

From Manchester to the Arctic

Nurse Sanders embarks on an
adventure that will change her life

Sheena Billett

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To my wife, Glen, without whom this book would never have been written. Thank you for all your memories and your unstinting encouragement and patience when the going got tough.

‘Only those who risk going too far can possibly find
out how far they can go.’ T.S Eliot

Foreword

This book is based on the journals and memories of my wife, Glen, who was that impulsive and romantic twenty-one-year-old nurse. During her two years in Arctic Canada, she kept notes and journals which have formed much of the setting for this story. Although Connie, the main character, is loosely based on Glen, she is a fictional creation and her story is just that, a story. All of the other characters are also entirely fictional, as is the setting of Harbour Inlet, so any perceived similarities with people from that time are purely coincidental.

It is important to note here that during the 1970s the Inuit were generally known as 'Eskimos', both in Canada and in the UK, but writing in 2022 it seemed inappropriate to use that term, so I have used the word 'Inuit' to describe Ilannaq and her people in this book.

I have tried to make the content as historically accurate as possible, and Glen's notes from the time have been invaluable, but if any inaccuracies have crept in, I take full responsibility for them.

Chapter One

The advert in the Situations Vacant column had simply said:
Wanted. Nurses with a sense of adventure.

Squashed into the red and white Twin Otter floatplane alongside medical supplies, many blue bags and large quantities of alcohol, Connie felt strangely insignificant as she watched the vast white, blue and turquoise Arctic landscape unfold outside the small window. The emptiness was at the same time both thrilling and unnerving. There were no trees, no roads, no cars, no movement, no signs of the busy urban environment she had left behind. It was a blank white page, as yet unspoilt.

There was a tense silence as the pilot searched for a suitable stretch of water for landing. Several times, Connie had been about to breathe again as safety had seemed imminent, only to find herself firmly hauled back up into the air as the pilot aborted the landing at the last minute, the ice floes stubbornly refusing to keep the expanse of water clear for the Otter to land. Feeling that she was trapped in some kind of recurring nightmare, Connie gripped the edge of the seat as the roller coaster ride continued. She firmly tamped down any sense of panic, wondering if she had inherited her grandfather's wandering spirit. Although she had never met him, Frederick James Sanders had been a merchant seaman who had travelled the world, coming home only for

brief visits, to ply his family with strange gifts bought in exotic places, and providing his long-suffering wife with yet another mouth to feed in his absence. In her more romantic moments, though, Connie liked to think that maybe she was made of the same stuff as her grandfather and maybe even the great explorers. Harbour Inlet, Baffin Island, the North-West Territories of Canada – she imagined him nodding in satisfaction, from beyond the grave, at her adventurous spirit. According to Connie's father who had not had fond memories of his largely absent parent, he had died a lonely death, apparently, as remote and uncommunicative as ever and had not been missed by his nearest and dearest, in spite of the gifts. She felt a twinge of disloyal sympathy for her fellow traveller.

Connie's departure had happened rapidly. Following an interview at Canada House, in Manchester, and once confirmation of her posting and her visa had come through, there had been little else to do but pack and go. She hadn't felt any regret about leaving home and friends – in fact she hadn't felt much of anything except an all-consuming need to get away from the overwhelming struggle her life had become. At twenty-one Connie felt deep down that she hadn't changed much since leaving school, for ever destined to be on the outside looking in, never part of the gang, always acting up in order to be noticed and accepted. But Helen...Helen had offered hope, had given her a glimpse of something different, had made her feel like she was the only one in the world that mattered, for six exhilarating months. And so her brutal rejection and betrayal had been a sledgehammer, causing Connie's fragile sense of herself to shatter. She had fled, vowing to somehow put all those broken pieces into a box and firmly close the lid. She would never go back there.

Connie's bewildered parents and her brother, David, had taken her to Manchester airport on a dull and cloudy day at the beginning of

June 1970. The goodbyes had been tense, and although Connie had sensed her parents' upset and disappointment, she hadn't been able to conceal her desperation to get away from them as soon as they'd arrived at the terminal. Consumed by thoughts of the Arctic, she'd worn a thick, brown woollen trouser suit, which, in the event, proved exactly the wrong thing to be wearing when she arrived in Montreal's sizzling Canadian summer heat – the temperature hovering at around ninety degrees.

