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THE ATLANTIS GENE

A.G. RIDDLE

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This novel is fiction, except for the parts that aren't.



For Anna.

PROLOGUE

Research Vessel Icefall
Atlantic Ocean
88 Miles off the Coast of Antarctica

Karl Selig steadied himself on the ship's rail and peered through the binoculars at the massive iceberg. Another piece of ice crumbled and fell, revealing more of the long black object. It looked almost like... a submarine. But it couldn't be.

"Hey Steve, come check this out."

Steve Cooper, Karl's grad-school friend, tied off a buoy and joined Karl on the other side of the boat. He took the binoculars, scanned quickly, then stopped. "Whoa. What is it? A sub?"

"Maybe—"

"What's under it?"

Karl grabbed the binoculars. "Under it..." He panned to the area under the sub. There was something else. The sub, if it was a sub, was sticking out of another metallic object, this one gray and much larger. Unlike the sub, the gray object didn't reflect light; it looked more like heat waves, the kind that shimmer just over the horizon of a warm highway or a long stretch of desert. It wasn't warm, though, or at least it wasn't melting the ice around it. Just above the structure, Karl caught a glimpse of some writing on the sub: *U-977* and *Kriegsmarine*. A Nazi sub. Sticking out of... a structure of some sort.

Karl dropped the binoculars to his side. "Wake Naomi up and prepare to dock the boat. We're going to check it out."

Steve rushed below deck, and Karl heard him rousing Naomi from one of the small boat's two cabins. Karl's corporate sponsor had insisted he take Naomi along. Karl had nodded in the meeting and hoped she wouldn't get in the way. He had not been disappointed. When they had put to sea five weeks ago in Cape Town, South Africa, Naomi had brought aboard two changes of clothes, three romance novels, and enough vodka to kill a

Russian army. They had barely seen her since. *It must be so boring for her out here*, Karl thought. For him, it was the opportunity of a lifetime.

Karl raised the binoculars and looked again at the massive piece of ice that had broken off from Antarctica nearly a month ago. Almost ninety percent of the iceberg was underwater, but the surface area still covered forty-seven square miles—one and a half times the size of Manhattan.

Karl's doctoral thesis focused on how newly calved icebergs affected global sea currents as they dissolved. Over the last four weeks, he and Steve had deployed high-tech buoys around the iceberg that measured sea temp and salt-water/fresh-water balance as well as took periodic sonar readings of the iceberg's changing shape. The goal was to learn more about how icebergs disintegrated after leaving Antarctica. Antarctica held ninety percent of the world's ice, and when it melted in the next few centuries, it would dramatically change the world. He hoped his research would shed light on exactly how.

Karl had called Steve the minute he found out he was funded. "You've got to come with me—No, trust me." Steve had reluctantly agreed, and to Karl's delight, his old friend had come alive on the expedition as they took readings by day and discussed the preliminary findings each night. Before the voyage, Steve's academic career had been as listless as the iceberg they were following, as he floated from one thesis topic to another. Karl and their other friends had wondered if he would drop out of the doctoral program altogether.

The research readings had been intriguing, and now they had found something else, something remarkable. There would be headlines. But what would they say? "Nazi Sub Found in Antarctica"? It wasn't inconceivable.

Karl knew the Nazis had been obsessed with Antarctica. They'd sent expeditions there in 1938 and 1939 and even claimed part of the continent as a new German province—Neuschwabenland. Several Nazi subs were never recovered during World War II and were not known to have been sunk. The conspiracy theorists claimed that a Nazi sub left Germany just before the fall of the Third Reich, carrying away the highest ranking Nazis and the entire treasury, including priceless artifacts that had been looted and top-secret technology.

At the back of Karl's mind, a new thought emerged: reward money. If there was Nazi treasure on the sub, it would be worth a huge amount of money. He would never have to worry about research funding again.

The more immediate challenge was docking the boat to the iceberg. The seas were rough, and it took them three passes, but they finally managed to tie off a few miles from the sub and the strange structure under it.

