

Chapter 1

Wright spotted it first. A small rise in the featureless landscape. His eyes ached against the relentless white. No shadows on a dull day. A cairn off to the right of their route. He waved the rest of the party to a stop. Eleven men in search of their missing leader and his four companions.

The snow crunched under Wright's frozen boots. As he approached it, the hummock seemed to grow. He walked around it, recognised the sharp shape of a tent under the soft outline of winter's drift snow. He stood still, uncertain now what to do. But he was sure of what he had found. He started back to the others. He would have to tell them.

Atkinson, now expedition leader, and Cherry-Garrard approached him.

'What is it?' Atkinson asked.

'It's the tent,' Wright said.

'Are you sure?'

'Yes.'

'How?'

'I just know.'

'It could be one of last year's cairns,' Cherry said. 'There must be three or four of them about here.' He looked around. 'It's directly on the old route.'

'There's a bamboo pole sticking out of the top of it,' Wright said. 'It *is* the tent.'

The three men walked across to the mound, out of the wind. They brushed the snow from the top of the silent shape. Green canvas surfaced.

'The ventilator flap. Dammit,' Atkinson grunted.

'The door should be directly below,' Cherry said.

They dug with their mittened hands until they reached the tent's outer funnel.

'Who?' Atkinson asked.

'I,' Cherry said, standing tall.

Cherry and Wright crawled into the tunnel. Unable to see, they crawled out backwards.

'It's too dark,' Cherry said.

'We're going to have to dig it out,' Atkinson said. He looked across to where the other men were waiting with their sledges and mules. 'They ought to make camp where they are. Doesn't seem right to set up any closer, if this is Captain Scott's tent.'

'Who else's?' Wright asked.

Atkinson shrugged. 'No one's.'

By now the other men had approached, almost on tiptoes. They huddled together in front of Atkinson, shovels in hand. He spoke with difficulty.

'We think this is the Owner's tent, but it's too dark inside to see anything. I'd like you ... and I know this isn't easy ... I'd like you to dig it out. Build a wall around it to keep the wind away.'

He looked at them. They were all tired, unshaven and shaken.

'Once we've cleared a lot of the snow, I'll go in. Then I'll call each one of you by name so you can come in and confirm what I have seen. Understood?'

They nodded in unison. By now some of them were crying. Their tears froze to their faces. Not one spoke. They began their work, created a circle of evenness around the tent.

Atkinson crawled in again. Half-light in there now, a frigid gloom. He saw only indistinct shapes and instinctively reached out. The canvas rustled. He needed more light. Slowly, it came. Three outlines of death. Two closed sleeping bags and one fearsome face.

He would never get used to the nightmares, never forget

the green light inside the tent, and their yellow, frost-bitten faces. He opened the two sleeping bags to reveal the bodies of Wilson and Bowers. They had slept themselves into death calmly, from what he could see, but the weather had carved mutilation into their faces.

Scott had thrown his sleeping bag wide open at the moment of death, or so it seemed. His face was distorted by a grimace of pain and fear, the skin glassy and scarred across his starved cheeks. Like the other two, he was frozen solid. They had lain here, under the snow, through the blackness of winter, in cold so fierce that boiling water would freeze when thrown in the air.

Atkinson did not try to close Scott's eyes; the eyelids would have shattered. He shook his head, tried to remember these three friends in life, but could not. When they hadn't returned at the end of the Antarctic summer the previous April, he knew they hadn't survived, of course, but he hadn't expected this, not to find them here, perfectly preserved in their last moment, and only two of them at peace.

Wilson reclined against a tent pole, a smile on his face, as if he had nodded off in the middle of a conversation. Bowers seemed fast asleep, exhausted from his efforts, comfortable in his repute as the expedition's hardest worker. Scott's arms were spread wide, touching the bags of the two men, one either side of him, as if he were trying to find a connection to them, or trying to grasp, in that final instant, their faith in a life after death.

As a naval surgeon, Atkinson was used to death, blood and gore, but he could not bring himself to closely examine the dead men. He would have to stay with them, he knew that, because he would have to search the tent, to find any notes they had made, any scientific evidence they had gathered on their journey. For now, however, he could not, and would not, move their bodies.

