

STEF PENNEY

UNDER
A POLE
STAR

Quercus

Chapter 1

*At sea, North Atlantic
Summer 1883*

This was a list of the things that Flora stole on her first voyage. There were other items, but she only wrote down her favourites. For years, until it disappeared, she kept the peg whale as a talisman – it was carved of a pale, close-grained wood, very smooth, with the merest blunt suggestions of head, fins and tail. The eyes and blowhole were burnt in with a hot awl. It fitted beautifully in her fist. She had coveted it when she saw it in a boat-steerer's hand, and when she found it lying in the scuppers, she pocketed it without scruple. It was forfeit, on its way back to the sea; she felt she had the right.

Flora Mackie was twelve when she first crossed the Arctic Circle. The previous November, her mother had died, and her father did not know what to do with his only child. He was the Dundee whaling captain, William Mackie. Flora took after him in looks and brusqueness of manner, and showed no sign of her mother's grace. Elsa Mackie had been a pretty woman who delighted in her decorative capacity. Her husband was proud of her, but a whaling captain's wife in Dundee – no, anywhere – had limited opportunities for displaying her charms. She had been horrified by the process of producing Flora, and was critical of the results, having a tendency to bemoan her daughter's

shortcomings: chiefly, hoydenishness and a thick waist. Before Flora could talk, Mrs Mackie had developed mysterious, lingering ailments, and left Flora's upbringing largely to a nursemaid, Moira Adam, who was efficient, but had a heart of Doric granite. In the last weeks of Mrs Mackie's life, after the captain had come home from a successful season in the north, he and his daughter sat together in the front room while, upstairs, Mrs Mackie consulted a succession of doctors. When she died, the widower was not so much grief-stricken as haunted by guilt – if he had stayed at home instead of leaving her for up to two years at a time, he thought, she might not have died. What if the same happened to Flora?

Other captains took their wives north, he reasoned – to himself, since he was not a man people argued with openly – so why should he not take his daughter? He had been in the Davis Strait so many times it no longer seemed to him a particularly hazardous place. People talked, although, having few friends in the town, he did not know this. He should have farmed her out to a relative, they said. He should have sent her to a boarding school, a foster home, a convent. But Captain Mackie did not know what people said, and would not have cared. He had spent most of his life on board ship, where, for the last fifteen years, he had been captain and absolute ruler under God; he was accustomed to getting his own way.

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

Much of Captain Mackie's confidence in his daughter's safety lay in his ship. The *Vega* was a Dundee-built steam barque of 320 tons, from Gourlay's shipyard, her hull reinforced with six-inch-thick oak planks. Her bows and stern were doubly reinforced – her bows were three

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

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

With fifty men and a girl on board, it was a crowded ship. Often she was, nominally, alone – in the cabin, when she was working on her books – but wherever she was, she could hear a full symphony of human noises. Apart from talking, shouting and occasional, quickly

hushed, swearing, all day and night there were grunts, groans, farts, laughter, cries, snores and sounds less identifiable. Flora heard much cursing through the wooden walls. She pretended, if her father was around, that she couldn't hear it – and if it was unmistakable, that she did not understand it. In that way, the ship was no different to the streets of Dundee.

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

While still in Crichton Street, she had heard – she was a shameless eavesdropper – all sorts of gossip about sailors which fuelled her imagination. Sailors did vague, excitingly terrible things to young girls, but on the *Vega* they were kind and deferential. Just in case, Flora had prepared herself with a weapon: a penknife that lived on a thong around her neck, under her chemise.

In her heart of hearts she did not believe that any harm would come to her from the crew; apart from their kindness, she knew she was not alluring, being plain and thickset, with a round, whey-coloured face and stone-grey eyes. She had learnt early in life that there were those who were caressed for their physical charm (like her mother), and those that were not; those who drew glances in the street, smiles from strangers, favours – and those who passed invisibly, like ghosts. She was used to being invisible. But it was as well to be prepared, and, in her imagination, she could be (why not?) golden-haired and fragile, with a heart-shaped face and violet eyes, like the diminutive heroine of her favourite book, *Poor Miss Caroline*. Never mind that she had never met anyone with violet eyes (nor, come to that, a heart-shaped face). There were nights when she swung in her cot, imagining assault from faceless assailants

– imagining, too, her violent, blood-spattered response. She enjoyed these thoughts. Sometimes, rocked in the resounding darkness, she allowed herself to be overpowered. She enjoyed those thoughts, hazy though they were, also.