Karl and Steve bundled up and donned their climbing gear. Karl gave Naomi some basic instructions, the long and short of which were “don’t touch anything,” and then he and Steve lowered themselves to the ice shelf below the boat and set off.

For the next forty-five minutes, neither man said anything as they trudged across the barren ice mountain. The ice was rougher toward the interior, and their pace slowed; Steve’s more than Karl’s.

“We need to pick it up, Steve.”

Steve made an effort to catch up. “Sorry. A month on the boat has got me out of shape.”

Karl glanced up at the sun. When it set, the temperature would plummet and they would likely freeze to death. The days were long here. The sun rose at 2:30 A.M. and set after 10 P.M., but they only had a few more hours. Karl picked up his pace a little more.

Behind him, he heard Steve shuffling his snow-shoes as fast as he could, trying desperately to catch up. Strange sounds echoed up from the ice: first a low drone, then a rapid hammering, like a thousand woodpeckers assaulting the ice. Karl stopped and listened. He turned to Steve and their eyes met just as a spider web of tiny cracks shot out across the ice below Steve’s feet. Steve looked down in horror, and then ran as hard as he could toward Karl and the untouched ice.

For Karl, the scene was surreal, unfolding almost in slow motion. He felt himself run toward his friend and throw a rope from his belt. Steve caught the rope a split second before a loud crack filled the air and the ice below him collapsed, forming a giant chasm.

The rope instantly pulled tight, jerking Karl off his feet and slamming him belly first into the ice. He was going to follow Steve into the ice canyon. Karl scrambled to get his feet under him, but the tug of the rope was too strong. He relaxed his hands, and the rope slid through them, slowing his forward motion. He planted his feet in front of him, and the crampons beneath his boots bit into the ice, sending shards of ice at his face as he came to a halt. He squeezed the rope, and it pulled tight against the ledge, making a strange vibrating sound almost like a low violin.

“Steve! Hang on! I’m going to pull you up—”

“Don’t!” Steve yelled.

“What? Are you crazy—”

“There’s something down here. Lower me, slowly.”

Karl thought for a moment. “What is it?”

“Looks like a tunnel or a cave. It’s got gray metal in it. It’s blurry.”

“Okay, hold on. I’m going to let some slack out.” Karl let about ten feet of rope out, and when he heard nothing from Steve, another ten feet.

“Stop,” Steve called.

Karl felt the rope tugging. Was Steve swinging? The rope went slack.

“I’m in,” Steve said.

“What is it?”

“Not sure.” Steve’s voice was muffled now.

Karl crawled to the edge of the ice and looked over.

Steve stuck his head out of the mouth of the cave. “I think it’s some kind of cathedral. It’s massive. There’s writing on the walls. Symbols—like nothing I’ve ever seen. I’m going to check it out.”

“Steve, don’t—”

Steve disappeared again.

A few minutes passed. Was there another slight vibration? Karl listened closely. He couldn’t hear it, but he could feel it. The ice was pulsing faster now. He stood up and took a step away from the edge. The ice behind him cracked, and then there were cracks everywhere—and spreading quickly. He ran full speed toward the widening fissure. He jumped—and almost made it to the other side but came up short. His hands caught on the ice ledge, and he dangled there for a long second. The vibrations in the ice grew more violent with each passing second. Karl watched the ice around him crumble and fall, and then the shard that held him broke free, and he was plummeting down into the abyss.



On the boat, Naomi watched the sun set over the iceberg. She picked up the satellite phone and dialed the number the man had given her.

“You said to call if we found anything interesting.”

“Don’t say anything. Hold the line. We’ll have your location within two minutes. We’ll come to you.”

She set the phone on the counter, walked back to the stove, and continued stirring the pot of beans.



The man on the other end of the satellite phone looked up when the GPS coordinates flashed on his screen. He copied the location and searched the satellite surveillance database for live feeds. One result.

