



Veronica's Travels



Christmas Island



'Ginty Island'

Melbourne



Snares Islands

ANTARCTICA

Veronica



The Ballahays, Ayrshire, Scotland

‘I HAVE ASKED Eileen to find us some penguins in Scotland.’

Daisy gives a small shriek of delight and springs up from the sofa. I do worry that all her bouncing is not good for it, and I always ensure it is me who is seated in the more valuable Queen Anne chair whenever we are in the snug, the smaller of the two sitting rooms at The Ballahays. Daisy’s fervour borders on vandalism at times.

‘You don’t need to ask Eileen,’ she proclaims, her voice imbued with cheekiness, which, as she is not a healthy child, I decide to let go. ‘I can find the Scottish penguins on my phone.’ She rummages inside her dizzyingly multi-coloured bag, pulls out her phone and waves it around. The phone is no more than a small, flat rectangle, but I know she can she operate it with ferocious efficiency.

‘Put that thing away,’ I tell her. ‘It is an abomination to see a nine-year-old frittering her life away on such pointless gizmos.’

‘A bomination? That sounds fun!’

‘It isn’t, believe me.’

She tosses the phone back into her bag. We seem to have wandered away from the subject already, which is a little dangerous as far as I’m concerned. This is not because my memory is at fault (it is, as ever, in tip-top condition), but one often loses track when one is in conversation with Daisy, whose young mind darts about all over the place. I return to the topic with haste, before we lose the thread altogether.

‘Penguins,’ I remind her, ‘are not only a source of endless entertainment; they are an example to us all. They are well worth seeking out.’

‘I know,’ she says. ‘*Remember the penguins!*’

This was the little mantra I often cited to cheer her along when she was undergoing chemotherapy before Christmas. Penguins, as well as being quite charming, have for me come to represent bravery, determination and resilience. With their daily challenges of long treks across snowy wasteland, swimming in icy waters and trying to avoid becoming meals for seals, they are paragons of good cheer in the face of hardship. I’m pleased that Daisy has fully grasped this concept.

She scrambles back on to the sofa and kneels up, looking over the arm and out of the bay window, as if she might see one of her favourite birds waddling about on the lawn. The Ballahays garden boasts several sweeping herbaceous borders, a fountain and a fine collection of

rhododendron bushes, all lovingly tended by Mr Perkins, but alas, there is a complete dearth of penguins.

‘Perhaps I will commission a penguin statue to be made,’ I muse. ‘It might look rather splendid in the shrubbery.’

Daisy is overexcited at the very idea of it. Her eyes have lit up. They are unusually big and blue. She has a scattering of freckles across the bridge of her nose, which, although she is growing at an alarming rate, is still the small, buttonish nose of childhood. Her mouth, when not busy, settles into the shape that is commonly described as ‘rosebud’. She is a pretty girl in spite of her hair loss. The orange scarf wrapped around her head does her no favours, however. I have offered to buy her a wig, but she won’t have it. A very determined young lady is Daisy.

It was, I am proud to relate, her first wish to come and visit as soon as she was out of hospital and well enough to do so. Her parents and brother accompanied her here for the first few days, but they have now returned to Bolton. Although she must still rest every day and take various medications, Daisy asserts that she feels less tired when she is here. I, on the other hand, feel more tired. It is absolutely worth it though.

It is gratifying that the McCreeley charm is still intact, but the ramshackle Jacobean elegance of The Ballahays may also have played its part in seducing Daisy here. As well as the three acres of formal gardens, it has much that appeals to her vivid imagination: oak panelling, ingle-nook fireplaces, several staircases, and twelve bedrooms filled with assorted antiques and objets d’art. She is particularly smitten with my padded footstool that is shaped like a donkey, my carriage clock, my pianola and my

globe on legs. Not to mention the special photograph which hangs in my hall.

‘I’m going to go to Antarctica one day, just like you did, Veronica,’ Daisy proclaims. ‘And I’m going to see Pip.’

She rushes to fetch the photograph now. I do wish she wouldn’t do that, as it resides in a large, heavy frame and I worry that she will drop it. It is a particular favourite of mine, having been gifted to me by the magnificent television presenter Robert Saddlebow, whose wildlife documentaries inspired me to go on my epic voyage. I must proudly now refer to him as *Sir* Robert, since the New Year Honours list was announced last week, when 2013 quietly slipped into 2014.

In the photo, Pip’s outline is crisp against the snow. When I knew him, he was a teacup-sized grey fluff-ball with big feet. He is quite grown up now, with the typical Adélie penguin snow-white frontage and sleek black everywhere else. He has clearly been caught mid-waddle because one foot is lifted slightly higher than the other. His flippers are outstretched. His head is cocked forward, his beak is open, and there is a bright, inquisitive look on his face.