Captain Mackie ensured that Flora maintained an education of sorts. By the end of their voyage, she should have read the Bible, preferably learning the Gospels by heart, have studied the glories of God's creation in the form of the natural world, and have an idea of All the Things That Have Occurred Up to This Point. He insisted that she keep a journal describing what she had read, proving that she understood it. He bought a number of notebooks for the purpose.

Flora stared at engravings of plants and birds. *Today I studied Passiflorae*, she wrote in the journal entitled, *What I Have Learnt*, by Flora Elsa Caird Mackie. *They are Perching Birds. There are very many species of them. E.g. Blackbirds.* This seemed to keep her father satisfied. She worked her way through *A Child's History of the World*, and thus knew that history started with the Egyptians, followed by the Greeks and the Romans. Then there was Jesus, after which, things went downhill. *A Child's History* was tantalising but vague. She had the impression that history got more boring the nearer it came to the present day. By their own century, long gone were gladiators, embalmed cats and cups of hemlock, replaced by monarchs who no longer wanted to murder each other, ever-increasing agricultural yields and the spinning jenny. Flora was disappointed. She longed to know more: how exactly did gladiators kill each other? How could a Pharaoh marry his sister? What did hemlock taste like and how long did it take to die? (Did you vomit, suffocate or bleed to death?) On these subjects, and much else of real interest, *A Child's History* was mute.

On the second day out of Stromness, Flora took another of the notebooks, and paused for a time before opening it. She was thinking

about the groaning she had heard on the other side of the bulkhead the previous night. Her father slept, snoring quietly. She had been obscurely afraid, wondering if the man was ill, but fearing, in a way that she could not identify, that he was not. She did not sleep for the rest of the night.

She did not write anything on the cover of this notebook, but opened it at the back page and started to scribble in tiny, terrible writing. Perhaps she did this because, in a place where privacy and solitude were illusory or impossible, Flora had a need for secrets. So, on the day she had breezed through the order of passerines, read a chapter about the Greeks and skimmed through part of Matthew's Gospel, she took the nameless diary and wrote, *I don't like birds. They don't have fur and I don't like the way they look at me.* The only birds she saw now were the gulls (definitely not passerines) that landed on the ship's rail – you could argue that they perched there, but somehow not in a way that counted – and stared at her with glassy, impudent eyes.



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

'I could teach you to read,' she said, when they had known each other a week.

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

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

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

She paused, wondered what would hold the most appeal. ‘Well . . . newspapers.’

‘Ach, they’re fu’ o’ nonsense.’

She shrugged. ‘Stories. About sailors . . .’

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

A tremendous noise broke over them like a wave: loud, deep cries came from the fore-rigging – the Orkneymen were raising sail, chanting a mysterious incantation that contained no words you could pin a meaning to. Flora stared at them with a kindling of unease; the Orkneymen were big – taller and broader than the men she was used to. They had sandy hair and raw, reddened skin; jutting cheeks and brows. They spoke a different language. Their chant had a glamour that stirred something inside her.

‘Can you understand them?’

Robert turned candid blue eyes on her. ‘*Vou, vou!*’ he shouted, imitating the men’s weird cries. He laughed and shrugged.

The time they spent together was irregular and liable to be broken off at any moment by yelled commands; Robert would leap to his feet and scramble up the rigging, or disappear below. Flora experienced frustration at this, not envy; it wasn’t that she particularly wanted to climb the rigging, but, as soon as he turned away, she knew Robert forgot her existence. He had a place in the running of the ship, which she – a supernumerary, and a girl – did not.

Her only other friend on board was the surgeon, Charles Honey. Like most surgeons on whale ships, he was a recent medical graduate without the means to buy a practice. He was twenty-three, but looked younger, with a fresh complexion and an air of bewildered innocence. For the first two weeks he suffered from appalling seasickness, and the sounds of his misery could be heard throughout the ship. At first, the sailors were sympathetic, but after a few days their sympathy

turned to hilarity. Captain Mackie spoke sharply to the men, but was tight-lipped. He hadn't been able to find anyone else. Since Honey was usually on his own in the sickbay, Flora wasn't afraid of seeking him out, and since she was a little girl, and not a pretty one, he wasn't afraid of her being there. He was the least alarming of men: slight, gentle, hesitant. He blushed easily.

