

# MIGRATIONS

A NOVEL



“Extraordinary.”

—EMILY ST. JOHN MANDEL, author of *Station Eleven*

CHARLOTTE McCONAGHY



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Charlotte McConaghy



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*For Morgan*

*Forget safety.  
Live where you fear to live.*

—RUMI



# PART ONE



The animals are dying. Soon we will be alone here.

Once, my husband found a colony of storm petrels on the rocky coast of the untamed Atlantic. The night he took me there, I didn't know they were some of the last of their kind. I knew only that they were fierce in their night caves and bold as they dove through moonlit waters. We stayed a time with them, and for those few dark hours we were able to pretend we were the same, as wild and free.

Once, when the animals were going, really and truly and not just in warnings of dark futures but now, right now, in mass extinctions we could see and feel, I decided to follow a bird over an ocean. Maybe I was hoping it would lead me to where they'd all fled, all those of its kind, all the creatures we thought we'd killed. Maybe I thought I'd discover whatever cruel thing drove me to leave people and places and everything, always. Or maybe I was just hoping the bird's final migration would show me a place to belong.

Once, it was birds who gave birth to a fiercer me.

#### GREENLAND NESTING SEASON

It's only luck that I'm watching when it happens. Her wing clips the hair-thin wire and the basket closes gently over her.

I sit up straighter.

She doesn't react at first. But she knows somehow that she is no longer free. The world around her has changed just a little, or a lot.

I approach slowly, reluctant to scare her. Wind screams, biting at my cheeks and nose. There are others of her kind all over the icy rocks and circling the air, but they're quick to avoid me. My boots crunch and I see a ruffle of her

feathers, that hesitant first flap, the will-I-try-to-break-free moment. The nest she has built with her mate is rudimentary, a scattering of grass and twigs wedged into a crevice in the rocks. She doesn't need it anymore—her fledglings are already diving for their own food—but she returns to it like all mothers unable to let go. I stop breathing as my hand moves to lift the basket. She flaps only once, a sudden burst of defiance before my cold hand closes over her body and ceases her wings' movement.

I have to be quick now. But I've been practicing and so I am, my fingers swiftly looping the band over her leg, shifting it over the joint to the upper stretch beneath her feathers. She makes a sound I know too well, one I make in my dreams most nights.

"I'm sorry, we're nearly there, nearly there."

I start to tremble but keep going, it's too late now, you have touched her, branded her, pressed your human self upon her. What a hateful thing.

The plastic tightens firmly on her leg, keeping the tracker in place. It blinks once to tell me it's working. And just as I am about to let her go she turns very still so that I can feel her heartbeat pounding inside my palm.

It stops me, that *pat pat pat*. It's so fast and so fragile.

Her beak is red like she's dipped it in blood. It turns her strong in my mind. I place her back in the nest and edge away, taking the cage with me. I want her to explode free, I want there to be fury in her wings and there is, she is glorious as she surges. Feet red to match her beak. A velvet cap of black. Twin blades of a tail and those wings, the sharpness of their edges, the elegance.

I watch her circle the air, trying to understand this new piece of her. The tracker doesn't hinder her—it's as small as my little fingernail and very lightweight—but she doesn't like it. She swoops at me suddenly, giving a shrill cry. I grin, thrilled, and duck to protect my face but she doesn't swoop again. She returns to her nest and settles over it as though there is still an egg that she must protect. For her, the last five minutes never happened.

I've been out here on my own for six days. My tent was blown into the sea last night, as wind and rain lashed it from around my body. I've been pecked on the skull and hands more than a dozen times by birds who have been named the most protective in the sky. But I have three banded Arctic terns to show for my efforts. And veins filled with salt.

I pause on the crest of the hill to look once more, and the wind calms a moment. The ice spreads wide and dazzling, edged by a black-and-white ocean

and a distant gray horizon. Great shards of cerulean ice float languidly by, even now within the heart of summer. And dozens of Arctic terns fill the white of sky and earth. The last of them, perhaps in the world. If I were capable of staying any place, it might be here. But the birds won't stay, and neither will I.

★ ★ ★

My rental car is blessedly warm with the heating on full blast. I hold my frozen hands over the vent and feel my skin prickle. A folder of papers sits on the passenger seat and I fumble through them, looking for the name. Ennis Malone. Captain of the *Saghani*.

I have tried seven captains of seven boats and I think maybe the persistently mad part of me wanted them to fail the second I saw the name of this last boat. The *Saghani*: an Inuit word for raven.

I scan the facts I've managed to learn. Malone was born in Alaska forty-nine years ago. He's married to Saoirse and they have two young children. His vessel is one of the last legally certified to fish for Atlantic herring, and he does so with a crew of seven. According to the marina schedule the *Saghani* should be docked in Tasiilaq for the next two nights.

I put Tasiilaq into my GPS and set off slowly on the cold road. The town will take all day to reach. I leave the Arctic Circle and head south, pondering my approach. Each of the captains I have asked has refused me. They don't abide untrained strangers on board. Nor do they like their routines disrupted, routes shifted—sailors are superstitious folk, I have learned. Creatures of pattern. Especially now, with their way of life under threat. Just as we have been steadily killing off the animals of land and sky, the fishermen have fished the sea almost to extinction.

