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My Last Continent

Written by Midge Raymond

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My Last Continent

A Novel

Midge Raymond



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For John

My Last Continent

AFTERWARDS

As I lead tourists from the Zodiacs up rocky trails to the penguin colonies, I notice how these visitors—stuffed into oversize, puffy red parkas—walk like the penguins themselves: eyes to the snowy ground, arms out for balance. They're as determined as the penguins to get where they're going—but they're not here to ask about the birds, about these islands. They don't seem interested in the Adélies' declining populations or the gentoos' breeding habits or the chinstraps' dwindling food sources in the Antarctic.

Instead they ask about the *Australis*.

How many people drowned? they ask. *How many are still missing? How many bodies now belong eternally to the sea?*

None are questions I want to answer.

Back in 1979, a sightseeing tour, Air New Zealand Flight 901 out of Christchurch, crashed into the side of Mt. Erebus in southwestern Antarctica. More than two hundred and fifty people died that day. It was the worst disaster in the history of this continent—until five years ago. Until the *Australis*.

According to records, we know that both crafts—the plane and the ship—went down due to navigational error. Each was

felled by what its crew knew existed but was unable to see, or chose not to see.

Sometimes I wonder whether some other force is at hand—something equally obscured, warning us that none of us should be in Antarctica at all.

We cross sharp-edged hills near penguin nests, the rocks covered with pinkish red guano that seeps into the snow like blood. At this time of year—late January, the middle of the austral summer—the birds are fat, their chicks tucked under their chests; they lean over to warm and protect the downy gray-and-white bodies as they watch us pass. The Adélies stare at us with their white-rimmed eyes; the chinstraps look serious in their painted helmets; the gentoos twist their heads, raising orange beaks into the air to keep us in their sights.

More than anything, the birds remind me of everything I've lost. And somehow, this only makes me more determined to save them. And so I return.

I'd prefer not to answer the tourists' questions about the *Australis*, but I do. This is my job, after all—I work not only for the penguins but for the boat that brings me here every season.

So I tell them.

I tell them I was here when the massive cruise ship found herself trapped and sinking in a windswept cove of pack ice. I tell them that the ship was too big and too fragile to be so far south, and that my ship, the *Cormorant*, was the closest one and still a full day's travel away. I tell them that, below the Antarctic Circle, the phrase *search and rescue* has little practical meaning. There is simply no one around to rescue you.

I tell them that 715 passengers and crew died that day. I don't tell them that 2 of those who died were rescuers, whose fates tragically intertwined. Most want to hear about the victims, not the rescuers. They don't yet know that we are one and the same.

ONE WEEK BEFORE SHIPWRECK

The Drake Passage
(59°39'S, 61°56'W)

From the motion of the M/S *Cormorant*, it feels as though we've hit fifteen-foot swells. This is nothing for our captain, who chugged through thirty-foot waves a little more than two weeks ago on a previous trip through the Drake Passage, where the Southern Ocean, the Pacific Ocean, and the Atlantic meet and toss boats around like toys. Though the *Cormorant* will make the voyage six times this season, it will never become routine. The Drake never gives the same experience twice.

I'm not nearly as seasick as I pretend to be, but the downtime helps me ease into my role as tour guide. Because 90 percent of the passengers are sick in their cabins and will remain sequestered for the next two days, our expedition leader, Glenn, doesn't mind if I hide out in the crew's quarters until we reach the South Shetlands.

The company's flagship vessel, the *Cormorant*, was built the same year I was born, nearly forty years ago. While I'm

five foot nine and single, she is just shy of three hundred feet long and carries one hundred passengers and fifty crew members. We are both built for the ice—I've got a thick skin and a penchant for solitude; she's got stabilizers and a reinforced hull, allowing us to slip into the tiny inlets of the Antarctic peninsula and, weather permitting, to go south of the Antarctic Circle—something all visitors want to check off their lists of things to do before they die.

