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Under a Pole Star

Written by Stef Penney

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UNDER A POLE STAR

Stef Penney

Quercus

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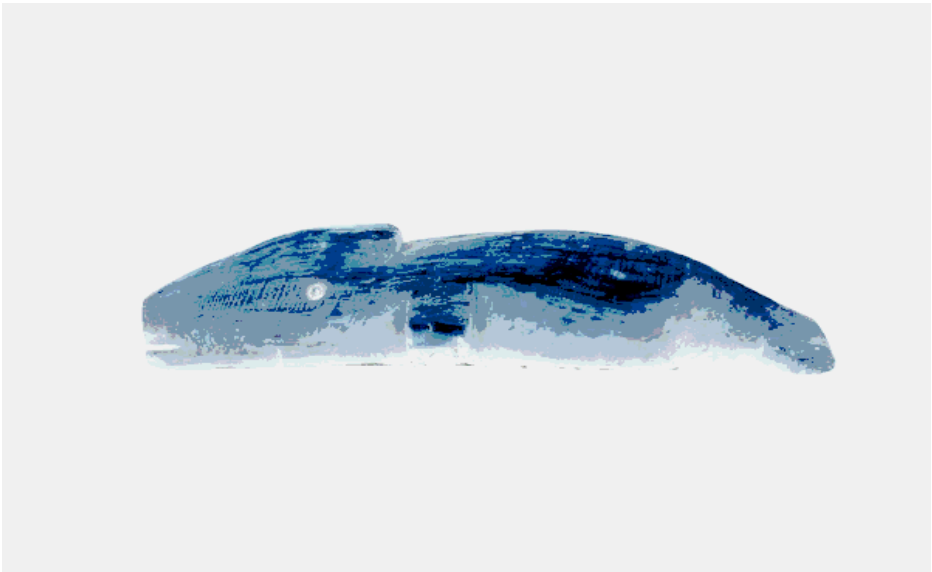
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PART ONE

A PEG, SHAPED LIKE A WHALE

'A glass vile vial of POISON. An iron hook. A copper penny. A length of red ribbon. A bronze pin (bent). A handkerchief with embroidry. A peg, shaped like a whale.'



UNDER A POLE STAR

A Glossary of Inuit words

Aja! – an exclamation, often of pleasure
Angekok – shaman/person with healing powers
Angut – woman
Ayornamut – a pity, but it cannot be otherwise/it is fated/bad luck
Erneq – son
Ieh – yes
Illu – house of stone (permanent) or snow (temporary)
Imaqa – maybe
Inuk – Eskimo/Inuit man (singular)
Inuit – Eskimo/Inuit people (plural)
Kallunat – Westerners (plural)
Kamik – bearskin boot
Kiffak – menial servant
Kiviak – rotten auk meat, a delicacy
Kooyounah – thank you
Kujappok – sex
Marmarai – Mm, it's good
Naamik – no
Naasut – flowers
Neqi – meat, food; a place name
Nilaktaqtuq – the ice that forms on the inside of a tent
Ooangniktuq – north wind
Panik – daughter

Perlerorneq – winter madness
Qamiut – sleds
Qaniit – snowflakes
Qaqulluk – Arctic fulmar (bird)
Qatannguh – sibling
Qooviannikumut – deep happiness
Siorapaluk – pretty little sandy beach; a place name
Tupik – sealskin tent used in summer
Tutsarfik – roughly, the month of November. Lit. 'it is listening'
Ulu – crescent-shaped knife used by women
Umingmak Nuna – Land of musk ox/Ellesmere Land
Upernallit – whalers, usually Scottish. Lit. 'those who arrive in Spring'
Usuk – penis
Uttuqalualuk – old man; Inuit name for the star Arcturus

UNDER A POLE STAR

A Novel

By Stef Penney

Chapter 1

McGuire Air-Force Base, New Jersey, 40˚2'N, 74˚35'W

April 1948

The aeroplane, a modified Douglas C-47 Skytrain, is a fat, shining cigar of aluminium, brilliant in the sun. The word *Arcturus* has been stencilled on to the fuselage in a confident upward sweep. The journalist has done his homework, but there are things he does not know: for example, that four grease monkeys spent days polishing the skin, and that the name has been added especially for this trip – a celestial name, deemed more heroic and appropriate than the boring clutch of numbers on its tail. The Skytrain was a bomber throughout the war, but now it is carrying an overtly peaceable cargo; there are air-force men, it is true – weary-eyed, beribboned and grizzled – but there are also scientists from several universities, a camera crew from ABC, the journalist.

The film crew takes some footage of the scientists standing by the plane. When ordered, they wave and smile, raggedly, never all at the same time. The air-force men stand to attention until their commander smiles – then the rest of them relax a little, but not as much as the civilians. There is one last arrival – a special guest. The film crew from ABC explains that the guest is a British woman of advanced years, who was known, for a time, fifty years before, as the Snow Queen.