He opened the stream and panned the view to the center of the iceberg, where the dark spots were. He zoomed in several times, and when the image came into focus, he dropped his coffee to the floor, bolted out of his office, and ran down the hall to the director's office. He barged in, interrupting a gray-haired man who was standing and speaking with both hands held up.

“We've found it.”

**PART I:
JAKARTA BURNING**

1

Autism Research Center (ARC)
Jakarta, Indonesia
Present Day

Dr. Kate Warner awoke to a terrifying feeling: there was someone in the room. She tried to open her eyes but couldn't. She felt groggy, almost as though she had been drugged. The air was musty... subterranean. She twisted slightly and pain coursed through her. The bed below her was hard—a couch maybe; definitely not the bed in her nineteenth-floor condo in downtown Jakarta. *Where am I?*

She heard another quiet footfall, like tennis shoes on carpet. “Kate,” a man whispered, testing to see if she was awake.

Kate managed to open her eyes a little. Above her, faint rays of sunlight filtered in through metal blinds that covered short, wide windows. In the corner, a strobe light pierced the room every few seconds, like the flash of a camera snapping a photo incessantly.

She took a deep breath and sat up quickly, seeing the man for the first time. He reeled back, dropping something that clanged as brown liquid splashed on the floor.

It was Ben Adelson, her lab assistant. “Jesus, Kate. I’m sorry. I thought... if you were up, you might want coffee.” He bent to pick up the remnants of a shattered coffee cup, and when he got a closer look at her, he said, “No offense, but you look horrible, Kate.” He stared at her for a moment. “Please tell me what’s going on.”

Kate rubbed her eyes, and her head seemed to clear a bit as she realized where she was. She had been working at the lab day and night for the last five days, virtually nonstop since she had gotten the call from her research sponsor: produce results now, any results, or the funding goes away. No excuses this time. She hadn't told any of the staff on her autism study. There was no reason to worry them. Either she got some results and they went on, or she didn't and they went home. “Coffee sounds nice, Ben. Thanks.”



The man exited the van and pulled his black face mask down. “Use your knife inside. Gunfire will draw attention.”

His assistant, a woman, nodded and pulled her face mask down as well.

The man extended his gloved hand to the door, but then hesitated. “You’re sure the alarm is off?”

“Yeah. Well, I cut the outside line, but it’s probably going off inside.”

“What?” He shook his head. “Jesus—they could be calling it in right now. Let’s be quick.” He threw the door open and charged inside.

Above the door, a sign read:

Autism Research Center

Staff Entrance



Ben returned with a fresh cup of coffee, and Kate thanked him. He plopped down in a chair opposite her desk. “You’re going to work yourself to death. I know you’ve slept here for the past four nights. And the secrecy, banning everyone from the lab, hoarding your notes, not talking about ARC-247. I’m not the only one who’s worried.”

Kate sipped the coffee. Jakarta had been a difficult place to run a clinical trial, but working on the island of Java had some bright spots. The coffee was one of them.

She couldn’t tell Ben what she was doing in the lab, at least not yet. It might amount to nothing, and more than likely, they were all out of a job anyway. Involving him would only make him an accomplice to a possible crime.

Kate nodded to the flashing fixture in the corner of the room. “What’s that strobe light?”

Ben glanced over his shoulder at it. “Not sure. An alarm, I think—”

“Fire?”

“No. I made the rounds when I got here, it’s not a fire. I was about to do a thorough inspection when I noticed that your door was cracked.” Ben

reached into one of the dozen cardboard boxes that crowded Kate's office. He flipped through a few framed diplomas. "Why don't you put these up?"

"I don't see the point." Hanging the diplomas wasn't Kate's style, and even if it were, who would she impress with them? Kate was the only investigator and physician on the study, and all the research staff knew her CV. They received no visitors, and the only other people who saw her office were the two dozen staff who cared for the children with autism in the study. The staff would think Stanford and Johns Hopkins were people, long deceased relatives maybe, the diplomas perhaps their birth certificates.

"*I'd* put it up, if I had an MD from Johns Hopkins." Ben carefully placed the diploma back in the box and rummaged around in it some more.

