

# Chapter 1

@Words\_No\_Sounds

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EXCITEMENT: Tastes like space dust & popping bubble-gum; feels like the thud-bump of a plane landing; looks like the big furry hood of Dad's Inupiaq parka

It's FREEZING cold; like the air is made of broken glass. Our English cold is all roly-poly snowmen and 'woo-hoo! it's a snow day!' a hey-there friendly kind of cold. But this cold is mean. Dad said there were two main things about Alaska:

For one, it's really really cold and

For two, it's super-quiet because there's thousands of miles of snow and hardly any people. He must mean the north of Alaska, not here by Fairbanks Airport, with cars' tyres vibrating on the road and people with suitcase wheels

juddering along the pavement and planes scissoring up the sky. Dad is a big fan of quiet. He says it's not that I'm deaf but that I hear quietness.

Mum is keeping close to me, like she can wrap me up in another warm layer of her, and I lean right back into her. She thinks that Dad's snowmobile broke down so he missed his taxi-plane. She says his sat phone must have run out of charge otherwise he'd have definitely phoned us.

Dad was meant to meet us at the airport. Instead there was this policewoman who 'Can't Tell You Anything Yet I'm Sorry.' Now she's striding off ahead of us like we're on a school trip and the museum's about to close with the girl gang calling after her, 'Five minutes in the gift shop, miss!' but when a woman walks like that you know she's not going to slow down.

I'm wearing goggles and a face mask. Dad was super-bossy about what we had to bring with us – *proper Arctic gear, Puggle* – and now with the broken glass air I'm glad. I never cry, least not when people can see me, because if you start down that slippery slope you could end up wearing a pink tutu. But crying in goggles doesn't count as public as I don't think anyone can see. Dad says that up in the north of Alaska your tears can freeze.

Holding her daughter's hand, Yasmin stopped walking towards the airport's police building, causing the young police officer to frown, but for a short while she could pause what was happening. All around them snow had fallen, snow on snow, covering what had once been there in its monotone colour and texture; a scene made of plaster of Paris. By her feet

she saw the delicate markings of a bird's footprints in the snow and realised she was staring downwards. She forced herself to look up, for Ruby's sake, and was startled by the clarity around her. The snow had stopped falling and the air was dazzling, bright and crystalline, the lucidity astonishing; one more turn of the dial to more clarity still and you'd see each atom of air defined around you. It was as if the scene hovered, too in focus to be real.

The policewoman just took a newspaper off the table, like I'm a little child who's not allowed to read newspapers, so I hold up all my fingers to show her I am ten but she doesn't understand.

'A senior police officer will shortly fill you in,' she says to Mum.

'She thinks I'm a colouring book,' Mum signs to me, pretending that she's OK, trying to make me smile. People often miss Mum being funny, as if people who look like movie stars can't tell jokes too, which is really unfair. She hardly ever signs to me, she always wants me to read her lips, so I do a smile back, but inside I don't feel smiley

Mum says she'll be back soon and to come and get her if I need anything. I sign 'OK', which is raising my thumbs. It's a sign hearing people use too, which is maybe why Mum doesn't tell me to 'USE YOUR WORDS, RUBY'.

When I say 'I said' I mean I signed, which is hand-talking or I typed which is another kind of hand-talking. Sometimes I use an American sign which is like people using an American word when they speak with their mouth.

There's 3G in here but I've checked and I haven't got an

email from Dad. It was stupid to even *hope* there would be as:

For one) his laptop broke two weeks ago and

For two) even if he's borrowed a friend's there's no mobile signal or Wi-Fi in the north, which is where he must be because his snowmobile broke down; so he'll have to use his satellite terminal to send me an email and that's super-hard to do when it's freezing cold.

'Puggle' is the name for a baby platypus. Dad films wild-life programmes and he loves platypuses. But a platypus, especially a baby one, wouldn't survive two minutes in Alaska. You need to have special fur that keeps you warm like an Arctic fox and feet that stop you sinking in snow like a snowshoe hare or be like a musk ox with big hooves that can break ice so you can get to food and water. And if you're a person then you need goggles and arctic mittens and special clothes and a polar sleeping bag and Dad has all of those; so even if he has broken down in the north where your tears freeze he'll be all right, just like the Arctic fox and the musk ox and the snowshoe hare.