The thought of being aboard one of these merciless vessels with people who lay waste to the ocean makes my skin crawl, but I'm out of options, and I'm running out of time.

A field of green stretches to my right, punctured with a thousand white smudges I think at first are stalks of cotton, but it's only the speed of the car blurring everything; in fact they are ivory wildflowers. To my left, a dark sea crashes. A world apart. I could forget the mission, try to swallow the compulsion. Find some rustic hut and hunker down. Garden and walk and watch the birds slowly vanish. The thought darts through my mind, inconstant.

Sweetness would turn sour and even a sky as big as this one would soon feel a cage. I won't be staying; even if I were capable of it, Niall would never forgive me.

★ ★ ★

I book a cheap hotel room and dump my pack on the bed. The floor is covered with ugly yellow carpet but there's a view of the fjord lapping at the hill's foot. Across the stretch of water rear gray mountains, cut through with veins of snow. Less snow than there once was. A warmer world. While my laptop powers on, I wash my salty face and brush my furred teeth. The shower calls, but first I need to log my activity.

I write up the tagging of the three terns and then open the tracking software with a lungful of air I'm too nervous to let out. The sight of the blinking red lights melts me with relief. I've had no idea if this would work, but here they are, three little birds that will fly south for the winter and, if everything goes to plan, take me with them.

Once I'm showered, scrubbed, and warmly dressed, I shove a few papers in my backpack and head out, pausing briefly at the front desk to ask the young receptionist where the best pub is. She considers me, probably deciding which age bracket of entertainment she should recommend, and then tells me to try the bar on the harbor. "There is also *Klubben*, but I think it will be too ... fast for you." She adds a giggle to this.

I smile, and feel ancient.

The walk through Tasiilaq is hilly and lovely. Colorful houses perch on the uneven terrain, red and blue and yellow, and such a contrast to the wintry world beyond. They're like cheerful toys dotting the hills; everything feels smaller under the gaze of those imperious mountains. A sky is a sky is a sky, and yet here, somehow, it's more. It's bigger. I sit and watch the icebergs floating through the fjord awhile, and I can't stop thinking about the tern and her heart beating inside my palm. I can still feel the thrumming *pat pat pat* and when I press my hand to my chest I imagine our pulses in time. What I *can't* feel is my nose, so I head to the bar. I'd be willing to bet everything I own (which at this point isn't much) on the fact that if there's a fishing boat docked in town, its sailors will spend every one of their waking moments on the lash.

The sun is still bright despite how late in the evening it is—it won't go down all the way this deep in the season. Along with a dozen snoozing dogs tied to pipes outside the bar, there is also an old man leaning against the wall. A local, given he isn't wearing a jacket over his T-shirt. It makes me cold just looking at him. As I approach I spot something on the ground and stoop to pick up a wallet.

“This yours?”

Some of the dogs wake and peer at me inscrutably. The man does the same, and I realize he's not as old as I thought, and also very drunk. “Uteqqissinnaaviuk?”

“Uh ... Sorry. I just...” I hold up the wallet again.

He sees it and breaks into a smile. The warmth is startling. “English, then?”

I nod.

He takes the wallet and slips it into his pocket. “Thanks, love.” He is American, his voice a deep and distant rumble, a growing thing.

“Don't call me love,” I say mildly as I steal a better look at him. Beneath his salt-and-pepper hair and thick black beard he is probably late forties, not the sixty he appeared at a glance. Creases line his pale eyes. He's tall, and stooped as though he's spent a lifetime trying not to be. There is a largeness to him. A largeness of hands and feet, shoulders and chest and nose and gut.

He sways a little.

“Do you need help getting somewhere?”

It makes him smile again. He holds the door open for me and then closes it between us.

In the little entry room, I shrug off my coat, scarf, hat, and gloves, hanging them ready for when I leave. In these snow countries there's a ritual to the removal of warm gear. Inside the bustle of the bar there's a woman playing lounge music on the piano, and a fireplace crackling in a central pit. Men and women are scattered at tables and on sofas under the high ceiling and heavy wooden beams, and several lads are playing pool in the corner. It's more modern than most of the undeniably charming pubs I've been to since I arrived in Greenland. I order a glass of red and wander over to the high stools at the window. From here I can once more see the fjord, which makes it easier to be indoors. I'm not good at being indoors.

My eyes scan the patrons, looking for a group of men that could be the *Saghani's* crew. I don't spot any who particularly stand out—the only group

big enough has both men and women playing Trivial Pursuit and drinking stout.

I have barely taken a sip of my overpriced wine when I see him again, the man from outside. He's down on the water's edge now, wind whipping through his beard and against his bare arms. I watch him curiously until he walks straight into the fjord and disappears beneath the surface.