‘He’s saying, “Hello, Daisy and Veronica,” isn’t he?’ Daisy decides.

‘Yes, Daisy, I’m sure he is,’ I reply. Lies tend to be so much simpler and kinder than reality.

I wonder what is really going on in Pip’s head. In the background you can see a blurry mosaic composed of other penguins going about their daily lives. The picture always has the power to take me back. I would give anything to see again those sparkling landscapes and wander amongst that vast, rowdy congregation of black-and-white

birds. Daily life here is humdrum in comparison: eating, sleeping, reading, litter-picking; decisions as to whether to take tea in the Wedgwood, Royal Crown Derby or Coalport china; Eileen bustling in and out with a vacuum cleaner or tin of beeswax polish . . .

I am grateful that I am able to live in comfort. There remains, however, a kind of grief in my heart. Never again will I have such an adventure. Travelling across the globe is bad for the planet and, in any case, my eighty-seven-year-old body would find it hard to tolerate. The longings are there, nonetheless.

‘There aren’t any penguins in Scotland.’

Daisy’s brother, Noah, although he is only seven, is what is commonly called ‘a geek’. ‘You only get penguins in the southern hemisphere,’ he asserts. We are communicating with Noah by means of a device called Skype. Skype (even the name lacks musicality) is another of those tiresome technological doo-dahs considered essential by the younger generations. It was set up at The Ballahays by Daisy’s parents, who thought they should have daily visual contact with her whilst she is here. Eileen and I are equally panic-stricken by the intrusion of Skype into this calm household, but we have come to accept it.

Daisy is now arguing with Noah in a voice that sets my hearing aid quiver.

‘THERE ARE PENGUINS IN SCOTLAND!’ she screeches. ‘AND I WILL PROVE IT TO YOU!’

‘HOW?’ demands her brother, in equally ear-splitting tones. I am surprised that Skype hasn’t exploded into a thousand smithereens.

‘Please, Daisy,’ I beg. ‘Consider the chandeliers!’

She glances up at the Waterford crystal suspended above her, which is indeed jangling slightly.

She lowers her voice and delivers the next line in an urgent hiss. I can hear the hiss but cannot make out the words at all.

After her call has ended, she skips off into the dining room to pester Eileen, who is flicking dust around and humming something tuneless. Eileen has become adept at doing housework and entertaining Daisy simultaneously, so I leave them to it and head upstairs for a little quiet time.

It is certainly a challenge having a child in the house, but nobody can say Veronica McCreedy fails to rise to any challenge. I believe my Antarctic adventures have underlined that point.

In my bedroom I leaf through the *Telegraph*, which renders the usual uninspiring catalogue of human quirks and misdemeanours. It is some relief when I alight on the crossword page. It is imperative to keep one’s little grey cells exercised when one reaches an advanced age, and I delight in fathoming out cryptic clues. Unfortunately, I am quite unable to find my pen. I know I left it here somewhere, but the infuriating implement is determined to thwart me and hide away. Having searched every nook and cranny of the bureau, I discover it at last beside a stack of postcards.

Now, why did I need it? It must have been so as to write a letter to my grandson, Patrick. Eileen can then transcribe it into her computer and relay it to him via email. I must tell him all about Daisy’s visit. I sink back

into my chair to ponder the wording, but my head is feeling exceptionally heavy . . .

When I come to, my eye falls on the clock and I am alarmed to see that it is already half past two.

I rise stiffly and make my way downstairs.

‘Come along, Daisy, dear. It is time for our walk.’

I usher her to the porch, and she scrambles into a puffy jacket that resembles a sleeping bag and pulls on a woolly hat with a pompom on top. Meanwhile I don my scarlet coat and stout walking boots. As always, I take my stick to steady me, and a handbag; one never knows when one might find oneself in need of a handkerchief or painkillers. It is useful to have Daisy accompanying me because she is keen to carry the refuse sack and litter-picking tongs.

Daisy’s parents were insistent that she gets out in the fresh air every day. In this matter I am entirely at one with them. I owe my extreme toughness to my lifetime habit of daily walking along Ayrshire’s coastal path. I persist with it no matter what the Scottish weather decides to hurl at me, be it snow, hail or sleet. Eileen often begs me not to (‘Oh, Mrs McCreedy, it’s too chilly today’), which only makes me all the more determined to go. As Daisy and I set out today, however, there is no precipitation, only greyness and murk, with a few pale smudges of snow on the ground. We step out of the Ballahays front gates and along the short lane that leads to the coast. The hedges on either side soon give way to fuzzy gorse bushes, scoured rocks and a sense of openness.

With her eagle eyes, Daisy is quick to spot the first item

of litter, a crisp packet caught in the bracken. She pounces on it with the tongs and stuffs it into the sack with cries of triumph.