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

Flora was perched on the sickbed, her back braced against the cabin wall, pestering Honey with questions about dissecting corpses. She had ascertained during previous interrogations that medical students did this, but he was prevaricating – he was, in short, lying to her. As the captain's daughter, she had a certain borrowed authority and he was unwilling to put her off, but he was also worried that the captain would be angry if he filled his daughter's head with nightmares.

'What force of wind is this?'

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

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

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

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

'Heavens, Flora, why would you want to know such a thing?'

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

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

‘I’m sure you know far more than you let on, Miss, and you are ragging me.’

‘I’m not! I might be a doctor one day. I want to heal people. Without knowledge, you cannot heal the sick, can you? What do you think? Would I make a good doctor?’

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

‘Fuckin’ cunt!’

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

‘Doctor, I . . .’ He saw Flora and turned red. Flora recognised him as one of the Orkneymen, Ian Sellar.

‘Miss Mackie is just going. Run along now, Flora.’

‘Can’t I help?’

Ian Sellar released his hand with a groan.

‘Ach, Sellar, what happened here?’

‘Thole pin. Shoulder.’

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

Ian Sellar was one of the younger Orkneymen, and the most perfectly made man Flora had ever seen. Where most of the men from the north were craggy and reddened, his skin, uniquely on the pink, Pictish *Vega*, was the colour of honey. His features were strong and graceful; he moved with an ease that singled him out. Flora stared at his bare, golden back. She failed to understand how she hadn’t noticed him before now. Honey tutted as he palpated the shoulder, where blood was spreading under the skin.

‘It’s not dislocated, Sellar. Just badly bruised. You’ll have to keep it

in a sling for a while. Flora, pass me that roll of bandage, there. No, there . . . If you want to make yourself useful, you can pour some witch hazel into that dish. It's the one in the . . .'

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

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



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

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

'You're not seeing all of it. The plough is just the bear's back and tail.'

'Bears don't have tails. Not long ones.'

'Perhaps old Greek bears had long tails.'

Flora laughed derisively. Her father thought she was getting above herself.

'How do you know that Draco looks like a dragon, in any case?' he went on. 'Have you seen one?'

'I've seen pictures.'

'Do you think those pictures were drawn from life?'

'Of course not! They don't exist.'

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

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

'Are you asking me why people invented monsters?'

'I suppose so.'

'Perhaps because they had never been whaling. Look in Draco's tail – halfway between the bears. There is one brighter . . . the second-brightest star.'

She steadied his telescope on the yardarm. The ship was completely still; the sea like a pond. An iceberg hung, motionless, two hundred yards away, doubled in the mirror surface. The stars were multiplied, as though the *Vega* were suspended in dark space, stars under them, and infinite depth.

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

'Yes. They had a god with a falcon's head.'

'They did. Whose name was . . . ?'

A fraction of a pause. 'Horus.'

'Yes. The Egyptians built their Great Pyramid so that Thuban shone down a shaft into the middle of the pyramid.'

Flora was disturbed.

‘How could it be the Pole Star?’

‘Five thousand years ago, Thuban was the Pole Star. And one day – far in the future – it will be the Pole Star again. And it will be more perfectly placed than Polaris. Why? Because the earth moves on its axis. Like a spinning top when it’s going to fall over.’ He demonstrated with his hand held vertically, waving it back and forth. ‘Very, very slowly. Now, of course, Polaris is the Pole Star, or rather, it is closer to the celestial pole than anything else, but one day . . . Everything changes, Flora. No matter how good, or how bad, nothing lasts forever.’ He moved the telescope up and fractionally to the left. ‘Now look there.’

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

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

When Flora got over this disturbing news, she decided that she liked Thuban – once and future lodestar. She liked things to be right; not nearly right, or good enough. Best of all, she liked Vega. She belonged to all of them on the ship, but especially, Flora felt, to her. When she found out – as she was shortly to do – that the Eskimos called Vega the Old Woman, she was violently, though secretly, offended.



The Atlantic swell disappeared, quelled by the increasing frequency of icebergs. The sun came out, and stayed around the clock, as if it couldn’t bear to leave them. It conjured colours out of grey ice: green depths, royal-blue shadows, aquamarine hollows. The whole watery, deliquescent world glittered.

Flora spent hours hanging over the gunwale, staring at the ice. It was like watching a fire – you couldn’t stop. There was a precision

about ice that she felt as a new quality in her experience. Every piece was different and particular, effortlessly beautiful.