When the old lady – white haired, tall, erect and rather forbidding – is introduced to the scientists, the Harvard physicist feels able to claim that his father (in his day also a physicist, or something) had met her many years ago and had spoken of her to his family. The Snow Queen nods, murmurs and moves on, giving no indication whether she remembers the father, believes the story or was even listening to what he said. The film camera whirs, recording the handshakes. The journalist thinks that, in the resulting film, at some point, there will be a graphic of a globe, a tiny plane crawling over it, dragging a dotted line across the

world. The thought thrills him.

At last they are ready to embark. Randall is nervous – not of the flight, not really, although it is his first – but because, for his own reasons, he hopes to bag a seat next to the old woman. She doesn't look at him as he sits down, but stares fixedly out of the window. He buckles himself in, opposite the oceanographer from Harvard, behind the civilian whose field of expertise no one seems quite sure of, who is engrossed in an automobile magazine. They take off with a tremendous roaring, in a steep upward trajectory that drags him back in his seat. His scalp prickles under his hair. Then, quite quickly, the nose of *Arcturus* levels off, the plane swings round, and fierce sun stripes the cabin, blazing on one face after another.

Randall turns to his neighbour and attempts to start a conversation, rather hampered by the incredible din of the engines.

'I have some of your old press cuttings,' he says, or rather, shouts, to the white-haired woman. She frowns, probably because she can't hear a thing.

'Your press cuttings!' he yells. She frowns some more.

'It must have been such an exciting time. You knew everybody . . .'

'Who are you?' she asks, although they were introduced on the ground.

'Randall Crane . . . Crane! Hi! I've been commissioned to write up the trip for *World* magazine.'

'Oh. The journalist.'

She might as well have said, 'A cockroach,' or, 'A hernia.' Something decidedly unwelcome. She looks away, through the window next to her, to where the sunlight burns on a smooth snowfield of white cloud.

'It's beautiful! Is this what the Arctic looks like?' He leans towards her, eager, and also moved, made almost breathless by the strength of the light, the hot blue of the sky. After the visceral experience of take-off, it feels as though they are not moving at all.

'You've never been there.'

'No,' he admits, cheerfully. He can't help grinning. He has been told he has a winning smile; it almost always gets him out of trouble. 'I can't wait till we see it.'

'It doesn't look like this at all.'

'I hope you don't mind me saying . . . I have been reading about you . . .' Does she cock her ear towards him, slightly? Flattery never fails with these old birds. 'Your career. You were a superstar. And you knew all those explorers, didn't you? Armitage, Welbourne, de Beyn and the rest? It was an amazing time. All those discoveries. You were a real pioneer.'

'Yes.'

'And the . . . the controversy . . . I've always been fascinated by what happened. What was your take on it?'

He could slow down – should, probably – but he's so full of energy; it bubbles up through him like an unstoppable spring, pouring into her old veins, he hopes.

'Controversy?'

'The Armitage–de Beyn controversy . . . The mystery over what happened to them. You knew them, didn't you?'

‘Oh, goodness. It’s such a long time ago. Now they’re all dead. Except me.’ The way she says this – it is impossible to tell whether she feels satisfaction or regret. ‘What does it matter now?’

‘Doesn’t the truth matter?’

He gazes hopefully into her grey eyes, which give nothing away.

‘No one seems to know what really happened. I would love to know what you think, as someone who was there. Put the record straight, you know? Or straighter, at least!’

‘What really happened?’ She smiles, not at him, but for herself. ‘You flatter me if you think *I* know the truth.’

‘I would very much like to know your opinion. Could I talk to you about it?’

‘Oh, well . . . It’s so noisy here. I think I might have a nap.’

‘Oh, yes, not here, of course. It is noisy, isn’t it?’

The Snow Queen leans her head back against the seat, her eyes angled out of the window. She looks tired – but then, to Randall, from his unassailable vantage point of twenty-seven years, old people always look tired. She must be – what? – seventy-seven. Older than Randall’s grandmother, Lottie. Her hair, drawn back under a scarf, is as white as the clouds outside; her eyes a nondescript dark grey, unreadable, like boring pebbles. Her skin is very clear but mazed with tiny wrinkles. She is wearing some discreet make-up, so she cares what people think. That gives him hope. He has done his homework on her, as well: read her books on the north, and trawled through the magazine’s archives for contemporary newspaper articles. Press reports from the 1890s (impossible length of time ago!) described her rather breathlessly as beautiful, although

he finds this hard to verify from the photographs – usually blurred, and all tiny – that accompany the articles: she tends to be one of a group of white-faced people staring at the camera, wearing hats. Lined up at the gunwale of a ship. Standing on a quay. At the front of a lecture theatre. But there was one portrait he found, probably taken when she was in her early twenties: it is a studio-based fantasy, wherein the girl known as the Snow Queen poses stiffly in front of a painted icy landscape, her face emerging from a halo of pale furs, her eyes fixed on an imaginary horizon. Her face is round and smooth, lips closed, well shaped but firm, the eyes staring beyond the camera. A thick snake of hair winds over her shoulder. Handsome, rather than beautiful, in his opinion. If Randall stared at it for long enough, he felt he could discern something in the wide-open eyes, but what was it? Arrogance? Ambition? Alarm? Almost any emotion, once he thought of it, could be imputed to those still features. Like most of those old portraits, it tantalized, but ultimately revealed nothing.