The sea and the sky are melded in a silvery wash. The cries of the gulls seem muted and nature is infused with that January feeling of suspense, as if it's waiting for things to start growing again. I maintain a steady pace as Daisy runs about reaping further spoils: a disintegrated old wellington boot, a broken glass bottle, a curved piece of plastic that I believe is part of a container for animal feed, a squashed Coke can and a piece of thick orange twine.

Daisy loves using the tongs, and I think I will purchase her a pair for when she goes back home. It will be of benefit both to her and to the environs of Bolton, which are doubtless in far more need of a thorough cleanse than the Ayrshire cliff path. It is good to see her enjoying herself today. By the time we arrive back at The Ballahays, her eyes look brighter and her cheeks rosier.

Eileen is at the door to meet us. Her plethora of tight curls is unkempt, her chins are wobbling, and there is an air of excitement about her as she helps us off with our coats. She will later don her Marigolds and sort out the rubbish into what can be recycled and what will have to be consigned to the dustbin. I have increased her wages to amply cover the nastiness of this task in addition to all the other things she does for me.

Thankfully she has a freshly brewed cup of Darjeeling and a steaming mug of hot chocolate waiting for us on the kitchen table. As I claim my tea and Daisy her chocolate, Eileen proudly crosses her arms.

I look at her quizzically. 'I perceive you have something to tell us, Eileen. I beg you not to stand on ceremony. Please unburden yourself.'

A wide grin spreads across her face. 'I've found them,' she declares.

2

Veronica



EILEEN DRIVES US. I am quite capable of driving myself, but I gave it up three years ago. My reactions, as I told the doctor in no uncertain terms, are as lightning-quick as ever, and my long-distance vision is more than adequate. However, after that small scrape with the Jaguar and a very tiresome young man in his Vauxhall, I came to the conclusion I could live without the aggravation.

Last week's snow has been washed away and the day is replete with bright, lemony sunshine. As the daubed sky and green hills of Scotland fly past the window, Daisy is quiet in the back of the car (I suspect she is surreptitiously up to 'social medium' shenanigans on her phone) and Eileen hums to herself as she drives, occasionally making comments such as 'Lovely day for it,' and 'Pretty clouds, aren't they?'

Eventually we traverse a crossroads and swing left

under a low-hanging sign that says ‘Lochnamorghy Sea Life Centre’.

‘Veronica, we must do a selfie with the penguins!’ Daisy chants behind me as we drive into a space at the far end of the car park. ‘You *will* do a selfie with us, won’t you?’

‘That may be possible,’ I assure her, not wishing to let on that I am vague about what exactly ‘doing a selfie’ involves. If it is anything like ‘doing a handstand’ or ‘doing the splits’ I have no wish to oblige, and indeed my limbs will permit no such thing.

Eileen, Daisy and I go in through a huge entrance with a rotating glass door. The woman at reception is brisk and efficient: ‘Aquarium straight ahead. Go to the end of the corridor and follow the signs for seals, otters, seabirds and penguins.’

We follow signs through a maze of passageways lined with informative posters about sea life which we entirely ignore. We also ignore the baleful squids, octopuses, jellyfish and other tentacled and scaled creatures in the grey waters of the tanks that line the walls. The three of us are equally focused on where we are heading. Daisy runs ahead and loops back to us like an excited puppy.

There will not be Adélie penguins here. With their Antarctic background, it would be unkind to keep them in these warmer climes. But there will be other breeds, those that are used to a more clement climate.

When we reach the enclosure, at first I can see nothing but human couples and families with young children jostling round. We shuffle forward. We are in a broad space with a netting roof and an artificially blue, kidney-shaped pool. Areas are partitioned off with red tape and behind

them I perceive a collection of birds standing amongst rocks, sand and a few low brick caves.

Eileen elbows her way through, parting the crowds and calling, 'Excuse me, excuse me!' so that we can find a good spot to stand and watch. Daisy is bubbling with excitement. I, too, am straining forward to look. At last I see them.

The African penguins (otherwise known as Jackass penguins) have black-and-white markings around their heads, a strip of black circling their fronts, and pink patches of skin showing above their eyes. They are mostly skulking around, but a few slide off into the pool for a dip as we approach. They are extremely attractive. But the Macaroni penguins charm us even more, with their mighty headdresses of long yellow feathers that stick out where their ears should be. It is a bizarre and jaunty look. They are quite splendid.

'Are they named after macaroni cheese?' asks Daisy.

'I was wondering that, too,' admits Eileen.

'Because they have cheese-coloured tufts,' nods Daisy.