The promotional brochures for this cruise highlight not only the wildlife but the onboard experts like me. I'm one of six naturalists on this voyage—a group of wildlife experts and historians hired by Glenn to educate the passengers on penguins, whales, seabirds, ice, and the stories of the continent itself. While most naturalists will remain on board for the full two-week journey, several times each season two of us will disembark at one of the peninsula's uninhabited islands, make camp, and gather data for the Antarctic Penguins Project. After another two weeks, when the ship returns with a new load of passengers, we'll join them for the journey back to civilization. While I'm on the ship, I'm on call, available to answer questions, pilot Zodiacs (the small but sturdy inflatable boats that take us from ship to shore), herd tourists, spot whales, and give presentations in the lounge after dinner. This part I love—introducing the continent as it was once introduced to me. The part I dread involves the questions that venture far beyond the realms of flora and fauna.

At least once on every voyage, someone will ask me how I do it—how I can live for weeks or months at a time down here, going from ship to tent, dealing with the harsh conditions, spending so much time alone. They will ask whether

I'm married, whether I have kids—questions I rarely hear asked of a male naturalist. But because I want to keep this gig, I will bite my tongue and smile. I'll tell them I know penguin breeding habits well, but human connections are another thing entirely and are especially complicated when it comes to the Antarctic. I'll offer up a bit of the continent's history, overflowing with stories of love gone wrong: The polar scientist Jean-Baptiste Charcot returned home after wintering on the ice to find that his wife had left him. Robert Falcon Scott, who died on the continent, never even knew about the rumors that his wife had strayed while he was away. And of course I have stories of my own, from my complicated and still-evolving history of love on the ice, but these I'll never share.

The brochures also highlight the fine dining, the fitness center and sauna, the library, the business alcove with its computer terminals and satellite phone—all the things that remind our passengers that they're never far from the comforts of home. These passengers can't understand that I prefer a sleeping bag on hard icy ground to soft sheets in a heated cabin. That I'd rather eat half-frozen food than a five-course meal. That I look forward to every moment away from the ship, when I hear the voices of penguins and petrels and feel farther than ever from the world above the sixtieth parallel.

WHEN I WAKE early the next morning, the other bunk in my cabin is empty. My roommate, Amy, must be up on deck, looking for albatross and petrels. Amy Lindstrom is the

ship's undersea specialist, but she's just as fascinated with the creatures hovering above the water—and the Drake offers glimpses of birds we won't see farther south.

I should drag myself out of bed, too, but instead I prop myself up on one elbow and watch a wandering albatross just outside the porthole above my bunk. I'm always mesmerized by these birds who dominate the skies over the Southern Ocean; they spend months, sometimes years, at sea, circumnavigating this part of the planet without ever touching down on land. I observe the albatross for ten minutes, and he doesn't once flap his wings. He occasionally lets the wind lift him above the ship, out of my line of vision, but most of the time he glides a few inches over the waves, just out of reach of the roiling whitecaps.

I turn my head when I hear the door creak open, but I know it won't be the person I'd expected to see by now, the one I most want to see.

"Rise and shine," Thom says.

His tousled hair is spiked with more gray than I remember. I haven't seen Thom since we last camped out amid the penguins on Petermann Island five years ago, doing APP research, and yesterday, during the madness of getting passengers boarded and settled, we'd hardly had time to exchange more than a few words. Like most of the islands we'll visit with passengers over the next week, Petermann is inhabited only by Antarctic natives—birds and seals, lichens and mosses and algae, various invertebrates. Despite the long hours we put in there, counting penguins and crunching data, it's a quiet, peaceful existence. And now I know Thom and I will fall into the same rhythms, on land and on sea, alone or surrounded

by tourists. We usually work in a companionable near silence, having learned each other's moods through weeks together at the bottom of the earth.

"Let me guess," I say. "Glenn sent you."

