

Constance Lujan
4310 Sage Circle
Anchorage, Alaska 99516
Phone: 907-345-0382, 351-7676
connie@tedconnie.com

30,000 Words

STOWAWAY TO ANTARCTICA

A Journey to the Ice Fields

Constance Lujan

Chapter One

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I hated school—the horrid green uniforms, boring classes, bullies. Then, one day when walking into the science lab, I see her...can't stop staring. I decide then, no more home schooling. Nearly thirteen, I had no idea what I was missing. Except for Mom and Grandma Ellie, girls lived on a different planet.

Chapter One

When Becky's freckled grin caught my eye from across the room, I knew she was the babe for me—a wonder woman who wouldn't care that I was short, skinny, and a science geek. Smiling back, I give her a thumbs-up. I look away when her neck flushes pink.

She peeks at me a couple of times while we listen to Mr. Thompson, our science teacher, talk about a coming fireball to be seen in our skies tonight, an event Dad and I have been waiting for all year. The bell rings. I grab my books and cap and hurry to catch up with her.

Hi, I mumble, hoping she'll turn around before we get to the next class. She slows and looks over her shoulder, flipping her pony tail around

Hi, she says. Are you going to Lit? You want to sit with me?

I nod and put my cap on. I had planned to go home but not now . . . won't turn this chance down.

What's your name and how come you're wearing a hat inside?

It's my turn to blush now. I reach up and yank at the bib of my hat.

My name is Derrick. Once a month my Dad cuts my hair. What's your name?

I'll tell you when you take off your hat.

After class we have a chance to chat and discover our fathers work in the same office.

Are you going to watch the Fall tonight? She looks surprised.

I hope so. It's going to be so exciting.

Maybe you and your folks can come and watch it at my place. I watch her eyes light up. She really likes me. Where have all the girls been? This blows my mind. Wait until I tell Dad.

It was after Mr. Thompson, our science teacher, told the class about the coming fireball that I decided to invite her to watch the fall at my house. Mom had said okay. The next day Dad talked to Becky's dad, Jake Jorgenson, another geologist who worked at the university.

I've been dreaming about searching for meteorites in Antarctica ever since we moved to New Zealand last year. At first I didn't want to move. Then Dad told me about NASA tracking a humongous fireball scheduled to fall in the southern skies this month.

This morning it happened. The meteor exploded at 1:58 A.M., streaking through the Southern Cross skies with a swishing, whistling sound, getting louder and louder until ... POP! BANG! ... I jumped, startled by the sonic boom even though I knew it was coming.

Brighter than the Pointer stars, it lit up the sky—a dazzling, breathtaking, unbelievable, luminous spectacle of fire in a rainbow of colors, more brilliant and sensational than any July Fourth fireworks I'd ever seen. Seconds of silence followed ... time to blink, breathe, and smile in wonder as I gazed into the night watching the quiet starlit sky return.

Our house in Christchurch, on the edge of the city, is a perfect setting for viewing celestial events. Neighbors are distant and street lights miles apart. Dad's fourteen-inch LX200 telescope, GPS, tape deck, and Mom's surveillance video camera recorded its happening.

Dad said in all his years of watching falls, he'd never heard a meteorite explode

with such a racket. “I hope it didn’t burn out after getting through our atmosphere.”

“Where do you think it landed,” I asked.

“If these initial readings are correct, could be Antarctica.”

I was so ecstatic I started hopping around like a kangaroo. My new friend, Becky, and her folks were hugging each other in their excitement, too. When I glanced at Becky, she started giggling. She looked so cool in her jeans, pink tank top, and hoodie that matched her deep blue, almost purple eyes. A ponytail held her reddish brown hair away from her cute freckly face. I’m lucky we met.

Mom was not smiling. She’s been anxious ever since she found out that the meteorite search team (ANSMET) based at McMurdo Station, have an office at the university where Dad works as a research geologist. She had agreed to move to Christchurch because she thought it promised an eight-to-five job for Dad. Back in Alamogordo, New Mexico, where I was home schooling, Dad and I’d be in the field almost every week. Now that I’m a seventh grader, Mom wants me in public school hanging with kids my own age—definitely not venturing off to Antarctica.

Dad whispered to me, later; “I’ll have a talk with your mother. If there’s any way for me to get to Antarctica, Derrick, I’m going to do it. Sometimes one has to take risks to get ahead. I sure don’t want to be sitting at a desk the rest of my working days shuffling someone else’s discoveries. If we find this fireball, the news will be huge—like global. I want to be part of it.”

After that, I went along with Mom’s wishes to attend Kirkland middle school, skipping most classes when possible to research everything I could about Antarctica’s meteorites. Mom spent her days working at a local photography shop shooting wedding celebrations—too busy to keep track of me.

As it turned out, the fireball fell in Antarctica. The next morning I whispered to Dad, “When will you find out if you’re going?”

“My application’s on ANSMET’S desk. I’m hoping to hear from them later this week. Haven’t talked with your mother yet so don’t say anything until I know for sure. No sense getting her upset for no reason.”

The next two days were frustrating. I went to all my classes to keep my mind busy, talking only to Becky. Then Dad told Mom and me the news after dinner. ANSMET needed a geologist schooled in meteorites to join the team in Antarctica. His boss wanted him to go.

“No, Brad,” Mom said. “Please ... I want you at home. It’s time Derrick has a normal family life. You remember what happened the last time you went to Antarctica? What kind of life could we have without you?”

“Marsha, my last trip was fifteen years ago. Survival gear is far more sophisticated now. Risk of accidents is minimal; Kaz makes sure of that. I’ll be gone four months at the most. If we find the fireball I’ll be home sooner. This is a chance of a lifetime. I have to do this.”

The discussion went on all night. I couldn’t hear all they were saying but I knew Dad’s mind was set. Mom would worry about us no matter what we did, here or in Antarctica.

I rolled over and yanked the pillow over my head to keep from hearing Mom cry. I tried to think about our talks Dad and I had this week. This fireball might be another big one from Mars. Finding a meteorite with primitive life on it like the Martian rock was one of our dreams, even before we left New Mexico. How can I help Mom understand? This is the year, my brain screamed inside—we have to do it. Daylight filled the room by the time I fell asleep.

* * *

Dad’s orders came the following week: report to McMurdo Station, Antarctica, by November tenth. My heart and head were thundering until Dad called from his office and told me ... I wasn’t going.

At first I couldn’t believe my ears when he explained that kids weren’t allowed on the expedition. Listening to him was unreal. My whole body shook.

“But Dad—you promised. You promised we’d go to Antarctica together. You can’t leave me home. I’m not a kid. I’ll be thirteen in February.”

“I know Son, but not this time. There’ll be other chances when you’re older. I’m

sorry. I'm really sorry."

When he finished, I hung up. I couldn't talk.

No one was home, so I cried. Hot tears stung my face and soaked the kitchen towel hanging near the phone. I threw it in the sink and got another in the bathroom. I felt sick. Worn out and trembling from the exertion of catching my breath, I collapsed to the floor and leaned against the toilet.

Later, I hid in my room, going down to eat when Mom and Dad were gone. A sign taped to my door warned everyone to leave me alone. I felt miserable with my life. I didn't want to talk with anyone, not even Becky.

Chapter Two

Several days pass before I'm ready to pick up the pieces and talk with Mom. I'm not going to give up. No way! I march into the kitchen and look around to see what there is to eat. Mom's at the table, watching me.

"Morning, Derrick; it's good to see you. Hope you're feeling better. Your Dad already left for work."

I sit down across from her.

"Can I get you some breakfast?" she almost smiles.

“We need to talk, Mom. Okay? You have a minute?”

“Not much more than a minute. I was about to leave before you came down.

What’s up?”

“Is it a problem with you that I go to Antarctica with Dad?”

“Derrick” She sighs and gives me that ‘oh, my-little-boy look’.

I hate it when she talks down to me. I stand up bumping my knee on the table leg.

“Don’t smother me, Mom. I don’t like being treated as a child. It’s time you trust me. I know Dad would find a way to take me with him if he didn’t have to worry about you.”

“Derrick Ripley, I do trust you; but this is different. Your dad already explained the rules and why he can’t take you.”

I lean over with my hands on the table and stare at her. “Mom, all I ask is that you talk to him again with a positive attitude. He’ll know what to do about the rules. He knows Kaz. They’ll figure a way for me to go.”

She gets up, walks over to the counter, puts her bowl and coffee cup in the sink, grabs her camera and film and stuffs them in her photographer’s bag. She’s unhappy. I follow her to the hallway.

“At least tell him it’s okay with you. You let me go last year to Australia as Dad’s assistant. He said he couldn’t have made all his finds without me. There were no ‘no-kid’ rules then. I know he’ll need me in Antarctica.”

Mom’s leaving. She tips her head, giving me that motherly look of patient impatience that drives me crazy. She’s afraid I’ll grow up.

“I’m not a baby anymore,” I yell. “Dad’s been teaching me how to find meteorites since I was four. If I’m going to be a scientist, I need experience. Now he’s going on our dream trip without me? For four months?”

“Derrick, your dad told you the rules. It’s too dangerous for kids. As your mother, I would worry myself sick. Australia’s weather was decent, and you were home-schooling.”

“School breaks here in December, Mom. I’ll study on my own the rest of the time.

Survival clothing like Dad's will keep me warm. Remember last month when Dad gave me books from his office on lunar meteorites and the Martian rock? Why would he do that if he didn't expect me to go with him? I'll find rocks that will help me win the science fair contest."

Mom straightens her skirt and blazer before looking in the hall mirror to fluff her hair and dab on more lipstick. She'll be out the door any minute.

"Derrick ...," she puts her purse down and comes over for a hug.

I step aside. She just won't learn. A hug is the last thing I need.

She shrugs with a huge sigh. "Your dad and I have always been proud of you and pleased with your interest in collecting rocks. You are a remarkable kid and someday you'll be a remarkable scientist. If he could your dad would take you.

"Besides," she adds, "you need more friends your own age. You've been isolated with adults all your life. I want you at classes every day this semester, making friends and taking an interest in school activities. With your determination and intelligence, you'd be great on the debate team."

"I'm not a kid, Mom, and I don't need to be coddled like one. And ... I collect meteorites—that's what I want to do— that's my work—like Dad. And what's wrong with my making friends with Dad's friends?"

She looks hard at me and takes a deep breath. "Why don't you continue this conversation with your dad tonight? He'll be home early. I'm leaving. I have an important photo sitting in an hour."

"Is that an okay, maybe?"

Shaking her head like, whatever, she turns to leave and blows me a kiss. She stops at the door. "I'll be late tonight. Round up some dinner for you and Dad.

"And, by the way, your friend Becky and her parents are coming for dinner next week."

She winks, like she knows something I don't, and rushes off.

I drag myself to the kitchen, fill my bowl with cereal and milk, and sit down thinking about what to say to Dad tonight. I'll be cool and convince him my going will be

okay with Mom. He'll talk with Kaz. They'll find a way for me to go. If we leave next Friday, I'll have plenty of time to organize my school work on my laptop and get packed. It'll be easy to keep up with my classes and take tests when I get home. No sweat.

Yeah, Mom, I know, I mumble to myself. I'd be great on the debate team. I'm probably too smart for my own good. The other kids think I'm a nerd because I use big words and ace the tests, but I don't care. Becky's a good friend. Until I met her I ate lunch alone. She's plenty smart; always reading adventure stories, hoping to go to the moon someday. I told her about going to Antarctica with Dad.

"I wish I could go with you," she said.

"I'm not sure you'd enjoy the weather. It's really cold. Remember the blizzards in *March of the Penguins*?"

She shuddered. "Not that cold, I hope. You be careful, Derrick. I'll miss you."

Our faces got warm about the same time my heart skipped a beat.

"I'll send you an email," I say.

Chapter Three

The door in the front hall closes. Dad's slow getting to the kitchen. He looks tired. Better wait until we eat before we talk. Mom's gourmet pizza in the fridge will cook up fast—then a beer. Mom doesn't like him drinking in front of me, but with pizza, it's okay.

"Hi Dad, Mom's going to be late shopping. Would you like a beer? There's some yummy pizza in the fridge." Dad smiles halfway through his tired look.

“Thanks Derrick. That sounds great—I’m starving—didn’t have time for lunch today.”

He loosens his tie and pulls his jacket off before sitting down and untying his shoes. His business suit tells me he had meetings all day. Like me he’d rather be outside in the fresh air digging in the dirt and climbing rocks.

“How did your classes go this morning?” he asks.

“They were okay. Mr. Thompson wasn’t there so I came home early and did work on my own. I didn’t want to suffer with a substitute.”

Dad raises one eyebrow and almost says something but then gulps his beer. Shrugging, he gives me one of his knowing smiles.

I’m pulling the pizza out of the oven when he starts talking.

“Your mother called today—said you wanted to talk about the Antarctica trip. Kaz Kopac called also from McMurdo and filled me in on the time schedule and the other eleven team members. He says we have a two to three week window to get our field camp set up before summer storms begin. We have to leave McMurdo base within ten days which means the team has to be ready to leave Christchurch by next week.”

The pizza’s ready. I’m wondering what all Mom said. I wait for him to tell me I’m one of the eleven. He likes to save the best for last most of the time. I bite into my pizza ready to listen.

“We suspect the fireball burned out northwest of the Ross Ice Shelf near the Far Western Ice fields in the Allen Hills close to where the Martian rock was found in 1984. The helicopters are doing a reconnaissance search this week to find a plateau with good visibility for landing and take off. It’ll take a week to get everything together and loaded on the aircrafts. When the team arrives in McMurdo next week, Kaz wants us ready to leave and get settled in the field before sudden storm winds change the landscape or a white-out shuts us down.”

Dad slows for a sip of beer and a bite of pizza. He’s watching me. He must feel my hope firing up. I can’t keep my thoughts from thinking out loud. He knows me too well.

“This pizza is the best I’ve had in a long time—goes good with beer.”

Nodding, I wait for him to begin again.

“By the middle of the month, weather allowing, we’ll be ready to hunt for our burned-out fireball. It’ll be like searching for a needle in a haystack, but then that’s how Robbie Score found the famous Martian meteorite. Who knows what else we’ll find. Kaz says we have money to stay until the end of February.

“I told you about Kaz, my Polish friend? We were team rookies the first time I went to McMurdo over fifteen years ago, before your mother and I were married. Our expedition was at a field camp on a plateau near the base of Mt. Derrick. Kaz pulled me out of a crevasse and saved my life on that mountain. That’s where I got your name. Did you know that?”

“No—you never told me. Does Mom know?”

“Yes, she knows, and as you know, she’s never been too excited about my Antarctica adventure. Later, she wanted to name you William after her brother. I wanted to name you Kaz. We compromised with Derrick.”

“Uncle Willy? No way. I can hear the guys at school calling me Silly Willy or Willy Nilly. Thank goodness you got to Mt. Derrick. I like my name.”

“Kaz has been the field safety officer at McMurdo ever since. New rookies have to get through his snow survival school before going on their assignments. His work plays an important role in collecting and surveying the meteorites.”

Dad’s excited. His enthusiasm is firing me up again. He must be hyper from Kaz’s call. I can’t wait to meet Kaz. He’ll fix things up for me to go. If anyone can do it, he can. In a minute Dad’s going to tell me I’m one of the eleven. I’m thinking with all the storms my laptop may not work in the field; but I can journal. Notes will be valuable for

my science fair project.

“Well, Son, you wanted to hear about Antarctica. There’ll be more to talk about after I’m there. It’s going to be a staggering adventure. With all my heart, I wish you could come.”

He stares hard at me; the wrinkles on his brow shift together. “I know you have your heart set on going, Derrick. It’s just not possible this time. But like tonight, I plan to share everything and call you and your mother on the radio when I can. You’ll have first-hand scoop on what’s going on, before and after.”

He keeps staring. Can he see my thoughts and feelings churning inside me? Can he hear my brain screaming? What’s wrong with him; I’m his best friend and buddy. He can’t abandon me for four months on an adventure we’ve dreamed of sharing together. This trip must be blowing his mind or else Kaz’s call excited him and he’s forgotten about me.

I won’t cry ... I’m not going to cry. There’s nothing to say. Will he stop staring at me? He sighs guessing I might cry Noooo I don’t want a hug—gotta go—don’t need his stupid pity. I’m out of here.

“Derrick, come here. We need to talk.”

I’m almost to my room when he calls up the stairs.

“Son, come back ... talk to me.”

“Forget you!” I scream. I walk into my room and slam the door. It’s too much.

Chapter Four

It's midnight. Dad's talking to Mom. She's upset. I'm worn out trying to keep my tears back. Now I know why some kids cry when they don't get their way. It's an easy way out. I look in the mirror at my screwed-up, red face. Inside, my brain screams—not fair. I want to hit someone or something.

The bullies at school push me around and call me names. Angry like me, they don't want to cry either. Instead they pick on kids too little to fight back. My face is hot. I grab my glasses and throw them across the room.