A sight she was always to remember: a peculiarly fine berg, crested and crenellated like an Alpine peak, which rotated to reveal an arch of ice, seventy feet high. It glittered white, scored with clefts that glowed deep blue above and, at its water-worn foot, a pale, silky green. A ruined masterpiece from a vanished civilisation, it drew even the most ice-weary sailors to the rails.

The crow's nest called down: 'If Miss Mackie would care to come up, she will see something fine.'

Mackie sent Flora up ahead of him – it wasn't the first time she had been to the crow's nest on a calm day, but he made her tuck up her skirts and climbed the ratlines behind her, just in case. John Inkster hauled her up through the hole and she wriggled into the narrow space in front of him. He kept his arms loosely around her, to stop her from plunging the eighty feet to the deck below.

Above the arch, the top of the iceberg flattened into a small plateau. The sun's rays had begun to melt the ice, which formed a round pool the intense blue of a melted sapphire – and now, she could see, a little stream was carving a channel in the pool's white bank, a stream of milky blue that ran to the edge of the plateau and vanished over the other side. A blind, blue eye, weeping a single, endless tear.

'Well, Miss Flora,' said Inkster, his breath warming her ear. 'What do you think of our ice islands? Are they not fine?'

Flora found she could not speak. There were no words good enough. She turned full, gleaming eyes to Inkster, who laughed, but kindly. He thought it made her look almost bonny.



It was a good run, but at seventy-three degrees north, they hit the pack ice. Fog descended, blotting out the ice-choked coast of Baffin Land. Other ships in the fleet caught up: *Ravenscraig*, *Symmetry*,

Mariscal and *Hope* . . . They threaded their way through the loose pack to the North Water, where whales might lurk. A lookout conned the ship, peering into the murk, shouting himself hoarse. The fog smothered all sound other than the eerily slopping water and the masthead's cries.

'A fall! A fall!'

Flora was in the cabin. She crept on deck, keeping out of the way as men ran to the whaleboats hanging in the davits. She could feel the tension in the ship: running feet, bitten-off commands. She watched Ian Sellar spring into the first whaleboat, his face alive with excitement. The five men took their positions and the deck crew winched them down on to the water. They pushed off, and the boat-steerer barked orders. The oarsmen swept them around in their own length and the boat shot off at a swift clip. Her father's hand landed on her shoulder.

'Flora,' he said warningly, 'when they come back with the fish, you get below. If I see you on deck after that, I will give you such a hiding.'

'When do I come out again?'

'When I say.'

'But what if . . . ?'

He gave her a look of such ferocity that she shut up. He had sworn to himself Flora would not witness the actual business of whaling. She thought she knew all about it. She thought she was prepared. In the end, the boat returned empty-handed, having lost the whale.

The following day, they had more luck: boats were lowered after two whales; one was brought back. Flora listened to the shouts as the carcass was brought alongside. The men were cock-a-hoop. She sat quietly and saw nothing, but heard everything, and smelled a stench worse than anything she had ever imagined. The reek of blood filled her nostrils, her mouth, her eyes. Another foul, chokingly awful smell – rich, ripe decay – made her retch. The men were working amidships, but she heard the drumming of feet and the laughter – louder and

wilder than the men's usual discourse, as though they were drunk on slaughter.

She heard the blades' slicing and chopping, the sawing of bone and the ripping – the endless ripping – of skin; a sloshing that she hoped was water, even as she felt it was blood. Seeing it couldn't have been any worse – this way, she imagined the knives plunging into flesh and fat, the blood swilling around the men's limbs, sleeving them in red. When at last her father came to release her from the cabin, she was sickened and mutinous. Seawater had been pumped over the decks to flush out the bloody sawdust. But the whale's despoiled carcass was still near, low in the water, violated by fish and gluttonous seabirds. Heaps of grey-pink blubber were on deck, as men pitchforked it down into the hold. Blood-streaked bone hung, drying, on the yardarms.

'I told you it's not a pretty business,' said her father. 'Do you understand why I don't want you to witness it?'

'I don't know how seeing it can be worse than hearing and smelling it,' she said. 'I just imagine it. And in the cabin I can't breathe.'

Her father – to his credit – took her opinion seriously. Subsequently, she was allowed a small area of freedom aft of the mizzen when the men were working, from where she could glimpse the bloody process, but not get under their feet. She appreciated the dangers – the deck became slick with blood and oil, and more than once she saw a man slip, and be cut by the wicked blades.