I completely believe that.

And he'll come and find us. I know he will.

On the plane from England, which took HOURS and HOURS, I kept imagining what Dad was doing. I was thinking, *Dad will be leaving the village now; Dad will be on his snowmobile now; Dad will be getting to the landing strip.*

*'In the middle of nowhere, Puggle, and the thing about the*

*middle of nowhere is that it is very beautiful and empty because only very few people find it.'*

*Dad will be waiting for the taxi plane now.*

*'Like a letter for the postman, you need to be there on time or you're not collected.'*

I fell asleep for ages and when I woke up I thought, *Daddy will be at Fairbanks Airport now, waiting for us!* And I wrote that tweet about Excitement being Dad's furry Inupiaq parka hood and the thud of the plane landing, although we hadn't actually landed yet but I thought that would be the most super-coolio feeling ever; bumping down and Dad being so close.

Then the flight attendant came busy-bodying towards me and I knew he was coming to tell me to switch off my laptop; which would've made Mum happy, because she hates that-bloodylaptop. I asked Mum to tell him that I'd put my laptop on flight-safe mode. I wasn't sure Mum would, because she'd have been super-happy if I'd had to turn it off; but the flight attendant saw me signing to Mum and realised I was deaf and did that thing people do, which is to go all mushy. Dad thinks it's the combo of beautiful Mum and little deaf girl (me!) that makes them like that – like we're in a movie on a Sunday afternoon. The mushy flight attendant didn't even bother to check I was on flight-safe mode after that just got me a free Twix. I hope there aren't any terrorists who are ten-year-old deaf girls or they'll just be giving them free sweets.

I'm nothing like the little girls in those films, and Mum isn't like a movie star either, she's too funny and clever, but Dad is quite like Harrison Ford. You know, the kind of person

who can disarm a terrorist if he has to but still reads the bedtime story? He finds that really funny when I tell him. And even though he's never actually had to disarm a terrorist – well duh – he always reads me a story when he's home, even now I'm ten and a half, and I love falling asleep with his fingers still making words in front of my eyelids.

Then we landed – bump-thud of the wheels and me super-coolio excited – and I linked up to the free Wi-Fi and posted my tweet and we got our luggage off that roundabout for cases, our legs a little funny after being on a plane for so long and we hurried through to Arrivals. But instead of Dad waiting for us there was a policewoman, who Can't Tell You Anything Yet I'm Sorry and she brought us here.

The senior police officer had been delayed, so Yasmin went to check on Ruby. She and Ruby were coming out to spend Christmas with Matt in just four weeks' time, but after her phone call with him eight days ago she'd needed to see him face to face immediately – as immediately as is possible when you have a child at school and a dog and cat who need looking after and arctic clothes to buy. She'd been worried about taking Ruby out of school but since Matt's father had died there was no one who Ruby would stay with happily.

She looked at Ruby through the glass in the door, watching her shiny erratically cut hair falling forward over her face as she bent over her laptop. Ruby had trimmed it herself last Wednesday evening in a Maggie Tulliver moment of hair-cutting independence. At home, Yasmin would ask her to turn off the laptop *and enter the real world*, but for now she'd let her be.

Sometimes when Yasmin looked at her daughter time seemed to hit an obstacle and stop, while everyone else's time moved on without her. She'd missed entire conversations before. It was as if the contractions, begun in labour as pain, continued afterwards as something else, equally strong, and she wondered if this labour had an end to it. Would she still feel this when Ruby was twenty? Middle-aged? Would her mother feel this for her now? She wondered how long you could go on missing being loved by your mother.

The young policewoman strode up to her – the woman never went anywhere slowly – and told her Lieutenant Reeve was waiting for her and that her suitcases were safely stored in an office, as if the logistics of luggage had equal weight with what Lieutenant Reeve would say to her.

She went with her to Lieutenant Reeve's office.

He stood up to greet her, holding out his hand. She didn't take it.

'What's happened to Matt? Where is he?'