In the seat next to him, the Snow Queen's eyes are closed, although he suspects she is not asleep. He could not recognize her from that portrait. His grandma, Lottie, claims never to sleep – she says you dispense with the need for sleep when you get old. Randall looks around him. Some of the scientists are dozing; some are reading magazines (not *World* magazine, he notes). He is not in the least discouraged. They have hours to go before they reach their destination.

*

Flora Cochrane (her name has been many things, but this is the one she will have when she dies) awakens with a jolt. She was dreaming about things and places and people she has not dreamt about for decades. Her mouth tingles with the remembered pressure of warm flesh. A surge of erstwhile feeling has washed through her. Years since she had such a dream – how long is it? For a moment she cannot think where she is. She thinks she is young, and . . . An infernal noise hammers her brain.

The surroundings are distressingly bright. Then the lissom feeling in her body evaporates, and she remembers that she is old. A juddering – ah, yes, she is on the plane. *Arcturus*. She looks round to see the absurdly young man next to her; he turns towards her, too quickly. She keeps her eyes unfocused as she scans the cabin, wondering if she moaned in her sleep. How embarrassing. But no one is looking at her, or talking; the engine noise makes it too wearing. They couldn't have heard her anyway.

'We're just coming down to Gander, now.'

He leans towards her and shouts in her ear. Flora nods minutely without meeting his eye, hoping he won't start another conversation. She would like to go to the bathroom, but she doesn't remember anyone mentioning whether there was one on board. Although she was once so used to it, it is still tedious to travel in all-male company. But they are dropping, losing height. As they descend through a layer of clouds, the plane performs a series of bumps and bounds, like a small ship in a crossing sea. All very interesting, this mode of travel; the first time she has done it. Crossing to America, she came on the boat. They have come over a thousand miles in just a few hours. Think of all the walking that would have entailed. Even sailing, travelling at the speed of the wind, it was a distance that would have taken days. Now she leaves the wind far behind. It is as well she is speeding up, she thinks. At her age. The thought slots into her head: how he would have loved this. He would have laughed with delight . . .

'What's funny?'

The young man is smiling, tenacious. But his familiarity is less irritating than she would have thought. There is something charming and puppyish about him; perhaps it is his hair, which flops across his forehead, untamed by the pomade he uses; or his slightly buck teeth, eager to show themselves.

She shakes her head and points to her ear – the engines are roaring

harder. He nods and gives her his pretty smile, biding his time.

*

RCAF Station Gander, Newfoundland, 48˚57'N, 54˚36'W

They have landed at an airbase by a crooked-finger lake in Newfoundland, which, though far from luxurious, is designed to cater for women as well as men. They even rustle up a woman for her – Flora thinks she is a secretary, or an administrator – to show her to her quarters and explain how to put on the extraordinary padded garment they expect her to wear tomorrow; it looks as though it was designed for giant babies, or lunatics. Flora sighs. There is a certain lack of elegance. Once, she stood on the ice in long skirts, or in native furs, and was none the worse for it. The woman, who has unlikely, solid-looking hair and a smear of lipstick on her teeth, shows her the flap that zippers open and shut around the bottom, 'For, y'know, emergencies? We recommend you practise while you're here, to get the hang of it.' She is tactful enough about it, but still.

'How long is it since you were up there?' the woman asks – someone did introduce them, but Flora has forgotten her name and isn't going to ask.

'Oh, hundreds of years. During the last ice age.' She smiles to show it is a joke rather than a put down. The woman laughs, mechanically, without humour. Flora has never been good at humour. She tried it for a while in her twenties, then gave it up. She decides to make amends. 'I'm surprised they asked me, that there wasn't anyone more . . . important.'

'Not from that time. You've outlived them all,' says the woman, smiling. 'Good for you.'

Flora is annoyed.

'You know,' the woman goes on, and thankfully the lipstick smear has

disappeared now, 'when I was young, I used to read about you and your expeditions. It was so inspiring to think that a woman could do that, even then.'

'Well . . .' Perhaps she has misjudged her. 'It wasn't easy. I'm sure it's not easy now.'

'No. Things changed a bit during the war, but since then, when all the men came back, we've kinda had to get out of the way, if you know what I mean?'

She does up the zipper with a noisy flourish. Flora isn't sure she does know what she means, but nods.

'Thank you so much. I think I can manage now.'