Kate drained the last of the coffee. "Yeah?" She held the cup out. "I'll trade you for another cup of coffee."

"Does this mean I can give you orders now?"

"Don't get carried away," Kate said as Ben left the room. She stood and twisted the hard plastic cylinder that controlled the blinds, revealing a view of the chain-link fence that circled their building and beyond it, the crowded streets of Jakarta. The morning commute was in full swing. Buses and cars crept along as motorcycles darted in and out of the tight spaces between them. Bicycles and pedestrians filled every square inch of the sidewalks. And she had thought the traffic in San Francisco was bad.

It wasn't just the traffic; Jakarta still felt so foreign to her. It wasn't home. Maybe it never would be. Four years ago, Kate would have moved anywhere in the world, any place that wasn't San Francisco. Martin Grey, her adoptive father, had said, "Jakarta would be a great place to continue your research... and... to start over." He had also said something about time healing all wounds. But now she was running out of time.

She turned back to the desk and began clearing away the photos Ben had taken out. She stopped at a faded picture of a large dancing room with a parquet floor. How had that gotten in with her work things? It was the only photo she had of her childhood home in West Berlin, just off Tiergartenstraße. Kate could barely picture the massive three-story residence. In her memory, it felt more like a foreign embassy or a grand estate from another time. A castle. An empty castle. Kate's mother had died during childbirth, and while her father had been loving, he had rarely been present. Kate tried to picture him in her mind's eye, but she couldn't. There was only a vague recollection of a cold day in December when he had taken

her for a walk. She remembered how tiny her hand felt inside of his, how safe she felt. They had walked all the way down Tiergartenstraße, to the Berlin Wall. It was a somber scene: families placing wreaths and pictures, hoping and praying for the Wall to fall and their loved ones to return. The other memories were flashes of him leaving and returning, always with some trinket from a faraway place. The house staff had taken up the slack as best they could. They were attentive but perhaps a little cold. What was the housekeeper's name? Or the tutor who lived with her and the other staff on the top floor? She had taught Kate German. She could still speak German, but she couldn't remember the woman's name.

About the only clear memory of the first six years of her life was the night Martin came into her dance room, turned the music off, and told her that her father wasn't coming home—ever again—and that she would be coming to live with him.

She wished she could erase that memory, and she'd just as soon forget the thirteen years that followed. She had moved to America with Martin, but the cities ran together as he rushed off to one expedition after another, and she was shipped off to one boarding school after another. None of them ever felt like home either.

Her research lab was the closest thing she had ever had to a real home. She spent every waking moment here. She had thrown herself into her work after San Francisco, and what had started as a defense mechanism, a survival mechanism, had become her routine, her lifestyle. The research team had become her family and the research participants her children.

And it was all about to go away.

She needed to focus. And she needed more coffee. She pushed the pile of photos off the desk and into the box below. Where was Ben?

Kate walked out into the hall and made her way to the staff kitchen. Empty. She checked the coffee pot. Empty. The strobe lights were going off here, too.

Something was wrong. "Ben?" Kate called out.

The other research staff wouldn't be in for hours. They kept a strange schedule, but they did good work. Kate cared more about the work.

She ventured out into the research wing, which consisted of a series of storage rooms and offices surrounding a large cleanroom lab where Kate and her team engineered gene therapy retroviruses they hoped would cure autism. She peered through the glass. Ben wasn't in the lab.

The building was creepy at this time of morning. It was empty, quiet, and not quite dark, but not light either. Shafts of focused sunlight poured into the hallways from the windows in the rooms on each side, like searchlights probing for signs of life.

Kate's footfalls echoed loudly as she prowled the cavernous research wing, peeking into each room, squinting to see through the bright Jakartan sun. All empty. That left the residential section—the housing units, kitchens, and supporting facilities for the study's roughly one hundred children with autism.

In the distance, Kate could hear other footsteps, faster than hers—running. She began walking more quickly, in their direction, and just as she turned the corner, Ben reached out and grabbed her arm. “Kate! Follow me, hurry.”