She sounded angry, as if she was blaming Matt for failing to turn up. She'd been so deeply angry with him that her voice had not yet attuned to this new situation; whatever this situation was.

'There are a few things I'd like to confirm with you,' Lieutenant Reeve said. 'We have records for foreign nationals working in Alaska.'

Since Ruby had been diagnosed as totally deaf (very rare they said, as if her baby's deafness was a type of orchid), Yasmin had seen sound as waves. As a physicist, she should have done that before, but it took Ruby to comprehend

the truth that sound was physical. Sometimes, when she didn't want to hear what a person was saying – audio-vestibular specialists, thoughtless friends – she imagined surfing over the top of their words, or diving through them, rather than letting the waves hit her eardrums and turn into decipherable words. But she had to listen. She knew that. Had to.

'According to these records,' Lieutenant Reeve continued, 'your husband has been staying at Anaktue. Although originally we had him staying at Kanati?'

'Yes, he was there for eight weeks in the summer, at an Arctic research station, making a wildlife film. He met two Anaktue villagers and they invited him to stay in their village. He returned to Alaska in October to stay with them.'

An unnecessarily detailed, procrastinating answer, but Lieutenant Reeve didn't hurry with his response either, as if he too didn't want this conversation to go any further.

'I'm afraid that there has been a catastrophic fire at Anaktue,' he said.

*Catastrophic.* A word for immense devastation, for volcanoes and earthquakes and meteorites striking the Earth, not for the tiny village of Anaktue, more of a hamlet even than a village. The stupid thing was that she'd been coming out here to row with him, to issue ultimatums that she'd intended to carry through. She'd travelled halfway round the globe to tell him that he had to come home, right now, that she didn't believe him that nothing more would happen with the Inupiaq woman and she wasn't going to stand by on the other side of the world as this woman destroyed their family.



But that had made Matt seem so lily-livered weak, this other woman and herself determining his loyalties and future, that she had become angrier still so that not a single item in hers and Ruby's cases was folded but hurled and crammed inside, ready to burst out when they were unzipped in Alaska in a fury of down feathers and Gore-Tex.

'We think gas canisters for a heater or cooker exploded in one of the houses,' Lieutenant Reeve said. 'And the fire spread to a stockpile of snowmobile fuel and generator diesel which caused another much larger explosion and a devastatingly intense fire. No one at Anaktue survived. I'm sorry.'

She felt knifed by love; winded by the sharpness of it. The sensation was oddly familiar; a harsher version of the pain she'd felt in their early days, long before marriage and a child, before there was any tangible security that he'd still be with her tomorrow. And time was no longer stretched out and linear but bent back on itself and broken into fragments so that the young man she'd loved so passionately was as vividly recalled and equally present as the husband she'd argued with eight days ago.

She remembered the low winter sun slanting through the windows, the slow quiet voice of the philosophy professor, the thick walls of the lecture hall cushioning them from the cawing of birds outside. Later, he would tell her they were starlings and dunnocks. He was sitting a few empty places away from her. She'd seen him twice before and had liked his angularity; his way of walking quickly and pre-occupied, as if his mind was dictating his pace; the sharp planes of his face. When she clicked her knitting needles

he'd glanced towards her and their eyes had a jolt of irrational recognition. Then he'd looked away as if looking any longer would be a reproof for the clicking. When the lecture finished he came over to her as she put her knitting away, baffled.

'Is it a snood for a snake?'

'A railing.'

Later he said he thought she was barmy but wanted to give her the chance of a defence.

'You're a fruitcake, right?'

*That was your idea of giving me a defence?*

'An astrophysicist,' she'd said.

He'd thought she was joking, then he'd seen her face.

'A knitting astrophysicist in a philosophy lecture?'

'I'm learning about the metaphysics part of physics. In Oxford you can do a joint degree. And you?'

'Zoology.'

'So what are you doing at a philosophy lecture? Apart from questioning my knitting?'

'Philosophy's important.'

'To animals?'

'To how we think about animals. Ourselves. Our environment and our place in it.' He caught himself and looked abashed. 'Not normally so heavy. Not so quickly.'

'I've come a long way to do heavy quickly.'