It seems unlikely but none of us know. We watch as two penguins stand on a stone and preen each other, long beaks rifling through shining plumage. Task completed, one of them hops off the stone. Noticing his audience, he waddles towards us and looks at us with one eye and then the other, his crest waving a little in the breeze. Then he points his beak to the sky and swings his head from side to side in a series of movements that look almost like a dance.

'Oh, look at him!' cries Daisy. Seldom have I seen a child so enthralled.

The penguin ruffles his feathers, opens his beak and lets out a loud, crooning sort of honk.

My eyes start prickling. For seventy-odd years I did not permit myself to cry at all because somebody once said it was a sign of weakness. I no longer believe that, but I am still uncomfortable with any demonstrative show of emotion in public. Nevertheless, my tears gush forth with embarrassing frequency these days, and there is little I can do about it.

‘Here you are, Mrs McCreedy. Take this,’ Eileen offers. I have a freshly laundered handkerchief in my handbag, but I graciously accept her tissue.

‘Are you OK, Veronica?’ asks Daisy, glancing up to examine my expression.

‘It is a sinus condition. It troubles me sometimes,’ I tell her sharply.

These penguins are not quite like my Adélie friends, but they manifest the same qualities of bumptiousness and enthusiasm. Our friendly Macaroni trumpets again.

‘We call him Mac,’ one of the so-called penguin patrolers tells us, stepping up. She’s a young woman with a confident air and a swinging ponytail. ‘He was hand-reared. From a chick,’ she adds.

I look from her to the penguin and back again. ‘So you will have used a syringe to feed him a carefully balanced formula of liquidized krill and tuna?’

Her eyes widen a little. She looks as if she is trying to calculate what the answer should be. ‘Ummm . . . well, it wasn’t me who—’

‘This is Veronica McCreedy,’ Daisy interrupts. ‘She’s been to Antarctica and saved a baby penguin called Pip

and after that she was ill and Pip saved *her*! And’ – Daisy takes a breath – ‘she’s friends with Robert Saddlebow.’

‘*The* Robert Saddlebow,’ Eileen adds.

‘*Sir* Robert Saddlebow,’ I point out.

I must admit, I am rather enjoying my protégée’s admiration.

‘Well, your nan is an amazing woman,’ says the patroller, clearly not believing a word of what Daisy has told her. I wonder whether to correct her on the ‘nan’ front but cannot be bothered. In any case, most of my attention is focused on the penguin, who is utterly delightful.

‘Can I feed it?’ asks Daisy, all eagerness.

‘Not now. It’s feeding time in twenty minutes.’ The patroller looks relieved to be back on familiar territory. She crouches down to Daisy’s level and speaks to her in a big-sisterly way. ‘You can watch them all enjoying their dinner then. In fact, I might let you have a fish or two and you can help.’

My legs are weary now. Daisy and Eileen trot off to find the enclosures with the seals and otters whilst I head for the tea shop. I purchase a slice of cherry Bakewell tart and cup of Darjeeling tea. At least, they call it Darjeeling (presumably to justify the extra pound on the price) but it is of a very disappointing quality. I am not one to complain, however.

I park myself at a small table by the window and look out at the chink of sea that is visible beyond the edge of the building. Having visited the Macaronis and Africans, it is perhaps inevitable that my mind insists on winging its way back to Antarctica, to the colony of Adélie penguins, to my friend Terry and my grandson, Patrick. I am

invested in the Locket Island research project both metaphorically and literally, as I have committed a monthly sum towards it, mainly because Patrick is now part of the team.

Terry and he have been together for a year now. Terry is really Teresa, you will understand, and 100 per cent female – although, with her lack of make-up or any particular hairstyle, she does little to flaunt the fact. Unlike Sir Robert, she is never likely to become a television celebrity but, like him, she is one of the few people on this planet who has won my respect.

Some would say that Patrick doesn't deserve Terry and there was a time I would have agreed with them. Patrick is like caviar. This is not because he is an upper-class delicacy (quite the reverse!) but because he is an acquired taste. The first time I met him, which was a mere eighteen months ago, I took an immediate dislike to him. With his scruffy appearance, unsophisticated mannerisms and seeming immaturity for his twenty-eight years of age, Patrick remains an unlikely candidate for my affection. I am not somebody who finds it easy to love and the blood tie alone would not be enough. But I have seen the sweeter side of Patrick. I have seen how he cares for others. I have seen how he adores Terry. And I have seen how he loves the penguins.

