

ONE PLACE TO LIVE  
ONE CHANCE TO SURVIVE



# COULD PEOPLE

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SMITH

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**COLD  
PEOPLE  
TOM ROB  
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*To Suzanne Baboneau, my editor of fifteen years*

PART ONE

EVENTS PRECEDING

## TWO THOUSAND YEARS AGO THE FIRST SIGHTING OF ANTARCTICA

LOOKING UP AT THE NIGHT sky Ui saw only unfamiliar stars. These weren't the constellations that guided him between the Polynesian islands of his homeland; these were stars from the sky's outer edge, the stars his people had never bothered to name since they were no use to navigate by, dismissed as the *petuu vare* – the foolish stars. Tonight, he imagined them looking down upon him and asking who was foolish now, this man all alone, so far from home. His vessel made excellent speed as a strong wind filled the sails plaited from pandanus leaves. The two hulls shaped like canoes, harnessed together with a lattice of bamboo, skimmed gracefully across the ocean, carved from the oldest calophyllum tree on their home island. His father, a master shipbuilder, had toiled on them for many months using mud paste to test every seal, dabbing the joins, fitting them together then pulling them apart, searching for even the smallest patch where water might find a way through. His father's skills were in such demand that sailors from faraway islands bartered for his services and yet he'd refused all offers, working exclusively on his son's ship, the finest ever built.

Many in their community considered both the ship's construction and the expedition itself an indulgence of Ui's vanity, since this journey into the unknown brought no benefits to their patagonia. It was already agreed that his abilities at sea were unmatched and his navigational skills unrivalled. He had nothing to prove. He was adored by many lovers and envied by many friends. To them, this adventure was folly, an obsession with the mythical land they called *Iraro*.

The first time he'd heard the word *Iraro* was as a young boy when his father had drawn a map on the sand to teach him the geography of Polynesia.

Studying the islands, Ui had jabbed his finger at the ocean on the outskirts and asked:

‘What is this?’

‘We call those waters *Iraro*.’

‘What is *Iraro*?’

‘The place we know nothing about.’

‘Why do we know nothing about it?’

‘Because no one has ever sailed there.’

‘One day I will sail there.’

His father hadn’t laughed or brushed off the claim as the mere boasting of a child. He’d crouched down and wiped away the markings, fearful that he’d sown the seed of a dangerous idea in an impressionable mind:

‘And if you sail there, my son, who I love very much, and who I could not live without, will you also sail home?’

Ui brought the vessel to a stop, dropping the sails, standing on deck and searching the horizon. If he didn’t discover land soon, he’d be forced to turn back. The hollow hulls had been loaded with supplies, parcels of fermented vegetables, bundles of sugar cane, but mostly with drinking coconuts since the ocean provided a ready supply of food. On his voyage he’d seen ocean life of an undiscovered kind, shoals of elegant fish unfathomable in number bursting out of the water like birds with milk-coloured scales and eyes like pearls. Having always presumed that warmth meant life and cold meant death, he now accepted this assumption was wrong. Cold was merely a different way of life.

He cut a notch on the mast to mark his sixty-ninth day at sea without sight of land. The air was cold in *Iraro* and he was wrapped up in the thickest of furs, clothes created especially for this journey. As he sipped some of the precious coconut water, drinking only enough to stop his mind and muscles weakening, he contemplated the prospect of returning home without a discovery. Aware of his own vanity, when confronted with the expectations of his Patagonia he might lie, concealing his failure by inventing stories of strange lands populated with strange creatures. Most of the people back home would believe him no matter what fanciful stories he told, listening with hushed reverence, but his father would know since he’d never been able to lie to his father. It would mean that this magnificent vessel, carved from the oldest tree on the island, had brought back only dishonour and deceit. His

father's heart would break with shame. Better not to return, better to die, than to lie.

Sitting on deck, he lowered his hand to the water, pressing his palm against the surface. Reading waves was a gift many considered a kind of magic, possessed only by those touched with the spirit of the sea. Deep ocean waves had a powerful voice, a backwards and forwards motion unlike waves reflected from land, which spoke in a softer, upward-downward movement, a voice that became inaudible the further they travelled from the shore. His body shivering with the cold, he implored the ocean to speak to him and guide him. To his relief, this time the ocean answered – whispering that land was near.