'We're having dinner in an hour. I expect you'd like to get some rest before then. If you need anything, just holler.'

Flora would like to disagree, but nods, grateful. As she closes the door, she finally remembers the woman's name – Millie . . . or Mindy; something childish like that. She is aching to lie down. Sleep. Perhaps recapture that feeling from the plane . . . Then, afterwards, maybe she will allow herself to have a cocktail. One of those sweet things she had in New York. She stretches out on the bed with a sigh of relief.

Outside it is twilight – it will be twilight for hours. The clouds have gone. The air is very clear and still. Clean. She hasn't seen air this clean for years, but then it is years since she has been this far north. Through the large window, she acknowledges the faint, familiar stars as they rise. There is bright Arcturus, which the Eskimos call the Old Man, *Uttuqaluaaluk*. She cannot remember the names of the people she met earlier today, but those names learnt so long ago, she has never forgotten. There, just above the horizon, is the Old Woman – her favourite star from childhood – Vega. The Caribou, known to others as the Great Bear. Cassiopeia: the

Lamp Stand. And just rising now, with its faint hint of red, the ghoulishly named *Sikuliaqsuijuittuq*, the Murdered Man.

She opens the window of her room and leans out, inhaling the chill, blue air. She cranes her neck to look for Draco, coiling around Polaris, and searches for Thuban, its once and future pole star. She stares until her eyes are watering, but it must be too early, too light, or perhaps her eyes are too tired, and she cannot find it.

Since she knew she was coming on the flight, she has been thinking again of that time. She closes her eyes and can see the valley spread out in front of her: duns and greens and greys; minute jewels of colour; lake of breathtaking blue. Impossible Valley, they called it. But it *was* possible, if only briefly.

Recently, her old friend Poppy became ill and Flora had managed to see her, before it was too late. Lying in bed, looking tiny and somehow both sexless and ageless, she had talked, quite calmly, about her approaching death. She believed in heaven. She knew, she said, that she would meet her sons there: reluctant soldiers, unwitting martyrs. Flora nodded but could not in her heart agree (though who was she to say what Poppy did or did not know, or which of their beliefs was true?). She would *like* to believe in heaven, of course, but that has always seemed too easy, too trite, almost; if it were true, why would one go to all this bother down here? Besides (she thought, but did not say), heaven is here on earth. She knew; she had been there.

Chapter 2

Melville Bay, 76˚21'N, 71˚04'W

1882–3

This was a list of the things that Flora stole on her first voyage. There were other items, but she did not write them all down, just her favourites. Many years after, when Flora found the notebook again and tried to read it, she could not decipher her code writing. Later still, she picked it up again, by which time she had mislaid large parts of her life, but the glyphs she created at the age of twelve sprang off the page, alive with meaning. And for years, until it disappeared, she kept the fid whale near her as a talisman. It was carved of a pale, close-grained wood, very smooth, with the merest blunt suggestions of head, fins and tail. The eyes and blowhole were burnt in with a hot awl. It fitted beautifully in her palm. She had coveted it when she first saw it in a boat steerer's hand, and when she found it lying in the scuppers, she pocketed it without scruple. It was forfeit, on its way back to the sea; she felt she had the right.

Flora Mackie was twelve when she first crossed the Arctic Circle. The previous November, her mother had died, leaving the girl without a mother and her father without a wife. He was the Dundee whaling captain, William Mackie. Though he had spent much of his daughter's life at sea, he doted on Flora, who, he felt, was like him in many ways. She took after him in her sturdy looks, and in her brusqueness of manner, and showed no sign of her mother's willowy grace. Elsa Caird Mackie had been a cat-like, pretty woman who delighted in her decorative capacity. Her husband was enormously proud of her, but a whaling captain's wife in Dundee – no, anywhere – has limited opportunities for displaying her charms. She had been horrified by the process of producing Flora, and was openly critical of the results, having a tendency to bemoan her

daughter's shortcomings: chiefly, hoydenishness, and a thick waist. When Flora was still a baby, Mrs Mackie had developed mysterious, lingering ailments, and left Flora's upbringing largely to a nursemaid, Moira Adam, who was efficient and sensible, but had a heart of Doric granite. In the last few weeks of Mrs Mackie's life, after the captain had come home from a successful season in the north, he and his daughter would sit together in the front room while, in her bedroom, Elsa Mackie consulted with a succession of doctors – to no avail. When she died, practically with the words 'I told you so' on her lips, he was not so much grief-stricken as bothered by guilt – if he had stayed at home, instead of leaving her for up to two years at a time, he thought she might not have died. He was determined the same would not happen to Flora. Rather than assuming he would thereafter have to stay on dry land, he decided to take her to sea.