My hand automatically goes up to my neck and I run my fingers along the fine chain of the locket that I still wear every day under my clothing. Daisy spotted the chain the other day and asked me what it was, so I pulled it out to show her. She is very taken with the idea of having a piece of jewellery that contains tiny items of personal

value. I did not open it for her, however. Unlike Terry, I am not skilled in the art of empathy, but I do recognize various aspects of human nature. I have found it useful to reserve some means of bribing Daisy if she becomes a little uncontrollable, along the lines of: ‘If you do not come and sit at the table at once, Daisy, I will never show you what’s inside my locket,’ or ‘If you do not give me back my lipstick, Daisy, the locket will always be a closed book to you.’ My little ploy works well, for Daisy is possessed with an insatiable curiosity.

I drain my tea and flick the Bakewell crumbs from my lap with the paper napkin. I glance towards the door of the cafe and see that Eileen is already here to fetch me, Daisy dragging her in by the hand. We march back to the enclosure together. The penguin patroller with the ponytail is wielding a blue plastic bucket, from which she is throwing limp fish at the crowd of penguins. The fish have shocked, glazed expressions on their dead faces, but the penguins’ enthusiasm is captivating. They hop about, grabbing the fish, gulping them down their greedy beaks and clamouring for more.

Daisy is offered the bucket. She extracts a fish with a mixture of revulsion and rapture, stares at it for a moment, then flings it at a penguin so hard that I fear she will knock it down like a skittle. She is relieved when Eileen, ever practical, hands her a wet wipe afterwards.

Most of the human spectators are taking photos.

‘It’s time for our selfie, Veronica. Our selfie with the penguins!’ Daisy cries. ‘So I can prove to Noah that there *are* penguins in Scotland.’

She holds the phone out at arm’s length to take a picture

of us together but (as her arms are not very long) fails to capture all that she wishes. Eileen is then presented with the phone and forced to take hundreds of photos of Daisy and me with the friendly penguin called Mac. I am glad I reapplied my lipstick on my way from the tea shop and pleased I have brought a presentable handbag in complementary tartan reds. I ensure that I keep it well out of reach of Mac's beak. I have already, in my time, lost one handbag to the forces of penguin curiosity.

On the drive back, Daisy tells us she is googling Macaroni penguins. I am astonished when, contrary to my expectations, she comes up with some interesting information. Apparently, the birds were named after eighteenth-century dandies called 'macaronis' who often wore flamboyant tassels in their hats.

'Like the song about Yankee Doodle!' Eileen cries in a tone of wonder and revelation. 'Do you know it, Daisy?'

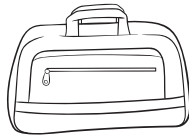
Daisy doesn't and Eileen insists on teaching it to her.

'Yankee Doodle went to town
Riding on a pony
Stuck a feather in his cap
And called it macaroni.'

My ears are assailed with one high-pitched voice and one deeper, ill-tuned voice singing these profound lyrics all the way home. Under normal circumstances I would find this unbearable but today, for reasons I cannot quite fathom, I don't mind it in the least.

3

Patrick



Locket Island, South Shetlands, Antarctica

THE SUN'S RAYS are glancing off wet rock, every crevice of the land is wedged with fleecy rags of snow, and I'm gazing across acres and acres of penguins. My nostrils are zinging with the smell of fish and guano. My ears are full of gabbling, squawking, honking and twittering. All around me cute, stumpy birds are waddling about in the pebbles and ice. Above is a great white drift of clouds. In the distance, a range of blue peaks and glaciers. It's one of those moments when it hits me.

I live here, I fricking *live* here; this small island off the Antarctic peninsula, shared with a collection of seals, albatrosses, skuas and gulls . . . plus three other human beings. And five thousand Adélie penguins. I never thought I'd end up counting penguins as a profession. But

then I never thought I'd discover a rich, eccentric grandmother who was obsessed with them, either.

Over the last year, I've fully adjusted to the Locket Island lifestyle. I don't miss Bolton one bit. Well, maybe I miss Gav and the bicycle shop and telly and fresh vegetables, but not a lot else. It's amazing how quickly this wilderness has become my world. At this precise moment there's just one thing missing: Terry. It's such a bummer we have to work in different areas of the colony. It was much better when we were working together, even if it did mean we got distracted sometimes . . .

Terry always says I should relax more. 'We don't have to live in each other's pockets to prove we're in love, do we?' she said recently when I was coming on all possessive. But I can't help being passionate, can I? I'd spend every moment of the day with her if I could. Not that I'm complaining. It's pretty incredible she wants to spend any time at all with a loser like me.

I glance at my watch. I've been counting and weighing penguins for three hours.

'I think I've earned a kiss at least,' I mutter.

A cheeky little penguin looks up at me, his eyes beady, his stomach swollen with self-importance.

'No, I don't mean from you, mate,' I tell him.

We're not due back at the field base for another hour. I think I'll go and find Terry and escort her back for lunch. I pull out my radio but then change my mind and tuck it back into my belt. I know her whereabouts roughly and it would be much more fun to surprise her.

