



CHAPTER ONE

The Polar Night

APRIL WOOD STOOD with her family in the centre of Longyearbyen and watched the sun go down for the final time that year. It was minus twelve degrees with a bitter wind that made it feel even colder.

Today marked the start of the dark season. Where night would become day and day would become night

and there would be nothing for April, save the hands on her watch, to tell the two apart.

‘The polar night,’ she whispered.

Longyearbyen was the capital of Svalbard, a group of islands close to the North Pole. It was a place of final frontiers, unimaginable adventures and one of the few locations left on Earth that still ached with a pure, deep wilderness. And it was also April’s home.

It hadn’t always been this way. Up until about six months ago, April had been living a perfectly ordinary life far away from the Arctic. She had lived in a small, red-brick house, attended her local school and studied unremarkable, everyday lessons.

But ordinary lives can only carry so much allure.

And living in the Arctic was *anything* but ordinary. After all, where else in the world could you experience twenty-four hours of darkness in wintertime? To celebrate the occasion, Longyearbyen’s two thousand residents – nearly the entire population of Svalbard – had lined the main street to get the best view of the Polar

Night Ceremony. This was an event that took place on the same date in mid-November every year, and since this was April’s first proper winter in Svalbard, it was her very first time taking part in it.

Wearing her thickest winter coat, a blue bobble hat, some mittens and a pair of rainbow snow boots, April was sandwiched between her father and his girlfriend Maria. It should have felt quite cosy but Dad was chomping on an aniseed candy, his favourite sweet, and all April could hear was loud crunching. Her hearing had always been sensitive – more so than the average girl – and was even more so these days.

‘It’s starting,’ Maria said, craning her neck to get a better view.

As if on cue, the town’s only church burst open its wooden doors and out emerged a boy, maybe nine or ten years old, carrying a flaming fire torch high above his head.

‘The torch symbolises the light, of course,’ murmured April’s dad, placing a gloved hand on April’s shoulder.

Luckily he had finished eating so she could concentrate on what he was saying. 'And this simple procession represents the final passage of the sun across the sky, as it disappears from sight.'

'Not to be seen again until March,' April said in awe.

'All that darkness!' Maria shivered, winding her handknitted scarf around her neck even tighter. Maria was originally from Spain, and whilst she had adapted to Svalbard surprisingly easily, she was still nervous about the prospect of an entire winter without any daylight.

'We would not be human,' Dad said, offering a reassuring smile, 'if we did not fear the dark. But there is nothing to be afraid of. The polar night is merely a result of the axial tilt of the Earth. In fact, in scientific terms, it is considered—'

'Edmund! How you manage to suck the excitement out of any occasion is beyond me.' Maria rolled her eyes playfully at April. 'This is not *just* science. This is . . .'

'Magic,' April said, finishing Maria's sentence.

'Technically *not* magic,' Dad said. But both Maria

and April had put their fingers in their ears and in the end, even he started laughing.

'The ceremony,' April squealed. 'Look!'

The boy carrying the flaming torch had reached the end of the main street and was face to face with the town's governor, a tall, broad-chested man who stood in front of a large wooden barrel of water.

The governor addressed the crowd in Norwegian, which was the main language in Svalbard. April had picked up a decent amount – more than her dad anyway, who was one of those people who found learning languages impossible. He could just about order a cup of coffee, but quite often ended up with tea (and once even a bowl of dog biscuits) by accident.

'What did he say?' Dad asked eagerly.

'Something about the time being ready,' April translated. 'That whilst we are grateful for the sun, we are also grateful for the dark. For the dark brings its own kind of light. The light of community . . . and . . . I didn't catch that bit. But I think he's saying the dark

is an opportunity to bring people together, to look after each other and to look after ourselves.'

'Like a recharge.' Maria nodded in approval. 'A recharge of the soul. I can do that.'

As the governor finished talking, the crowd clapped and cheered. This was accompanied by dog howls and a few excited barks. In a place where cats were forbidden, in case they harmed the local wildlife, most people owned at least one dog. Usually retired husky dogs but other breeds too. In fact, April sometimes wondered if there were more dogs here than there were humans. Not that she minded. April often preferred animals to humans anyway.

Finally, the crowd fell to a hush.

Upon the count of ten – a count led by the governor – the boy held out the torch. Then, after a dramatic pause, he dowsed it in the barrel of water. The flame sizzled brightly, mirroring the last of the sunshine that had disappeared behind the surrounding mountain tops – before extinguishing completely. April held her breath,

aware of a strange, almost sacred feeling in the air. A feeling which was hard to identify – only that it signified change.

The polar night had begun.

'Right,' said Dad popping in another sweet. 'Shall we head home?'

Home happened to be a hotel.

Some people might find it strange living in a hotel. But for April and her family, it felt like the most natural thing in the world to stay in the Arctic Lodge.

It had started back in February, when April and her father had travelled to Svalbard on a quest to find her best friend. That April's best friend was a wild polar bear was another story, but for April, her friendship with Bear was the truest thing in her life. And nothing, not ever, would get in the way of that. Luckily, the owner of the hotel, Jurgen, had both an open mind and an undeterred enthusiasm to help. In the adventure that followed – not without some risk – April had managed to track down

Bear *and* save his tiny cub, Peanut.

Following this, April's dad had realised that his daughter belonged in the Arctic and, to her great surprise, he had decided to resettle them in Svalbard. Where else to live, but Jurgen's hotel? Dad now worked as one of the scientists at the Polar Institute whilst Maria taught in Svalbard's sole primary school. And even though the three of them were living in one of the coldest places on Earth, Dad's smile was the warmest April had ever known it.

When she wasn't at school or helping her friend Hedda at her husky yard, April tried to see Bear whenever she could. Which wasn't *that* often given he was a polar bear. But it was enough. Enough to know he was close by and within sniffing distance.

As they climbed the hill towards the hotel, where the lights from the windows blinked cheerfully, April's father looped an arm around his daughter. She was too big to lift up in the air, like he had done when she was much younger, but he pulled her close anyway.

'What was the song you used to sing?' he asked.
'Something about crocodiles?'

'Oh!' April laughed, blushing under her bobble hat.
'I haven't sung that for ages!'

'But how did it go?' Dad pressed. 'Wasn't it something like . . . I'm happy, happy, happy . . .'

'So, so, so happy,' April continued, since Dad was looking expectantly at her. 'I'm full of sunshine and smiles, I'm not even afraid of crocodiles!'

Dad laughed. A big, belly rumble of a laugh that made April sing the next verse a bit louder. Even Maria joined in until the three of them were singing April's childhood song at the top of their lungs.

'I'm so happy, happy, HAPPY,' they all warbled. Somewhat haphazardly in April's case, because if there was one thing she couldn't do particularly well, it was sing in tune.

But what did singing in tune matter when your heart was full?

Because apart from the summer spent on Bear Island

a couple of years ago, when she had first met Bear, these past few months on Svalbard had been the happiest, most beautiful time of April's life.

And she didn't want anything to change that.



CHAPTER TWO

A New Home

THE ARCTIC LODGE consisted of a trio of interlinked cargo containers, which perched on top of the hill that overlooked Longyearbyen. When April and her father had first visited earlier in the year, it had been tired and run-down with very few visitors. Since then, Dad had helped Jurgen remodel the hotel so it looked a lot more inviting.