How can Dad do this to me—his best friend?

Well, I'm not going to cry; and I'm not going to be a bully. I'm going to be a man. Soon I'll start growing a beard. Tomorrow I'll tell him I'll be his assistant, here, in Christchurch. I'll show him I'm not a kid. Later we'll talk about why I should be on the team. Tired, I fall asleep with my clothes on. Last thing I remember is kicking off my shoes and wondering if Becky cries.

Smells and sounds of breakfast stir downstairs. I look for my glasses on the dresser and am reminded of the night before and my decision to be agreeable. A quick

look in the mirror tells me it won't be easy. I crawl around looking for what's left of my glasses. They're in the corner; one lens is scratched, the other, popped out. I leave the pieces on the desk, jump into my jeans, pull on my Saturday shirt, and stagger down the stairs barefoot.

"Morning, Mom." I clear my throat and stumble over to the counter feeling like I forgot to wake up. She mumbles back a quiet 'morning'. Her eyes are puffy. She's still upset about Dad. My arguing doesn't help.

I'm reaching for a cereal bowl when Dad walks in, his eyes on my back. I turn around and brace myself, trying to look normal without glasses. Hope Mom knows where my extras are.

"Let's talk, Derrick."

He sits down and watches me pour milk and dump more sugar than I should on my cereal before looking up with a mental pout. Mom is busy at the sink.

"Son, there's no one I'd rather have on my team than you."

His voice is thoughtful and eases some of my hurt.

"You know a great deal about meteorites. I realize that. I read your latest research paper on the Martian rock. Someday you're going to be an important scientist. Both your mother and I are proud of you, and I appreciate your interest in what I'm doing. Like I said, I'd have you with me if I could. But twelve-year olds are considered children and the rules say no children.

Dad fills his bowl with cereal and reaches for the milk. Mom is still puttering around behind me. It's my turn now.

“Dad, I read about Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts working at McMurdo as assistants to scientists in field camps.”

“That’s true. Every year they have a contest for the scouts to see which boy and girl will get to come. The competition is tough. You have to study really hard and be graduating from high school. I hope you’ll be a winner when you’re older.”

“But Dad, the rules aren’t fair. I’m more mature than most seventeen-year olds, and I’ve learned more from you than those scouts will ever know about rock formations and meteorites. I’m already experienced enough to be an assistant. Isn’t there someone, maybe Kaz, you can talk to and explain what I can do? I’m your son and you’re well known and ... Kaz’s friend.”

Dad’s brow scrunches. He sighs and looks back at Mom, then me, and shakes his head. His soft voice turns stern.

“Are you suggesting the rules should be broken because you think I’m someone special?”

“Well, yeah ... maybe, something like that.”

“It doesn’t work that way, Derrick. I have to follow the rules like everyone else. You won’t be allowed to come and that’s final. I don’t want to hear anymore about it. If you want to be my assistant here in town, you may come with me this morning to the Clothing Distribution Center and help me get packed.”

For the moment, my ribs cave in ... feels like my heart dropping in my chest. What can I say? He’s not about to take a chance of getting in trouble with Kaz. I want to tell him that this situation is different. Those rules are for regular kids, and I’m not a

regular kid. He knows I can be a big help to him. I'll have to try again later. Maybe he'll come to his senses. There must be a way. Right now I need to be cooperative. I stare back at him and sigh.

“Okay, Dad, what can I do? I want to help.” His face brightens. Mom’s at my back ready for a hug.

“That’s my son. I really can use your help here in town,” he says. “Let’s finish breakfast and we’ll go to the Center.”

There’s a quiet sigh of relief from behind. The whole kitchen feels jacked up. For now, it’s okay.

“Wait till you see the survival gear and clothing we take,” Dad says. His voice is back to normal. “Bring your camera. You’ll want pictures for your science project.”

On the way he tells me more about the expedition. I try to listen with enthusiasm. We drive past the airport across from the International Antarctic Center (IAC).

Dad says the architects designed the buildings to look like Antarctica’s landscape. One building looks like an iceberg, and the distribution center’s two-story warehouses next door look like blocks of ice.

“I’ve been meaning to bring you and your mother here ever since we arrived last July. Jake says it’s a fantastic exhibit of the science and experiments going on in Antarctica with plenty of data about the meteorite finds.”

“Yeah, I know. Becky told me.”

“You’ll see all kinds of displays to help you with your science project. They’ve recreated Antarctica’s atmosphere and environment so you can experience all four

seasons of the continent. They even have a polar room of real snow and ice caves where they generate authentic storms with twenty-five mile per hour winds.

“Jake says you can try on survival clothing, crawl around in polar tents and ice caves, and jump on ‘skidoos’ at the model field camps. It’s incredible, he says. I’m looking forward to our going next week. Don’t you think a trip to the Center and my sharing with you on the radio will give you plenty of information for your project?”

I know he’s trying to get me excited again about his trip. He feels bad and like a kid I’m sulking. It’s hard to be the man. Crying is easier.

“Dad, will you bring home some special rocks for my science project? Like maybe from the moon or Mars?”

“Wow, that’s a big order. I don’t know. I’ll do what I can. Not that many moon or Martian rocks are found. I’ll get pictures of what we do find and give you detailed reports on them. You’ll see lunar and Martian meteorites at the Visitors Center next week, you know.”

“Yeah, I’ve read all about them. Everyone can get that information. Pictures will help. Having my own rocks for the project would be better.”

“I’ll see what I can do. Maybe I can borrow a specimen sample. Don’t get your hopes up, though.”

We finally find a spot to park. Dad says this place is big business for New Zealand, especially Christchurch. People from all over the world come to be outfitted for their stay in Antarctica. Before following Dad in, I stop to take pictures. It’s hard to get the whole building in the frame.

I get wound up again watching the people move in and out the doors with baskets full of clothing and gear. Listening to the excitement in their voices and conversations, I imagine myself taking off for McMurdo, flying over with the team, and getting off the plane in my red hooded coat.

Dad's reading the signs. Soon we're facing a long wall displaying the clothing and gear on peg boards. Samples of everything from socks and underwear to fur hooded red coats, face masks, and gloves hang with identification tags. Boots, ropes, and axes sit on shelves at the end. I follow Dad over to take pictures of everything.

I've read about the importance of layers but never imagined wearing so much stuff. Mom needs to see this—even skinny me could keep warm. I take a whole bunch of pictures before Dad calls me over.

This is great. Now I know what we wear under the red coats. I wonder if they have gear to fit me. I watch people, some half-dressed, run back and forth to the dressing rooms, grabbing different sizes. I'd probably wear a woman's size small which is okay, whatever would fit.

Dad's busy checking out the sleeping bags on another wall. He motions for me to come over with the basket.

"Better bring two more," he says. "Kaz needs to replenish the storerooms. He wants a dozen of the winter bags and three sets of extra small sizes of polar gear. There're always a few rookies, he said, who misjudge their size."

I push and pull the baskets over, smiling to myself. I'll try the extra small sizes on when we get home. If I'm big enough for the gear, I'm big enough to be an assistant on

the team.

“Hey, Dad—where are you going to pack all this stuff?” He pushes the bags down in two of the baskets and the polar gear in the other. Each item is wrapped in clear plastic and bubbles out. Dad carefully pokes holes in the plastic with his jackknife.

“No problem. Next week it’ll be your job to cut off the tags and wrapping and pack them in the large trunks I have in the garage.”

Chapter Five

I'm sitting alone at the lunch table with my brown bag of healthy food looking like an outcast as usual. The principal says I have until the first of the year to start wearing my greenies or look-a-likes, as I call them. Mom has my school uniform waiting for me in the closet. I'm thinking I can stall until February if I get to Antarctica.

My brain's been working full blast all weekend on how to get there. Becky sees me and comes over. Guess I better tell her.

"Hi Derrick, how's it going? You don't look too good."

"It's Antarctica—Dad says no go. He wants me on the team but the idiotic rules say no children."

"You're not a child," she says. She sets her tray down across from me. Looks like pizza day.

"You've had tons of experience and you know plenty about meteorites. Your dad must know that's not fair. What are you going to do?"

Some weirdoes walk by and throw their garbage on our table. I look at Becky. She looks at me. We shake our heads and ignore it.

"I'm not sure what I can do—except I know I have to go."

“By the way,” Becky says, as we push the garbage to the other end of the table, “it was cool what you did yesterday, telling that bully to back off when he was picking on Joe.”

I shrug. “Yeah, I almost got myself pummeled though. It’s a good thing that teacher came along. I hate bullies. I don’t like to fight, though, unless I have to.”

Becky gives me a thumbs-up look. She makes me feel super okay. Right now, she’s the smartest girl I know and the only person in the whole world understanding me.

I’m thinking hard while I finish my cold breakfast burrito and start peeling my orange. I wonder what she’ll think if I tell her I’m going to sneak on the plane to Antarctica. Better let her know—maybe she can help—as long as she doesn’t tell her folks.

“Can you keep a secret?”

“Sure, what’s up?”

“I’m going to Antarctica.”

“You mean without your dad’s okay?”

“Yeah—looks like I’ll have to break the rules if Dad won’t. I’m going to get on that plane one way or another, no matter what the rules say about no kids.”

“Like a stowaway?”

“Yeah ... like a stowaway—that’s it. I’ll be a stowaway. Good idea. Thanks. I knew you could help.”

“But what will you do when he finds out? He’ll be furious and send you home.”

“Not my dad. He’ll understand. He’ll be glad I’m there. The hard part will be

getting on the plane without being seen. Once I'm at the base, he'll convince Kaz and the others that I'll be a good assistant. They won't send me home. They don't have many flights once the summer storms begin. Kaz told him the weather at McMurdo is the worst they've had in years—like blizzards and white-outs for weeks at a time. I just hope Dad's team can get out okay. Kaz says they'll have ten days at the most to get to the field. I have to be ready to go when they call him.”

We dump our garbage on our way out of the cafeteria.

“Gee whiz, Derrick, you sure are brave. It's not going to be easy.”

“I know, I know. It's scary. My brain's been going over every possible idea. How about you? Any brainstorm? Dad's flight may leave this week on Friday if the weather's okay. I'm packing gear for him tomorrow.”

“If you were a little mouse, you could ride in his pocket or in his suitcase.”

“Yeah, very funny,” I smile at her wanting to humor me. “What else?”

“I don't know. I've read stories about stowaways who hide with cargo. Big problem is how you'll get to the airport. I'd drive you if I could. What about a taxi?”

“No, that's too chancy. Someone would see me and tell Mom.” At the mention of Mom a lump of guilt feels stuck in my throat. *I have to do this Mom*, I say to myself. *I have to do this.*

Then something Becky said sticks. I stop walking ... stowaways hide with the cargo. Yeah ... maybe I can ... that's it—maybe I can.

“The cargo, Becky—the cargo.”

“What?” She stops and turns around with a puzzled look.

“Dad asked me to get sleeping bags and gear for Kaz ready for a cargo pick-up truck Friday morning. A separate flight is going over with extra gear, snowmobiles, and big stuff like the trunks I have to pack. I can ride out with the cargo truck.”

We keep walking toward our lockers. My breathing is back to normal. What a relief to have a solution—at least a possible one. For a minute I thought I might start crying again.

“Then what? You think you can get into the plane without someone seeing you; and what about your mom and dad? They’ll be expecting you when your dad takes off.”

“Details,” I say, cheered on with my new idea. “I’ll figure something out after I get more information from Dad. It’s going to work, Becky—wait and see. I’ll get my stuff together tonight after I talk to Dad.”

“What all do you have to take?”

“Well, the cargo plane will be cold once it’s airborne—like way below zero. I’ll wear my polar gear—it’s good for eighty below, and my other stuff like camera and GPS can go in my pockets; and a notebook, of course. A scientist always has to journal.”

“How long is the flight? What about water and food?”

“Dad said the cargo flight takes around eight to ten hours. I’ll have my water bottle in another pocket and some protein snacks. I’ll be okay. Once the plane is on its way I’ll come out of hiding. The pilots will be upset but they won’t want to turn around.”

“Hope you’re right. Sounds risky to me. Aren’t you a bit frightened? Something could go wrong. Stowaways sometimes get in big trouble in the stories I’ve read.”

“No ... yes ... I don’t know ... maybe a little. Don’t worry. I’ll be fine. Better get

going to class. Mr. Thompson wants our outline for the science fair contest today. Have you decided on your project?"

"No, not yet," she says, pulling her books from her locker. "I've been busy. I can't make up my mind."

"You can partner with me, if you'd like. Don't you think we'd make a good team?"

She turns, clutching her book, and gives me that wide-eyed wonder-woman look, like I was the Easter bunny or something.

"That would be cool," she says. "My ideas are boring after listening to your project. And besides, I'd like to learn more about meteorites. I might decide to be a geologist someday. If you give me a copy of your outline, I'll get started with the research while you're gone."

"Cool, Becky, super cool. I'm going to need help getting a report together by March if I'm not back until February. We can tell Mr. Thompson this afternoon we're partners. Just don't let him know about my being gone until I'm gone. I'll be in touch with you through Mom."

Becky's eyes are misty. She's going to miss me. "I'll call you tomorrow after school and let you know how everything is going, okay?"

"Thanks Derrick."

She squeezes my hand. My heart races again as her deep purple-blue eyes hold mine in suspense. I think she might marry me some day. Together we can go to the moon or Mars.

Chapter Six

Dad said he has chores to do for Mom this afternoon, so I cut classes to get home early. Maybe he'll know more about the cargo pick up. Man, I hope I can hide in the truck and figure a way to get on the plane.

“Hey, Derrick—you're just in time to give me a hand. I promised your mom I'd get the screens on before I leave. Next month you'll want windows open for a summer breeze. Aren't you home a little early?”

“Yeah—not much going on the last hour—thought I'd get to see you before dinner. Is Mom still upset?” I hand him a screen when he's up the ladder.

“A little but she'll get over it. Not for you to worry. You know your mom. Once I'm gone she'll focus on you. I hope you'll keep her company.”

“She keeps pretty busy at work, doesn't she? I'll be working at school on my science fair project. Won't you be calling her?”

Dad climbs down, moves the ladder to the next window as I get another screen. Mention of Mom rattles me. I never lie to Dad. Sometimes I don't tell the exact truth to Mom because she gets upset so easily, but I'm always straight with Dad.

“Not every night; maybe once a week, briefly. We have to keep the line open for communication with the base. They keep us up-to-date on the weather. And remember, the rest of the team has loved ones to call.”

Dad climbs down the ladder and tips it sideways. He keeps talking as we move to the back of the house.

“Don’t be anxious though; Kaz will call your mother if any emergency arises. I’ll tape our daily happenings for you to have when I get home.”

More questions. “When do you take off, Dad? Will Mom and I take you to the airport? When are the trunks picked up? What if they have another big storm next week and the planes can’t get out?”

“Whoa, hold on—one question at a time. I told you Kaz wants us in McMurdo next week, ready to go. If the weather cooperates we’ll take off early Friday morning; otherwise wait until next week or the first clear day.

“Hey—this isn’t the right screen. Hand me that taller one behind you ... thanks. I don’t know why this window had to be odd ... here, hold onto this short screen for the next window.

“Don’t fret about getting me to the airport. You and your mother will still be sleeping when they pick me up. The cargo crew will get the trunks later to go on a separate flight with the snow machines. I do want those trunks packed by Thursday, though, just in case our plans are moved back a week. Anything can happen with Antarctica’s crazy weather.”

“When do we go to the Visitors’ Center? It’s Tuesday already. Did you talk to

Mom about going? Becky's been but wants to go again with us."

"I'm sorry, kiddo. I'm bogged down with last minute errands, plus getting my office in order before I go. You and your mother will have to go later while I'm gone. There'll be plenty of time during summer break. Becky can go with you then.

"You plan on getting to classes while I'm gone and making friends. Your mother's concerned about your limited companionship. There's more to life than just looking for rocks with your dad. Having friends, boys and girls your own age, is important for your happiness. Think about that while I'm away, okay?"

"I will. Becky and I are good friends, you know. Did I tell you, we're going to be partners on our science fair project?"

"Well, that'll please your mother. See what you can do about other friendships. Not all the guys at school are bullies or jocks."

"I know."

"Are you taking your GPS?" I ask.

"No. Kaz says they have more sophisticated ones for us to use that locate and record multiple destinations instantly. The new ones make it almost impossible for anyone to get lost unless they're in a total white-out. And we'll have the radio to communicate when the weather allows.

"Well? Have I answered all your questions?"

All the screens are up and Dad's moving the ladder to the shed. I'm walking behind him holding one end.

"When will we ... I mean, when do you get home?"

“Like I told you, we have funds to last until the end of summer. I imagine, if we’re lucky enough to find the fireball, we’ll break camp and head home right away. The Johnson Space Center will be anxious to have a look at it.”