Her school had been brutally underachieving. She'd survived it by becoming hidden and anonymous; fortunately, her high-cheekboned, small-breasted looks had no currency with teenage boys. She'd hugged the secret of being clever close to herself, deliberately underperforming in exams until

A levels when she'd spectacularly pulled a glittering four As out of a bag everyone presumed contained a collection of unshiny Cs and Ds. She'd had to hide her nerdiness for years, now she was celebrating it.

She put away her long thin piece of knitting.

'Eight o'clock. Outside the UL. I'll show you.'

Lieutenant Reeve leaned towards her and she realised that they were both sitting at a table, opposite one another; she hadn't remembered sitting down. He was handing her something.

'A state trooper from Prudhoe found it at the scene. He brought it to us to show you. From the initials inside we think it may be Matthew's?'

She stroked the touch-warmed solid metal of his wedding ring. Inside were hers and Matt's initials; half of the first line of a vow. She felt the second half of the vow under her wedding ring imprinted on the soft underside of her finger.

'Yes, it's his,' she said.

She took off her wedding ring and replaced it with Matt's, which was much too big for her finger. She put hers on again, hers now keeping Matt's safe, because maybe one day he might want to wear it again. It was impossible for him to be dead, not with that knife inside her; not with Ruby sitting next door. She could not – would not – believe it.

She saw Lieutenant Reeve watching her hands.

'He takes off his wedding ring when he's working. Puts it somewhere safe.'

The explanation Matt had given to her, weeks ago, when she'd spotted his bare ring finger in a photo he'd emailed to Ruby. Thankfully Ruby hadn't noticed.

She didn't tell Lieutenant Reeve that she hadn't believed Matt's excuse.

A few hours after the philosophy lecture, already dark, they'd walked away from the historic part of town, inhabited by students and tourists, to a retail park on the edge of a housing estate, the tarmac and concrete impersonal, the shadows forbidding. He saw that there were knitted tubes around signs and railings and a bike rack. He hadn't been beguiled solely by luminous eyes, long limbs and generous smile, but by soft wool around hard metal, yarn colouring aluminium and steel in stripes and patterns.

She told him that she was part of a group of guerilla gardeners, stealthily changing concrete roundabouts into small flower meadows in the middle of the night, but she hadn't done that for a little while.

'Only so many roundabouts?' he'd asked,

'The wrong time of year to plant,' she'd replied. 'And you can't garden in lectures.'

'So is this your secret passion?' he asked.

'Knitting snoods for railings? Fortunately not.'

'So?'

But she didn't trust him enough yet to show him.

Lieutenant Reeve was unsure whether to put a comforting hand on hers but felt awkward as he started the gesture. She was being so dignified, none of the fuss he was expecting.

Unfair, fuss; he meant emotion he wouldn't know how to deal with; grief.

'A plane saw the blaze yesterday afternoon,' he told her, thinking that she'd want details. He would in her place.

'The pilot flew over Anaktue just before a storm hit. The North Slope Borough state troopers and public safety officers mounted a search and rescue mission, despite the storm and terrible flying conditions. And they kept searching until the early hours of this morning, but tragically there weren't any survivors.'

'Yesterday afternoon?' she said.

'Yes, I don't have any more details, I'm afraid. It was the state troopers and PSOs in the north who were on the scene.'

'He phoned me yesterday. Matt phoned me. At five pm Alaskan time.'

She'd known it all along but now she had the proof. As the policeman made a phone call she remembered fragments of their conversation as they'd walked back towards their colleges together and how all the time another conversation was going on, in the way he leaned in closer to her, the way she subconsciously matched her pace to his; she noticed the faded checked collar of his shirt against his neck, with the protruding Adam's apple, as if he was still in the process of being formed, this man-boy.

He saw the harsh street lights land on her brow and cheeks and mouth, and

saw the woman she would be in ten years and it was just like that, he told her later. *Bam! A magic trick. A miracle. The woman I want to be with.*

She'd had less confidence in his imagined future. But as she walked with him she felt the solitariness of her old life, the one in which she was the oddity, the only person in her family and school and estate to go to university, recede a little behind her.