One by one he called the men in, asked them to confirm to him – and to their diaries if they were keeping one – that

the three they had found were indeed Scott, Wilson and Bowers. Each man answered in the affirmative. Some of them made the sign of the cross, others merely buried their faces in their hands and sobbed the hurt of hard men into their frozen gloves.

Cherry was the last of them to crawl into the tent. He shuddered. 'Only eleven miles from safety,' he whispered to Atkinson. 'Only eleven miles from One Ton. It's my fault. I should have saved them.'

'You don't know when they got here, Cherry,' Atkinson answered. 'Who knows when they got here? It could have been weeks after you were at One Ton, a month even.'

'You're right. Of course you're right.'

They sat in silence for some minutes and cast their eyes about the shifting tent.

'How spotless it is,' Atkinson remarked.

'He always kept a very tidy tent, did the Owner,' Cherry whispered. 'That's why I hated sharing his tent. It made me feel inferior. As if I wasn't fit to be with him. I couldn't keep the same order.'

'I'm sure that's not what he thought.'

'Perhaps not. But I did.'

'Nevertheless ...'

'Nevertheless it was a disappointment to me that I couldn't go on to the Pole with him. They must have got there, mustn't they?'

'I don't know. I'll have to read his sledging diaries.'

'They must be in the wallet, under his shoulders.' Cherry gestured at the body.

Atkinson nodded.

'And those papers next to him?'

'Letters, probably. I haven't looked yet. I needed confirmation from you first that my senses weren't deceiving me.'

'How sad they were not, and that we didn't find them only sleeping.'

‘Yes.’

‘I’ve seen enough,’ Cherry said, shifting uncomfortably in his partly thawed clothes. ‘The men could do with some help.’

‘Make sure you keep everything so we can decide later what to take and what to leave.’

‘I will.’

Cherry moved slowly away, out through the inner opening. Atkinson heard him pull closed the outer flap. He sighed, braced himself. ‘It has to be done,’ he muttered, and moved to Scott’s side.

He picked the letters up from the floor cloth. They were neatly folded and sealed – addressed, even. There was one to Wilson’s mother. The paper felt brittle, like a communion wafer. The next was to Bowers’ mother. More – to J.M. Barrie; to Sir Edgar Speyer, who gave money; to two vice-admirals; to Kinsey, his agent in New Zealand. Atkinson wondered how Scott had summoned the energy to write all these.

By Scott’s head was some tobacco and some tea, and a lamp made of a tin with a wick fashioned from the lining of a boot. And some more letters, to those he held dearest – his mother, and Kathleen, his wife.

The wallet was secured by a strap to Scott’s body, just as he had carried it with him in life. Atkinson gently tried to unloop the leather tie from the dead man’s shoulders, moving it gingerly, half an inch after half an inch. He couldn’t bear, though, to look into that face, that screaming face, nor into those open eyes, never to sleep again. In the end, the strap would not come loose. He would have to force it, would have to move Scott’s arm to free the valuable words.

The men outside were ripped from their silent work by the crack of a pistol shot. It came from inside the tent. They rushed to the entrance. Cherry and Wright crashed through the flap, expecting the worst. It had been a dreadful winter, and the hope of spring had been broken.

Atkinson, on the floor cloth, clutched the wallet. 'I had to,' he sobbed, 'I had no choice ... it had to be done. I ... I ...'

Scott's arm, at a strange angle, pointed south.

'I had to break it, had to. Nothing else I could do.'

'We thought ...' Cherry said. 'The sound frightened us. We —'

'It's done now,' Wright said calmly. 'It's done. There was no other way.' He put his arm around Atkinson, briefly, awkwardly, and motioned Cherry outside.

Atkinson sat down, facing away from the bodies. He opened the wallet. There were three journals in there. He took them out, replaced them with the letters he had gathered. Now he turned the books over in his hands, and glanced at the flyleaf of each one. He knew Scott wrote on only one side of the paper until the end of a book was reached, then would reverse it and continue on the blank sides.

On the flyleaf of the second notebook, Scott had noted the ages of the final polar party. *Self* 43, *Wilson* 39, *Evans (P.O.)* 37, *Oates* 32, *Bowers* 28. *Average* 36. The first entry was for 22 December 1911, the last day Atkinson had seen Scott alive, the date Atkinson, Cherry, Wright and Keohane had turned back towards home, 450 miles from the Pole. And 500 miles back to the base at Cape Evans.