Dad keeps talking as we carry the ladder into the shed and lean it against the wall. All done, he turns with his hands on his hips and looks at me again with that, ‘I’m-sorry look’ He caught my slip. I better be careful.

“It’s going to be a super cool adventure for you, Dad. I wish I could go but I understand the rules.”

He shakes his head. “I hope you do. I know it’s hard after all your dreams of going with me. There’ll be more chances when you’re older. Keep up your studies and your day will come.”

“Yeah, I know.” My day *is* coming, I’m thinking. I hurry to my room to call Becky. She’ll be waiting.

Chapter Seven

“Hi, can you talk?”

“Oh, Derrick, it’s you. Hold on. Let me get the phone in my room.” She calls her mother to hang up and waits for the click. “How’s it going?”

Becky’s gentle voice reminds me that I’m going to miss talking with her. I suppose Dad will be lonesome for Mom, too. We can always daydream—that might help.

“I just finished talking with Dad and getting all the details. I don’t have to worry about being around when he goes to the airport. He plans to leave early Friday if the weather is okay. The trunks will get picked up later, giving me a chance to sneak onto the truck.

“With any luck, Mom will have left for work by then. Friday is a perfect day. She always comes home late after wedding rehearsals and leaves early Saturday, letting me sleep in. I can fix the bed to look like I’m still in it. She may not miss me until that evening when she gets home from the wedding. What do you think?”

“You think of everything—except it’s going to be broad daylight. How will you get on and off the truck without someone seeing you?”

“I know. I’m going to have to trust my luck. I’m planning to sneak into the cab behind the seats while they load the trunks and sneak out when they unload. The hard part is going to be getting on the plane. I’m going to wear my red parka and do some fibbing if necessary. Not to worry, I’ll come up with something.”

At this point I can’t imagine what I’m going to say to convince the cargo guys I’m supposed to be on the flight. There I am, puny me in my red coat, pretending to be one of them. It’s going to take more than luck—like maybe a miracle.

“Well, don’t do anything dangerous.”

“I won’t. I may be short but I’m strong and smart. Hey, are you coming to dinner tomorrow? Mom said you all are invited.”

“I’ll be there. I’ve got something to give you for your adventure.”

“What is it? Tell me.”

“No. You have to wait and see.”

“Not fair—you’re a tease. I’ll hold my breath waiting if you don’t tell me.” I’m guessing it’s a picture of her and she’s shy to show me.

“Bye, see you tomorrow night,” she says and hangs up.

Smiling at her tease, I roll over on my back feeling totally pleased with myself. Becky believes in me. It’s going to happen.

Chapter Eight

Wednesday, November 8th

“Derrick, better get ready for school,” Mom calls. “The bus will be here before you know it. Breakfast is on the table. I have to leave. Your dad left early.”

Man, I meant to tell Mom last night I wasn’t going to school today. I wanted to sleep in. It is too late now. I roll out of bed, wide awake and yell down the stairs.

“Bye, Mom, see you tonight. I’m staying home to pack the trunks for Dad.”

“This is the second day this week you’ve missed classes. Can’t those trunks wait until after school?”

“It’s a big job, Mom. Not to worry. I’m okay with my lessons. Don’t forget about dinner tonight. Becky said she’s coming.”

“Well, okay, but next week I don’t want to hear any excuses.”

“You won’t. See you tonight. Have a good day.”

The garage door closes. Finally—home alone. I rush downstairs and gobble up my cereal, juice, and cold toast. Then back upstairs to get dressed and grab the stuff on my list for packing. Extra underwear and casual clothes can go in one of the trunks with

my pajamas and toothbrush stuff. The GPS and jack knife go in my coat pockets along with the camera and notebook. I'll have tent time in the evening to write notes for Becky and our science project.

Which reminds me, thinking about her; I need some snacks and a water bottle. A couple of packages of dried fruit and jerky from Dad's camping gear will keep me going for eight hours. I hope they have a place to pee on the plane.

Okay, now to get the sleeping bags and gear unwrapped and ready for packing. My stuff will go on bottom in case someone opens the trunks. I'm keyed up like the people at the Clothing Distribution Center last week. I'd like to tell all the jocks at school I'm going to Antarctica with my dad. Then they'd know how cool it is to be smart.

As I yank the bags and gear free of the plastic, I imagine myself dressed in one of the red coats, out on a skidoo, slowly moving along the deep blue ice in line with the rest of the team. Dad's a hundred feet away on my right. We drive by most of the rocks; by now we know what we're looking for. And then suddenly, a few yards in front of me. The sun's reflection on something catches my eye. I slow down and stop in front of a rock roughly the size of a baseball; a glaze of orange shines through its crust. Dad comes over—then the team. We take pictures and measurements before sealing it in a plastic bag to send to Johnson Space Center. The team high-fives and knuckles me with congratulations. Dad says it looks like a Martian specimen. I'm sure it is.

Caught up in my daydream, I jump when the garage door flings open. Dad rushes in. My extra clothes are on top of one of the trunks. He's so hyped this week, maybe he won't notice. I move over in front of the trunk.

“Hi Dad.” My words stick in my throat. I hope he doesn’t stop to talk.

“There you are. Your mother called, said you were working on packing today. I didn’t mean for you to stay home from school; but I’m happy to see it getting done. I’m here for just a minute to grab a report in my office.”

Thank goodness. He rushes through—doesn’t even look at me. As soon as I see his back I push the clothes to the floor and cover them with one of the sleeping bags.

Here he comes again. I’m still feeling fidgety. My armpits are sweaty.

“Bye, Dad.”

“Bye. Have to get back to the university. See you tonight.”

He’s almost to his car when he turns around and comes back in the garage.

“Are you okay?” he asks, touching my forehead. “You look hot.”

He knows me so well—won’t do any good to lie. I move to the driveway to get some fresh air.

“I am hot, Dad. Yanking these bags out of their wrappers made me sweaty. I’m all right. I just needed some fresh air.”

“Well, okay Son. No need to hurry so fast. You have all day if you aren’t going to school. I’ll see you tonight.”

I walk him to the car and wave as he drives away.

Whew, that was close. I better wait until tomorrow to pack my stuff just in case he looks at the trunks tonight. Means another day at home—Mom will be on me again. What can I say this time; have to think of something—like being sick?

In the meantime, I need to clean up for tonight. This may be the last time I see Becky for a long time. I hope she won't forget me.

Chapter Nine

Becky's at the door with her parents. She looks super nice. I've never seen her in a dress or without a ponytail. Her long hair looks more like honey than I remember—blondish with a red shine.

She flashes her smile. Wow, is she ever gorgeous. I'm blown away. My neck and face feel warm, like I'm blushing. Mom stares at me. Dad comes to the rescue.

"Come in, everyone. Hello Marsha, Jake. You're looking especially pretty this evening, Becky," Dad says.

"Thank you, Mr. Ripley."

"Derrick tells me you two are partners for the New Zealand Science Fair contest. That's great. He tells me you have good ideas."

"I hope so. I brought a couple of books for us to look at tonight after dinner." She looks over at me and smiles again.

This time Mom interrupts and calls me to set the table. Becky comes in to help. I'm without words and feeling weird until we finish eating and blood rushes to my stomach.

“We’re going to the garage,” I say, looking at Dad. “I want to show Becky the gear I’m packing, okay?”

“Fine,” he says. He turns to Jake to continue their conversation. Mom and Becky’s mom are talking weddings. I hear Mom mention she has a busy weekend Friday night and all day Saturday. I look at Becky. We both grin and do a thumbs-up. The timing will be perfect.

Becky grabs her bag from the hall table. I know it isn’t just books. I wait until we get to the garage to ask.

“Okay, tell me—what do you have?” I don’t know why I’m feeling like I want to grab her. How come she’s so pretty? She pulls something from the bag and hands it to me.

“It’s a small tape recorder for your journaling,” she says. “My dad uses one when he’s out in the field. I brought some extra tapes.”

She looks to see if I like it. I love it.

“Wow, this is super cool, Becky. What a great, great idea. It’s tiny enough to keep in my pocket and look—the microphone has a clip on the cord. I can hook it to the top of my coat and record when my hands are busy. It’s perfect--totally cool.”

She’s beaming. I wish I had the courage to hug her like Mom hugs me all the time. But I don’t. I’m afraid I’d fall apart just getting that close to her perfect face. I smile and open the trunk lid to show her the gear I’ll be wearing.

“These trunks are awesome,” she says. “I didn’t imagine they’d be so big. You could fit in one. I remember reading about a stowaway in a coffin. Have you thought of hiding in the trunk?”

I look at Becky. She’s grinning.

“You’re kidding, of course. It would be a bone crushing, bruising, and head banging ride. Do you know how cargo people throw stuff around?”

“Yeah, that’s true—just kidding. I wouldn’t want you to get hurt.”

“It’s something to think about, though. I could wear my bike helmet ...”

Becky laughs, “and my roller skating pads.” We both laugh. It’s hilarious just picturing me in the trunk in my red coat and sports gear.

“No, seriously Becky—I need help. The only idea I have so far is to sneak behind the front seats in the cab while they’re loading.”

“What if there’s no space to hide behind the seats like in mail trucks? Then what—you’d be left behind. And it isn’t going to be easy to con your way onto the plane if you do get there.”

“I know, I know. I may be pushing my luck.”

“Becky,” her dad calls, “time to leave.”

“I better go. Don’t give up. Let’s think about it tonight. I’ll call you tomorrow before I go to school, okay?”

“Okay, bye.”

“Bye.”

“Becky?”

“Yeah?”

“You sure look pretty tonight. Thanks for the cool gift.”

She blushes and glances down at her feet.

“Yeah, okay—talk to you tomorrow.”

Chapter Ten

Thursday Morning, November 9th

I'm getting dressed when I hear Dad tell Mom he'll be leaving early tomorrow. Kaz must have called this morning.

"Tell Derrick the trunks will be picked up around ten," he says before closing the door. I hope Becky calls soon. I'm feeling anxious—not so sure this morning if I'm ready for this. What if it makes Dad angry? Mom's going to be frantic. Making plans has been exciting until now. Talk is easy but the doing is scary.

No, I tell myself. I have to follow through. Dad said he wanted me with him. He knows we've always dreamed of going to Antarctica. It's just those stupid rules. Why should we have to follow rules when they aren't fair?

Dad will understand but Mom will be hurt about my fibbing. She desperately wants me in school doing stuff with kids my own age which doesn't make sense. I have Becky. She's the only friend I've met having the same interests I do. She reads a whole lot and likes science and math projects. What are the chances of meeting another Becky? Zero.

What if I promise Mom to ... that's it. I better get my letter written this morning. I'll send her an email. No, better write it in cursive. She says cursive is more personal.

"Are you up, Derrick?" Mom calls.

"Yeah—getting dressed," I yell down the stairs. "I'm going to stay home. I have an assignment I have to get done today." *Like writing my letter and finishing the packing,* I whisper to myself.

A long silence—I know what she's thinking.

"Have a good day, Mom. I'll get my own breakfast and clean up."

The door closes without a word. I listen to her car drive away. She's unhappy. Not just because of me, though. She's sad about Dad being gone for so long. I think she worries about him more than me. She's going to be lonesome.

The phone rings, must be Becky.

"Hello? ... Hi, Dad ... yes, I know ... ten tomorrow ... okay, I will. See you tonight."

Dad sounds anxious, too. Maybe I should call this off. Stowing away is going to take more than luck—especially the getting on the plane part. It's probably a stupid idea. What if I get caught and put in jail? Then Mom would really be mad and Dad would be embarrassed and furious. The phone rings again. I hope it's Becky. "Hello?"

"Hi, Derrick, how did you sleep?"

Hearing her voice gives me a boost. "Not so good. I've been feeling a little uneasy. Dad leaves tomorrow. He said the cargo guys will be by at ten to get the trunks. Still don't know what kind of truck. Mom left without saying goodbye. She's sad about

Dad leaving and my not going to classes. I'm thinking this may be a dumb idea. I better stay home."

Becky's quiet.

"Must be hard to see your mom unhappy," she says.

"Yeah, she never gets really mad but she would if I left without telling. Mostly she'd be hurt and feel betrayed. I can see her now sitting alone at the table in the kitchen, crying in her bed, and sitting in the dark living room, no one to watch television or movies with. Four months is a long time."

Becky's quiet again for a few seconds.

"I'd go see her and I know my folks will have her over for dinner and movies. I'll ask Mom to call her."

"You think I should go?"

"I don't know. It's a hard decision. You have to think of your dad, too."

"I know. You're right. He needs me with him. If Mom would only understand how necessary it is that I go."

"Have you written to her yet? Maybe you can convince her in your letter."

"Hey, that's a thought. I can be honest with her—tell her the truth. She'll have to understand. Thanks, Becky. You're the best friend I have. I'm going to write the letter right now before I finish packing. I still have signs to make for the trunks so they go to the right warehouse. I've been bummed out—can't think of how I'm going to get on the plane. You have any ideas?"

“No. My brain’s scrambled, too. I had a horrible dream about you last night—woke up screaming. Mom came running in to calm me.”

“What was it?”

“I can’t tell. Don’t want to worry you.”

“Tell me. I won’t worry.”

“Well ... in my dream you were hiding in a dark, pitch-black place. I could barely make out your face, but I heard your voice stuttering my name like you were freezing to death. I stretched my hand out to touch you, but you kept moving away. When I finally reached you I felt layers of fuzzy blankets covering your shivering body. I woke up trembling and cold with Mom shaking me. I tried to go back to sleep but couldn’t.”

“Don’t let it bother you—it’s only a dream. I’m sorry you lost sleep over me.” I look at the clock by my bed. “You better catch your bus. I’ll call tonight after I finish my letter and get my plan for tomorrow firmed up. I’m hoping Dad has information on the cargo truck. I’ll ask him tonight. Have you talked with Mr. Thompson yet?”

“Not yet. I will today. Okay, have to hurry. Talk to you later.”

“Bye. Thanks for sharing your dream—don’t worry.”

“Okay. Bye.”

We hang up at the same time. She sounded upset. That dream was heavy. She’ll be okay. I’ll share my letter with her. I better get it started while I’m in the mood. Becky makes me feel important. Except for Dad and Mom, there’s no one else who really cares about what I do. I’m going to miss her.

Mom's right—I do need more friends; but why not some who are interested in the same kind of work? Then we'd have plenty in common to talk about. There'll be scientists working with Dad, like Kaz. Why should I have to go to school when I can learn at home and at work? Becky's smart enough to do the same. I'll show Mom I can make friends in the field.

Chapter Eleven

Dear Mom,

Don't panic. I'm safe. Read this letter and you'll understand why I'm gone and haven't been at classes this week. Dad is my best friend. I want to be with him on this expedition and have a chance to meet more scientists like him. I know he wants it too—he's said so many times. I can't let a few dumb rules keep us from doing our dream adventure together.

Please don't worry about my being cold. You should visit the CD Center and check out the clothes I'll wear. Ask Becky—she'll tell you or go with you. She can show you a website about what we'll be doing at McMurdo. Dad will keep me safe. I'm sorry you'll be alone. Becky said she'd come see you and her mother will call you to visit.

I promise, Mom, when I get home I'll go to classes every day and make new friends and even join the debate team. I hope you like Becky because she's a best friend too. Please call her with any news from Dad.

Love, Derrick

The letter can go under my bed cover. She won't see it until she discovers the bump isn't me and that won't happen until Saturday when I'm with Dad. He'll talk to her. It'll be okay. He has a way with her.

I stick the letter in my dresser before hurrying downstairs to work on the trunk signs, telling myself everything's going to work out. There must be some way to get on that plane without being noticed. Hiding in the cargo truck won't be easy either. I better come up with an alternate plan. For now I need to survive the goodbyes this evening and get the signs made.

I'm in the garage working on the second sign, *Deliver to Clothing Supply Warehouse*, when a spark of genius crackles in my head. It takes a few seconds to catch on before sinking in. What if, yeah, what if . . .

"Yes, yes, yes," I yell out loud. "That's it!" A handle-with-care sign will keep the cargo guys from banging the trunk around. Why didn't I think of it before? Wait until I tell Becky. It was her funny idea.

My brain is warming up. Like, what about: *Handle with Care – Electronic Equipment*. I scribble the words on my notepad. The sleeping bags will cushion me. I'll wear my helmet just in case. I lift the lid of one of the trunks to check out the space. This time puny is good. I yank some of the bags out before crawling inside and pulling the lid down. I scream.

"*Whew!* It's pitch black."

Taking a deep breath, I bang the lid open and pop out like a jack-in-the box. This is going to take some getting used to. I step back and shake my head. Good thing I don't

have claustrophobia—or do I? That was scary. I give it another try. Better stay in and get used to the dark. I squirm around and use bags to sit on. There’s plenty of room. The lid falls down.

“Yikes!” I yell. I don’t think I can do this. I might be in here for hours. It’s stuffy. I need more air.