Ui scampered across the bamboo lattice, rooting through the supplies where he found a timber cage containing a frigatebird, her chest puffed out in distress at her confinement. This breed of bird wouldn't land on water since her feathers easily became waterlogged and she'd lose her ability to fly. By necessity she'd return to the vessel unless she found dry land. He fed her some scraps of dried fish skin and set her free. After so many days of being trapped, she didn't understand her freedom, remaining motionless until he nudged her, and she flew into the sky. He stood at the bow, studying her direction of flight. She slowly circled the boat and then set off. She must have seen land. She must have seen Iraro.

After many hours following the bird he entered a strange ocean consisting of countless small islands, smooth and white as the clouds. The air was so cold his breath turned to mist. He dropped the sail and, using the steering paddle, brought himself to the nearest island. There were no plants or trees, no creatures of any kind. Scraping the surface with the edge of his paddle produced a fine white dust which turned to water between his fingers. Ui dabbed the dust on his tongue. It wasn't salty ocean water; it was fresh like rain, as though these islands were clouds that had crashed into the sea. Perhaps this was the place where clouds crashed after they'd finished flying, or perhaps this was where clouds were born and if he stayed here long enough, he'd see these islands puff up and rise into the sky.

Ui climbed the mast and perched at the top, perfectly balanced, assessing the view. Far away he saw white cliffs, high and smooth, stretching from one side of the horizon to the other. He wondered how they'd come to be this way. Perhaps set back from the white cliffs, there were white volcanoes, and instead of red, hot lava they spewed cold, white lava. Perhaps there were white forests



with white tree trunks and white leaves. Perhaps there were herds of white-fur animals and tribes of white-skinned men and women. He wondered what kind of person could live in a land like this. It must be a different kind of people – a savage tribe; only a savage people could survive in such cold.

ONE HUNDRED AND FIFTY YEARS AGO  
SOUTH GEORGIA ISLAND  
TWO THOUSAND KILOMETRES  
NORTH OF ANTARCTICA

ONLY SOCIETY'S OUTCASTS COULD SURVIVE in these freezing waters and over the years Captain Moray had concluded there were no exceptions to this rule. Some of his crew could pass among civilized society for a while, they could entertain a room with tales of their adventures, but they'd pull a knife if they took a dislike to someone, and they took a dislike to a great many people. As the captain of the most successful sealing vessel operating off South Georgia Island, Moray was an expert in choosing his crew from the variety of outcasts on offer, his preference being for the melancholic, the sexual deviants and the thieves. For the thieves there was nothing to steal, for the melancholic there was the ocean to meditate upon and for the deviants there were other deviants. Moray never shared the secrets of his own past, cultivating the appearance of a forceful but fair man, a bastion of order in this otherwise barbarous industry. There was room for only one murderer on this ship.

The ship's name was *Red Rose*, a two-hundred-tonne steam and sail vessel anchored outside King Edward Cove. Moray intended to make one last trip to shore before setting sail for Canton, China, where a buyer had been arranged for his cargo of seal furs, a price set for three dollars fifty cents a skin, significantly below his record price of nine dollars, achieved when he'd been one of the few sealing vessels daring to venture so far south. Today there were over sixty vessels anchored around the South Georgia Island, and with the market inundated with furs, his ability to secure even three dollars depended on his reputation for quality.

Before setting sail for Canton, his final task was a dinner with His Majesty's Stipendiary Magistrate, representing the Government of the Falkland Islands and South Georgia, the authority over this far-flung outpost. Without the magistrate's blessing it would be impossible to operate in these waters. The customs inspector would levy unaffordable charges, the police officer stationed on this island would arrest his crew for infractions real or imagined and business would grind to a halt. Four of his crew rowed the captain to shore in a shallop – a nimble and flat-bottomed vessel used for hunting and excursions. Arriving at the newly constructed docks, he remembered a time not so long ago when this island had been untouched by man, the shores so densely populated with seals he had struggled to see the pebble beaches underneath their fat bellies. Now all that remained on the rocks were seal skulls picked clean by the petrels and a blubber factory which produced oil at fifty cents a gallon and a retch-inducing smoke that only the strongest of winds could dissipate. There were rickety dormitories for the workers, human colonies crowded with bunk beds and crisscrossed with washing lines of coarse wool socks. Behind the dormitories was an infirmary and a rudimentary timber chapel with a crucifix made from driftwood.