After a one-night stopover, the first time she had ever slept in another country – her only other foreign excursion being a day trip to Paris with some nursing friends, where they had all drunk too much and returned the worse for wear late that evening – Connie had found herself, the next morning on a plane to Frobisher Bay, and for the first time became aware that Canada wasn't the English-speaking country that she'd naïvely imagined. She could make out snippets of French reminding her of terrifying French lessons at school, from where a dim memory surfaced that many Canadians were indeed French-speaking. But alongside the French was something composed of sounds that Connie had never experienced before. The speakers of this unfamiliar language were Inuit, most of whom Connie assumed were travelling home to Frobisher Bay and maybe on to settlements beyond. In this swirl of other tongues, Connie had felt the first uncomfortable stirrings of anxiety now beginning to mingle with the desperation to escape that had brought her, unthinking, to this point.

Frobisher Bay was the largest settlement on Baffin Island. A growing frontier town, with all the benefits of a major hub, including an airport – with regular flights to and from Montreal, a modern hospital, schools (both Catholic and Protestant) and a large store which was the main hub for the Hudson Bay Company. Intended as only a brief stopover, in the end it had been home Connie for two

interminable weeks, while she had waited for weather conditions to be right for a flight to Harbour Inlet. She spent the time aimlessly wandering around, impatient to get to her destination and start her new life. She found that bars and dance halls were plentiful, and learnt on her hastily arranged training days at the hospital that Westerners had already brought with them the plagues of alcoholism and STDs to a people not equipped to cope with either.

When no flight seemed imminent, one of the sisters at the hospital suggested that Connie use the time to have some further training and meet colleagues who, she assured Connie, would become distant lifelines over the next year or so. Although impatient to get to Harbour Inlet, Connie was glad to learn more about her work. It seemed that much of her time would be spent combatting the plague of TB that was rampaging through the Inuit communities. She would be responsible for persuading the Inuit community in and around Harbour Inlet to get tested and vaccinated, and for spotting any suspected cases – which would need to be sent to the TB clinic in Frobisher Bay without delay. Connie was daunted as the realisation dawned that she, and she alone would also have to deal with any other medical emergencies that arose, and so was grateful for a few days on the maternity ward, revisiting her midwifery skills, as well as time in the Emergency Unit, revising her first aid and stitching. She was relieved to see that the techniques were much the same as she had been trained to use back in Manchester.

In a bizarre twist of fate, the Queen and Prince Phillip has chosen the same time to visit this far-flung outpost of her empire with Prince Charles and Princess Anne, and the excitement and brief glimpse of the motorcade, had been strangely comforting – a glimpse of home in a far-flung city. Connie had waved and cheered with much more enthusiasm than she would have at home, where the royal family

had seemed a distant entity, far from the life she knew. But here they were a link with something familiar, and Connie felt a strange sense of loss when they inevitably moved on to their next destination, leaving her behind.

In the evenings Connie listened to the unearthly creaks and groans of huge blocks of ice grinding and crashing together in the bay, as the sea melted and tides came and went. Haunting sounds that she would never forget, along with the annual break-up sight and smell of rotting seal, walrus, husky and other, unidentifiable carcasses that washed ashore.

She went to the cinema a few times, a place of comforting familiarity, never getting over the novelty of the late-night daylight when she came out of the darkness, and the sounds of children playing in the middle of the night, as she tried to sleep. It was hard to get used to a way of life that was not dominated by the clock or the 'pips' on the radio. The Inuit had no such restrictions.

As the days passed with no news of a flight, Connie began to wonder if she would ever get to her destination. She looked longingly out over the ice floes from her hotel room, praying for something to happen before she lost her nerve or ran out of money, and booked a flight home.

Eventually she learnt that the Hudson Bay manager in Frobisher Bay had been on an inspection visit to their store in Harbour Inlet, taking advantage of an emergency flight to evacuate a young woman with a retained placenta. A risky return flight had been arranged to take various provisions, and Connie jumped at the chance to grab the only passenger seat on the plane in spite of having been warned by the pilot that landing would be likely be precarious as he would have to find a large enough expanse of water between the ice floes. As this was break-up time, the ice was too weak to bear the weight of a fully

loaded plane and the sand bars had not yet formed to allow a more traditional landing. Connie was to soon learn that any kind of Arctic travel involved some kind of weather-related risk.

Eventually, seizing the moment, and with expert handling the pilot deftly took possession of a stretch of ice-blue water, and after a precarious landing, Connie was ready for whatever the Arctic had to offer. She was vaguely aware of the clicking of a camera noting every move of her unceremonious transfer to a seemingly flimsy canoe, already full of Inuit paddlers. A second canoe received the blue bags, alcohol and her medical supplies from the pilot of the Otter. Waving goodbye to him, Connie turned and smiled uncertainly at her new acquaintances.