Think, think. I’m talking to myself. Drill holes in the back. That’ll help. Flaps of duct tape inside can cover them when people are near. Some light; need some light. Snacks can go in my coat pockets, and water—must remember water. I wiggle around. It’s going to be okay. I can handle this. Three hours at the most and I’ll be out, stretching in the plane.

I take a deep breath and push the lid open, noticing the latches on the front. I’d be in big trouble if the trunk got locked. The keys to these old trunks are long gone but the latches might click shut. I rig duct tape over the bottom latch with extra tape over the top of the latch allowing a strip of it to hang inside as a handle to lift the lid off. I practice several times. It works.

The sound of Dad’s car surprises me. I hustle out to meet him in the driveway and help take the groceries to the kitchen. I don’t want him in the garage. What if he decides to check out the trunks? He’ll see that duct tape. My heart starts to race. Must keep the conversation on other things and stop holding my breath.

“Your mother will be late,” he says. Let’s get the fixings ready for burritos. I’ll heat up the cold chicken with some beans if you want to shred the cheese and lettuce. There’re fresh tortillas in the bag. How’s your day been? Are the trunks ready?”

“All ready. Have to put the signs on after dinner,” I say.

“Great. I’ll have a look at them later. You know I’m leaving early?”

He spreads chicken and beans on a tortilla and hands it to me for cheese, lettuce, and salsa. I wrap it up and get it in the pan. Hope Dad doesn’t smell me sweating. Mom says girls shave their armpits. Ugh!

“Yeah, Mom told me you’d get picked up after midnight.”

“I won’t bother you in the morning. When you get up push the trunks out into the driveway, stay with them until the cargo guys come.”

“Not to worry. I’ll take care of them. What time are they coming for you?”

“Around three o’clock. We have to be off the ground by five in case the weather closes in again. Inspection at the terminal will take at least an hour.”

“Will they inspect the trunks?” I ask. *Please say no.*

“Most likely--be sure they aren’t locked.”

Thump—my heart sinks again.

Mom walks in and gives us a quick kiss and hello. She looks tired. Dinner time is not very lively. She isn’t hungry. My nerves are on edge with my stomach flipping around like hot cakes. What if Dad wants to check the trunks? I’m anxious to call Becky.

Dad and Mom go into the family room to watch the news while I clean up and put the leftovers away. As soon as the dishes are in the dishwasher, I dart upstairs to the phone hoping Dad has forgotten about the trunks. Worrying about security inspection is enough.

“Hi Becky, can you talk?”

“Yeah, I’m in my room thinking about your getaway. Nothing new comes to mind, how about you?”

“Good news, bad news. You won’t believe it—wait until I tell you. Remember our joking about my hiding in the trunk? Well that’s exactly what I’m going to do—stow away in the trunk. And I won’t need my sports gear. I’ll have *Handle with Care—Electronic Equipment* signs on top of each trunk. I’ve already practiced sitting in one of the trunks. In the morning, I’ll drill air holes in the back. Duct tape will cover them from inside. There’ll be plenty of room for my extra clothes and gear.”

“Sounds dark and scary to me; can you take a light with you? How long will you be locked inside? Won’t you get hot?”

“I’ve got it all taken care of—don’t worry. I’m fixing the latches so they won’t lock. It’ll be hot for a few hours until we’re loaded on the plane. Once we’re airborne, I can get out. My frozen water bottle will keep me cool until then. I’ll need a flashlight for sure.”

“Don’t forget the tape recorder,” she says. “I started looking on the internet at the websites you suggested for our science fair project. I wish I could go but not in a trunk. What’s the bad news?”

“The bad news is the trunks may have to go through security. There’s no way I can hide if they start poking around looking for electronic equipment. Not sure what I’ll do. Any suggestions?”

“That’s a tough one,” she says. “Surely they can’t go through the beeper line. How do you think they’ll do it?”

“I don’t know. I’m guessing they’ll have special inspectors open them in the cargo room. They’ll be looking for electronic equipment and find only survival gear—and me. It’s going to be a mess; not sure I can do it.” Before she can answer, I hear Dad calling.

“Have to go, Dad’s in the garage to look at the trunks—call you back later.”

The next minute, I’m stomping down the stairs trying to figure out what I’m going to say about the duct tape on those latches. Fooling Dad is impossible. This is it. My goose is cooked, as Mom would say.

Cool it Derrick. Calm down. You’re a nervous wreck. I slow down and walk to the kitchen door going into the garage. Mom’s still in the living room watching television. I take a deep breath, turn the knob on the door, and step into the garage. Dad stands there in front of the trunks. A broad grin spreads across his face.

“Son, I am so proud of you for your forward thinking. I don’t have keys to these trunks anymore. It would have been a major nuisance if the latches were locked before the trunks reached Kaz. This tape job is ingenious. Just don’t forget the signs.”

“I won’t. I’ll have them on by morning. Right now I want to call Becky back. She said to say goodbye to you and good luck in finding the fireball.”

“Tell her thanks and goodbye also. I’ll be talking to her dad tonight. First, I better finish packing.”

He walks over and wraps his arms around my shoulders, holding me to his chest for a long time before standing back and staring at me with tears in his eyes. Without a word, he ruffles my hair like he used to when I was little, then turns away, walking

through the door to the kitchen. A lump forms in my throat. Don't worry, Dad, I'll see you soon, I say to myself.

Dad's farewell reminds me of Becky. I'm glad I can say goodbye to her on the phone. Better call her back before it gets too late. Still have to think about security inspection at the airport.

Chapter Twelve

“Hi Becky, hope I’m not calling too late.”

“No problem, I’m awake. What’s up with your dad? Did you get caught fixing the trunks?”

“I did but—surprise, surprise. When he saw the duct tape on the latches he thought I was clever since we don’t have the keys. I hope I have that kind of luck with airport security. Any ideas?”

“Just one. How about you?”

“Nope. Nothing so far—been sweating it out over Dad’s inspection and hoping you might think of something. What?”

“Just a suggestion—not sure it’s a good one.”

“Let’s hear it.”

Her silence is noisy. Don’t know why she’s short on confidence tonight. She’s smart and her ideas are usually right on. Guess I sounded harsh or impatient. I still feel edgy about Dad looking at the trunks.

“Sorry Becky—what’s your idea?”

“Well,” she goes on with lilt in her voice, “since the signs say *Electronic Equipment* inside, then how about putting something on top of the bags and survival gear? Like, for instance, your laptop in one trunk with cords and attachments in the other? It might convince the inspectors, maybe enough to let the trunks pass. What do you think?”

“Could work,” he says. Except, my puny laptop or attachments in a huge trunk would look strange. What happens if they keep digging in the pile of gear? Then what? They’ll find me.”

“Not if you’re at the bottom when it’s time for inspection. Put layers of bags on top of you so they’ll stop poking around. How about that?”

“Might work. I’m thinking if the trunks are left alone in the cargo room, I could sneak out and crawl back in after the inspection. You think?”

“Perfect, as long as no one is there when you need to get out and back in. What if you’re out and the trunk is taken to the plane after the inspection?”

“At least I wouldn’t go to jail.”

Becky’s quiet again.

“I don’t know what I’m going to do. I’ll just have to make a decision at the time. I can’t think straight right now.”

“Me neither. I’m tired and a little worried about you.”

I’m thinking I’d better get off the phone. I hate saying goodbyes. She sounds like she might cry.

“Four months is a long time. I’m going to miss you,” she says.

That's it. I better go.

"I asked Mom in my letter to get in touch with you when Dad calls her with news. Time will go by before you know it. Keep busy with the report and don't worry about me. We better hang up, okay?"

"Okay, bye."

"Bye."

"Becky?"

"Yeah?"

"I'll miss you, too."

"I know, bye."

"Bye."

Chapter Thirteen

Friday, November 10th

It's a rough night for getting sleep. Midnight is the last time I see on the alarm clock. Can't stop worrying about getting through security. I'm a goner for sure if they open the trunks. Mom will be called from work to come get me. Even worse, Dad will be notified.

What am I thinking? I sit up in bed, turn the light on, and start remembering what Dad said. It was a risk for him to send in his application to ANSMET. He knew Mom would be upset. And it was risky when he let me climb those cliffs with him in Deflation Basin in New Mexico. I almost lost my grip until he grabbed me. He didn't tell Mom about that either.

"Life is always a risk, Son," he said. "Courage is your willingness to try and to face the consequences, good or bad."

I turn the light out and close my eyes. I'll deal with security when I get there.

Before I know it, a car engine awakens me. It's three o'clock when I look out the window. Dad's survival gear is loaded. He's on the front porch hugging Mom. She looks miserable as they wave goodbye.

Three more hours and she'll be up again and gone before seven. I don't have to get up until eight. Not that I can sleep. Still have to get those holes drilled and signs secured before ten. I mustn't forget to fix the bed with my note. Hope I can get through this okay. I could use more shut-eye ... too much on my mind. I go over my packing list. Oops, almost forgot my pocket knife. Don't need my ax.

I doze again thinking about Becky's dream of me in a dark place. I wonder if it's a premonition of my being in the trunk. That is a scary thought. Better remember to take my flashlight.

Almost seven—Mom's car pulls away. I roll out of bed half asleep and look out the window. Sunshine fills the skies and warms my room, reminding me it will be hot in the trunk with my arctic clothes. Better not wear the down vest.

I shower and pull on my wool underwear, shirt, pants, and socks. The rest of the gear goes in the trunk with the red coat on top to put on last. I tuck my helmet in, for just in case. My pockets are packed. I want to get those holes drilled before breakfast. I'm not hungry now but I will be. I follow Becky's suggestion and grab my laptop and attachments.

I scoot down to the garage and easily find Dad's one and a half inch bit for his drill. He is so organized—like me. Scientists have to be that way. Four holes should be enough. I cover them with the duct tape and secure the signs. Then back to the kitchen for

juice and toast, peanut butter and jam. Then I remember Mom. I run upstairs, fix up my bed with the note, go to the bathroom, and hurry to the garage to finish packing and attach the signs. The laptop goes in one trunk. I'll climb in the other with the attachments.

It's nine-thirty—time to push the trunks out and get in. They might come early. Darn, forgot the water bottle. I hustle to the kitchen, grab it out of the freezer, then back to the trunks. Hope no one is watching. I'm hot and nervous. It's nine-forty-five.

I'm pushing the second trunk out when I see the mailman approaching. Man, I hope he doesn't stop ... now what? He wants to talk.

"Hi Derrick," he says, stopping his cart and shifting his weight to a time-to-chat position. "What are you doing home from school today?"

"Oh, I have some work to do for my dad. I'll be going to school later." Darn it—I hate to fib like that. I stand behind the trunk to push, hoping he'll move on. I check the time—nine-fifty.

"Have to get this trunk ready to be picked up. Kind of in a hurry."

"Hey, let me give you a hand," he says, pushing his cart out of the way and coming toward me.

"It's okay, Mr. Lewis. I can get it. You better keep your schedule."

"I have time. You're sweating." He stands next to me behind the trunk, reading the sign on top. "Bet it's a heavy one for you."

As the trunk slides out like a wagon on wheels, his face shows surprise.

"I guess you're stronger than I thought."

“Yeah, I’m pretty strong.” I glance at the time: nine-fifty-five. That truck could be rolling up any minute. *Cool it, Derrick, cool it. Hopefully they’ll be late.* “Thanks, Mr. Lewis, for your help. I have to get back in the house.”

“Anytime, Son. You say hello to your folks for me.” He reaches in his bag on the cart and hands me our mail.

I thank him again and watch him continue down the sidewalk before I set the mail on the workbench and close the garage door. Ten o’clock. Any minute they could be here. Mr. Lewis is still in sight pushing his cart up the Terrigan’s walkway. He waves at me again. I wave back and wait.

When it looks clear, both ways, I lift the top of the trunk, slip on the red coat and crawl in. I strap on my bike helmet. My watch says five after ten—they’ll be here soon. Light shines through the holes as I check the tape on the latches. Here comes the van. I cover the air holes and listen as I adjust to the darkness.

The guys chatter about the signs before lifting the trunks onto the dolly and heaving them into the truck. Glad I wore my helmet. One guy mentions they have five snow machines to load. We must be going on an LC-130, the work-horse cargo plane.

I reach into my pocket for my flashlight and feel my journal and pencils. Not there. Supposed to be. I check my other pockets before remembering taking it out to change the batteries. I quietly grit my teeth and mumble to myself, “Dumb, dumb, dumb.” Every scientist carries a flashlight when exploring. I hope Dad or Kaz will have an extra one. Problem is I don’t have it now when I really need it.

I push the light button on my watch. Great, I can at least check the time. It takes about thirty minutes to get to the terminal. I lift the top slightly. It's a big truck. I can't hear the guys in front. We park. Soon I'm on a cart and moving. It seems a long way before I'm stopped. Lots of yelling. And then quiet.

I pull the tape down from the holes. Can't see much; I lift the top on the other side. No one's around. This would be a good time to get out except I have no idea what the plan is for inspection. Better stay put. It's warm and I'm feeling drowsy. Don't want to sleep now for sure. After awhile I check my watch.

Noon and still no sounds of being moved again. No sense getting out. Don't know if I'm in the inspection room or what. I'm hot. These new down sleeping bags smell like dead ducks. I should have aired them after pulling them out of the plastic. These holes aren't much help.

Someone's coming. I pull the tape over the holes and cover myself as best I can. Hard to get a decent breath—never been so hot. What can I say if they find me? The truth, dude—what else—have to face the consequence. Feet shuffle around the trunk.

Chapter Fourteen

“Hey ... are you two going to take these trunks or not?” someone yells. “The snow machines and rest of the cargo’s loaded. The pilot’s waiting to take off.”

A second voice yells: “Darn, no security stamps on them. They haven’t gone through inspection. Help me wheel them back or else get an inspector out here.”

“Come on—we don’t have time,” the first voice yells. “The pilot says he’s taking off in five minutes with or without this load. These trunks have to go now or maybe never if this storm continues.”

“No way. I’m not risking my neck on this one. Hold on two more minutes. I’m getting an inspector out here,” the second voice calls as he takes off running. The first guy is mumbling and I’m sweating. This is it.

Two minutes and he’s back. I hear a slap on the top of the trunk.

“Okay let’s go,” says the second guy.

The cart is rolling. I’m assuming, we’re on our way to security, until the first one asks, “Where did you get those inspection stamps?”

“I was lucky.” the second guy says, “When I told the inspector about the plane waiting, he just looked at me, handed me a couple stamps, and told me to do it myself. Anyway, let’s go.”

“Well, are we going to have a look?” says the first voice. “What if the electronics in here are guns?”

“Okay, okay,” the second voice says. “But make it fast. Great—they’re not locked.” He lifts the top of mine and then the other. The tops fall shut as they continue to push the cart along. “No guns, just computer stuff and sleeping bags,” he says. “Let’s go.”

I made it. I made it. Let me on that plane and in the air. I’ve sweated enough. I need to get these air holes open and suck in some clean oxygen before I pass out with this stench. Hurry, hurry, hurry.

“Hey, Luke, let the ramp down again. These trunks are ready to load,” the first voice yells.

Luke must be in the plane at the cargo end. I hear the ramp bang down and the other trunk bumping up on it.

“This one sure doesn’t weigh much for electronic equipment,” Luke says.

I’m guessing he’s lifting it off the ramp into the plane.

“This one’s heavier,” says the other guy.

Now, I’m sliding sideways and rumbling up the ramp.

“You got it?”

“Yeah, I got it” Luke answers as I feel the trunk being pulled into the plane and hear the motorized ramp coming up. *Please hurry.*

“You better strap them down,” a different voice on the plane says. “Don’t want them sliding around, banging into snow machines.”

“Will do.” Luke says. “Hope that’s it. The weather’s closing in at McMurdo. We’ve about eight hours to make it to Willy Field before the next storm hits. Otherwise we’ll have to land on the ice runway ten miles away from MacTown. I hate riding in those Sprytes. They’re cold and slow as sleepy snails.”

I brace myself as they push the backside of the trunk a ways before banging it against the side wall of the plane. Above the roar of the engines I hear Luke yell he’s closing the hatch. I’m guessing the trunks are in the cargo hold in the back near the loading door.

Wish they’d hurry. I’m going to have a heatstroke if I don’t cool off soon. The ice in my water bottle is melted. One more hour and I’m out of here. They won’t turn back with that storm on the way.

It’s pitch black except for the light on my watch. Glad Becky gave me this mini-tape recorder. I can start journaling in the dark. I pull the cord out of my pocket and hook the mike to the top of my coat’s zipper before pushing the buttons to record—quietly.

