambled up and clasped him in a bear hug, almost squeezing the air from his lungs.

"Dimitri, you old devil; Come to party with Igor again, have you? It's been a long time."

"There's work to do first. Are we clear to fly?"

"I am, no problem. My techies are fettling the crate up right now. The boss men have other ideas; say the runway is too dangerous. But we know different, eh?"

"We've been through worse, sure."

"Can't exactly sneak past them, that's the problem; they'd have my balls for breakfast."

"So, they've banned flights at the moment?"

"Yeah, waiting until the weather clears. Visibility is shit. But if we were the only ones up there, I don't see the problem. Know what I mean?"

"I'll twist some arms, if you're happy then so am I."

Dimitri turned to see Brovsky staring like a rabbit in headlights.

"Hey, don't look so concerned, it's a walk in the park for Igor! Let's go ruffle some feathers."

Dimitri found the office of the base Flight Commander, knocked and entered.

"Yes?" The Commander looked up. "Dimitri, good to see you again!" he rose, walked towards Dimitri, and then shook his hand.



"I want to get this flight to Kolguyev Island off the ground."

"Ah yes, Kolguyev Island. Well, as you can see, the weather is very much against you right now."

"Not according to my pilot."

"That would be Mr Kuzmich, yes?"

"Yes."

"He's a lunatic; I won't let him fly that plane down my airfield in this weather".

"I've flown with him before, he knows his job and he knows his aircraft."

"That may be so, but I'm in charge of all operations here."

"I appreciate that, Alexander. But I insist you allow us to depart, I have an important mission. I've had the Navy on my back already."

"I tell you, it's too dangerous, give it a few hours, see how the weather goes."

Despite their friendship Dimitri's tone became firmer, "I'm afraid I must demand you give us clearance, this is a matter of safety for shipping. If I get it in the neck because you've delayed me, I'll be laying responsibility right at your feet - then you can have the pleasure of bending over and taking a fucking deep shafting from Naval Command. I've already had an ear-bending from the captain of a Destroyer."

Alexander thought for a moment. He appreciated that Dimitri was considerably senior to him and that Naval Command was not a department with which to trifle. He spoke again. "I'm only concerned for your safety, Dimitri. There are winds up to gale force forecast. But if you insist then I can't stop you. You have clearance, my friend."

"Thank you, we'll be back by this evening."

"You must be as nuts as Mr Kuzmich, Godspeed."

Dimitri and Petrov returned to the briefing room where they found Igor relaxing with a fellow pilot and playing cards.

"Hey, Igor! We're clear to go."

Igor's face lit up while the other pilot shook his head in disbelief. Igor loved the challenge and considered blue-sky flying to be for chicken-shit amateurs and fair-weather kite-fliers. Those words of Igor's had stuck in Dimitri's mind for twenty years since the day he saw Igor take over a mission from a pilot who refused to fly into the eye of a storm. Igor survived with an engine down and a blown-out windscreen but still came back smiling.

Maybe he was insane.

The wind outside had begun to howl and Brovsky's face was white. Igor slapped him on the shoulder. "I'll give you the ride of your life, lad! Don't worry 'bout a thing."

Soon they were strapping themselves into the transport plane as Igor lit a pipe and sat calmly in the pilot's seat.

"It's a bit rough," said Igor. "We'll wait for a lull then make a run for it, once we're off the ground we can take anything. The air is soft, but the ground is hard. Know what I mean?" he smiled and looked Brovsky straight in the eye. Igor was just telling the facts as they were, but Dimitri knew he was also toying with Brovsky, playing on his fears. He smiled to himself and remembered how

Igor teased him the same way many years ago.

After a short wait, the wind eased back for a time and Igor became animated. He flicked a few switches on the console and started the engines. Then he gesticulated wildly at the ground crew. He wanted the chocks removed right away.

The aircraft taxied a short distance to the end of the runway and, without stopping, Igor thrust the throttles forward. He rocked back and forth as if trying to make the aircraft speed up.

"We just gotta beat this wind," he yelled above the drone of the engines.

The aircraft lifted from the runway and rose into nothingness; it was as if someone had thrown a sheet across the windscreen.

"Flying blind boys," Igor called out. He was still smiling. "Ain't nobody up here except us, even the birdies will be safe in their nests. No chance of bumping into anything, know what I mean?"

They continued to climb as Igor pulled out a chart and marked off the course. He swung the plane around onto the correct heading and sat back with his pipe. "We'll go higher, perhaps get out of this whiteout."

Brovsky was trembling.

Within half an hour they were flying through clear but grey skies. The snow had stopped, replaced with occasional rain showers which hammered the airframe as they forged ahead into the wind. It had reduced, but the forecast was for more high winds later.