Atkinson opened the third notebook. Inside the front cover, scrawled faintly: *Diary can be read by finder to ensure recovery of Records &c., but Diary should be sent to my widow.* On the first page: *Send this diary to my wife.* There was a line through that last word, replaced by *widow* and signed.

What had happened to Oates and Evans? Atkinson stood up for a moment, moved his arms as briskly as he could. The cold seeped through his layers of clothes, and his hands numb out of their gloves, removed so that he could turn the pages of Scott's last testament.

Sitting down again, he read through the journal as quickly as he could. They had reached the Pole – after Amundsen. Evans had died at the foot of the Beardmore Glacier, Oates closer to home. Atkinson decided there and then to seek out the body of Oates, fallen less than thirty miles further south. He continued until the writing stopped. A final scrawl: *For God's sake look after our people.* Atkinson shivered and drew a deep breath, then flipped over a few more pages. And there – more writing, smaller, even more scrawled, tightly squeezed into what space there was: *Message to the public. The causes of the disaster are not due to faulty organisation, but to misfortunes in all risks which had to be undertaken.* That was enough for now. He put the diaries back into their bag, next to the letters, and crawled out of the tent.

By now the men had uncovered the polar party's sledge. On it lay the detritus of the polar journey and pounds of rocks they had gathered, probably on their trip back to this place. To end here ... Atkinson shook his head again. Dreadful, dreadful. How alone and afraid they must have been. He dared not think further. He called the men to his side.

'We can't take them with us,' he said, simply. 'We must bury them here.' He paused, his thoughts confused. How? 'We should empty the tent of everything except the men and their sleeping bags. Everything else we keep.'

He crawled back into the tent, this time with Cherry. They moved all the gear to the entrance and passed it through to Wright outside. A flag, Wilson's diary, Bowers' diary, a mess of papers. Socks, finnesko boots, watches, spare clothing. They worked until the tent was empty of all they could move, all they wanted to move, until there was just an empty tent and three empty bodies.

The last things they took out were the bamboo sticks that held up the tent from inside. The men and the guy ropes still held it from the outside. All was done now, finished. It was

all over. Cherry and Atkinson slowly crawled from the canvas tomb. Atkinson nodded at the men. The tent was lowered over the bodies. Then they shovelled snow to cover it – until no shred of green was to be seen.

They stood in a circle around the new mound of snow.

‘They did reach the Pole,’ Atkinson said. ‘But they were not the first. Unfortunately.’

He held up his hands to stop the questions he guessed would come. He took out the final diary and read to them those parts they needed, wanted, to know, and then the final part of the ‘message to the public’, his voice failing by now.

‘We took risks ... we knew we took them ... things ... things have come out against us, and therefore ... we ... we have no cause for complaint, but ... bow to the will of Providence, determined still to ... do our best ... to the last.’ He blinked away the icicles. *‘Had we lived, I should have had a tale to tell ... of ... of the hardihood, endurance, and courage ... of my companions.’* He looked around. *‘For God’s sake, look after our people.’*

He took the book they had identified as Wilson’s bible, read aloud the burial service from Corinthians. He said prayers for the families, and for his still-living men. All bowed their heads and held the silence in the wind for some minutes. There was no need for more words.

The cairn-building began. Snow stone after snow stone piled up over where they had found their friends. They did not stop until the cairn was the height of two men. Tryggve Gran, the Norwegian, climbed to the top and fixed his skis there in the form of a cross. ‘I’ll wear the Owner’s back to Cape Evans,’ he said when he had descended. ‘They must complete their journey.’

They built two smaller cairns, one on either side of the tomb, to support two sledges raised on end, the guardians of the dead. They left a note, signed by eleven crying men, put it in a metal tin, and nailed it to one of the sledges. At

midnight, the clouds broke, and the low sun covered the camp in a cold light of gold. They would head south tomorrow to look for Oates.

They never found him.

Chapter 2

I spot her as soon as I get into the train. She leans against the door when it closes. There's nowhere else to go, and she can't be bothered to find somewhere to sit, doesn't seem the kind of woman who wants to be offered a seat. She's got boots on that make her legs appear really thin. I try not to make it too obvious that I'm staring at her. She gets a book out of her pocket, but I can't make out its cover. She's too far away from me, and I don't dare move closer. When I'm not expecting her to, she raises her eyes and scowls at me. How pale she is, how perfect. I hadn't realised how lonely I am. I turn away.