Recording on Friday, November twenty-seventh, in flight to McMurdo Station,

Antarctica: Hi Becky, I’m using my recorder, for the first time. All is going according to plan. Mom left early this morning not expecting me to be awake. She left a note that she

would be late tonight and not to wait up. I fixed up the bed with my letter under the cover. She won't miss me until tomorrow. By then Dad will have called and let her know I'm okay and staying with him. The cargo crew came on time. There were a couple of bumps but I had my helmet on. Luck and your suggestion to have the laptop and attachments on top got me through security. It's almost one o'clock. The guys said eight hours to McMurdo. I'm still in the trunk strapped down in the cargo hold. I'll wait an hour before hopping out just to make sure they won't turn around. I don't think they will with them rushing to beat the storm. I'll be glad to get out—tired of being cramped. My legs ache. The plane's ready to take off, engines are revving. Can't wait to get in the air and cool off. Seems like we taxi forever. Okay, here we go. Oops—plane's climbing—have to brace myself. That's all for now. Derrick

Chapter Fifteen

Three o'clock! I'm freezing. I've got to get out of here—must have fallen asleep after takeoff. It's quiet. I pull on the latch tapes and push up. The top won't budge. I try again. The tapes covering the latches break off. I keep pushing, banging ... not even a wiggle. I yank the air hole tapes off from inside and push two fingers through one hole. It dawns on me when I feel leather; the cargo guys strapped the trunk over the top. I'm trapped. My whispering voice gives way to a shriek.

No way, dude. They can't do this to me. Now what? Darn, I could be cramped in this trunk for six more hours and I'm cold. The cargo end isn't heated. I might freeze to death before anyone finds me. This can't be happening. Maybe if I scream ... they can't hear me. The air holes are against the wall and the guys are too far in front. Why didn't I think of this?

Okay, don't panic--breathe—use your brain—there must be something I can do. I'd be good for eighty below if I'd worn my down vest and had all my layers on. Problem is, I can't move around and generate any heat. Where are my chocolate bars and jerky?

That'll get me by for a couple hours. Mom's right, I need to gain weight for weather like this. I hope Dad's packed plenty of food for two.

Brrrrr ... I'm freezing. Five o'clock—snacks are gone, water's gone. Another three hours at least before McMurdo. Starting to shake—sign of hypothermia. I must stay awake and keep my mind active.

I loosen my helmet and put it on the outside of the hood, snuggling the fur around my face. I pull my feet closer in and wrap a bag around my legs and one over my shoulders before curling my hands under my armpits. I count seconds then minutes until I get to an hour.

Six o'clock, two more hours. I can hold on for two more hours. Have to—no choice. Mom and Dad would be furious with me if I die in this trunk. Becky would miss me, too.

Shivering won't stop; have to stay awake ... can't go to sleep. Okay, name all the states: California, Arizona, Nevada, New Mexico, Oregon, Washington, Idaho, Utah—they're the easy ones. Keep going Derrick—you can do it—don't sleep—keep going, do the capitals, keep awake, don't - go - to - sleep.

What day is it? Can't think ... Friday ... Friday night. When Mom gets home and reads my note, she'll call Dad. I hope she calls Becky. She's the only one who knows I'm in this trunk. Mom will come unglued if no one knows where I am. What if I ...? Dad will talk to her. I'm so sleepy ... so sleepy. What if I get hypothermia? Eyelids keep shutting. *Call Becky, Mom.*

Chapter Sixteen

Saturday, November 11th

Where are we? My face and hands are warm. Thank God, I'm alive. Last thing I remember is shivering and trying to stay awake. I must have fallen asleep before we landed. Can't remember being moved but it's warmer than in the plane. I check my watch—ten-thirty; in the morning? I must have slept all night.

My stomach's growling and my feet are numb. I can't move my legs. I think I'm gonna cry. What's that terrible smell? Where's Dad? Where's Kaz? I'm starving—my stomach aches. I gotta get out of here before I go crazy.

Trying to push the top up reminds me the lid is strapped shut. I check the air holes. No strap. Still won't budge. Man, that's great—the latches clicked shut when I pulled the tapes down. I've been in this trunk almost twenty-four hours. The smell is choking me—must have peed in my sleep. Haven't done that for years. I'm going to die if I don't get out of here. I scream and bang the sides and top and yell out through the air holes. Where have they left the trunks, anyway?

Let me think ... Saturday morning ... Mom must have discovered my note by now and called Dad. He'll come looking for me. Hurry Mom—go upstairs before you go to work. Look for me. Call Becky. I could sit locked in this trunk, wherever it is, all day. I'll be dead by the time Dad finds me. He might leave for the field before I get out. What if Mom went to work without checking on me? Tears burst out. I can't stop them. I hear one of the cargo guys. Sounds like Luke.

“That was a rough ride coming in last night. Then having to hang out at the ice field until morning waiting for the Spyrté to pick us up. I hope those trunks made the landing okay. Better get them on the next ride to the base. Kaz is waiting for them. Careful—in case those signs mean business. Who knows what he's got in them.”

I'm ready to yell to get out when I hear them mention Kaz. It'll be better to wait for him. Dad will be there. When he sees the signs he'll guess where I am and find a way to get these trunks open.

Chapter Seventeen

“Boy, what you doing here? Where you from? What your name? No kids allowed here.”

He’s talking so fast. I can’t understand him. This must be Kaz, Dad’s Polish friend.

“Kaz?”

“Yes, I’m Kaz.” He scowls and yanks at his goatee. “Who you are?”

“I’m Derrick, Brad Ripley’s son. Dad said I couldn’t come but I know he wants me with him. I’m not a kid.” My helmet falls as I try to stand. I brace my bottom on the edge of the trunk trying to get both feet under me. Sweat rolls down my face. I need to get this coat off and change my clothes. I’m exhausted and smell like pee. I can’t get my other leg out. He’s standing in my way with hands on his hips leaning over like he wants to eat me. I keep talking. He’ll understand once I explain.

“I’m going to be thirteen next year. Dad’s taught me all about his work. I’m here to be his assistant.”

“You here do nothing. You get back in trunk. We ship you back where you come from. You bad ... what you say ... you naughty boy.”

I’m not sure what to do with this numb leg. Is he kidding? Ship me back in this trunk? No way, dude, am I getting back in this trunk. I hold on to the edge to steady myself. I’m about to faint.

“What you think you do? In some countries stowaways get chopped up and fed to dogs. Good for you no dogs here, you be gone. Your Dad, he know shame, his son hide in trunk. Sheez, embarrass Father ... such naughty boy.”

Ashamed of me? No, no! Dad can’t be ashamed of me. He’s never been anything but proud. Thinking of him being ashamed feels like a knife in my back.

Kaz doesn’t know what he’s saying. He’s mad—like red in the face angry. Dad told me about his one eye that was poked out when he was eighteen. It’s hard to look at both eyes at the same time. Looking at the unmoving glass eye is scary. The other one feels threatening. His face tightens up like his fists wanting to grab me by the neck and stuff me back in the trunk. Again I try to get out. Blood rushes into my legs and feet, stinging them back to life. I want to cry but not in front of this angry man.

“Where’s my dad?” My voice is angry. Dad will understand. He won’t be ashamed of me. Mom will be worried, that’s all.

“Get back in trunk. I ship you home. Your dad not here, we don’t want kids.”

I don’t know what to think. Does he mean it? Is Dad really gone? I thought he said he wasn’t leaving for another week. I’m not feeling very good, and I don’t like this man with one eye and crazy talk.

“I want my dad.” I try to steady my voice. I’m not going to cry or be scared.

“Your dad gone in the field. He has plenty helpers. He not need you. You good for nothing here.”

Before I can say a word he starts walking away, then turns and motions to me.

“You come, maybe you good for cleaning work.” His face cools.

I stumble out of the trunk, dragging one leg. We go through a long hallway past many rooms that look like dormitories. I limp and hurry to keep up with his long quick steps. He leads me into a large room of stoves, refrigerators, sinks, and tables. The powerful smell of food cooking takes my breath away. Saliva rushes over my tongue and fills my mouth. I swallow hard and hold onto my aching stomach.

A short, sturdily built, brown-haired woman is busy grating carrots when we enter. Surprised to see us, she turns with the grater in one hand and throws the other hand on her hip. Her jaws drop as her startled eyes open wide, checking me out up and down with a bewildered look. She shakes her head in denial of what she sees. She reminds me of my Grandma Ellie in Alamogordo who never says a word without extreme expressions with her body. Mom learned all her hugging from her.

“Holy Mary, Kaz! What you have here? No kids allowed, you know?” Her dark penetrating eyes stay friendly in spite of her stern questioning words.

He answers her in a strange language—must be Polish. I hear him say Derrick and Dad’s name. They talk back and forth for several minutes. He says “tak, Danuta” several times and she says “nie, Kaz.” Must be yes and no. He’s still mad. She glances over at me as he stomps out of the room with a final: “Tak, Danuta—toalety.”

Danuta looks me over like I'm a sorry sight—and I am. I smell like duck down and pee and must look like a starving homeless beggar. I stare at a chair near the table, wishing I could get my red coat off and sit down, and talk to Dad.

“Does Mother know?” she asks.

“I left a note.” I don't want to think about Mom right now.

Danuta takes a deep breath, sighs, and shakes her head. She keeps shaking her head as her eyes burn into mine like Grandma Ellie's when she has something serious to say.

“Boy ... you not good to Mother and shame Father.” She sighs again and stares.

Her words really hit me hard. She's not angry like Kaz. She's hurting for me. Now, the thought of Dad being ashamed of me and Mom being hurt, is unbearable. I wipe my face with the backs of my hands and bite my lip trying to keep the tears from rolling.

I don't know what to think. I'm all messed up. Dad won't want to see me even if he is here, and I'm sure Mom has flipped out and given up on me. I stare back through my tears at this grandmother looking woman.

“I don't know what to do,” I say, my words spilling out with sobs.

She reaches out, pulls me to her breast, and holds me until the flood is over. With her hands on my shoulders, she pushes me back and wipes my face with her apron that smells of fresh bread.

“You hungry?” she says, staring at me again with her dark intense eyes.

I nod.

“Okay. I have good Polish sausage soup for you with fresh bread and cheese. Kaz radio message to your mother, father that you are safe. You call me Danuta. Come. I give you food.”

She motions for me. “Sit in chair at table.”

I shed my coat and watch her cut thick slices off the fresh loaf and lavish it with creamy butter spread to the edges. Then she spoons on black jam like it was an ice cream sundae. Two big pieces and a chunk of white cheese fill my plate. Next comes a steaming bowl of soup full of vegetables with large pieces of sausage floating on top. I can’t remember any food ever tasting so delicious. I eat until it’s gone. Before I can stack the dishes, a mug of hot cocoa and plate of sugar cookies sit in front of me which I finish in a short time.

“Okay, now you sleep. I show you bed and bath with shower. Tomorrow we talk, you work.” She smiles as she leads me into a small room behind the kitchen.

“Thank you,” I say. I have many questions but am too tired to talk. Can I get my bag I left in the trunk?” I ask.

“I get, you sleep.”

I’m gone before my head hits the pillow.

Chapter Eighteen

Sunday, November 12th

Next morning I'm feeling better and more hopeful that Dad will call me on the radio. I'm glad Mom knows I'm okay. My bag is at the foot of the bed. I shower and dress and hang up my red coat. As I spread out my smelly clothes, I'm wondering if there's any chance of my going on a supply flight to Dad's field camp, assuming Dad isn't here at the base. Kaz could fix it up if he isn't still angry.

Danuta calls from the kitchen. More fresh bread with butter and jam and a big bowl of hot oatmeal with pecans and sweet milk and a mug of hot cocoa is waiting on the table. Everything tastes so good. I'm feeling my old self again. I can't wait to tour the buildings and meet some of the scientists here. Imagine—I'm finally here at McMurdo Station. Dad will be happy for me and find a way to get me to the field. Mom will stop worrying.

Danuta is watching me finish my cocoa. She doesn't look happy.

“Derrick, Kaz ask me. I take you for your work. You clean toalety and floors. I show you, then you do. Kaz say you no talk to others. If they talk to you, you say, *spsfontachka*. No else you say. They think you Polish boy and leave you alone.”

I stare at Danuta in total disbelief feeling like a bolt of lightening struck. “What! Are you joking? I’m not going to be a Polish boy. You tell Kaz I’m trained to be an assistant for my dad. And I don’t clean other people’s toilets. That’s gross. Tell Kaz he needs to talk with my dad. He won’t hear of it.” I’m feeling furious at Kaz wanting to punish me by giving me shameful work.

The scowl on Danuta’s face tells me I said too much. I better cool it. It’s not her fault.

“I’m sorry, Danuta. I feel angry and frustrated. Won’t I get to go to the field and help my dad?”

“No, Derrick. You go home soon as storm over and plane go out.”

“Can’t I talk to my dad? I’m sure he’ll want me to be with him. Kaz doesn’t understand how much I know and can be an assistant in the field.”

“Derrick, no kids here—that’s the rule. You no understand rules?”

I’m remembering Dad’s talk with me before he left. I understand rules all right. I’m tired of rules. Right now I just want to talk with Dad. I’m already here—why can’t I go?

“Danuta, I need to talk to my dad.” I stand up ready to leave. Danuta comes over and sits across from me. She’s not happy. She’s scowling again, like Kaz.

“Derrick—you sit, can listen? Being stowaway is very bad—not smart. Kaz say you have big lesson to learn. Your dad, he say also. Kaz talk to him. Your dad sad and angry with you. He not trust you anymore and tell Kaz he not talk to you until you’re home. He not proud of son that break rules and stow away and worry Mother sick. Kaz talk to your mother. She want you home.”

I know what Danuta says is true. At the same time her penetrating eyes work to comfort me. I turn away not wanting to hear or see what she’s saying. Her words stab at my heart and dreams. Life is being crushed out of me; my eyes burn with hot tears spilling down my face.

It’s too much. I run to my room and let the pain pour into my pillow. By the time my tears are spent and the last sob released, I’m exhausted. All dreams have disappeared. My dad has abandoned me.

In despair I doze off until I hear a gentle tap on the door.

“Derrick? You need eat. I have good lunch for you.”

I roll over and wipe my face with my shirt sleeve before going to the door. Danuta is standing there smiling with a tray of hot soup and bread. She sets it on the desk before sitting down on the edge of the bed. I sit next to her slumped over in total emptiness.

“Maybe you have lunch in own room alone to think. Later I bring you apple cake and we talk, okay? After I show work to do.” She leaves with a peculiar look on her face like Mom has sometimes. I don’t know what it means.

“Okay,” I say. “Thank you.”

I'm not hungry and thinking is not what I want to do. What can I say to anyone even if they would talk to me? Everyone is disgusted with me and worst of all I've lost Dad's trust and maybe Mom's, too. Kaz is angry. I feel empty like a popped balloon.

How did it all happen? How could I not think about Mom especially, and how upset she would be reading my note? She may even have talked to Becky and knew I was hiding in the trunk. Her heart will break if she knows Dad is angry and won't talk with me. She's always been proud of my friendship with Dad. To think he doesn't trust me now is too much. How could I not care for those who love me the most? I'm so ashamed.

"Come in," I say when Danuta knocks.

She looks at my untouched food and then me. "Maybe you eat apple cake?" she smiles, trying to cheer me, I suppose.

"I'm sorry but I can't eat right now—maybe later."

She walks over and sits next to me. I turn and look into her eyes for comfort that food can not give me. She holds me tight until tears come again.

"What can I do, Danuta? I feel deserted and useless."

"Here—you eat apple cake, then you come do work. You do what Kaz say—he's boss. You follow his rules."

She stands up and waits at the door until I finish and wash my face. I feel better having eaten the cake and knowing I have something to do. I'm ready to follow Danuta.

She takes me through the hallway and shows me the dormitory bathrooms. "You have to do work when people gone. Kitchen floor you scrub, too. Soap and mop here."

I'm looking around to see where outside doors are when she shows me the dining room.

"After people eat you clean, okay? Derrick, no go outside. Only do what Kaz say. Remember, he big boss. Clean toalety, scrub floor and sinks every day." She shakes her head and frowns. "When done come back to kitchen, peel potatoes, okay?"

"Okay, Danuta."

"You have to hurry. You lost time crying. Kaz not feel sorry for you. You have to catch up."

"I will, wait and see." I run back to the cleaning closet and grab the mop, bucket, and supplies and head for the dormitories. No argument from me this time. I'm glad to have something to do, something to fill my hollow space, and someone to tell me what to do. If I work hard and follow Kaz's rules then maybe he'll see I'm not a bad kid, and he'll tell Dad to call. If I work hard maybe I won't have to go back right away.

Chapter Nineteen

“What does *spshontachka* mean, Danuta?” I’ve finished the scrubbing chores and am in the kitchen peeling potatoes leaning on the table to keep from falling asleep. Smells of chicken soup steaming on the stove and cookies baking in the oven keep me from going to bed.

“*Spshontachka* is Polish word for cleaning boy, Derrick. It’s good work and good name.”

“It’s hard work. How many days do I have to do these chores?”

Danuta frowns. “I sorry, Derrick, but Kaz say you work until you go home.