Other captains took their wives north – this was his reasoning (to himself, since he was not a man people argued with openly) – why should he not take his daughter? He had been in the Davis Strait so many times it no longer seemed to him a particularly hazardous place. People talked, although, having few friends in the town, he did not know this. He should have farmed her out to a relative, they said, even though he had none. He should have sent her to a boarding school, a foster home, a convent . . . but Captain Mackie did not know what people said, and would not have cared had he known. He had spent most of his life on board ship, where, for the last fifteen years, he had been a captain and absolute ruler under God; he was accustomed to getting his own way.

So, in April of 1883, Flora and her father set sail from Dundee in the whale ship *Vega*. No good would come of it, people muttered. What they meant by this, no one was quite sure, but she was a young girl on a ship full of men, going to a land of ice, a sea of blood. It was unprecedented; it was immoral, in some way. It was definitely wrong.

Much of Captain Mackie's confidence in his daughter's safety lay in his ship. *Vega* was a Dundee-built steam barque of 320 tons from Gourlay's shipyard, her hull reinforced with six-inch-thick oak planks. Her bows and stern were doubly reinforced – her bows were three feet thick – and twenty-four-inch-square oak beams, each cut from a single trunk, were placed athwart-ships to brace her sides against the pressure of converging ice floes. Captain Mackie, who had sailed in numerous ships in the seas around Greenland for the best part of thirty years, thought her the finest ship Dundee had ever produced. He was an owner-captain; that is to say, he owned ten sixty-fourths of the *Vega*, but he loved all of her, with a proprietor's love, as well as the love a captain feels for a brave, willing boat. He had captained her for nine years, and was convinced that, in her, Flora could come to no harm. He couldn't have placed the same confidence in some of Dundee's other ships, now – naming no names, but glancing perhaps at the aged *Symmetry*, not to mention Peterhead's wicked old *Fame* . . .

Vega was neither large nor beautiful – Davis Strait whalers were, on the whole, small, stout and slow – but to Flora she seemed marvellous: massive, dense; the weight and heft of her oak, awe inspiring. She loved the thickly varnished gunwales that she could barely see over, smooth and slightly sticky to the touch; she loved stroking the silky brass-work, rubbed to a soft, liquid gloss. When no one was looking, she straddled the enormous ice beams, unable to imagine anything that could vanquish them. And she loved her name. The rest of the fleet had names like *Dee*, *Ravenscraig* and *John Hammond*, so the *Vega* felt to Flora like a doughty wood-and-pitch ally: the sister she had never had, the mother she had lost and, in the relentlessly masculine world of the north, a female confederate she would appreciate. And from the first time she walked up the gangway, she even liked her smell: dark and bitter, of tar, salt, coal and – faint after a winter in dock – a sweetish hint of her summertime carnage: the smell of fat, blood and death.

With fifty men and a girl on board, it was a crowded ship. Flora worked out that she was never more than five feet away from a seaman. Often she was, nominally, alone – in the cabin, when she was working on her books – but wherever she was, she could hear the full symphony of human noises. Apart from talking, shouting and occasional, quickly hushed, swearing, all day and all night there were grunts, groans, farts, laughter, cries, snores and sounds less identifiable. There was a man who regularly cried out in his sleep in an anguished voice, 'No, no, Mary, in the name of God!' At first this was followed by laughter and swearing; after a week, he rarely got further than 'No, no . . .' before someone dealt him a swift blow. Flora heard much cursing through the wooden walls. She pretended, if her father was around, that she couldn't hear it – and if it was unmistakable, that she did not understand it. In that way, although in few others, the ship was no different to the streets of Dundee.

Her father did his best in unpromising circumstances. She shared with him the misleadingly named 'great cabin', divided down the middle by a blanket rigged on a rail to slide back and forth like a real curtain. She had her own cot slung from a beam on ropes, so that it stayed more or less level while waves pitched and rolled the ship. It had lipped sides like a tray, and she swung in it, wrapped in blankets, and later on in furs, like a sausage in bacon.

While still in Crichton Street, she had heard – she was a shameless eavesdropper – all sorts of gossip about sailors, which, while she could not reconcile it with the sailors she knew, fuelled her imagination. In gossip, sailors did vague but terrible things to girls, but on the *Vega* they were kind and deferential, passing her from arm to arm as she made her way along the decks to the bow. Just in case, Flora had prepared herself with a secret weapon: a little penknife that lived on a thong around her neck, under her chemise. She sharpened it once a week, having learnt how to do so from the ship's blacksmith. She never used it, so it never

lost its edge, and was, in fact, lethal.

In her heart of hearts she did not believe that any harm would come to her from the sailors; apart from their kindness, she knew she was not in the least alluring, but plain and thickset, with a round, whey-coloured face and stone grey eyes. She had learnt early in life that there were those who were caressed for their physical charm (like her mother), and those that were not; those, like Elsa Mackie, who drew glances in the street, smiles from strangers, favours – and those who passed invisibly, like ghosts. She was used to being one of the invisible ones. But it was as well to be prepared and, in her imagination, she could be (why not?) golden haired and fragile, with a heart-shaped face and violet eyes, like 'Poor Miss Caroline', the heroine of her favourite book. Never mind that she had never seen anyone with violet eyes (or a heart-shaped face). There were nights when she swung in her cot, imagining assault from a faceless assailant – imagining, too, her violent, blood-spattered response. She enjoyed these thoughts. Sometimes, rocked in the resounding darkness, she allowed herself to be overpowered. She enjoyed those thoughts also, hazy though they were at her age.