He nods. "It's showtime."

"What's next, costumes? Batons?"

"It's as good a time as any to make an appearance," Thom says. "It's a ghost ship right now. Last chance to eat a meal in relative quiet."

I sit up slowly, realizing by the steadiness of my stomach how much the waves have lessened, and while it's not exactly Drake Lake out there, I have no excuse to keep hiding down here.

I swing my legs over the side of the bunk. Because I shower at night and sleep in my clothes, I only have to pull back my hair before I'm ready to go.

I let Thom lead the way to the dining room and observe the slight limp with which he walks, the result of a fall into a crevasse on his first trip to Antarctica, more than a decade ago. Despite the swaying of the ship, despite my own need to let my hands trace the bulkhead for balance, he does not need to hold on to anything.

We sit down at an empty table with plates of toast and fruit, our full coffee mugs sloshing. The dining room is vacant except for a steward walking through with a tray, on his way to deliver nausea-calming ginger soup to one of the bedridden passengers.

"You're right," I say to Thom. "Gotta love a ghost ship."

He nods. I look at him for a moment, then ask about his kids, his wife, how it feels to be back. We usually don't spend

a lot of time talking about our personal lives. But I have a question I need to ask him, and I want to ease into it.

After Thom fills me in on his wife's new job, his kids' transitions into the first and third grades, I bring it up. "So you were called in sort of last minute?"

He nods. "I contacted Glenn last year, thinking I'd be ready to come down again now that the kids are older. He said he didn't have any openings, but then he called a couple of months ago, asked me to fill in."

"For Keller?" I ask.

"Yeah."

"Did he tell you why?"

"I didn't ask." He looks at me. "You don't know?"

I shake my head. Out of the corner of my eye I glimpse a passenger entering the room, and I feel my shoulders shrink down, an automatic reflex, the instinct to hide. But the guy sees us and comes over, his plate piled high with eggs and sausage, which would turn my stomach even if we weren't rolling through the Drake. I know from the ship's doctor that about 60 percent of the men on board take heart medication. I also know that the second most requested pill on this ship, after meclizine for seasickness, is Viagra—and that the loss of blood flow to the right places is due more to artery-clogging food than to age.

And now this middle-aged guy, who actually looks trim and healthier than most, takes a seat across from Thom and me.

"Nice binocs," Thom comments, indicating the binoculars the man has placed on the table.

"Thanks," the man says, clearly pleased that Thom noticed. "Waterproof, shock resistant, image stabilizing. They've even got night vision."

"Not that you'll need it here," Thom says.

"What do you mean?"

"It doesn't get dark," Thom says. "Just a couple hours of dusk between sunset and sunrise."

The man looks out the nearest porthole, as if he's not sure whether to believe what he's heard. "Well, for what they cost me, I'll certainly use them for other trips after this," he says at last. "I'm Richard, by the way. Richard Archer."

"Thom Carson. And this is Deb Gardner. Welcome aboard." Thom rises to get more coffee, taking my mug with him.

I nod toward the binoculars. "May I?" I ask, reaching for them.

Richard pushes them across the spotless white tablecloth. "Be my guest."

I take the binoculars over to a porthole and raise them to my face. It takes me a moment to realize they're digital, that I have to press a button before my field of vision comes into sudden, sharp focus. Their power is incredible. After a few moments, I see the barnacle-encrusted gray head of a sperm whale, barely breaking the surface of the water as it refuels with air. I should announce this over the PA, but without binoculars like these, no one else is likely to see it.

I lower the binoculars and return to the table, handing them back.

"Maybe I did spend a little too much on them," Richard says, "but this is a once-in-a-lifetime trip, right? I don't want to miss anything."

"There's a sperm whale at eleven o'clock." I point toward the horizon and watch him scan for the whale. I imagine the

tiny electronic pulses that are disassembling and reassembling reality at mind-boggling speed.