Lieutenant Brovsky had fallen asleep. Dimitri wondered how on earth he could manage it with all the noise, perhaps the stress had worn him out. He could see they were ploughing into a stiff headwind. It would add to their time on the outward leg, but if it didn't change direction, they would have a quick trip home.

To pass the time, Dimitri unfastened his seatbelt and went up forward to talk to Igor. They hadn't met for five years and there was much to catch up on. He found the cockpit cramped and he had difficulty climbing into the Co-pilots' seat. It was empty as no one wanted to fly with Igor today. Dimitri could understand why.

"You can stay there for the rest of the flight if you like," said Igor.

"Might as well. My number two is fast asleep."

"I don't think he's enjoying this, but no need to babysit."

"Nah, he'll be okay back there. I'll be your Co-pilot." Dimitri laughed.

"You've got more guts than those other lads down there; they all refused to ride with me today. Fucking pussies, that's what they are. Know what I mean?"

Dimitri watched this large, calm, confident man as he puffed away on his pipe.

A slight smile was on Igor's face; he loved it, flying was his life. All he wanted was to be airborne from dawn until dusk, though he wasn't averse to night flying either.

He didn't need to watch the instruments all the time; he was at one with the aircraft and could feel every movement. He turned to Dimitri while he held the joystick with a nonchalant grip.

"So, what do you expect to find out there?"

"I don't have a clue, that's why I'm heading out."

"But surely you didn't need to, you could have just sent Brovsky, and the cutter will be there this afternoon."

"I guess I needed a quick jolly."

"What, with me?!" He laughed a great deep belly laugh which Dimitri felt through their joined seats.

"It gets me out of the office."

They continued with small talk and reminiscences of times long past until the island came into view. They were almost on it but had only just seen it because of the bad visibility.

"Let's take a look at the lie of the land," said Igor.

He quickly reduced altitude as he circled the lighthouse and when down to less than fifty metres he made two close passes.

"No sign of life at all down there," he said.

"That's what worries me," said Dimitri. "You'd have thought someone would have stuck their head out by now with us buzzing them."

Dimitri's brow furrowed. Perhaps it was worse than he expected.

"Take us down then, Igor."

"My pleasure."

Brovsky suddenly appeared, "what's happening?"

"Hey, sleeping beauty," said Igor. "We're about to land, get yourself strapped in. Don't want you bouncing about the cabin roof like a crazy fuckwit. Know what I mean?"

"Right," said Brovsky. He staggered back to the rear seats.

"Looks like a good patch of land down there," said Igor

"That's the usual landing place."

"I've not been out here for years."

"Me neither," said Dimitri.

The wind had increased again, and Igor struggled to keep the flight path straight as he came in for the final approach. The wind was skewing around the headland causing gusts from different directions. Igor fought with the controls and touched down with the aircraft pointing at a slight angle to its actual forward course. As the tail swung from side-to-side, Dimitri glanced back to see Brovsky gripping the seat with white knuckles.

The speed reduced and Igor brought the aircraft under control and taxied towards the lighthouse. He brought it to a stop, but the aircraft continued swaying from side to side with the wind.

"You crack on with what you've got to do," said Igor. "I have to get some guy ropes out to pin her down. Don't want to take any chances, and I ain't going back on no ship. Know what I mean?"

"No problem," said Dimitri.

He turned to his colleague, "all set then, Lieutenant? We'd better grab some torches."

Brovsky nodded meekly.

Dimitri and Brovsky walked the short distance to the lighthouse. The wind had died down and there was an eerie silence, accented by the strange grey light of the late morning. The entrance door was wide open, but no light emanated from inside, either via the door or from any of the windows of the building. The generators were silent.

"Do you know anything about generators, Lieutenant?"

"Yes, a bit, sir. I can operate one and do some basic fault-finding."

"Good man. You see about getting power back on while I look inside."

"You think it's wise to go in alone, sir?"

"There are our two guys in there or no one at all. I think it's safe."

"I'll have a look at the generators then."

Dimitri made his way to the door. It was pitch black inside the storeroom, there were no windows on the ground floor. A small amount of light spilt from the stairway to the workshop. He switched on his torch and shone it around the room; he saw nothing out of the ordinary.

He climbed the stairs to the workshop. The emergency lights were still on and cast their dull red glow over the contents of the room. As he played the torchlight around the room, he realised it was almost the same temperature as outside. It was obvious there had been no heating on for some time. His breath came out in clouds of vapour.

The silence was oppressive as he made his way up to the saloon. His apprehension failed to prepare him for the sight he witnessed. The saloon was like a battlefield; it seemed not a single article remained in its normal resting place. Then he saw the first body.

Vasily was slumped in an armchair, a large bloodstain on his jumper spread across his entire abdominal area. But that was nothing compared to the sight which assailed his eyes from the other side of the room.