One of the vows that Captain Mackie had made to himself and God was to ensure that Flora maintained an education. By the end of their voyage, he said, she should have read the Bible, preferably learning the Gospels by heart, have studied the glories of God's creation in the form of the natural world, and have an idea of All The Things That Have Occurred Up To This Point. And, not being a fool, he insisted that, after the reading he set for her each morning, she keep a journal describing what she had read, thus proving that she had read it. He bought a number of pasteboard notebooks for the purpose.

Flora was good at appearing to obey. She stared at engravings of plants and birds. *Studied Passiformae*, she wrote in the journal entitled

What I Have Learned, by Flora E. C. Mackie. *They are Perching Birds. There are very many species of them. E.g. Blackbirds.* This seemed to keep her father satisfied. She was interested enough to gallop through *A Child's History of the World*. Thus she knew that history started with the Egyptians, followed by the Greeks, then the Romans. Then there was Jesus, after which, things went downhill. *A Child's History* was vague but tantalizing. She was left with the distinct impression that history got more boring the nearer it came to the present day. By their own century, long gone were gladiators and embalmed cats and cups of hemlock, replaced by monarchs who no longer wanted to murder each other, ever-increasing agricultural yields and the spinning jenny. Flora was disappointed. She longed to know more about the gladiators. How exactly did they kill each other? How could a Roman emperor marry his sister? What did hemlock taste like and how long did it take to die? (And did you vomit, suffocate or bleed to death?) But on these, and much else of real interest, *The Child's History* was mute.

*

On the second day out of Stromness, she took out another of the notebooks, and paused for a time before opening it. She thought about the groaning she had heard on the other side of the bulkhead the previous night. Her father had slept, snoring quietly. She had been obscurely afraid, wondering if the man was ill, but fearing, in a way that she could not quite identify, that he was not. She was disturbed, and did not sleep for the rest of the night.

She did not write anything on the cover of this notebook, but opened it at the back page and started to scribble in tiny, terrible writing. Perhaps she did this because, in a place where privacy and solitude were illusory or impossible, Flora had a need for secrets. So on the day she had breezed through the order of passerines, and read a chapter about the Greeks, and skimmed through part of Matthew's Gospel, she took the secret diary and wrote, *I don't like birds. I don't like the way they look at me.*

The only birds she saw now were the gulls (definitely not passerines) that landed on the ship's rail – you could argue that they perched there, but somehow not in a way that counted – and stared at her out of one glassy, impudent eye.

The real gift the history book gave her was the story of the Rosetta Stone. From that point on, Flora's diary changed, and instead of writing in minute letters, she began to develop her own personal cipher. At first she kept the key on a piece of paper that lived in a secret pocket sewed inside her chemise, but once she had it off by heart, she destroyed the key in a ceremonial burning. Her cipher had some initial similarities with Phoenician, the simplicity of which appealed to her, but she varied it with squiggles and pothooks of her own. After some time, she could write as fluently in her cipher, which she termed 'Florean', as she could in English.

*

The officers of the *Vega* – the harpooners, boatsteerers and line managers, were all from Dundee and the Fife towns – Cellardyke, Pittenweem, St Monance; but the oarsmen were Orkadians. Out of the fifty men on board, thirteen were called John, seven Robert. There were four sets of brothers. Flora made friends with the youngest Robert – a first voyage apprentice from Dundee called Robert Avas. Robert was a year older but some inches shorter than Flora. Also thinner. He had the white, pinch-faced look common to children from the fish market, but an irrepressibly sweet nature and boundless enthusiasm. He had never heard of the Egyptians, and thought that Newcastle was the capital of London. Flora was staggered by his ignorance.

'I could teach you to read,' she said, on their third day out of Stromness.

'Read? For why?' he answered, grinning.

‘So . . .’ Flora was taken aback. ‘So . . . that you could read.’

‘What would I read?’ he asked. He was genuinely curious.

She paused, wondering what would hold the most appeal for Robert. ‘You know . . . newspapers.’

‘Ach, they’re fu’ o’ nonsense.’

She shrugged. ‘And stories. About sailors . . .’

‘I reckon I’ll get to know enough about them as it is.’

Just then a tremendous noise broke over them like a wave: loud, deep cries came from the fore-rigging – the Orkneymen were raising sail, saving the coal, chanting their mysterious incantation that contained no words you could pin a meaning to. Flora stared at them with a kindling of unease; some of the Orkneymen were big – taller and broader than the men she was used to. They had sandy hair and raw, reddened skins, jutting cheeks and brows, big skulls. They spoke a different language. The noise they made was a glamour that stirred something deep and wild inside her – a mixture of fear and . . . not fear.