My stop approaches too soon. I'll have to walk past her to get out. As the train slows, I try to move across the carriage without catching her eye again. I'm halfway out when she collapses. There's nothing I can do but catch her. Her book drops out of her hands, her eyes closed. I stumble out with her in my arms, kick her book onto the platform. Everyone else just stares or pushes past me. No one bothers to help. Bloody London.

I drop down onto one of the benches by the wall and catch my breath. What now? I check her pulse. It seems OK, if a little shallow. Her face is so drawn, her teeth clenched, her lips tight and thin. Hell, I've got a real, warm, beautiful woman in my arms for the first time in ages and she's unconscious, and I don't know what to do. When the train's gone and the platform empty, I get up, turn, and lower her miniscule weight onto the bench.

Why am I doing this? I do give some of my time to charities, to help people who can't help themselves. And it's

my duty to pick up this scrap of a girl in trouble. I can't just walk away. That's too easy. I did it once, a long time ago, and I've regretted it ever since. And I suppose part of me is thinking I might at last have found someone who'll want to depend on me, who will see me as a strong man. Because, despite everything I do, my life lacks that.

The platform's filling up again when her eyes flicker open and she tries to sit up. She puts her hands into her jacket pockets, and pulls them out again, empty.

'Where's my book?' she says. 'I need my book.'

I get down on my knees in front of her, retrieve it from under the bench, get up again, and hand it to her.

'What's that all about?' I say. '*The Worst Journey in the World?*'

'The Antarctic.'

'Oh.'

'I've got notes in it.' She seems calmer now, stuffs the dog-eared book back into her jacket, and tries to get up.

'Take it easy,' I say.

'I need to get to the Royal Geographical Society,' she says.

'You sure that's a good idea?'

'I don't have a choice.'

'Have you fainted before?'

'Coupla times. I just don't eat enough.' She scowls at me. She's a scary, skinny thing.

'You should get yourself checked out,' I say. 'And you need some food.' I'll get her up to the fresh air and then she can sort herself out. 'Come on.' I get up, throw my bag over my back and hold out my arm to her.

She grabs hold of it and pulls herself up.

'OK?' I say.

She nods, links arms with me, and doesn't let go as we walk along the tunnel towards the exit. In the lift up to the street, she leans against me, dizzy again. Her short, blonde hair smells of lemons, and she's trembling. She pulls away when we walk out into the fresh, cold November air. It's too

much, and she trips. I catch her by her small hand. It's freezing cold. I let go as soon as I can. Touch talks, and I don't want her to know what I'm thinking.

'What now?' I say. 'You really need something to eat.'

'Can't be bothered.'

'Look, I'm sorry, and I don't even know you, but you're being stupid.'

She shakes her head. 'You don't understand. I've got to be there. It's important.'

I scratch my head. Why am I getting involved? I've sorted her out, haven't I? She'll be fine. I've got a meeting in an hour. But I can't forget that child in my head, that beggar child in Rome I walked past, now years ago, too weak even to ask for help. An hour later, on the way back, all I saw was a patch of blood on the pavement. My fault, to see that and walk away.

'It won't take a minute,' I say. 'You can get something over there.'

We walk across to the shop without talking. I watch her through the shop window, how narrow she is, how her clothes cling to her, how beautiful she is.

'Why did you keep eyeing me up on the Tube?' she says, her mouth full, when she comes out of the shop.

I blush. 'I wasn't really,' I say. 'I just like watching people.'

'That makes two of us, then.'

My blush fades. 'You seem OK now. I should get on.'

She throws the sandwich box violently into the bin. 'Tell you what,' she says. 'Why don't you come with me?'

'Why would I want to do that?'

'Because I'm asking you. It seems a shame to just let you go now that coincidence made us meet.'

My heart quickens. 'I've got a meeting in an hour.' I feel regret as I speak.

'Cancel it,' she says. 'Skive. You don't look like a man who does a lot of skiving.'

‘But ...’

‘Live a little.’ She laughs.

I text to cancel my meeting. ‘There,’ I say. ‘And, by the way, I’m Adam.’