“I’m ashamed, Danuta, for being trouble to Mom and Dad. I didn’t think about them and how they would worry. I thought Dad wanted me with him. I’m sorry. I was just thinking of myself.

“I need Dad as a friend. I’ve been alone with no school friends except Becky. Everyone at school has friends. I couldn’t bear to think of Dad being gone for four months and not sharing the Antarctic adventure with me.”

“Oh, my little *chlopak*, I sorry for you, too. Your dad, he not stay angry. Your mom, she think about it. You lucky they love you much and Becky, your friend.”

Danuta must have talked to Mom if she knows about Becky. I wonder what Becky is thinking. Wish I could talk to her. I’ve been such a know-it-all. And what do I have to show for it—nothing. Not a single rock to bring home for our project. She won’t trust me. I start crying again.

“What’s wrong with me, Danuta? I’ve never cried before. I feel like a wimp. No one will want to be a friend to me, especially not Kaz. I want Kaz to like me. He’s still angry and won’t look at me except to call me *spshontachka*.”

“It’s okay you cry. You feel better. Even Kaz, sometimes, he cry. And he know to forgive. You work hard and follow rules. He be friend soon. You must eat now then sleep. Finish your cake and cocoa. Tomorrow another day. Hard work.”

Danuta gives me a hug and kisses me on each cheek. The crying did make me feel better. It’s easy to cry with Danuta. She smells good and feels like Mom did when I was a kid.

I finish the cake and cocoa and go to my room. I’m ready to hit the sack when I remember I haven’t done any recording since I was in the trunk. Not much for a scientist to report—cleaning toilets and scrubbing floors. I’ll start tomorrow night. I wonder if I’ll get a chance to hike to Observation Hill or to Robert Scott’s original hut. Tomorrow I’ll ask Danuta if it’s okay to go outside.

Chapter Twenty

Monday, November 13th

“It sure would be great, Danuta, to get some fresh air. May I take a break after my morning work and go for a walk?”

Danuta shakes her head. “What Kaz say? You know.”

“Will I never get to go outside?”

“Kaz be boss. You do what he say. Your dad say you stay inside.”

The mention of Dad reminds me that he’s still angry. As much as I want to get outside, I want more for Dad to be my friend again. I’m still hoping he’ll forgive me. There must be some way for me to be with him in the field. When we see each other, then we’ll be friends again. If I can get a chance to help him, Kaz will see I know how to be an assistant. I better keep working hard and get Kaz on my side.

“Okay, Danuta. I’ll follow the rules.”

“That’s good boy. Now eat.”

* * *

Recording on Monday, November thirteenth: My third day in Antarctica; my second day of hard work. I never dreamed I'd be scrubbing floors and cleaning toilets in Antarctica, or anywhere. But that's what I'm doing, Becky; I have to admit. Being a stowaway was not a good idea and definitely punishable at MacTown. Until the next plane out, I'm confined to the kitchen, dormitory bathrooms, and dining hall as the spshontachka or cleaning boy. Everyone is angry with me except Danuta who is fattening me up with her delicious soups and breads and desserts. Tonight I feasted on pierogi, small little pasta pockets of meat cooked in gravy. Smells from Danuta's cooking keep me going during my hours of scrubbing. I'm working hard to make up for the trouble I've been to Mom and Dad and Kaz. My plan to be with Dad isn't working out unless by some miracle Kaz says I can go with a supply flight to his field. When I tried to talk with Kaz this afternoon he said he's too busy to talk to cleaning boy. He scowled and said my dad is busy also doing very important work, and he didn't have time to worry about a selfish son. See, Becky, how smart I am—not. I hope we can still be partners for the science fair, and you won't be too disappointed when I come home empty-handed. Derrick

* * *

Recording on Wednesday, November fifteenth: Last night I was too tired to do any recording. I fell into bed with my clothes on after supper—too tired to even wait up for the treats Danuta was fixing for the residents' party. Tomorrow I'll have to do the clean-up. Being a Polish cleaning boy not able to talk with anyone except to answer

sphontachka is embarrassing. I know they know who I am and that I'm being punished. One of the women wanted to talk but I didn't want to get in any more trouble with Kaz. I'm determined to follow all his rules and not complain. I'm hoping he'll tell Dad I'm a good worker and Dad will let me come help him. It's so hard, Becky, to think of Dad being angry with me. He's always understood me—the best Dad and friend a kid could ever want. I want to cry when I think about him not trusting me. I know Mom will forgive me. I don't have much to talk about. Derrick

* * *

Recording on Thursday, November sixteenth: A good scientist journals every day to report what he's been doing: I cleaned ten toilets, scrubbed five bathroom floors and the kitchen floor, cleaned a dozen sinks and five shower stalls and peeled I-don't-know-how-many potatoes. I also ate three delicious, huge meals which helped to make my day bearable. I think I'm not so skinny anymore. I wish I had something interesting to report, Becky. Everyday is pretty boring except for my meals with Danuta, and when I get a chance to look out the windows. The sun shines all the time. It is so beautiful. From different windows I can see Observation Hill and the volcano. I watch the red coats moving to different buildings and driving strange looking vehicles. I have so many questions, but I'm not allowed to visit or talk to anyone except Danuta. I suppose I'm going to be shipped home without seeing anything or anyone. Kaz says he wants me kept in the dark like I was in the trunk. That's all. Frustrated Derrick

* * *

Recording on Saturday, November eighteenth: Not much to report for yesterday and today. It's been a long week of working ten hours every day and crashing at night, always wondering what Dad is doing. I wish Kaz would talk to me about Dad. I heard him mention to Danuta about a snow survival school being planned for the rookies if the weather allows. McMurdo has had one storm after another this year. No planes coming in or leaving this week. I've always dreamed of going to the snow survival school. Not a chance now. Danuta says I'm a good worker—that my dad would be proud of me. I wish he would call. Derrick

Chapter Twenty-One

Sunday, November 19th

“Danuta, can I get a book from the library after I peel these potatoes? I sure would like something to read. I’m going crazy working every day, not learning anything. I’m totally bored.”

“Kaz say you only clean and scrub. I sorry, too bad. I have only Polish books.”

I bend my head as tears come to my eyes. A lump falls into my chest. I can’t help it. A whole week gone and still no word from Dad or Mom. I want to go home. Will the wind ever let up?

A bright look comes to Danuta’s face. “I go, maybe a book I find for you?”

“Would you please, Danuta?” I look up and wipe my eyes. “Any books on geology studies or meteorites in Antarctica would be super cool. I saw some when I was scrubbing the floor. No kid’s book, though.”

She laughs. “No kids here, no kids’ books; but at night only you read, not work time. Kaz not like, okay?”

“Okay—I know.”

“I find when I can.”

* * *

Recording on Sunday, November nineteenth: Hi Becky, I'm feeling more cheerful tonight. Danuta said she would look for a book for me at the library. Tonight she made her famous Polish apple cake and gave me two pieces. I think she feels sorry for me which makes Kaz mad. I heard them talking mostly in English last night after I went to bed. Kaz wants her to understand how important it is for me to learn to respect rules especially as a scientist. Respecting rules means respecting the judgment of those who have come before you as well as your fellow workers, he told her. Danuta argued with him saying he was being too hard on me. Kaz argued back saying my dad says also I am a stubborn boy and have been spoiled. They need to be tough he told her, to wake me up to my selfishness or I'll never be good for anything. Danuta got angry. I've never heard her angry before. She had a few Polish words to say and then told Kaz he's been tough enough. I am stubborn but also smart, she told him. It's time you treat him like a smart person and respect his intelligence. He has been working very hard and following all your rules she told him. He has learned your lesson, she finished. Kaz said some Polish words, ending with "nie" before stomping out. I'm glad for what Danuta said but I know what Kaz said is true. I have been selfish and I have been spoiled. Dad respected me and I let him down. I deserve my punishment. I'm going to keep working hard and doing what Kaz and Dad want—whatever it takes to get them to respect me. Danuta is like Mom. She

wants to make me happy. I'm missing our talking, Becky. I wonder what is happening at school. I promised in my note to Mom I would try harder to make friends and would join the debate team. I hope we can be debate partners. I don't know anyone at school as smart as you. Derrick

The next morning I'm surprised to find a book on the breakfast table next to my bowl of oatmeal. I start looking through it as I eat.

"Thanks a lot, Danuta. This book is the one with an article about the expedition on Mt. Derrick. I saw it on the shelf last week. Did you know my dad was there years ago with Kaz?" I ask her. "He told me about Kaz rescuing him. I didn't know they had written about it."

"Yes, I know," she says. Her smile makes me smile. "Kaz say no tell he pick book for you. He tell me he know you very smart kid. Your dad talk about you many time to Kaz. Your dad good to you and help you learn much—very proud of you, Kaz say."

"I know, Danuta." My voice is shaky. "I am lucky. Dad has shared his work with me ever since I could walk. That's why I feel bad for breaking the rules and losing his trust in me. I don't know if he'll ever be proud of me again."

"You not worry. Fathers always forgive. You be friends again, you wait and see. Have, what you say ... patience?"

* * *

Recording on Tuesday, November twenty-first: Good news tonight, Becky. Danuta brought me a book about the Mt. Derrick expedition and Kaz said my name for the first time instead of spshontachka and he wasn't scowling. He's a good looking man like Dad when he isn't grouchy. Today I looked at both his eyes at the same time. I think he's excited about the next snow survival school. Wish I could go. The wind is supposed to die down. I'll have to leave if the planes are flying. Derrick

* * *

Recording on Wednesday, November twenty-second: Another storm's blowing in from the north—no planes in again. This weather is impossible. I don't know how the scientists get any work done. I wonder if Dad is out on the ice or having to stay in camp. Still no word from him. I think Kaz is going ahead with the classes next week. He hopes for a break in the weather later to do Happy Camp. The rookies are excited. Rookies are those who are brand new to Antarctica, like me except I've studied and listened to Dad talk about this continent. I don't feel like a rookie. I do wish I was on the team. I could be helpful. That's enough for tonight, Becky. It's late and I'm tired. Thanksgiving feast tomorrow which means extra clean-up. Derrick

Chapter Twenty-Two

Thursday, November 23rd

“Happy Thanksgiving, Derrick,” Danuta says. “You look tired. You miss home?”

“I guess. I miss Mom and Dad liking me. We always have such fun on holidays. Mom must be feeling lonely. I hope she goes to Becky’s house for dinner.”

“Your mom be all right—don’t worry. When you want your turkey? I fix special plate for you. Today I make *chrusciki* cookies and polish sweet raisin bread.”

“I’m not hungry. Maybe just some cookies and sweet bread with cocoa will be enough.”

“Oh, you be hungry after work. Wait and see. I be here with good food. Eat good breakfast now so you get strong.”

While I’m finishing my oatmeal I get to thinking about snow school next week. It would be great to go to a few of Kaz’s classes. I wonder if . . . I decide to ask. She might.

“Danuta, I heard the new people talking about going to survival school next week. Is there any chance Kaz might let me sit in on a few of the classes since I can’t go home yet?”

“Nie. I don’t think he say yes. When you work?”

“I’d get up extra early and finish up at night. I’ll eat faster and have time. The classes would be a big help with my science fair project.”

“I talk to Kaz tonight. We see what he say. Finish your breakfast. You no eat fast.”

* * *

Recording on Thanksgiving, November 23rd: I have hopeful news, Becky. Danuta is talking to Kaz tonight to see if I can go to snow survival classes next week. The information will be great for our science project. I’m wondering what research you have done so far. I’m sorry I’m not much help like I thought I’d be. I hope you aren’t disgusted with me. I miss you but glad you aren’t here to scrub floors. Thanks again for my recorder. It’s much faster than writing. I like to pretend you can hear me talking to you. Bye. Derrick.

“Good Morning, Danuta.” I smile and look to see how she looks back at me. I can tell she has happy news, but I’ll have to wait until my breakfast is on the table. Then she’ll sit and talk with me.

I can’t wait. As soon as I get my oatmeal I ask. “Did you talk to Kaz?” Then I wait. She glances over at me with a grin before coming to sit down.

“I talk to Kaz. He think awhile then say okay, if you get work done, be quiet, and sit in back.” A big smile spreads under her wrinkled dark eyes.

Jumping out of my seat, I yell, “Hurray!” and step around the end of the table to give her a kiss on each cheek. She gives me a big hug.

Work is easy today. I feel like dancing with the mop as I scrub the floors. Danuta catches me sliding around in the dining hall and laughs.

* * *

Recording on Friday, November twenty-fourth: I get to go, Becky. Danuta talked to Kaz and he said I can go to the survival classes next week if I get my work done and am quiet. Now I'll have information to contribute to our project. I hope Kaz tells Dad I'm going. It might help a little. I'm going to take good notes. That's all for tonight. I'm tired. I'm going to work overtime this weekend to get the floors and toilets super clean so I won't have so much to do next week. Derrick

* * *

Recording on Monday, November twenty-seventh: Kaz says we're having two days of classes because all of us are first timers. Also we have to wait for better weather for our overnight session. First day of class went well. I was quiet in the back row and didn't ask any of the tons of questions I wanted to ask. There is much to learn about surviving in Antarctica. It's more different than any other place in the world. The weather is totally

unpredictable which means one needs to always be prepared for the worst. I took a ton of notes about shelters and how to survive a storm and white-out conditions. I have a better idea of what Dad is experiencing and how important it is to work with a team and follow the rules of safety. I thought I knew everything I need to know to be out in the field—but I don't. I've been acting like a smart aleck. It's no wonder Kaz is disgusted with me and no one likes me at school. I'm going to change. I'm a rookie. Derrick

* * *

Recording on Tuesday, November twenty-eighth: Today we talked about how to detect crevasses, how to cross them, and how to rescue a person who has fallen in one. Listening to Kaz was awesome; he sounded like he was talking about the time he rescued Dad. This afternoon I had a chance to apologize to Kaz for being such an arrogant, spoiled, know-it-all kid. He laughed at me and said all kids have to learn—that's why there're rules. Dad is out on the ice, he told me. When he gets back at camp, Kaz will call him. The rookies will be going to Happy Camp this weekend if the weather holds, Kaz said. Happy Camp is located out on the ice shelf. The team stays overnight and practices what they learned in class. I wish I could go, of course, but there's not a chance. My turn will come when I'm older. Derrick

Chapter Twenty-Three

Wednesday, November 29th

“Good Morning, Derrick. How your classes go? Is Kaz good teacher?”

Danuta brings over a plate of warm cinnamon buns covered with frosting and butter on top to go with my oatmeal, polish sausage, and white cheese. She says she wants to fatten me up before I go home. Mom will be happy about the pounds I’ve gained.

I’m missing Mom. I’ll be going home this weekend if the plane gets in as scheduled. Kaz says Happy Camp is a go for Friday and Saturday, which means they aren’t expecting any storms. I’ll miss Danuta—Kaz, too.

“Kaz is an excellent teacher,” I say. “I learned a lot, Danuta. Thank you for talking to Kaz to let me go to the classes. You have been good to me. I’m going to miss you when I go home. You’re the best chef in the whole world. Wait till I tell Mom about what I’ve been eating.”

“Maybe you not tell Mom how I cook.”

We both laugh. I don’t think Mom’s feelings would be hurt, but maybe.

Danuta sits across from me and starts watching me chew on my last piece of sausage jerky. She's quiet and smiling. I look up at her a couple of times.

"What's up?" I ask.

"You go to Happy Camp."

Her laugh obstructs her speech. I'm not sure I hear her right. "What? What did you say about Happy Camp?"

"Happy Camp" She pauses and chuckles. "You go," she says and hands me a dog tag chain.

I'm stunned. My name's on it. I remember Dad telling me everyone gets dog tags when they leave Christchurch in case a plane goes down or they get lost in a storm.

Finally I hear her when she says again, "You go."

"I go to Happy Camp with Kaz and the team?" I shout, bounce up from my seat, and pound my fists on the table.

"Yes, you go with Kaz and team," she says again with a big belly laugh.

"Are you kidding me, Danuta?"

"No—Kaz say you go to Happy Camp on Friday. Last night he talk to your Dad. Your dad say okay and team say okay and Kaz say okay—you go."

I jump up and go over to hug Danuta. Now she's crying. I can't believe it. Dad must not be angry with me anymore. I'm sobbing. A ton of bricks on my chest falls away as I catch a deep breath for the first time in over a week.

"Dad forgives me, Danuta, or he wouldn't let me go, I know. He's the best Dad in the whole world. Mom will be happy, too. And Kaz is my friend?"

“Yes—Kaz always be your friend—no worry.”