As he approached the magistrate's residence, Moray observed the incongruous picket fence around a garden of black soil and tussock grass. The magistrate's wife loathed this island and had tried to transform their home into something that might exist in the British countryside. She'd brought rabbits for comfort, but rats from the ships had eaten them. She'd planted meadow flowers, but the sea salt spray had killed them. Fearful of the debauched sealers, the magistrate insisted she carry a Beaumont–Adams revolver with her whenever she left the confines of their picket fence, not concealed under her clothes, but clearly visible and clasped in her hand. To Moray's knowledge, she'd fired it only once and her aim had been true.

The butler, another British import, opened the front door, his expression set to a permanent grimace as a way of signalling that he didn't belong here either. After taking off his leather boots, exchanged for a pair of silk Savile Row slippers, Moray followed the butler through to the sitting room decorated with fashionable mahogany furniture carved from felled Caribbean forests and walls covered with oil paintings of bucolic English landscapes. A fire crackled in the hearth and with the curtains closed to block out the bleak

reality of their location, it was a shabby approximation of a stately drawing room.

The magistrate entered, accepting the bottle of Chateau Margaux the captain had brought as a gift without so much as a thank you. Dinner was poached tongue of elephant seal, sliced in wedges, served with assorted steamed sea vegetables. None of the magistrate's imported provisions were used. Moray wasn't offended, although offence was intended. In the hierarchy of ocean professions, sealers were the lowest, far below Her Majesty's naval officers or the merchant traders, below even the deep-sea fishermen and the whalers. No stories were ever written about the sealers, for it was a shameful occupation. Even in these distant waters a class system had sprung up, as though there was nowhere on this earth where a class system of some kind wouldn't take root. Moray hastened the conversation to the business at hand.

'I've come to enquire what outstanding duties might be owed.'

Normally the magistrate would gladly discuss his bribe but today he seemed uninterested in these details, pressing the captain on another matter:

'I've heard this is to be your last year. That you have your eye on a town house in Cavendish Square. Can it be true?'

Moray sliced off a small piece of seal tongue and chewed thoughtfully. It was true. The seals were on the brink of extinction due to undisciplined crews hunting pups and pregnant cows. The island's once limitless resource was limitless no more. The sealing industry wouldn't last another five years. The magistrate was to blame. He didn't enforce the laws, preferring his bribes. If the sealing industry collapsed, not even the remote location could protect this man from the scrutiny of officials in London.

'This island is over, sir. We've ruined it.'

'Ruins are merely the end of one opportunity and the beginnings of another.'

The magistrate clapped his hands and the butler entered. Moray sat back, surprised as the butler served the bottle of wine that he'd brought as a gift, an act of generosity that had never happened before.

'Last week I saw a hunting crew on the cliffs above Cumberland Bay. They'd trapped a group of female elephant seals and their pups. There was no escape, and the crew were killing them at a leisurely pace, beating them back with clubs if any tried to break away. In despair, one of the females broke rank and jumped off the cliff – she fell a hundred yards, bounced a little into the air,

and survived, blundering in the sea. In order to escape the massacre, another jumped, and another, the entire colony following her over the cliff face. Many died in the fall, but some survived, their blubbery mass protecting them. The pups followed their mothers, but they were too small, and none survived.'

The magistrate sipped his fine wine and regarded Moray.

'Do you imagine London society will look upon you as the gentleman you'll pretend to be? That they'll invite you into their homes or desire your company? Naturally you'll lie about your past. You'll tell them you worked as a trader on the high seas, dealing in fine spices. You'll talk of saffron and cinnamon. You'll wear the finest clothes and hang art on the walls. But they will smell the blubber on your skin and see the sordid stories under your fingernails. You'll be a butcher in their eyes. A savage in a silk shirt.'