He edged over to the body which lay prostrate on its back on the floor.

"Dear God!"

He bent down knowing this had to be Nikita, though he didn't recognise him to begin with. Blood covered his face and the cause almost made Dimitri vomit. A crucifix, about ten centimetres long and still on its chain, had been thrust deep into his left eye socket.

He touched the arm of the body; it was hard as stone.

At that moment Brovsky appeared.

"Holy Mother of God! What the hell happened here!" He looked at Vasily's body.

"He was shot! What about the other one?"

"You don't want to see," said Dimitri.

But Brovsky wandered over.

He looked down at Nikita's face then turned away in revulsion. "Fucking hell!" Brovsky moved away from where Nikita lay and looked at Vasily. He bent down to look closer and then rose with a start. "Shit!"

"What is it Brovsky"

"You'd better look at this, sir."

Dimitri moved and stood next to Brovsky. "Well"

"The hands, look at the hands."

Dimitri lifted one of Vasily's arms. "Oh my God!"

Someone had cut all the fingers off at the palm. He lifted the other arm. It too was fingerless.

"What the hell's this all about?" said Dimitri. "We'd better search the rest of the place. Any luck with the generators?"

Brovsky didn't answer straight away, his mind was somewhere else.

"Lieutenant?"

"Sorry, sir... ah, no. I don't know what's up with them."

"Never mind, we've got torches. The technicians on the Vostok will sort it out when they arrive."

They examined the remaining floors of the building and found only two other strange situations. In one of the sleeping quarters, the bedroom furniture had been overturned. But most shocking of all, the radio had been smashed.

"Now we know why we hadn't heard from them," said Dimitri.

"It looks like it was done with an axe." Brovsky pointed to the fire axe lying on the floor. "What on earth do you think happened here?"

"I don't have a clue," said Dimitri. "We have known lighthouse crews go a little crazy from the isolation, there have been some bad cases through the years. But nothing like this, and they hadn't even been out here long enough for something like that to happen."

"They must have had an argument, then a fight which got out of hand. But to destroy the radio"?

"Your guess is as good as mine."

They reached the lightroom and looked out from the balcony.

"It's beautiful," said Brovsky. "But sod six months out here."

"Look," said Dimitri. He pointed into the distance as a plume of smoke rose through the air. "If that's the Vostok they've made good speed. Let's get back down. I need to call them up from Igor's radio. There's one hell of a mess to sort out here."

Dimitri and Brovsky exited the lighthouse into a new fall of snow. The wind had increased again, and Dimitri admired the simple but effective way Igor had tethered his aircraft to the ground.

"What did you find?" said Igor.

"It's a real mess, two dead bodies."

"Bodies?"

"Yeah, the two keepers, looks like they killed each other," said Brovsky.

"Bloody hell? What did they do, shoot each other?"

"One was shot," said Dimitri. "The other ... got stabbed in the eye with a crucifix."

"Fuck!" said Igor.

"I need to use your radio to contact the Vostok. She's nearly here, we saw her from the lighthouse."

"No problem," said Igor.

Dimitri tuned the radio to the Lighthouse Commission's calling frequency and hailed the Vostok. He gave them an overview of the situation and asked for the technical team to get ashore as soon as possible and two extra crew members to deal with bodies.

"Oh, and you might as well send the doc, he can make an official report at the scene and write the death certificates."

By the time he had finished the call, the Vostok was dropping anchor about one hundred metres offshore. Within minutes they launched a boat from the side and several people embarked. Without delay, it sped towards the shore. The boat slid into a gully between some rocks and the landing party came ashore.

An officer came up to Dimitri and greeted him. "Good day sir, I am First Officer Salkov, I am here to assist in any way I can."

"Very well, I need the technical guys to get the generators running and then check out the main light. The doc can look at the bodies, then your guys can transport them to the ship."

"Yes, sir."

Dimitri had no choice over his next course of action, someone had to stay to replace Nikita and Vasily. He spoke to the two technicians and informed them they would take over duties here until the spring. The men knew there was no point in arguing, someone had to do it. But their faces belied their reluctance. Dimitri knew one that one of them was married and had a young daughter.

"I'll see you guys right for this. Extra pay and guaranteed promotion."

It was the least he could do.

"First Officer Salkov."

"Sir?"

"I want you to make a whip-round from the crew of your ship. Give these men adequate clothing for the winter and anything you can to make their lives more comfortable."

"I'll do that, sir."

There was no more he could do but wait as the parties went about their allocated duties.

"I've got a flask of coffee," said Igor, "with a little something extra."

"That will do," said Dimitri.

After half an hour the generators started up and a little later the main light came on. Dimitri breathed a sigh of relief. Next was the sombre sight of the two bodies being brought out.