Thom returns, placing fresh coffee in front of me. "What do you see?" he asks Richard.

"I'm trying to find a sperm whale."

"It probably took a deep dive," I say. "Don't worry. You'll see others."

I'm not sure he will—typically only the males feed in this region, and they prefer the deepest of waters—but I try to be encouraging, to let people believe they're going to see everything possible, that they'll get their money's worth. They don't need to know that they could visit Antarctica every year for the rest of their lives and still not see all there is.

"So," Richard says, putting the binoculars back on the table, "how long have you worked on the *Cormorant*?"

"We're actually with the APP," Thom tells him.

"Oh?"

Thom's mouth is now full of toast, so I continue. "The Antarctic Penguins Project is a nonprofit organization," I explain. "We study the three species of penguins here, tracking their progress, numbers, feeding and breeding habits. The boat transports us down here as part of the project's mission to educate people about the region."

"Nice," Richard says. "If you have to be down here, this is the way to travel, that's for sure. What's our first stop?"

Thom explains that we won't know until just before we get there—that each excursion to these tiny, remote islands depends upon ice, weather, and access, all of which change day to day, sometimes hour to hour.

My mind wanders back a few days to when I arrived in

Ushuaia, at the guesthouse where Keller and I had planned to meet. He wasn't there, and I took the opportunity to shower off the long flight and to close my eyes for a little while. When I woke up, it was morning, and I was due at the dock where the *Cormorant* was moored—with still no sign of Keller.

I sent a quick e-mail from the computer in the hotel lobby, thinking his flight had been delayed and that he'd show up that evening, just before we cast off. But when the *Cormorant*'s long blast sounded and the ship drifted into the Beagle Channel, I looked past the passengers' faces, past their champagne glasses at the waters ahead, and I wanted, irrationally, to run up to the bridge, tell the captain we had to wait.

I stare out the view windows of the dining room and try to think optimistically: Keller must've missed his flight, shifted his schedule at the last minute, made a plan to join the *Cormorant* in Ushuaia on its next voyage south, two weeks from now. I tell myself this even as I doubt all of it. I sneak a glance at Richard, who is adjusting the settings on his binoculars, and in that moment we're not so different—both of us searching for something we aren't going to find.

The last time I said good-bye to Keller Sullivan was only three months earlier, during an unexpected Stateside visit. We still live on opposite coasts, and during the eight or more months we spend away from the continent, we keep in touch via e-mail, phone, and Skype. We're like penguins that way—each of us off on our own separate journeys until we meet again, our shared nests reserved for these expeditions, for the peninsula, for the camps we build together.

It's complicated, what we share—a relationship born among the penguins, among creatures whose own breeding habits are

as ever-evolving as the oceans to which they're constantly struggling to adapt. While many species mate for life, others are monogamous for only one season; still others have surprisingly high divorce rates—for all of them, survival comes first. Sometimes I think this sums up Keller and me pretty well. We have fallen in love with each other as much as with Antarctica, and we have yet to separate ourselves, and what we are, from this place. Each time I arrive at the bottom of the world, I never quite know what our nest will look like, or if it'll exist at all.

Last season, when I arrived in Ushuaia, bleary-eyed and dreading our first week on the *Cormorant* before Keller and I would be dropped off at Petermann, I didn't see him until I was on board. Until I felt my duffel being lifted out of my hand, an arm around my waist. He spun me into a bear hug before I got a chance to look at him, then set me down so we could see each other.

"Here we are," he said. "*Fin del mundo—*"

"*—principio de todo*," I said, finishing the sentence for him as I usually did, repeating the town's motto, lettered in blue on the white wall that borders the colorful buildings of the town and the sharp, snowcapped mountains beyond them.

The end of the world, the beginning of everything.

Starting a journey to Antarctica doesn't feel right anymore without Keller. In a sudden flurry of emotions, I don't know which to give in to: worry, anger, or simply disappointment.