‘Can you understand them?’ she asked Robert. She had seen them teasing Robert – or had assumed it was teasing.

He turned his candid blue eyes on her. ‘*Vou, vou!*’ he shouted at her, imitating the Orkneymen’s weird cries. Then he laughed and shrugged. For Robert, a lack of understanding was part of life, not something to be afraid of.

Any time Robert and Flora could spend together was irregular and liable to be broken off at any moment by yelled commands. Robert was at work: he would leap to his feet and scramble nimbly up the rigging, or disappear below. Flora experienced frustration at such times. Not envy; it wasn’t that she particularly wanted to climb the rigging, but as soon as

he turned away, he had forgotten her existence entirely, she could tell. He had a place in the running of the ship, which she – a supernumerary, and a girl – did not.

Her only other friend on board was the ship's surgeon, Charles Honey. Like most surgeons on whalers, he was a recent medical graduate without the means to buy a practice. He was twenty-three, but looked younger, with wisps of blond fluff on the sides of his face, a fresh complexion and an air of bewildered innocence. He suffered from appalling seasickness for the first two weeks, and the sounds of his misery could be heard throughout the ship. The sailors were sympathetic at first, but after a few days their attitude turned to scorn and hilarity. Captain Mackie spoke sharply to the men, but was tight-lipped. He hadn't been able to find anyone else. Since Honey was usually meekly on his own in the sick bay, waiting for a seaman to appear with rope burns or crushed fingers, Flora wasn't afraid of seeking him out, and since she was a little girl, and not a pretty one, he wasn't afraid of her being there. He was the least alarming of men; slight, soft, with a gentle, hesitant voice. He blushed easily.

It was in the sick bay that she first became aware of Ian Sellar. They were beating into a north-westerly at the time, the *Vega* straining at her seams. Honey's bottles and jars rattled in their cages; on a sudden lee lurch, a mug of coffee skated down the slope of his desk, slopping its contents but holding its footing.

Flora was perched on the sickbed, her back braced against the cabin wall, pestering Honey with questions about dissecting corpses. She had learned during previous interrogations that medical students did this, but he wasn't telling her the truth. As the captain's daughter, she had a certain borrowed authority and he was unwilling to put her off too firmly, but he was also worried that the captain would find out if he filled his

daughter's head with nightmares. He was braced in front of his desk, the coffee cup now safely in one hand.

'What force of wind is this? Do you know?'

He treated Flora as a conduit for her father's seafaring knowledge, a tendency she did nothing to discourage.

'Oh about –' another lurch as the North Atlantic slapped the ship in the bows – 'a force six . . . or five. Five, I'd say. It could get very much worse.'

'Ah . . . I do hope not, or I fear for my medicines.' He looked up rather wildly. The wind was singing its mournful song in the rigging. Flora was pitiless.

'But have you cut up a woman's corpse?'

'Heavens, Flora, why ever would you want to know a thing like that?'

'You have to learn about their insides, and their insides are different to a man's, aren't they?'

She looked at him, sly. It had, initially, been terribly easy to make Dr Honey blush. But he was getting wise to her.

'Ah, they . . . I am sure you know far more than you let on, Miss, and you are ragging me.'

'I'm not! I might be a doctor one day. I would like to heal people. Knowledge is good. Without knowledge you cannot heal the sick, can you? What do you think? Would I make a good doctor?'

As Honey opened his mouth to respond, there came a thudding outside the door and the ship plunged into a deep trough.

'Ach, fuckin' cunt!'

Flora made her face blank. The door opened. A tall, loose-limbed sailor shuffled in, cradling his right arm, his face twisted with pain.

'Doctor, I . . .' He saw Flora and turned red. Flora recognized him as one of the Orkneymen, Ian Sellar.

'Miss Mackie is just going. Run along now, Flora.'

'Can't I stay and help?'

Ian Sellar released his hand with a groan.

'Ach, Sellar, what happened here?'

'Thole pin. Shoulder.'

He pressed his lips together and closed his eyes. Honey sat him on his chair under the lamp, picked up a scalpel and sliced off his shirt in one movement. When an injury presented itself, his movements, usually tentative, became sure. Flora, who had gaped, shocked when he picked up the scalpel – was he going to *amputate*? – hovered behind them.

Ian Sellar was one of the younger Orkneymen, and the most perfectly made man Flora had ever seen. Where most of the men from the north were craggy and reddened, Ian was lithe and gold, with hazel eyes and strong, graceful features. His skin, uniquely on the pink, Pictish *Vega*, turned to heather honey in the sun and stretched smooth over muscle and bone. He moved with an ease that singled him out. Flora stared at his long, bare back. She failed to understand how she hadn't noticed him before now. Honey tutted as he palpated the shoulder, where blood spread under the skin. Ian groaned.