* * *

Recording on Wednesday, November 29th: You won't believe this, Becky, but I'm going to Happy Camp, like I always wanted. Kaz talked to Dad and they both agreed I could go. We leave Friday morning. Tomorrow I go with the team to get outfitted with my gear. What's most important is that Dad forgives me—he isn't angry and Kaz isn't angry either. Danuta says Kaz is my friend. I'm so happy. Dad will be proud of me. Mom will worry but not too much. The camp is only overnight and I'll be back and going home next week. Imagine, me, learning how to survive on the coldest continent in the world. We'll practice operating radios, setting up tents, building survival shelters, and what to do when lost or sliding down icy slopes. This time I'll wear all my survival gear. I'll keep my recorder handy in my pocket and report everything. I hope I can sleep tonight. Derrick

Chapter Twenty-Four

Thursday, November 30th

Smells of ham, eggs, and cinnamon rolls wake me up early and make me hungry. I jump out of bed and get dressed, remembering I have to get my work done before I meet with Kaz and the team.

“I need to hurry with breakfast, Danuta. This afternoon we’re getting our survival gear together for Friday.”

“You not hurry much. Big breakfast good for your skinny bones. Riding Delta is cold, Kaz say. Heater not always work. You get all wool clothes and bundle good.”

Danuta is definitely being the mother this morning. I guess there’s no way to get away from mother-worry. I wonder if Becky will be a worry-wart some day.

“You don’t need to worry, I’ll have all my layers on. Thanks for the delicious breakfast. I’m full. If I don’t get my work finished this morning, I’ll get it done tonight.”

“You not worry. I get another *shantachka* to work when you gone. You pack and sleep tonight.”

“Another cleaning boy?”

“You go now. Finish today. I find cleaning girl for tomorrow and more days. I glad you go to Happy Camp. Maybe go home next week.”

She doesn't look too happy. She'll miss me, too.

* * *

I follow the team to the clothing distribution warehouse to get our additional gear. They already have the necessary layers of wool clothing they've needed to work outside since they've been here. I watch in line as they each get their crampons, axes, and ropes. Kaz is making sure everyone is outfitted properly. My arms are full by the time I get my boots, down vest, pants, sun-goggles, and over-mittens. They give us an orange duffle bag to stuff everything in. I reach for the ax and ropes when Kaz steps beside me.

“You not need ax and ropes,” he says.

He watches my face. I gulp trying to hide my disappointment.

“Derrick ...” he pauses until I catch my breath. “I promise your dad you stay in camp. Not go practice crevasse rescue. Else you not go.”

He lifts his last word like a question. Here's my chance to be the man for sure and show him I can follow the rules.

“It's okay, Kaz. I understand. I'll stay in camp and keep the tent warm.”

When Kaz smiles, his good eye pops open, brightening his face and crinkling his wrinkles. He looks like he wants to laugh which makes me smile.

* * *

Recording on Thursday, November 30th: Today I got to go outside for the first time and see Observation Hill from behind the dormitories. It was cold rushing from the kitchen to the warehouse. Tomorrow I'll have all my layers on with my boots and extra socks. I took a couple of quick pictures of a few of the buildings. I'm so excited, Becky. I'm going to see so many things in the next two days. Kaz said there'll be Adelie penguins along the way and maybe grown Emperor chicks that haven't jumped into the sea yet. It's been so cold the shore ice is too far away for them. And maybe, too, we'll see some Weddell seals. I'll sleep good tonight. I'm stuffed after eating a huge bowl of Danuta's pierogi, three slices of thanksgiving buttered raisin bread with strawberry preserves, and of course a generous helping of her apple cake. I do wish you were here to meet Danuta and eat with me. I forgot to mention, Kaz promised Dad I would not go with the team to practice crevasse rescuing. Dad wants me safe at camp. I'm hoping I can explore around the camp and find a meteorite rock or two. That's all for now. Next recording I'll have plenty to talk about. Derrick

Chapter Twenty-Five

Day One - Friday, December 1st

Twelve of us, including Kaz, climb up into the Delta, a huge old vehicle with a cab and attached box for passengers. Kaz rides in the cab with the driver. The tires are taller than Rick, our tallest member of the team. Rick grabs me under my arms and pushes me into the box. I'm clumsy with all my layers and big bunny boots. Another one of the team snatches me while I stagger over a pile of poles. Rick explains later the use of the poles as skua sticks to scare the birds away.

Before sitting, I pull my gloves off and get my camera out to take some scenery shots of the volcano, Mt. Erebus, with its cone of smoke puffing away. From the Delta I can see more of MacTown and its mishmash of one-story buildings. When I get back I hope I have a chance to hike to the volcano and Observation Hill. Maybe even to Robert Scott's original hut that Rick's pointing to on the left as we pull away.

The summer sun is high with warming temperatures in the teens. I leave my red coat open, pull my wool cap off and sit next to Rick. He's one of the instructors who will stay with us at the camp after Kaz leaves.

The instructors will talk us through setting up tents and making ice caves and wind barriers out of ice blocks. Rick says once we're settled, Kaz will go back with the Delta, keeping in touch with us on the radio.

With Rick we'll practice operating the emergency radios at camp and other survival activities we talked about in class. He works on the search and rescue team at the base, otherwise known as SART. I think Kaz assigned him to watch out for me, which is okay. He's one cool dude.

As we move farther inland onto the ice shelf it gets colder. Everyone is zippering up and pulling their gloves and hats on. Almost thirty below outside the box, Rick tells me. Not much wind.

I notice a row of flag poles sticking in the snow. We learned in class that the green ones mark safe areas and black ones mean danger of crevasses. I point out the window and ask Rick if that's where the team will go to practice rescuing.

"Not this time," he says. "It's too dangerous for rookies. Too many black flags. We have another area where bulldozers have constructed crevasses for practice. It's farther out but will be safer."

"How long before we make camp?" I ask.

"A couple more hours," he says. "These big tires are not too speedy."

Suddenly, the box leaps and wobbles. It feels like an earthquake. Everyone bounces off their seat and looks around to see what's happening.

"What was that?" several voices speak out at the same time.

Rick points out the window to a big machine in the distance and explains about a scientific study going on of the ocean floor in McMurdo Sound. The scientists are drilling large holes in the ice with an auger and sending down an air gun to blast a high compression of air, creating sound waves to determine the composition of the ocean floor. When they shoot the air gun, it shakes the ice we're riding on. It feels eerie but cool, like a carnival ride.

After a while of watching the ice and Transantarctic Mountains in the background, I get sleepy. My head is nodding when Rick nudges me.

"Look, there's the rookery over on the side of the hill."

He hands me his binoculars. It looks like thousands of dominoes bouncing around, picking up stones to make pebble nests, like I read about. I can hear their honking and squawking. Must be the Adelie penguins preparing for a summer nesting.

"They're not afraid of the red coats walking around with instruments and cameras," I mention.

"The penguins are friendly since they have no land predators," Rick says. "It's easy for the scientists to do their observations. Once they start nesting, though, everyone keeps their distance. When we get back I'll show you a smaller rookery we have going on near town."

"Will we see any Emperor penguins? Kaz said the chicks haven't followed the parents into the sea yet."

“That’s true. One of the helicopter pilots said he saw a bunch of them huddling up here a ways when he was hustling in from the last storm. With this nice weather they’ll be moving toward the water.

“It surprises me that the parents leave them alone to find the sea,” I say. “They are still chicks.”

“True. But they’ve grown almost as big as their folks who have fed them all they can and need to find food to replenish their own bodies. When the chicks are mature, they’ll find the water and have strength to protect themselves. You’ll hear them before you see them. Keep watching and listening.

“We might see some seals, too, with their newborns. During the summer they return to their breeding ground and stay on the ice most of the time until the babies learn to swim safely. They love to sunbathe on these long sunny days when the wind isn’t blowing. They have no land predators either so are usually friendly.”

* * *

Recording on Friday, December first: What a day this has been. I worked harder today than ever but it was fun. I practiced using the radio, starting the stove, setting up a Scott tent and cutting out ice blocks for the wind walls and ice cave. Right now I’m talking on my recorder snuggled in my thirty to sixty below sleeping bag deep in an ice cave that I helped to dig out. The top of the cave is shaped like an igloo. It’s forty below outside but I’m toasty warm. Rick insisted I sleep in the ice cave which is warmer than the tents. Five

or six of us at a time took turns in the Scott tent with the stoves, preparing and eating our freeze dried meals. Nothing like Danuta's, of course, but plenty to eat with several chocolate bars for dessert. I discovered dried polish sausage, hard cheese, and extra chocolates stuffed in my vest pockets by you know who. Rick keeps his eye on me making sure I drink plenty of water and eat lots. He says we have to eat twice as much for our bodies to generate enough heat to keep warm in these temperatures. He reminds me to wear my goggles all the time when I'm outside. It's easy to get snow blindness with the sun shining twenty-four hours a day in crystal clear air. The funniest time was when we had to take turns wearing buckets over our heads to assimilate a white-out condition. I got some good pictures of this. After, we set up ropes between all the tents and the outhouse just in case of a storm. The outhouse is built into the ground with a regular toilet seat on the hole. This is one toilet I don't have to scrub, thank goodness.

Everyone's excited about hiking out to the snow fields tomorrow to practice their rescue work. They'll be gone most of the day. Thirty below doesn't feel cold when I'm working outside in the sunshine. We are lucky the wind isn't blowing. Kaz warned us to be packed and ready to get on the Delta tomorrow by six in the afternoon. He doesn't want us staying over another night. Weather is always unpredictable. There's a storm blowing at the South Pole that could move this way by next week. It's plenty dark in this cave.

Almost like your dream, Becky, except I'm not cold. I am sleepy though. I'm wondering what Rick will have me doing tomorrow. There should be time for exploring around the campsite. Derrick

Chapter Twenty-Six

Day Two - Saturday morning, December 2nd

Breakfast is over. I'm watching everyone put on their survival gear. Straps hang over their shoulders with hooks to snap on ropes and axes. Tied to the bottom of their heavy boots are crampons, spiked iron plates, to keep them from slipping on the ice. From the camp they'll walk two miles to the practice site testing the snow and ice with their poles for possible crevasses. They all look alike clad in their red coats, goggles, and fur hoods. I'm envious. Rick catches my expression.

"Hey, Derrick," he calls. "Come here."

"Hi, Rick." My cheeks puff into a make-up smile.

"How come you aren't wearing your goggles? Do I have to worry about you when I'm gone?"

Quickly I pull my goggles down. "Sorry, Rick. No. I promise to wear them all day when I'm outside the tent."

"All right. Don't forget. Now listen—I have work for you to do while we're gone, okay?"

I nod. "Great. What can I do?"

“Well, most important, I want you to man the radio in the Scott tent and relay any messages from Kaz to me on the cell phone. We aren’t expecting any storms until next week but weather can change at a moment’s notice. I’ll be busy so don’t call me unless Kaz tells you to. He’ll call every two hours. I want you in the tent when he’s going to call, starting at ten. In between I have other work for you to do.”

I’m excited now. I get to be the radio man. Kaz will be calling me. “Can do,” I say. “What else?”

“It’ll be close to six when we return. I want you to check all the tents and bring the sleeping bags and liners to the Scott tent. They should be rolled up ready to go. Clean out anything else. I want the tents ready to break down when we return. Also check around all the activity areas and bring everything loose to the Scott tent. Make sure the outhouse is in good order, if you know what I mean, and have all the garbage in one bag. The kitchen utensils should be clean but check them out and stack them in the camping boxes, ready to go. Leave the jerky and chocolate bars out for our return on the Delta. This is real important work, Derrick. We need to be ready when the Delta arrives at six. You got it?”

“I got it Rick. I can do it.” I’m thinking one more day of being the *spshontachka*, but I don’t mind. I’m glad I have important work to keep me busy and a chance to talk to Kaz.

Ten o’clock

I’m in the Scott tent stacking the sleeping bags when the radio crackles.

“Derrick?”

“Yeah, it’s me.”

“You hear me good?”

“You’re kind of fuzzy but I hear you.”

“When team get away?”

“They were out of here just after eight.” His voice is breaking up. I yell back.

“Can you hear me okay?”

“Not too good. You okay?”

“I’m okay. I’ve been busy getting camp ready to leave tonight at six.”

“Yes, you good worker. I call you again at noon. Danuta say hello.”

“All right, I’ll be here. Tell Danuta thanks for the goodies.”

“Okay. Over.”

“Over.”

I pull my goggles down and plod over to the ice cave for my bag. The sun overhead warms my face. I’m almost hot with all my layers on. My over-mittens are clumsy for taking pictures so I pull them off and push my hood down. Doesn’t feel all that cold.

An hour passes shooting scenery images and details of the camp. The mountains and dry valleys seem close; but I know the distance is far. Dad told me when cold air is still and clear like today, it’s farther than you think. The dazzling bright blue sky stays the same as the slow moving, blinding sun glistens on the snow-covered ice.

It’s hard to believe I’m really here. I look out toward the jagged peaks of the Transantarctic Mountains and think about Dad. Kaz said he’s out there somewhere on the

blue ice in the Allan Hills. No sign of the fireball yet, he said, and no Martian or lunar rock. They have gathered other remarkable finds for the Johnson Center.

I snap some shots toward the hills and imagine I'm with Dad searching with the team. Wouldn't that be a blast? I'm ready to daydream again. I look at my watch ... close to twelve, better get back to the tent. After this next call I'll look for some rocks around here.

I'm stacking the utensils in the boxes when the radio crackles again. Kaz's voice sounds far away.

"Speak louder, Kaz. Can't hear you. Can you hear me?"

"I hear you. Now okay you hear me?"

"Yes, that's better."

"All okay?" he asks.

"All's okay. We're ready to go."

"Okay. I not call again until we leave here around three unless trouble. You call me if problem, okay? Over."

"Okay. Over."

I look at my watch—twelve-fifteen—time for a bite to eat and exploring. I grab some jerky and stuff my water bottle under my down vest and go outside where it's warmer in the sunshine than in the tent. I put my goggles on and get to thinking about Dad as I chew my jerky.

I'm happy he isn't angry anymore. He must be proud of me now. I'm sure to be the youngest rookie ever to attend Happy Camp. Imagine me thinking I was ready to be

his assistant. Dad understood how silly I was yet he didn't laugh at me. I can laugh. I've been a foolish kid.

When I get back to school, I'm not going to be so conceited. I want to have more friends than just Becky. She has lots of friends. I don't know why she likes me. I wish I could find a meteorite to take back for our fair contest. She would like that.

I wonder if the winds have blown any meteorites on the ice around the camp. I look around past the tents and wind barriers. You never know. Rocks get trapped in the snow covered ice all the time. The storm winds bring them to the surface making them easy to spot on the ice. I'm sure the winds of these recent storms have changed the landscape many times. There could be meteorites all over the place out there on the ice. Wouldn't it be something if I found one right here in camp?

I notice how barren and windswept it is near the outhouse. If I could at least find a rock or two—anything to bring back for the science fair and prove I've been in Antarctica. I'll have a look around the outhouse. It's not far and Kaz isn't calling until three or so. I can survey the area and be back in no time. I finish my jerky and start out toward the outhouse.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

One o'clock

Oh, man—all kinds of rocks out here. There has to be at least one meteorite in this pile. Imagine—all these rocks just outside the camp. I look back to make sure I can see the tents. As long as the orange tent is in sight, then I'm still in camp. I look at my watch. One o'clock; chores are done. I have two more hours before Kaz calls.

I examine the stray rocks, careful to not touch any that might be specimens. Dad taught me what to look for, and I've seen tons of pictures of meteorites in science journals. Man, wouldn't it be fantastic to find a lunar meteorite—or how about a Martian rock? I laugh at myself and remember the sterile plastic bag in my front pocket in case a good specimen turns up.

Like over there, near that ridge would be a likely place. I look back. No sweat—the tent's in sight. I search for awhile until a pile of rocks about fifty feet away catches my eye.

As I jog toward them, out of the clear blue a dark shape rises into the air. It scares me until I realize it's a bird--must be a skua. I watch it soar closer, flapping huge dark wings.

Surprisingly, it keeps coming towards me, flying right at my face until I stumble backwards and almost fall. Its threatening beak opens in a cry of outrage as it attacks and bonks me on my forehead with a wing. My head snaps back. I struggle to stay on my feet.

And then a second bird and another and another, join the first one. The air is filled with angry screeching and screaming and messy droppings. They continue dive-bombing, darting and flapping around my head with their wings until I move away from the rocks. I pull my hat and hood up to protect my face from their claws and start running, dodging them until I'm out of their territory.

I've read about skuas but these are the first I've seen. They feed on penguin's eggs and baby chicks. December's their breeding time. They need these rocks to build nests for their eggs. No wonder they want to attack me. Still feeling shook up, I hurry toward the clear ice hoping they won't follow, wishing I had one of those skua sticks for protection.

I catch my breath and pull my hood and hat down. My heart is beating rapidly from the scare and I'm warm. I quiet myself and pull out my water bottle tucked under my vest. A few frosty sips refresh me.

Beyond the clear ice my eyes are caught up with a breathtaking view of a patchwork of the dry valley and mounds of wind sculptured snow. The jagged peaks of

the Transantarctic Mountains with glaciers tumbling in between, fill the background in my view finder. The high sun creates fantastic shadows in the wind-scoops.