I pick my way through the rocks and scree and head as fast as I can up the slope. The temperature today is only

3.5 degrees Celsius but I'm wearing plenty of layers and the climb makes me hot. I take off my parka and bundle it under my arm. I pause, panting a little, when I reach the top. From here I have a good view of the mountains and the distant lake, which is mottled blue and white to match the sky. This island got its name because it's oval-shaped and on a map it looks like a locket, the semi-circular lake on the north edge making the hole that a chain would go through. I can see the ocean beyond, shining bright and decked with white blobs of icebergs.

The part of the penguin colony allocated to Terry is down on the other side. I can make out her orange jacket from here, a colourful dot amongst the thousands of black-and-white dots that are penguins. I head towards her, weaving my way around the pebble nests. There are so many tiny chicks. They're old enough to be active now so I have to be careful where I'm treading. The adults have super-smart plumage like glossy dinner jackets with white starched shirts, but the babies are dark grey and rather amorphous. You could easily hold one in the palm of your hand and you'd find it soft and squashy. I don't pick them up though. Rules is rules. Sample weights of the chicks will be collected just before they start fledging, but otherwise it's a 'don't touch' policy. Even the adults only get handled if we're tagging or weighing them, and then there's a special technique for that. I'm proud to say I now classify as a fully trained penguin wrangler.

The mums and dads are working unbelievably hard to get those chicks fed, taking it in turns to babysit and trek to and from the sea. When they return, they're stuffed full

of krill, which they empty down the chick's gullet, beak to beak. Penguin language is a complete mystery to me, but those adults and chicks all recognize each other's calls. It's mind-blowing that they can find their own in amongst the clamour.

I get a real pang seeing all this parental love . . . such mega commitment and devotion. It would've been nice to have some of that when I was growing up. Those chicks have no idea how lucky they are.

But enough with the self-pity.

There's Terry, straight ahead of me, looking like only Terry can look: 100 per cent absorbed in a massive sea of penguins. My heart lifts as she turns and waves. The sun is shining in her pale blonde hair and she starts pacing towards me, neatly skirting round all the nests.

'Patrick!' she calls over the penguin racket. 'Is something wrong?'

I shake my head emphatically. 'No, nothing wrong. Can't a man see his girl once in a while?'

She walks into my open arms, which I greedily wrap around her. We share a long, delicious kiss and I almost knock her glasses off.

'Why didn't you radio?' she asks, coming up for air. We're all supposed to let each other know where we are on the island, just in case.

'Do I really have to announce to the whole world that I'm in the mood for love?'

'Not the whole world,' she points out. 'Just me and Dietrich and Mike.'

'Dietrich and Mike don't understand.'

She frowns a little. I run my fingers over her brow,

smoothing out the wrinkles she's made. 'Relax. I didn't slip over and break my back, OK?'

'Yes, but—'

'I risked all sorts of terrible dangers to come and see you: ice, snow, rocks, seals . . . penguins. I thought you might come with me on a hot date now?'

She can't help smiling her incredibly gorgeous smile. 'Where did you have in mind?'

'Well, I believe there's a very comfortable if rather run-down research station not far from here, with sausage rolls that just need to be whipped out of the fridge and put in the oven.'

'I'll give *you* sausage rolls,' she answers in her mock-scolding voice, pushing me sideways.

'I wish you would.'

She won't let us leave until she's done another fifteen minutes of penguin monitoring, though, so I give her a hand.

It's a small operation we run here, not like some of the massive Antarctic stations which cover marine biology, oceanography and meteorology. Our speciality is penguins (and five thousand isn't that big for a penguin colony, would you believe it. Some are over thirty thousand). Still, four of us isn't really enough, which is why Terry is always pushing herself to get more work done. As well as running the project, she tries to engage the public across the world by writing blogs about our work. She featured Granny V in the blogs a lot last year which went down very well with the fans. Dietrich is the oldest and most qualified of the four of us. He's been studying the birds his whole life and calls himself a 'penguinologist'. Mike's special skill is biochemistry; he analyses blood, bones and faeces so he can

work out details about the diet and health of the birds. We all muck in with the donkey work – the endless monitoring of penguins, counting them, weighing them and tagging them. These facts and figures are at the core of what we do. They tell us a huge amount about the health of our whole ecosystem; and penguin numbers are going up and down at an alarming rate at the moment.

‘Do you mind having a girlfriend who’s your boss?’ Terry asks as we finally head back up the slope together.

‘If you don’t, I don’t,’ I tell her. She never gives herself airs or graces. In fact she’s the unbossiest boss I’ve ever known.

‘It would be nice to see more of you, though,’ I add, looking at her sideways. I hope I’m not sounding too clingy again.

