**Prologue**

“There it is a last. Truelock Island.” The Captain pointed off the starboard bow, toward a fog bank wisping across the ice flow. A dark image loomed out of the sea ahead of them, partially obscured by the white mist that danced in and out of the Arctic sunshine. It promised to break through into a fine day. “That’s the closest landmass to the North Pole and it’s American territory.” Captain Flood said.

New to command and the first woman to captain a U.S. Coast Guard icebreaker, Mary Kate Flood knew she was now in charge of the nation’s foremost high-latitude research vessel. The *Point Barrow* is a technological marvel, she thought. It is the only American military ship truly capable of navigating the frozen waters of the Arctic Ocean. And now, Mary Kate, she is your responsibility.

“Slow to one-third,” she commanded.

“Yes, Ma’am. Reducing to one hundred revolutions,” replied Bermudez, the young Hispanic helmsman. Instantly the ship responded to her will. The loud, crunching sound of the icepack parting before them, suddenly reduced to a whisper. She glanced down at the digital readout of the satellite navigation system, confirming the ship’s position.

“Lucy?”

“Yes, Captain.” Her Executive Officer, Lucille Jorgensen, stepped forward.

“This is a great day for both of us. We have successfully arrived at our mission destination in record time. Were two gals at the top of the world. Over the last three months since I have taken command, the officers and crew have performed brilliantly.”

Commander Jorgensen, smiled. “We sure are a long way from New London and the Academy. When I was growing up in Duluth, I never envisioned getting this far north.” She glanced down at the navigation system. “80 degrees, 22 minutes North-160 degrees, 59 minutes West. Were only three hundred twenty-five nautical miles from the Pole.”

“You know, that is exactly the same latitude and longitude which Henrietta Thurlow, who discovered this island a century ago, wrote down in her expedition journal.”

Captain Flood gazed out from the Bridge just in time to see the lifting fog reveal the glacier covered volcanic cone that was Mount Bascom. It towered like a frozen sentinel a thousand meters above the Arctic Ocean. “And remember, Lucy, she calculated the position of this place using her father’s hand-held sextant, a pocket chronometer set on Greenwich Mean Time and a set of old fashion navigation tables.”

“That Dr. Thurlow must have been a brilliant woman and very brave. It’s a shame she never lived to see full recognition for her discovery which she so rightly deserved.”

“Sadly, it was so unjust back in those days.”

Captain Flood hung her head for a moment in deep thought about the hero of her youth: Henrietta Truelock Thurlow, Ph.D. Only the second female in America to receive a university doctorate in geology.

“The problem was always a lack of physical evidence that she in fact did walk these shores,” the Captain added. “Unlike the other Arctic explorers of her era, no one has ever found any artifacts that proved she was ever here. No stone carain marker, discarded equipment, remains of a campsite or even a flag was ever found.”

“But Captain, I thought I read somewhere that Thurlow and her Inuit companion took shelter in some kind of volcanic cave, that was close to a geothermal source?”

“You are correct. That’s what she wrote in her memoir as the explanation for how she survived an entire polar winter at these frigid latitudes.”

The hatch to the Bridge swung opened. Through it stepped a stout, bearded man who looked more like a Portuguese merchantman than the leader of a scientific expedition. A broad grin graced his face.

“Dr. Benelli. Come on in” said Captain Flood. “I’ll pour you a cup of Joe. You take it black, don’t you?”

But Dr. Anthony Benelli was not interested in morning coffee. With eyes flush with excitement, he rushed forward to the broad window which now displayed a panoramic view Truelock Island.

“Doctor? Coffee?”

“Oh, yes, Captain. Thank you. That would be splendid.” He took the large mug from the Captain’s hand and blew on the steam rising from its rim, which instantly fogged a round circle on the cold glass.

As they watched from above, the other members of Benelli’s U.S Geological Survey team ran across the deck toward the bow rail. Jumping up and down like grade school children, they reveled in the delight of spotting Truelock Island for the first time.

“Incredible!” Dr. Benelli exclaimed. Everyone on the Bridge, including the captain, could not help but chuckle at his enthusiasm. “This is the highest sea mount of the Gakkel Ridge. The extreme northern edge of the great tectonic plate that splits the floor of the Atlantic Ocean. I can’t wait to get ashore.”

As the *Point Barrow* crept slowly through the pack ice, a horseshoe shaped inlet appeared before them. Rocky cliffs, over hung by the face of an ominous blue-white glacier, outlined the small bay. Its black sand beaches now exposed by the early summer melt produced by its southern exposure.

“Five degrees right rudder. Mr. Bermudez. If you please.”

“Aye, Aye, Captain. Five right.”

“Lucy, watch our depth below the keel. Even after all these years, this island is still poorly charted in places. I don’t want to accidentally discover a hidden shoal beneath this ice.”

“Yes, Captain,” Commander Jorgensen replied. The bright blue numerals on the depth finder set her mind at ease. “We still have twenty meters of water under us.”

“That is good. We will drop anchor about a quarter mile out. Doctor, that should make your Geo Survey people happy. They can stretch their sea legs on the flow.”

“Yes. I am sure they will appreciate that after nearly six weeks at sea.”

The Captain nodded. “Steady as she goes, Mr. Bermudez.”