My wine nearly tips over as I slide off the stool. There's no sign of him returning to the surface. Not now, or now, or now. God—he's really not coming back up. My mouth opens to shout and then closes with a snap. Instead I'm running. Through the door to the deck, down the wooden steps so slippery with ice I nearly land on my butt, onto the cold muddy sludge of the bank. Somewhere near a dog is barking with high, panicked yelps.

How long does it take to freeze to death? Not long, in water like that. And he still hasn't resurfaced.

I plunge into the fjord and—

Oh.

Out flies my soul, sucked through my pores.

The cold is familiar and savage. For a moment it grips me and forces me into a cell, the painted stone cell I know like a lover, for I spent four years inside it, and because the cold sends me back I spend too many precious seconds wanting to be dead, just for it all to be over, right now, I can't wait any longer, there is no part of me that isn't finished—

Clarity returns with a punch to the lungs. Move, I order myself. I've always been good at cold—I used to swim in it twice a day, but it's been so long that I've forgotten, I've become soft to it. I kick my waterlogged layers toward the large body below. His eyes are closed and he's sitting on the bottom of the fjord, and he is unnervingly still.

My hands reach slowly to encircle his armpits. I press off the floor and drag him up to the surface with a mighty gasp. He is moving now, taking a great breath and wading free with me in his arms, like he is the one who has rescued me and not the other way around and how the hell did that happen?

“What are you *doing*?” he pants.

There are no words for a moment; I'm so cold it hurts. “You were drowning.”

“I was just taking a dip to sober up!”

“What? No, you...” I drag myself farther up onto the bank. Reality sinks in slowly. My teeth are chattering so hard that when I start laughing I must seem like a lunatic. “I thought you needed help.”

I can’t quite recall the logic that brought me to this moment. How long did I wait before I ran? How long was he under?

“For the second time tonight,” he says. Then, “Sorry. You should get yourself warm, love.”

More people have emerged from the bar to see what the commotion is about. They are crowded on the balcony, looking puzzled. Oh, the humiliation. I laugh again, but it’s more of a wheeze.

“You right, boss?” someone shouts in an Australian accent.

“Fine,” the man says. “Misunderstanding.”

He helps me to my feet. The cold is inside me and—shit, the pain. I have felt this cold before, but not for a long time. How is he standing it so well?

“Where are you staying?”

“You were under so long.”

“Good lungs.”

I stumble up the bank. “I’ll get warm.”

“Do you need—”

“No.”

“Hey!”

I pause and glance over my shoulder.

His arms and lips are blue, but he doesn’t seem bothered. Our eyes meet. “Thanks for the rescue.”

I salute him. “Anytime.”

★ ★ ★

Even with the shower on as hot as it will go, I’m still cold. My skin is red raw, scalded, but I can’t feel it. It’s the two toes on my right foot that I can feel tingling as though with the return of heat; strange because they were cut off some years ago. But then I often feel those phantom toes and right now I’m disturbed by something else, by how easily my mind went back to the cell. I’m frightened of how simple it was to dive into the water instead of shouting for help.

My drowning instinct.

When I'm wearing every item of clothing I own, I find my pen and paper, sit down at the crooked table, and write a clumsy letter to my husband.

*Well, it's happened. I've embarrassed myself so thoroughly that there's no coming back from it. An entire village of people saw a strange foreign woman fling herself into an icy fjord to inexplicably harass a man who was minding his own business. At least it'll make a good story.*

*And don't even try to use this as another excuse to tell me to come home.*

*I tagged my third bird this morning and I've left the nesting grounds. Lost my tent, nearly lost my mind. But the trackers are working, and I've found a man with a vessel big enough to make the journey so I'm staying in Tasiilaq while I convince him to carry me. I'm not sure I'll get another chance and I don't know how to force the world into a shape I can manage. Nobody ever seems to do what I want them to. This is a place that makes you very aware of your powerlessness. I never had any power over you, I sure as hell don't have any over the birds, and I have even less over my own feet.*

*I wish you were here. You can convince anyone of anything.*

I pause and stare at the scribbled words. They feel silly, sitting there on the page like that. After twelve years I'm somehow worse at expressing how I feel, and it shouldn't be like this—not with the person I love best.

*The water was so cold, Niall. I thought it would kill me. For a moment I wanted it to.*

*How did we get here?*

*I miss you. That's what I know best. Will write tomorrow.*

*F x*

I put the letter in an envelope and address it, then place it with the others I haven't yet sent. The sensation is coming back into my limbs and there is an erratic pulse in my veins that I recognize as the marriage between excitement and desperation. I wish there were a word for this feeling. I know it so well, perhaps I ought to name it myself.

In any case the night is early and I've a job to do.



I'm not sure when I first started dreaming of the passage, or when it became as much a part of me as the instinct for breath. It's been a long time, or feels it. I haven't cultivated this myself; it swallowed me whole. At first an impossible, foolish fantasy: the notion of securing a place on a fishing vessel and having its captain carry me as far south as he is able; the idea of following the migration of a bird, the longest natural migration of any living creature. But a will is a powerful thing, and mine has been called terrible.