Moray pondered the magistrate's comments.

'That may be true. But the seals are gone, sir. Soon the only trade will consist of pulling teeth from the skulls of elephant seals and polishing them for jewellery. That is no business for a man, even a savage one.'

The magistrate was ahead of him.

'South, Moray, you must go south, to the great expanse of ice – the unexplored continent where there are undiscovered creatures and untouched wealth beyond our imagination.'

He placed an artist's folder on the table full of sketches of extraordinary creatures glimpsed on the undiscovered ice. There were seals with a unicorn's horn of ocean ivory. There was a walrus with a glittering silver pelt. There were birds with feathers of such beauty they'd be coveted by the finest fashion houses of Paris.

'The ice is impassable.'

'No, there are ways through; you will find them. Dangerous, but worth the risk.'

'And you?'

'I'll protect your trade. You'll use this island as your base. You'll eat at this table. You cannot be a gentleman in London but you can be one here. You'll be important and respected. You'll never be that man in England. Moray, we cannot go back. We can never go back. This place has branded us. We belong here, whether we like it or not.'

The butler returned, bringing out a tray with desserts, Egyptian dates, lavender blossom honey, dark chocolate and brandy-infused cream. Soon

Moray was drunk on dreams of cold creatures with tusks of twisted pearl and skins as soft as snow. With port-stained teeth the magistrate said:

‘The ice, captain, we shall plunder the ice!’

FIFTEEN YEARS AGO  
ANTARCTICA  
MCMURDO STATION

DOUG REYNOLDS HAD A HABIT of repeating wisdoms to new arrivals at McMurdo Station, such as:

*The hardest part of surviving in Antarctica isn't the cold; it's the people.*

As an Antarctica veteran, having lived on the continent for eight years, he enjoyed their bewilderment as they tried to figure out what this could mean. After all, Antarctica was the coldest, windiest and most hostile continent on the planet. It seemed bizarre to suggest that the hardest part of living here was the people. For a start, there weren't that many of them. In the summer there were a thousand scientists and support staff at McMurdo Station; in the winter that number shrank to under two hundred. Moreover, this was a prestigious place to work; those chosen to be stationed here were at the top of their profession, selected by the US Antarctica Program after a highly competitive application process. On paper these were some of the most well-adjusted people ever assembled in one place, with all of them having undergone rigorous mental health evaluations that included answering the following:

*Have you ever been clinically depressed?*

*Have you ever had issues with drink or substance abuse?*

*Have you ever displayed violent tendencies?*

The psychiatric evaluators went beyond the basics, asking questions such as:

*What conspiracy theories interest you?*

*Has a sexual situation ever made you angry?*

*You notice a group of people laughing and you ask what they're laughing about but they're laughing so hard that they can't answer. How does this situation make you feel?*

But Doug knew that no matter how many experts declared that a subject was able to cope with life on the ice, no one ever knew for sure until they were here. This continent changed people. Smart, stable, decent people lost their minds, and no evaluation could predict who'd snap next. That said, after eight successful years, he never imagined it would be him.

Lodged in Building 201, he woke at six every morning – he never overslept even on his days off, protecting his routine. His shower would never be longer than two minutes, timed with a stopwatch to conserve the precious water supply processed on site by fuel-intensive reverse osmosis. A few years back, one of McMurdo's greatest minds, studying undiscovered bacterial life buried deep within the frozen lakes, had started taking longer showers – three minutes had become five minutes, five minutes had become ten, until her concerned roommate had reported it to the authorities. When the scientist was delicately quizzed about the length of her showers, she'd erupted into a rage, calling her roommate a traitor and threatening to burn her belongings, which, she argued, took up far more space in their cramped room compared to her own possessions. She was discovering new forms of life, she'd shouted, she could shower for as long as she wanted. In response, she'd been sedated, held in confinement and evacuated from the continent on the first medevac flight.

This morning the stopwatch clipped to the plastic soap shelf informed Doug that today's shower had lasted one minute and fifty-five seconds. He said aloud, in a calm voice, as though he were a public service announcement:

'It's time to turn the water off.'