'It's not dislocated, Sellar. Just badly bruised. You'll have to keep it in a sling for a while. Flora, pass me that roll of bandage, there. No, there . . . If you want to make yourself useful, you can pour some witch hazel into that dish. It's the one in the . . .'

Flora hopped smartly to do as she was told. She was familiar with most of the contents of the sick bay. She passed Honey bandages and pins and compresses and brandy, nimble and steady as a cat as the ship strained and bucked under a mauling from angry waves. Ian's face was sickly under his tan; tiny drops of sweat rolled down his temples. Flora stood behind him and watched, and as the ship gave a mighty bound to starboard, she lurched towards him so that her hand brushed down the glistening, undamaged shoulder. In another moment, she snatched her hand away, stung by his heat. Honey himself had stumbled backwards, with a swallowed oath. Sellar sat with eyes tight shut, his lips moving silently. Neither seemed to notice that she had done it on purpose.

After that, Flora watched for Sellar's figure on deck, tuned her ear to his uncouth accent and became adept at picking out his voice through wooden walls. Men were never alone on board ship, apart from the few minutes they spent at the head, but even had he been alone, she would not have approached him. She could not imagine what she might say.

*

In long twilights, father and daughter searched for Venus and Mars, and Altair, and Arcturus, and the Pole Star. Sometimes they sat up through the whole brief night and followed the stars as they wheeled across the sky. They were circled by constellations – the ones that never set, even when the sun shone all night – the Bears, the Dragon, Cassiopeia, Cepheus – none of them looking anything like what they were supposed to represent, except Draco the dragon.

'Why is the Plough called the Great Bear when it looks like a plough?'

'That is because you are not seeing all of it. The plough is just the bear's back and tail . . .'

‘Bears don’t have tails. Not long ones.’

A sigh from her father. ‘It’s hard to say, Flora. Perhaps old Greek bears had long tails.’

Flora laughed derisively.

‘How do you know that Draco looks like a dragon, in any case? Have you seen one?’

‘Um . . . I’ve seen pictures.’

‘And do you think those pictures were drawn from life?’

‘Of course not! They don’t exist.’

‘So perhaps Draco is no more like a dragon than Ursa Major is like a bear.’

‘Yes, but . . . it can’t be *unlike* something that doesn’t exist because . . .’ She stopped, on uncertain ground. ‘There *are* bears. Why do they have to make something up . . . I mean, they could have called it the Snake . . . Snakes exist.’

‘Are you asking me why people invented monsters?’

‘Yes, I suppose so.’

‘I don’t know. Perhaps because they had never been whaling. Look in Draco’s tail – halfway between the bears. There is one brighter . . . the second-brightest star . . .’

She steadied his telescope on the yardarm. It was completely still, the sea like a pond. An iceberg hung, motionless, two hundred yards away, doubled in the mirror surface. The stars were doubled, multiplied, as though the *Vega* were suspended in space, stars under them, and infinite depth. The water above them. It was one o’clock in the morning. In

less than an hour it would be light.

'Do you see that star? That is Thuban. Once upon a time, he was the Pole Star, when the Egyptians were building their pyramids. You remember the Egyptians?'

'Of course. They had a god with a falcon's head.'

'So they did. Whose name was . . . ?'

A fraction of a pause. 'Horus.'

'Very good, Flora. Well, the ancient Egyptians built their Great Pyramid at Gizeh so that Thuban shone down a shaft into the middle of the pyramid.'

Flora was disturbed.

'How could it be the Pole Star?'

'Five thousand years ago, it was the Pole Star. And one day – very far in the future – it will be the Pole Star again. And it will be more perfectly placed than our Pole Star. Thuban: the once and future king. Why? Because the earth moves on its axis. Like a spinning top when it's going to fall over.'

He demonstrated with his hand, waving it back and forth. 'Very, very slowly. Now, of course, Polaris is the Pole Star, or rather, it is closer to the celestial pole than anything else, but one day . . . Everything changes, Flora. No matter how good, or how bad, it doesn't last forever.'

He moved the telescope up and fractionally to the left. 'Now, look there . . .'

'I see Vega,' said Flora firmly, alarmed by the conversation's metaphysical turn.

‘Yes. One day, very many thousands of years in the future, she too will be the Pole Star. And a very bright and good Pole Star she will be, although not quite as well placed as Thuban. And when she is the Pole Star, summer will be winter, and winter, summer.’

When Flora got over the disturbing news of the earth wobbling like a top, she decided she liked Thuban – once and future lodestar. She liked things to be right, not nearly right, or good enough. But best of all she liked Vega. It belonged to all of them on the ship, but even more, Flora felt, to her. When she found out – as she was shortly to do – that the Eskimos called Vega the Old Woman, she was violently, if secretly, offended.