‘Let me think. Which bit of me haven’t you seen, Patrick?’

We snigger.

As we reach the top, she goes back to the subject though, which is clearly bugging her. ‘Go on, admit it. You’d prefer me ordering you around if I was in a crisp suit or a sassily seductive police uniform.’

‘Nope. Parka jackets, woolly jumpers and thermal vests absolutely do it for me.’

Dietrich and Mike are already at the field base when we arrive. They look at us knowingly as we come in, Dietrich with a benign smile and Mike with one that’s a lot less benign. Mike doesn’t really do benign. They both assume we’ve been spending time canoodling rather than penguin-counting. They already have the sausage rolls on the table along with a mountain of peas and oven chips.

‘Tuck in,’ says Dietrich, whose English is flawless.

We do.

‘There’s something wrong with the water,’ Mike remarks, looking at me accusingly, as he does if any bit of machinery or plumbing is faulty.

‘OK, mate, it’ll be the reverse osmosis machine again. I’ll take a look at it later.’

The reverse osmosis machine is used to purify seawater, removing the salt and any chemical or biological nasties to make it drinkable. It’s a great alternative to bottled water . . . when it works. The field centre is pretty dilapidated and things keep breaking. It was built for five scientists years ago, but dwindled due to lack of funding and would have died altogether if it hadn’t been for Granny. Terry, Dietrich and Mike are trained environmental scientists and I’m just a humble techie-nerd, so I’m the one who ends up with all the fixing jobs.

‘Did you see Pip today?’ asks Dietrich, nibbling on a chip.

Terry shakes her head sadly. ‘Not today, no.’

Pip is everyone’s favourite rescue penguin. We all try to be impartial but when you’ve experienced the joys of a live-in miniature waddler, you’re bound to go a bit soft.

After lunch I notice Dietrich is rubbing his hand back and forth across his bristly beard, a habit he has when he’s anxious.

‘Can I have a quick word, Terry?’ he asks her in a low voice.

‘Of course.’

They go into the lab together. Cue curiosity from Mike and me, as we head for the kitchen to make coffee.

‘Stronger than that,’ Mike tells me, putting in an extra spoonful. ‘I need to stay awake.’

He suffers from insomnia and spends half the night prowling around the field centre, which is maybe one of the reasons he’s always so tetchy.

‘What do you reckon’s up with Dietrich?’ I ask.

He shrugs and taps impatiently on the side of the coffee pot. ‘I hope he’s not hassling Terry needlessly. She could do without it.’

When they come back in Dietrich looks relieved, but Terry is frowning and chewing her bottom lip.

‘Right, I’m off!’ she announces, already putting on her boots to go out again.

I wave a mug at her. ‘Aren’t you staying for coffee?’

‘Nope. Lots to do,’ she answers, darting out of the door so fast I can hardly catch the words.

I turn to the guys. ‘Has she gone off me or something?’

‘Of course she hasn’t,’ Mike replies promptly. ‘You’ve got a rich grandmother who’s keeping our research going.’

‘I – er, yes, that’s true.’

I glug down my coffee as fast as I can, wondering if I can catch up with Terry. But Mike’s words clang and clatter and repeat themselves over and over in every corner of my skull. Does Terry only tolerate me because of Granny’s funding? Yes, Mike loves a snide comment, but I can’t help asking myself if there’s an element of truth in what he says.

4

Terry



Locket Island

I HOPE I wasn't too short with Patrick. I need some head-space. I scoot out of the field centre and speed up the snow-laden slope, swinging my arms, sucking in the fresh air, trying to relax. I'm stressed after my discussion with Dietrich. I couldn't say no to his request, but I'm not sure how we're going to cope. I have a lot of rescheduling to do.

Poor Dietrich. I know he wouldn't have asked if it wasn't important. His eyes were full of concern as he ushered me into the lab, out of earshot of the others, then sat down heavily on the chair beside the microscope.

'Terry,' he began earnestly. 'A situation has come up.'

He gave his moustache a nervous tug. I knew already by his expression that it wasn't good news.

'Just tell me, Deet.'

‘My wife has to have surgery next month. It’s nothing too serious but she’ll be in hospital for a few days and it will take her a while to recover afterwards. Would it be all right if I went back to Austria to look after her and the children? I would have to leave in a couple of weeks’ time.’

We are already stretched here with four of us.

‘Of course you must go,’ I assured him. ‘Family comes first.’

‘I’d come back as soon as possible, but I know you’ll be pressed. Are you sure you can manage?’

I nodded vigorously and gave him an encouraging smile. ‘Absolutely.’

‘Thank you. She will be so grateful. As am I.’