‘I’m Birdie.’

‘Interesting name.’

‘I’ll explain it to you sometime.’

‘There may not be another time.’ I specialise in afterthoughts.

‘Who knows?’

I can’t make out if she’s being patronising or flirtatious, so I say nothing and tag along, making sure, all the time, that she’s not about to fall over again. On the Tube, I make her sit down. There’s no seat for me, so I have to stand half a carriage away from her. But I don’t play my usual game of counting how many fanciable women there are, and watch her instead, her stillness. I feel a confusing degree of tenderness for someone I’ve only just met. She fascinates me, draws me to her.

‘D’you know anything at all about the Antarctic?’ she says when we surface in South Ken.

‘Just what I learned at school. Amundsen beat Scott to the South Pole. Amundsen got back. Scott didn’t. Oh, and it’s bloody cold out there, and dark most of the time.’

‘Great summary. Go to the top of the class.’ She shakes her head.

We carry on walking.

‘You do know the Natural History Museum, though?’ she says.

‘Course. Been there. Dinosaurs and all that.’

‘But what’s it got to do with my book?’

‘Should I care?’

She stops. I hadn’t noticed she’s out of breath. She has to crane her neck to look me in the face, smiles for the first time. I smile back at her brown eyes. ‘The guy who wrote it, Apsley Cherry-Garrard, spent six weeks walking through the

pitch-black Antarctic winter to Cape Crozier, just to get three penguin eggs, and bring them back here.'

'The point being?'

'One of the blokes with him was Henry Bowers, also known as Birdie.'

'You've got a man's name?'

'Let me finish. Bowers died with Scott.'

'You're related to him, then?'

She smiles, despite herself, I think. 'No, he didn't have any kids as far as anyone knows. He still lived with his mum when he went on Scott's expedition.'

'So why the name?'

'My parents were obsessed with the Antarctic, and Dad reckoned he might find out he was the son of Bowers' love child, so they christened me Henrietta Birdie Bowers.'

'And you're mad about him?'

'I admire him, but he didn't live long enough to leave anything lasting behind.'

'That's sad.'

'It is a bit.' She gets the book out of her pocket. 'But Cherry meant this to be a memorial to him.'

'So why are you so keen to get to the RGS?'

'I've persuaded them to show me some stuff from the Scott expedition.'

'And it had to be today?'

She nods. 'The thing is, there's a mystery about the Pole journey no one's solved.'

'And that's why you're in a state.'

'I've been obsessing about it since Dad died.'

'Oh. Sorry.'

'That's done.' She wipes whatever pain she feels away with an impatient arm and starts walking again. 'Scott, Bowers and Wilson died eleven miles from the next food depot, and they were stuck there for ten days because of a blizzard, according to what Scott wrote.'

'What's odd about that?' I say.

‘It’s been scientifically proven that Antarctic blizzards only last three to four days.’

‘Without a doubt?’ This is interesting.

‘Without a doubt. That’s why I want to find out what really happened.’

‘You think Scott was lying?’

She shrugs. ‘Not necessarily. Delusions of a dying man, maybe.’

‘Hasn’t anyone else tried?’

‘Lots of people, but no one’s come up with anything that makes sense.’

‘So why this sudden urgency?’

‘It’s nearly a hundred years since it happened. Time we knew the truth.’

‘Does it matter?’

‘It does to me. And I’ve never been near any of the gear they had with them,’ she says. ‘We’re here. Want to come in with me?’

‘I’d love to, but I don’t want to intrude.’

‘You won’t. I need some support for once.’

‘Then I will.’ I willingly give in.

Inside, there’s an unreal hush. She walks up to the reception desk, transforms herself into someone much taller, much more determined than the sick, grieving woman who fell into my arms and walked here with me.

‘Miss Bowers here to see Leo McAllister,’ she says to the woman behind the desk.

‘I’ll let him know you’re here. Take a seat, please.’

We retreat to the high glass windows and watch the traffic.

‘What are you expecting to see?’ I say.

‘Just a few things. Stuff from the expedition’s spread out all over the world. Some here, lots more at the Scott Polar Research Institute in Cambridge, some in the Canterbury Museum in New Zealand. And the royals have got a stash of it, too, so we’ll never get our hands on that.’