The rhythmic motion of the silent paddlers carried her, with a sense of inevitability, to her new life as she heard the Otter take off behind her. There was no turning back now, and Connie gripped the sides of the canoe, her heart beating and her hands sweating. As they neared the shore she became aware of a small group awaiting their arrival, and feeling a growing sense of dread, she willed herself to keep calm as the Inuit rowers skilfully beached the canoe.

Once she had disembarked, with slightly more grace, a tall grey-haired man strode forward and shook Connie's hand. 'Welcome to Harbour Inlet.' He gave her a brisk handshake. From the corner of her eye, she saw the blue bags, crates of alcohol, and her luggage, being briskly conveyed by the paddlers to where a white man, hands on hips, was waiting impatiently further up the beach. There were rapid exchanges in Inuktitut and Connie wondered how she would ever understand anything in this alien tongue. More unwelcome memories of humiliation in French lessons at school surged into her mind, recollections of how incompatible French pronunciation had seemed with her Manchester accent.

The grey-haired man turned to Connie and introduced himself as, Reverend Brooks, Church of England Vicar. He then introduced Connie to other members of the community who had suddenly appeared. Word of her arrival had spread surprisingly quickly, it seemed.

‘This is Jim Briggs, the Hudson Bay Company manager.’ A round, fat and surprisingly effeminate man for a fur trader stepped forward to shake her hand. Connie’s gaze was drawn to his tiny feet. While endlessly waiting for her flight from Frobisher Bay, Connie had read about the all-encompassing, power of the Hudson Bay influence in the area and had vague knowledge about their fur-trading business with the locals.

‘Great to meet you. I’m sure you’ll liven us all up in no time.’ Connie noticed that the main focus of his attention, however, was the crates of beer and whisky, currently being stacked onto a small trolley.

Rev Davies gave him a stern look and turned to a middle-aged couple. ‘This is Thierry Banning and his wife, Françoise. Thierry is our engineer – we’re totally dependent on him if anything breaks down.’ Like George, Thierry’s attention was drawn to the now-stacked whisky and beer, only giving Connie a brief nod of welcome.

‘*Bonjour*, Connie.’ Françoise stepped forward and gave Connie a hug.

‘And this is our assistant administrator, Peter.’

Connie noticed the expensive-looking camera slung around Peter’s neck. ‘Was that you taking the photos back there?’

‘Yes, indeed. Peter is our resident photographer.’ Rev Brooks answered for him, as Peter stepped forward and shook Connie’s hand warmly. ‘Welcome to Harbour Inlet, Connie.’

‘And this is my wife.’ It seemed that Mrs Brooks was almost an afterthought, as she stepped forward to greet Connie. If she’d had to

imagine a vicar's wife, it would be Mrs Brooks, short and stout with her prim, greying bun and rimless spectacles.

Connie was quickly disabused of any notion that the welcoming party was purely for her benefit, as increasingly, all eyes were drawn to the packages and blue bags currently being sorted and checked against a list by the impatient man and an officious-looking RCMP officer.

'There is much excitement as this is the first delivery we've had in over two months. These blue bags contain post and packages from many families and friends.' The focus of even Rev Davies's eyes was starting to drift towards the enticing blue bags. 'Come and meet Paul Archer the government administrator for Harbour Inlet,' he said, striding over to where the unloading was almost finished. 'Paul and the RCMP will sort everything out and then distribute it. The supplies you brought with you will be delivered to the Nurse's Station by this evening. Paul deals with all the administration for the Nurse's Station, so you'll need to go through him for supplies. As you can see, he is busy today so I'm afraid you will have to make do with me.'

'Paul, this is Nurse Sanders.'

'Connie, please,' said Connie, holding out her hand.

'Not again! When will they ever learn to stop sending these inexperienced young nurses?' Paul raised his eyes to the sky and let out a frustrated sigh.

Connie quickly withdrew the proffered hand and took a step back. As she did so, one of the Inuit men beckoned Paul over and he walked away without a backward glance.

Rev Brooks ignored Paul's rudeness as if it hadn't happened. 'Right, let me show you where you're going to be living.'

A tingle of real fear and apprehension trickled down Connie's spine as the rest of the small crowd, obviously not deemed important enough to be introduced to Connie, started to disperse towards the

blue bags. She noticed a young woman standing apart from the others who gave her a smile and a hesitant wave as she passed. Connie smiled back in what she hoped was a friendly way as she was ushered firmly away by Rev Brooks.