I shoot half a dozen shots before deciding to take some close-ups of a pile of rocks trapped in the sastrugi fifty yards in front of me. I'm ready to turn back when one of the rocks catches my eye. The sun rays hit it, making it stand out from the others. Half running and half sliding, I rush over, my heart pounding again. Iron in meteorites will shine in the sun's light.

When I get to it, I just stare. I can't believe I've found a meteorite this close to camp. I push my goggles up and get down on my knees to have a closer look. A black crusty specimen about the size of a softball sits trapped next to a ridge of ice. It's definitely a meteorite; I'm positive. Recently fallen meteorites often have a fusion crust like this one, formed when it burns out breaking through the atmosphere.

As fast as I can I yank my over-mitten off and take several digital shots. Careful to not touch or breathe on it, I place the sterile bag over the top and slide it in. I stand and hold it like a precious jewel in my gloved hands. Stunned, I gaze at it for several minutes. It's hard to believe that it's my find. I did it all by myself.

Gradually I come to my senses and look around. There may be more in this area. I put the bagged specimen in an outside pocket to make sure it stays frozen. Thank goodness I'm close to camp. I better get back before Kaz calls. He won't believe what I have to show him. And wait until Dad sees it, and I tell him where I found it.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Two o'clock

Suddenly a huge cloud changes a bright sunny day to gray, bringing with it a brisk wind that stirs the surface snow. I'm shivering. I pull my mittens on and turn toward camp. It's out of sight. Don't tell me I'm lost. I can't have gone that far. The tents were right behind me. I need to retrace my steps to the skuas' nest.

I look for footprints. They've disappeared with the wind. Thinking I know which way to go, I move out cautiously, looking for the rocks where I changed direction. Wouldn't mind those birds flapping a wing or two. At least I'd know where I am.

No sign of them or their nests—or else I can't see that far. Foggy glasses remind me to jerk my goggles down to protect my eyes from the whipping wind. I strain to see the orange tent or outhouse.

Where's that sun? How did it get cloudy so fast? I can't believe this. Like they said in class—the weather is unpredictable. I should have stayed in camp. This is why they string ropes around the structures to keep us from getting lost in case of white-outs.

The wind is cold on my face. I pull my hood up and my hat down to cover my nose and mouth. Soon everything is painted white, erasing any horizon of land or sky. I'm swallowed up by the snow and clouds, cut off from everything, like the experience with the bucket over my head, except it's not funny this time. I'm frightened.

What can I do ... let me think. I have to get back to camp. Kaz will be calling to tell me to call Rick, to warn him. And I'm not there. Maybe he's called Rick. I hope so. This must be the storm expected next week from the South Pole.

I put my watch up to my face. Two o'clock. I've gotta get back. I've moved off the ice, which is good. The nesting rocks were in the dry valley terrain. I'm pushing against the wind expecting a bird to attack me any minute, if they can fly in this weather. Once I get to their rock piles I'll turn to my right and walk to the outhouse. A rope tied to it will take me to the Scott tent where I can call Kaz and Rick, if they haven't been in contact already. The Delta will come early, I'm sure. Their GPS will get them through.

Still no sign of those birds or their nests. I must be getting close. I know they were on the dry valley. It can't be much farther.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

What happened? I'm off the dirt. This isn't right. I should be shuffling close to the nests by now. Where am I? I'm losing it. I reach down to feel the ground beneath the snow. It's ice. This isn't the right way. I'm lost.

By this time my world is featureless: no shadows, no colors, only white—like struggling inside a ping pong ball. I'm going crazy. I panic. Paralyzed with fear, I try to scream. No sounds come out. Terror takes over my breathing until finally I shriek out loud: "Daddy, Mommy, help, please help me ... I can't see."

I close my eyes to hold onto my tears. Silence surrounds my prayer until a voice from the past echoes through the whiteness ... it's Dad.

"Derrick—don't panic—hold on, you can make it."

I breathe again until my senses take hold of my fear. Squinting, I turn around to see him. "Where are you, Dad? I can't see you."

"I'm with you, Derrick. Feel my hand in yours."

A fierce gust of wind whips me to my knees as my gloved hand warms to the memory of his strong grasp. I suck in a breath of cold air and sigh in wonder that I can

feel his presence from a past time of terror. I was five, hanging from a cliff and struggling to keep my balance on a narrow pinnacle of rock. I waited then for his hand, listening to his saving words, "*Derrick—don't panic—hold on; you can make it.*"

Conscious of his presence, I regain my confidence. "Okay Dad, I can do it," I say out loud to the ghostly voice. "I won't panic. I can't let you and Mom down. I have to get back."

It dawns on me again that Kaz was trying to get me on the radio when he had word of the storm and hopefully left early when I didn't answer. He would try to get in touch with Rick. They may be at camp waiting, looking for me. The GPS on the Delta will get them back to the base if they leave before the storm gets any worse.

The GPS, of course, dummy dude. I fumble in my pockets and find it next to the recorder and jerky. I push the dial for returning to location and listen to its happy beep. I check my watch; still have time; it's not far. I'll be back by three before anyone gets to camp and before the Delta leaves.

Three o'clock

Another hour and still no sign of camp. This roaring wind is too much. Hunched over I force myself to keep walking. Visibility is almost zero. The chill is getting through my layers. I have to get to the Scott tent and out of this wind. It must be close.

I keep going over in my mind how I got so far away from camp. I know the skuas' nest wasn't that far from the outhouse. Then I ran to the ice, saw the sastrugi and rocks. My excitement in finding the meteorite unsettled me. I went farther than I realized.

I must have angled off the opposite way when I tried to find the nests. Thank goodness for my GPS. It'll get me back to camp from wherever I am.

Four o'clock

I check the time again. Something's wrong. I squat down on the ice and roll up like a ball to get warm. My face and hands are numb. A surge of wind blows me over, knocking the GPS from my hand. The beep stops. I'm frantic as I scramble around on my knees, feeling the ground with my mittens. It's gone; buried or blown away. The wind is getting worse. This is a full-scale blizzard for sure. I'm a goner. I'll freeze before anyone finds me.

Use your brain, Derrick, think. What now? I need my GPS or I'm lost. Help me, Dad. Please help me. I'm sorry I left camp. I broke the rules again. Struggling to stand, I brace my back against the wind. I don't know which way I'm going anymore. Doesn't matter anyway. I shuffle around until my foot hits something. Excited, I reach down and feel around my boot. It's my GPS, thank goodness. Lifting it to my face, I push the locator button and listen to its beep-beep-beep. It isn't broken. Yeah—I'm going to make it.

My good feeling doesn't last long. A burning realization settles in my brain. I didn't reset the GPS when I left camp. The location calculator is set for McMurdo, ten miles away. All this time I've been moving toward MacTown—not Happy Camp. At the most I've moved two miles closer to the base and away from camp.

Chapter Thirty

Five o'clock

I'll never make it to town in this wind. Temperatures are dropping rapidly; I can't keep myself warm. My nose isn't cold anymore—a sure sign of hypothermia. No sense in trying to get back to camp. I'm bound to freeze to death unless the storm clears up. That's not going to happen. Think Derrick. Fight. Don't let your fears take over. Dad says courage is the willingness to try. I have to keep moving and follow the beeper.

The recorder cord pops out when I reach for the last piece of jerky, reminding me I want to record a message to Mom. Someone will come looking for me after the storm and find it. I clamp the microphone to the fur of the hood near my mouth and suck on the frozen jerky while I think about what to say. I'm so tired and cold.

I bundle down in a ball and look at my watch, maybe for the last time. Stuttering through cold lips, my words stumble out as tears freeze on the edge of my goggles:

Recording on Saturday, December second, five o'clock: Mom, I'm on my way home. I'm not sure I'll make it all the way but not to worry. Dad's with me holding my hand. He's

my best friend. I need to close and save my energy for the trip. Tell Becky I'll be with her for the contest. I love you. Derrick

Six o'clock

The beep-beep of my GPS gives me company and confidence to keep moving. I was ten when Dad surprised me with it for my birthday. He treated me like a partner and showed me how to use it. After that, I bicycled all over the city, going to strange places I'd never been, knowing I could always find my way home. Mom worried I might get hurt or my bike would break down, so she gave me a cell phone. I was big stuff with the neighborhood kids in Alamogordo.

I've read that dying of hypothermia isn't too bad. I'll just fall asleep. The hard part is I don't want to die. I don't want to hurt you Dad, or Mom, or Becky. There's so much left to do with all of you. What about this rock in my pocket, Dad? I want to see the look on your face when I hand it to you. I want to feel Mom hugging me when I get home, and I need to help Becky with the science fair. I want Kaz to slap me on the back and smile at me with his one bright eye; and I want another mother-hug from Danuta and more of her apple cake and *pierogi*. God, I don't want to die. Please help me.

My movement is slowing. I can't stop shivering and stumbling. So sleepy—like I was in the trunk—but worse. There's no hope of getting warm except at the base, and I'm not going to make it. No one will be out looking for me in this blizzard. They'll have given up by now.

My boot trips on a ridge in the snow and I slip, falling on my knees. Now what—I can't get up. I'm blind and helpless. Beep, beep, beep, will it never give up? What good

is it anyway? Frustrated, I throw it as far as my strength can manage. Only the sound of the wind howling breaks the absent noise of the beeping.

Exhausted and drowsy I crouch down on the snow covered ice. I give up. I can't fight this relentless wind any longer. This is it. I have to let go, Dad. I have to say goodbye.

Chapter Thirty-One

Seven o'clock

"Listen, Derrick."

Is that Dad's voice calling or am I dead and in heaven? Listen to what? The beeper is gone; only the wind wails. My body stiffens. Fear tightens my stomach as I realize I'm hallucinating. Yet the wind whines the words again: *"Listen."*

Surprisingly there *is* a noise. I hear it. A squealing, squawking, chattering sound. It's coming from beyond the ridge in front of me.

Perhaps ... it's hard to think; my mind is scattering my thoughts. What did Rick say about the Emperor chicks ... the pilot saw a group? Could they be huddling in this storm? Rick said they're friendly. If only I could huddle with them, next to their warm bodies and get out of this wind. I'm exhausted. I can't stop shivering.

Crawling on my knees and elbows, I pull myself over the ridge. The noise gets louder. A few hundred feet in front of me a group of gray fuzzy chicks have formed a turtle-like circle. I watch them shove, peck, and thwack each other with their wings. They're bigger than I thought. Four feet tall at least. Constantly on the move, they take

turns getting warm near the center, snuggling next to each other, protected from the wind. I watch the inside chicks come out and the outside chicks go in. If only I can get in the middle, my slow brain is thinking. I have to try.

It seems like forever to get to the edge of the turtle. Lowering my head, I drag my freezing feet and hands as near to their feet as I can. On my knees and elbows I push and pull my body toward the center, ignoring the squish and smell of the guana. A few of the birds shove and thwack me but let me stay in the middle. Finally protected from the storm, I sit upright, smothered with soft down feathers, warm blubber bodies, and guana.

Knowing the penguin chicks will stay huddled until the storm passes, I fall asleep. Hunger and the smells awaken me off and on. Slowly, sensation returns to my face, hands, and feet. In the cave-like darkness, as I listen to the constant chatter of the chicks and the noise of their movement, time disappears.

Light and sounds awaken me the next day. The excited squawking chicks shove to get free from the huddle as the sun warms their wings. The storm has passed and the skies are blue again. Sunlight blinds me until I pull my guana-covered goggles over my eyes. I push my hood and hat off and try to crawl away from the stench. My legs and arms give way. Too weak to get up, I fall on my face. In the distance I hear a motor running.

A voice is yelling. "I'm coming, I'm coming." This time I know it must be another ghost or else the noise of chicks moving out. I raise my head to breathe and try to get up but I can't.

All of a sudden strong arms reach from behind and lift me to my feet. A bearded face and breath warm my neck and cheek as he clutches me to his body.

“Is it you, Dad? Is it really you?”

“It’s me, Derrick. You’re going home.”

I remember Dad carrying me to the warm Delta cab and holding me in his arms before I fell asleep. Later he gave me water to drink and a piece of jerky to suck on.

There was much to tell him but for now it was enough to look into his watery eyes and know we’re still friends.

Chapter Thirty-Two

Sunday, December 3rd

Kaz and Danuta were at the door when the Delta arrived at camp. They both had anxious faces—especially Danuta. Dad carried me into the kitchen where the smells of her cooking were stronger than the guana. My stomach started to growl and ache from hunger.

“He’s all right,” Dad said. “He needs to take it easy for a few days. Keep him on liquids. I’m going to call his mother.” He takes me to my room and stretches me out on the bed. “I’ll be back to help you clean up. Thank God you’re alive.”

“Dad ?” He looks tired—more than I am. “I’m sorry I worried you and Mom. I really thought you wanted me with you. It was our dream. I thought I was doing the right thing but it was selfish.”

“I know, Son. It’s not all your fault. My excitement didn’t help me to see, to understand how you were feeling and how important your dream was to you. Belief in our dreams makes us real to each other. Don’t ever stop dreaming, Son.”

Dad leans over and gives me a tight hug. His face feels damp.

“Tell Mom I love her and I’m going to be on the debate team like I promised.”

Dad smiles. “You rest for now.”

“Wait Dad ... look!” I pull the rock out of my pocket. “It’s for you, Dad.”

Later, after a long nap and getting cleaned up, I sit at the kitchen table and slurp down several bowls of chicken broth and suck more beef jerky. Danuta keeps her eyes on me the whole time, smiling and grinning.

“I so happy you okay, Derrick.” She takes a deep breath and sighs. “It be my fault you almost die. I tell Kaz okay you ask Dad, you go Happy Camp.” Her words jumble out. She’s not smiling now.

“I’m okay, Danuta—I’m okay. Not to worry. I learned many important lessons.”

“What you learn? You more smart?”

“I learned that rules are necessary for safety reasons; and I learned that I’m not as smart as I thought I was. I also learned more respect for weather in Antarctica and for Kaz and his training.”

Danuta had a good laugh. “You smart now.”

“Where is Kaz, Danuta? Is he angry with me?”

“No, I not angry with you.” Kaz comes into the kitchen and puts his hand on my shoulder. “I’m proud you have much courage, and very smart to huddle with penguins. I tell that story in snow school as good lesson. I not tell your bad lessons. You smarter now.”

Chapter Thirty-Three

Sunday, December 10th, Christchurch

I'm on the couch reading the latest column in the newspaper about my find. It isn't the hoped-for fireball, of course, but Dad says it is an important rock. They think it may be a chunk blasted off from the moon. Dad sent it to the Johnson Space Center for testing. Kaz said I could name it Derrick2006. I decided to name it HappyCamper2006. Dad is proud.

Mom is still recovering. She hasn't let me out of her sight since I got back last week. For the third time this morning, she comes over to feel my head.

"I'm okay, Mom. I'm okay," I say looking up at her tired eyes.

"Thanks for the sourdough pancakes this morning. They were delicious—better than Danuta's." I wink at her. I had told her about Danuta's cooking.

She laughs. "Tonight I'm going to try her apple cake recipe she gave you. Did I tell you the Jorgensons are coming for dinner?"

"Becky, too?"

“Yes, Becky, too. She’s been calling. I asked her to wait until you were feeling stronger.”

“MOM—I’ve been waiting to talk to her for days.” Quickly, remembering my resolve to be patient and appreciative of mother-worry, I change my tone.

“It’s okay, Mom. Thanks for inviting them over tonight and fixing apple cake.”

She smiles, thank goodness. It’s so wonderful to see her smile again. At night, I’m haunted with thoughts of her being here alone, not knowing if I was lost and maybe dead. I must be patient with her protectiveness and constant hugging. Only time will bring total forgiveness. Dad and I are buddies again, yet sadness lingers in his smile, too. It was a terrible scare for both of them.

I hope Becky’s okay. By now she’s read about everything in the newspapers. I can’t wait to see her. We can talk about the science fair contest.

I’m busy setting the table when the bell rings. I glance through the window to see if it’s the Jorgensons. Mom steps out of the kitchen and gives me a look. She can tell I’m nervous.

“Brad, will you get the door?”

“Dad will get it,” she says to me.

After they finish their greetings, I walk into the living room listening for Becky’s voice. We see each other immediately. The look on her face wipes me out.

“Hi,” she says.

“Hi,” I say. This time I’m going to hug her.

She moves first. It's a tight one like Mom's, with a kiss on the cheek. I squeeze hard, too, before we push away.

"I found a meteorite," which she knows already. "Dad had to send it to the Johnson Space Center; but we can use the original images I took for the science fair." Now I'm smiling.

She wipes moisture from her cheeks with her fingers and recovers with her beautiful smile. I'd forgotten how gorgeous she is. I stare at her. I feel like I've been gone forever.

"Wait until you see the research work I've done for the contest," she says. I think we're going to be winners."

Our eyes lock. No blushing this time

. "I think so, too," I say. "Totally."