It was good of him to ask me rather than just telling me, in fact. He was the boss up until last year when he passed the job over to me, and his precise reason was that he wanted to spend more time away with his family. It’s the timing that’s so bad. It’s the height of the Adélie breeding season and we’re struggling to keep up with the workload as it is.

‘It is a good thing we have Patrick with us now,’ Dietrich said, picking up a test tube, looking at the grey contents (a sample of semi-digested krill from a penguin’s stomach) and putting it down again. ‘He’s learned fast, hasn’t he?’

I had to agree.

Dietrich beamed. ‘But then, he’s had a good teacher.’

I coughed modestly.

‘Do you think he’s happy here?’ I asked.

‘Why wouldn’t he be, with mountains, icebergs, incredible wildlife and a lovely girlfriend?’

It was kind of him to say that, but I do worry about

Patrick sometimes. He's had to adapt so quickly and things here couldn't be more different from his life in Bolton.

I feel bad that I've run off, leaving him choking on his coffee. But if I can get ahead with gathering penguin data now, there won't be so much pressure when Dietrich has gone. I've left him to break the news to the other two. I'm sure Mike and Patrick will understand that we'll all have to work extra hard in the weeks to come.

I've been so preoccupied I've hardly been aware of my surroundings. I've already reached the crest of the hill. I gaze across at the wrinkled markings of snow on the distant mountain ridges. If I half close my eyes I can see faces in those markings, an eerie artwork formed by the natural contours of the land. Above me a trio of gulls circles high in the sky, dark Vs against a wraith of white clouds.

There's a nasty little niggle in my mind that I can't quite identify. I try to focus in on it. It's to do with Patrick. He's always so jokey and enthusiastic but sometimes, when he thinks I'm not looking, I catch him with a faraway look on his face. And I sense an underlying sadness in him.

I know Patrick has unresolved issues with his family. I remember having a conversation with him just the other day, when I was complaining about my parents. 'They think I'm completely bonkers to be living out here,' I grumbled. 'They'd far rather I was settled in Hertfordshire with a sensible job, a mortgage and a healthy bank balance. But I'm only twenty-six and nowhere near that dreaded "set-ling" stage. They just don't understand me at all.'

'At least you *have* parents,' he'd answered glumly.

I realized how tactless I'd been. I tried to cheer him up by finding a positive.

'You have a fabulous grandmother, though,' I told him. 'There aren't many Veronicas out there.' Then, stupidly, as if I wanted to illustrate that I was just as unfortunate as him, I went and added, 'My nan got old at fifty-five, stopped going out altogether at sixty, and died two years later.'

'I suppose Granny V *is* cool,' he acknowledged. 'But parents are pretty important.'

The conversation moved on, but I still had the impression he was holding something down – a dark force, simmering below the surface; desperate to get out.

5

Veronica



The Ballahays

WHEN WE ARRIVE back at The Ballahays after this morning's litter-picking walk, I am ready for a rest in a horizontal position. I therefore decide to leave Daisy with Eileen for a short while. I have reached no further than the hall, however, when I am surprised by Eileen bursting out of the kitchen. She closes the door behind her.

'Mrs McCreedy, can we go into the snug for a moment?' she buzzes in my ear.

'What about Daisy?'

'She's quite happy looking at Pokémon for a while.'

'Very well. But I shall need a cup of tea.'

'Of course. Of course you shall,' she mumbles. She disappears back into the kitchen whilst I wander into the snug, wondering what all this is about.

She joins me soon after, teacup in hand.

‘What is the problem, Eileen?’

‘There’s an email for you. From’ – she lowers her voice in reverence – ‘Robert Saddlebow.’

‘Ah, my good friend, Sir Robert,’ I answer loudly. I am possibly showing off a little.

‘And another one from Locket Island. From your grandson, Patrick . . .’

‘I am well aware of his name, thank you, Eileen.’

‘I’ve printed them both out. Here they are.’ She waves the pieces of paper at me and I snatch them from her. I look on the mantelpiece, the dresser and the coffee table, but my search is in vain. My glasses are nowhere to be seen. This happens often and is extremely trying. I do wish people would stop moving my things around.

‘Mrs McCreedy, I’m sorry, I couldn’t help glancing over them,’ Eileen admits, referring to the messages. This is entirely normal; I am well aware that she reads every correspondence sent to me by email. She simply cannot resist.

‘Shall I read them out to you?’ she asks, obviously quite desperate to do so.

‘Very well.’

‘You may want to sit down, Mrs McCreedy.’

I lower myself into the Queen Anne chair, concerned now. I observe that she is in a state of extreme agitation, for as she takes back the two sheets of paper her hands are trembling.

‘I’ll read the one from Sir Robert first then, shall I?’

‘As you wish, Eileen.’

‘*My dear Veronica,*’ she begins. At those words my heart lifts a little. It is many years since anyone has started