His hands didn't move. The deadline was missed. Two minutes eleven, twelve, thirteen. He rested his head against the wall, the water streaming over his lips and nose.

'Turn the water off, Doug. Pull yourself together and turn it off.'

Two minutes twenty, two minutes twenty-one, his voice now sounding more like a lover pleading for a second chance:

'Please turn the water off, please...'

Two minutes thirty. Two minutes forty. He shouted:

'Turn the water off right now!'



With a twist of his wrist, he turned the water off and stood there, dripping, catching his breath, staring at the stopwatch. For the first time in eight years, his routine was broken.

Ignoring one of his own wisdoms – that small fractures in your sanity were always precursors to bigger ones – he dressed, telling himself that nothing was wrong, putting on his goose-down parka and setting off towards Building 155, where breakfast was served. He entered the galley, inspecting the self-service buffet. In the winter the selection rarely changed; there were no fresh herbs, fruit or vegetables and staring at the scrambled eggs made with powdered mix, he became fixated on their unnaturally bright yellow colour. He couldn't deny it any longer. Something was wrong, and that something was a new arrival, a man called Zack.

Zack was a New Zealander, part of the base's Search and Rescue team, and everyone agreed that he was an exceptionally nice guy, as kind as he was handsome, as charming as he was strong. If there was a station popularity contest, he'd not only win, but he'd be surprised about it. Doug had tried, over the years, to be more likeable. He might not be the most dynamic of guys, he certainly wasn't the most handsome, but he was interesting and kind. He went out of his way to help newcomers adjust to life on the station. He'd show people funny quotes from the 'Antarctic Participation Guide' which they'd email back to their friends and family.

#### US ANTARCTIC PARTICIPATION GUIDE:

**Money.** There is no ATM nor credit card usage available at the South Pole due to the limited satellite availability.

But these exchanges never seemed to grow into deeper friendships. His closest relationship had always been with his work. He'd only make a move for anyone if he was drunk. The next day's follow-up had always been answered with a rebuff, any intimacy explained away as a night of meaningless fun in a place of limited choices. Doug had always played along, agreeing that they should just be friends. Rejection had never bothered him until Zack arrived. Nothing had ever bothered him until Zack arrived. He hated Zack. It wasn't rational, but it was real. He took a breath and told himself:

‘This is ice-talk. You do not hate that man. You cannot hate that man. No one hates that man.’

Holding his breakfast tray, Doug took a seat at an empty table at the far side of the room, his back to the others, signalling he didn’t want company this morning. He was only a few mouthfuls through his powdery-bright eggs when he heard a voice:

‘Mind if I join you?’

It was Zack. His job was to sense when people were in emotional distress. The more you hid, the more he sought you out. He smiled as he sat down, and Doug’s first thought was to leave. He assessed the amount of food remaining on his plate. He’d barely made a start on his breakfast and if he threw this much food away, he’d draw attention to himself. McMurdo kitchens were strict about wasting food. They’d ask questions. Reports would be written up. He told himself:

*Be nice. Say something nice.*

Instead, Doug said:

‘Have you heard about Air New Zealand Flight 901?’

Flight 901 was the only commercial aircraft to crash on Antarctica. Some of the wreckage was still on the side of Mount Erebus, the volcano not far from the base. Zack was confused by the question.

‘Flight 901?’

‘Everyone on board died when the plane crashed into Mount Erebus. It had been a low-flying sightseeing flight, on a round trip from Christchurch. Are you from Christchurch?’

‘Auckland.’

‘This flight was from Christchurch although some of the passengers might have been from Auckland. Anyway, on the flight the passengers were free to move about and take photos. Some of their cameras survived. Do you want to hear the craziest thing? After the crash the accident inspectors developed the films. Do you know what they found? It was a clear blue sky. Not a cloud. So how does a plane crash into a mountain when the sky is clear, and the plane is working perfectly? The report into the crash claimed that “Malevolent Polar Light” played a part in the crash. Conspiracy theorists claim it crashed into a UFO. But do you want to know what the real reason for that plane crash was?’