When Leo McAllister arrives, she introduces me as her assistant. He's tall and spare, and looks old. I follow the two of them along a maze of corridors and doors.

'I've laid most of our artefacts out on the table,' Leo says. 'As you know, you'll have to wear these cotton gloves to make sure there's no damage.'

'Sure,' she says.

The three of us pull on our gloves.

'I'll just explain what these are,' Leo says.

What I see looks insignificant. There are just a few ancient containers, a couple of sorry-looking cotton bags, and a stack of discoloured magazines.

Leo picks up one of these things after another, tells us where it was found, and what he thinks is significant about it. He only takes ten minutes, but what he says leaves me shell-shocked. I hadn't anticipated the rawness of history.

'I'll be back in an hour,' he says. 'Is that enough time for you?'

'Yes, thank you very much,' Birdie says. Does she always change like this, from surly to polite, from weak to strong, from panicked to calm?

He closes the door behind him, and we don't speak for a moment. The room shrinks. She takes a deep breath, steadies herself on one of the chairs, then finally picks up a metal matchbox holder, rusty, tinged with the brown flecks of time. Leo told us it was found next to Scott's body. The dead live on in their traces. She hands it to me. Its lightness catches me by surprise, and I almost drop it. I put it on the table and open it. There are still matches in here, unused ones. I count them out onto the table. Eighty-eight of them.

'Why didn't they use them all?' I say into her brittle silence.

'They ran out of fuel. They spent those ten days in that tent without any fuel. That's why they died. They couldn't even make themselves a cup of tea.' She shivers.

I put the matches back into the box. They'll never be used.

'Are you all right?' I say.

She doesn't answer, moves along the table to the provision bags that were found in the tent. She caresses them with her gloved fingers, looks around, and quickly pulls off one of the gloves, runs the back of her bare hand across the bags two or three times.

'What are you doing?' I whisper.

'I just needed to touch, feel, to get close to them. To something more organic than metal.' There's strain in her voice. Her tiny body trembles with it. I want to reach out, but I can't, I just can't. To have caught her fainting body that short hour ago is less of an intimacy than to put my arms around her now, although that's what I want to do – to wipe her face dry, to make her smile again.

She laughs tearily, pulls her gloves back on. She picks the bag up again, weighs it in the palm of her hand, sniffs at its ochre stains. 'Curry powder. You know ...' She takes a deep breath. 'Scott blamed himself for getting frostbite in his feet because, one evening, he accidentally mixed some of this with his food and it gave him the trots, weakened him.' She wipes her nose with the back of her hand.

'Does any of this get you any closer to finding out what happened?' I say. 'All this pain?'

She shakes her head. 'But it makes me closer to them. It's real after all the books and notes. This is an addiction it's impossible to cure.'

How many books has she read, how many notes has her father left her? Does she believe anything beyond what he told her? Maybe she's just dealing with her grief this way. Mourning for Bowers is mourning for her father. Maybe carrying his name has burdened her with another kind of grief and guilt, too, the kind we feel when the past drifts off beyond recollection and memory into anecdote and dream.

She drifts off along the table again, reaching out with her

long fingers. She's as lonely as me, isn't she, surrounded by her father's notes and books, and nothing but hopes and mysteries? She's lost in a world of trying to find something that may not exist. Maybe that's all she wants from her life, to dig over the remnants of passed time.

'What if there really was a ten-day blizzard? What if you're just kidding yourself about finding a new answer?'

'Impossible.' She glares at me. 'You think I'm a fool, don't you?'

'I didn't –'

'What? You didn't what?' The anger forces her muscles into sharp, defined patterns. Her legs, her arms, her stomach just visible above the waistband, her entire body, confront me with their taut challenge. I ward her off with open palms before she gets close enough to touch.

'Sorry. I didn't mean to hurt, or offend, whatever it is I did. It all just seems –'

'Stupid?' She raises her voice even more.

'Shhh. No, not that. Just somehow unreal. Dangerous for you, to your sanity.'

'You don't know me very well.' She turns away, looks towards the window at the end of this long grey room. 'You don't know me at all.' She stops moving, stands entirely still. 'And I don't know you. Sorry.'

We put on our coats, and retrace our steps to the reception where we shake hands again with Leo. It's over.

'Good luck,' he says.

And then we're out into the dampness of an English winter once again.