"We'll transfer the bodies to the ship and then the boat will return with extra people to tidy the place up. I'll get a new radio set up too," said Salkov.

"Thanks," said Dimitri.

With the power back on and the heating system warming up, they retired to the saloon of the lighthouse. Igor prepared some food while the cutter's crew cleared up and made repairs.

When Dimitri was content that everything was almost back to normal, he told Igor to make ready to leave.

He thanked First Officer Salkov and then reiterated his appreciation to the two technicians who would remain after everyone else had gone. They would be comfortable at least.

They boarded the plane and Dimitri fastened his seatbelt and looked across at Brovsky.

"That wasn't so bad, was it?"

Brovsky raised his eyebrows with a look that said, 'you must be joking!'.

They took off and made one final circuit of the lighthouse.

"Poor buggers," said Dimitri.

"Who?" said Brovsky. "The dead men or the technicians you've told to stay?"

Dimitri had been thinking of Vasily and Nikita, but then said: "all of them."

He recalled the reputation of this facility; cursed, some said. *Just bad luck*, he told himself.

## Epilogue

Kanadara was a medicine-man, a seer, and a shaman-priest. He watched the figure as it approached from the snow-covered wilderness. He filled and lit a pipe, and then sat back against the wall of his hut wondering what the man had brought with him this time.

The Nenet settlement was quiet at this hour of the morning. Elders, like himself, relaxed with their pipes, women folk were busy with cooking and most of the young men were out on the plains tending to their reindeer herds or hunting.

The only sound came from the children playing in the distance.

The man was closer now and Kanadara noted his usual appearance. He dressed in animal skins from head to foot, a long beard trailed down his chest. His unkempt hair swung out from under the fur hat he had adorned with antlers.

To anyone else the man might seem alarming, threatening even. But Kanadara knew him. Though no one could ever really know a man such as this, it would be better to say they were acquainted.

Many years ago, their relationship was closer. While out on a hunt, Kanadara had found the man on the point of death. Using herbs and potions, he revived him out on the plains. For three days he tended to the man until his strength returned then, on the fourth day, he disappeared.

After many months he returned bringing with him intricate carvings of bone and horn. The Nenets had little with which to barter, but the man left with food, new boots, and ammunition. These visits continued every few months. He would appear, barter, then leave.

It was always to Kanadara he came, and the man finally sat down in front of him. Other than his manner of dress, the most striking thing about the man was his eyes. They were cold and piercing, the eyes of a predator. Kanadara had seen the same look once when he came face to face with a wolf. They were soulless and he had come across other men of the same ilk, mostly white men. They had left their souls in some other dimension so they could avoid being witness to whatever horrors they were committing.

He made not a sound; it was as if he wasn't even breathing. Kanadara had heard, in his early apprenticeship, the tales of men who had sold themselves in ways this man must have done. They existed in purgatory between this world and another, such that even their physical bodies were only partially present in this dimension.

The man communicated with signs made with his hands; he had not spoken for over ten years. Today he had brought something so special that Kanadara had to call upon favours owed by some other menfolk to make an exchange



worthy of the man's offering. They shared a smoke in silence then the man departed, his sledge heavier than usual. He watched him disappear into the distance and marvelled at his strength and endurance. How far was he capable of pulling that load? But the only sound came from the sleigh sluicing through the snow, the sound of footfall was absent as if the man weighed nothing. As always, Kanadara retraced the man's steps a short way. For a distance there were tracks and footprints, then the footprints faded to nothing, only the sleigh tracks remained. Kanadara shook his head slowly. He never thought he would meet one of these. Many of the elders remember the time they discovered this strange white man. Younger ones tell of a small cabin he has built himself in the centre of the island, while others talk about a cave in the far north. Kanadara clutched the bag the man had brought him. The contents would add great potency to his rituals. He put his hand inside the bag and brought out the contents. He held them in his palm while moving them around with the fingers of his other hand. A marvellous selection of human finger bones. The man was known by many names; Bog Man, Wild Man, The Animal Man, and others. But Kanadara knew him by his real name, from the days he when he would speak - Boris Tosovic.

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The Ice Remembers



## About the Author

**Robert lives in the windswept Isle of Man with his partner and an extended family of crazy but lovable dogs and cats.**

**Writer, engineer, adventurer, sailor, and free thinker, he engages his overactive mind in the world of stories and loves creating tales of adventure with sub-plots, intrigue and love, whether psychological thrillers, science fiction, or general fiction.**

**When not writing, working at his day job, or in his preferred state of sailing in the Scottish Hebrides, he can be found walking hills and glens, pondering the meaning of life and the universe. He also exists at <https://robertjepson.com>**

Read more at [Robert Jepson's site](#).