This was ice-talk, no doubt about it. Zack wasn’t eating, staring at him with his big, kind, caring eyes.

‘What was the reason?’

‘People.’

‘People?’

‘People crashed that plane. People lost their minds. Maybe the captain was transfixed by the volcano. Maybe the captain thought they were looking down on cloud cover when they were looking down at the ice. In Antarctica there is a gap between the way you perceive the world and the way the world really is.’

‘There’s always a gap, don’t you think?’

‘But the gap is at its widest down here.’

‘An interesting theory.’

‘How do you like your eggs, Zack?’

‘My eggs?’

‘How do you like your fake synthetic bright-yellow eggs? Their colour is extraordinary, isn’t it? We might not have the sun but at least we have powdered eggs.’

‘Doug? Are you okay?’

‘How can I not be okay? My job is to study the stars and there’s no better place on Earth to study the stars. The South Pole Telescope Station is at the top of a plateau three thousand metres above sea level where the katabatic winds haven’t gathered strength, with a sky containing almost no water – so how can you sit there and ask me if I’m okay when I have a view of the stars that could only be rivalled by going into space itself? Do you know what I saw? The other day?’

‘No, Doug, what did you see?’

‘A shooting star. It was travelling across the sky and then, suddenly, it stops, this shooting star, it stops, turns ninety degrees and carries on, across the sky, in a completely different direction.’

‘It changed direction?’

‘A shooting star changed direction. I saw it with my own eyes.’

‘How is that possible?’

‘You tell me, Zack, you tell me.’

‘I didn’t see it, Doug. I don’t know.’

Abruptly, Doug stood up, pushing his chair back so fast Zack flinched.

‘If you’ll excuse me, I have work to do. There are new galaxies that need discovering. You have a good day.’

With that, he left the table and he felt better already, not being at that table, away from Zack. He scraped his plate clean, reacting to the disapproving look from the chef.

‘Don’t look at me like that. They’re not even real eggs.’

At the door, about to leave, he felt a hand on his shoulder and turned to see Zack.

‘How about you hang with me a while? The winds are picking up. It’s not far off from Category Two.’

‘You can’t discipline me for going outside in a Category Two.’

‘No one’s talking about being disciplined. It might be an idea to wait a moment. Have a coffee, sit with me. You don’t have to talk. We can wait for the wind to drop.’

There were three grades of weather. Category Three was normal operating conditions, with no restrictions on movement, Category Two was winds over forty-eight knots, and Category One, the most serious, was winds over fifty-five knots, and a wind chill of one hundred below. During Category One no one was allowed off base and no one was allowed outside. As a representative of station safety, Zack had the power to report any unsafe behaviour. The station management were alarmists about accidents. It was for this reason that most personnel didn’t seek treatment for minor cuts and bruises, fearful that they’d initiate a risk-assessment process that might end up with them being shipped off the continent since it could be argued that a small injury should’ve been seen as a precursor to a serious incident.

‘I don’t want to hang out with you, Zack. I don’t want to drink coffee. I want to study the stars. That’s my job, to study the stars, and I can’t do that sitting at a table with you, pretending that we’re friends when we’re not.’

Without waiting for a reply, Doug opened the door and stepped outside. He hadn’t even finished putting on his parka, walking into the powerful wind with his jacket still unzipped, flapping about him. Zack would be following behind, full of concern and compassion. The thought made Doug run wildly. The wind was so loud he couldn’t hear his own thoughts. The cold was all around him, spreading into his arms and legs and body. Losing strength with each step, he stopped, dropping to his knees, accepting the truth. After eight years, it was his time.

He slowly stood up and changed direction, trudging towards the infirmary. If he went inside and told them the truth, they’d be sympathetic – he hadn’t

hurt anyone. But he knew it would get worse, this madness; someone would get hurt and it would probably be him. If he explained the situation, he'd be taken off work, sedated and made safe until a medevac flight could arrive. One thing was certain, he'd never return to the South Pole Telescope Station again. His career on the ice was over. His life in Antarctica was over. Doug opened the door to the infirmary and declared:

'I'm cold.'