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The Zodiac launch meandered through the jumble of broken ice flows, churning its way through the slurpy mess of surface ice. As they approached the island Dr. Benelli, the head of the research team jumped from the bow prematurely. He promptly went into the frigid sea water up to his waist. Uttering a great laugh, he trudged forward to a spit of black sand that was their first landfall, shaking off the wetness like a Newfoundland on a duck hunt.

“That, I guess, was my Arctic baptism.” he told his group of amused scientists. “Rather refreshing. I highly recommend it.”

A Coast Guard seaman dragged the Zodiac onto the beach and secured a line around a volcanic boulder. The sand was surprisingly warm, having absorbed its daily dose of solar heat throughout the clear morning. “And there, my dear colleagues,” Dr. Benelli said, pointing his walking pole toward the island, “is the object of our research.”

Before them towered the ice cliffs of Thurlow Glacier, glistening with spring melt that amplified its blue-green translucence. The group stood in awe before its majesty, enveloped by a curious polar silence where no birds could be heard, no creatures stirred.

“As you can see from the terminal moraine deposited above this beach, the glacier has obviously receded much over the years. How quickly it is now retreating we can only speculate. Our ice core samples will tell us more.”

Dr. Benelli quickly donned his camouflage day pack and took a hefty swig from his water bottle. “And now, my dear friends, you are on your own for the remainder of the day. We will all meet back here at 1800 hours. That’s 6:00 PM for you non-military types.” He smiled at the group and gestured toward the glacier. “If anyone needs to come looking for me, I’ll be in that direction.”

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Benelli was glad to be alone in this Arctic wilderness. Free from the constant enthusiastic chatter of his fellow scientists. He was, he knew, something of a misanthrope and was the first to admit it. But in his opinion, silence was a prerequisite to sound thinking. Perhaps in this place, he realized, a man could think great thoughts.

It took a half hour to cross the beach, which was strewn with heaps of grotesquely shaped blocks of sea ice. The wind in his face freshened, as he watched the sun transverse its strange parallel path across the polar sky. Finally, at around noon, he climbed the face of the moraine to its stony top and soon reached the glacier’s base.

Removing a glove, he reached out his hand in wonder, gently touching the ice wall. It felt wet and slick like the cold sweaty skin of a mammal. Almost alive. “Hello glacier,” he said playfully to the silent expanse around him. “I am Dr. Anthony Benelli and I am here to examine you.”

As he leaned forward to place his cheek against the ice, something crunched unevenly under his boot. It somehow felt softer than the rocky gravel beneath it. At first, he could not make out exactly what he was standing upon. Rectangular with faded wide lines, he realized the object was a frozen cloth still partially trapped within the glacier. Extracting a prospector’s pick from his pack, he slowly and meticulously began to chip away. After several minutes of concerted effort, he finally freed the material in one piece from its icy entombment.

Thawing the frozen cloth in a nearby pool of melt water was a painful process which turned Benelli’s hands a red and raw. But the discomfort was quickly forgotten when we realized what he had discovered. Stars appeared on a dark field in the cloth’s corner with pale horizontal lines of red-white-blue. Upon counting the number of stars, he discovered there were just forty-eight. He held the flag up to the Arctic sunlight, noting the thickness of the cloth and seeing that its gold tasseled fringe was still intact.

It was oddly warm in the little enclave of volcanic rock where he stood. A sheltered outcropping, not part of the larger moraine which surrounded it. Isolated from the polar breezes. A tiny stream which feed the pool gurgled down its black stone face, flowing steadily from the mass of ice which yawned over it.

At first, the burst of tepid air hardly caught his attention. It brushed his face and warmed his hands. Then another followed, steadier than the first. Benelli noticed it was coming from a dark hole in the cliff which was partially buried in glacier rubble. He placed his hands before the opening and could feel the warm air percolating from inside the earth. Removing the larger stones and clearing the hole of debris, revealed an entrance to a cave which was spacious enough to accommodate a person. “The flag,” he asked himself, “and now is this the dwelling place of its owner?”

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“Captain? Commander Jorgenson asks that you please come to the Bridge.”

The radioman stood at attention in the empty Wardroom. The smell of baking bread and fresh coffee filled his nostrils, making him hungry and long for the end of the duty shift.

“What’s the story, Mr. Trang? Have you a message from the landing party?”

“Yes, Ma’am. The Commander says its important.”

“Very well. I will be there presently.”

The young seaman of Vietnamese extraction saluted sharply and returned to his duties. Mary Kate smiled. I’m in charge of a virtual United Nations of passengers and crew, she thought. Scientists from Canada and Denmark, with American sailors of ever ethnic group imaginable.

Slightly annoyed at having her well-deserved coffee break interrupted, she took a last bite of the cherry Danish, marveling once again at the quality of the chow aboard the *Point Barrow*. But as she had been taught in Coast Guard Command School, a captain is never off-duty.

On the Bridge, Trang gave the captain a hand-held radio, “It’s Dr. Benelli” he said, “apparently he has found something interesting.” Commander Jorgenson radiated a big smile and nodded.

“Dr. Benelli. Captain Flood here. Acknowledge please.”

“Captain. I have incredible news. She was here! The evidence is indisputable. Henrietta Thurlow really was here!”

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