

F e l i c i t y  
V o l k

D E S I R E  
L I N E S

I will not follow where the path may lead,  
but I will go where there is no path,  
and I will leave a trail.

**MURIEL STRODE**

# I

*Each had his past shut in him like the  
leaves of a book known to him by heart; and  
his friends could only read the title.*

**VIRGINIA WOOLF**

## CHAPTER ONE

*Longyearbyen, February 2012*

*ARE YOU STILL a liar?*

As always, perhaps more this year, Evie felt a great weariness as her finger hovered over the send button. She sighed. Ahead of her, from the edge of the settlement, the valley stretched pristine and white towards its glacier. Nestling in a slope to her left was an abandoned coal mine where children put letters for Santa at Christmas. On the other side of the valley, a sheer mountain range rose like a frozen wave. But within, Evie carried a smoke-blinded battleground and the fatigue of the last soldier standing, preparing to fire into emptiness. *Are you still a liar?*

Her eyes watering from the cold, the phone's keypad and screen became a blur. She used her glove to mop the tears. For a moment the words sharpened on the display, then faded and the screen went blank. The cold. She put the phone back in the pocket of her overpants. Exposed to Arctic air for barely a few minutes, her hand was already numb. Replacing her glove, she swung her arm in circles to rush the blood to her fingers.

The eerie blue light of morning was giving way to a sky she understood better. Somewhere behind Trollsteinen mountain, beyond the fjords and valleys to the east, the glaciers and tundra of Spitsbergen, the sun was preparing to heave itself over the horizon for the first

time, marking the end of the lightless polar winter. But not yet. Not for another day. Tomorrow, the day after their anniversary, the sun would rise and set within two hours. It would not be visible from the peak-circled township, but already the crests of those mountains were flushing pink in anticipation of its arrival.

She checked her phone in case the warmth from her thigh had brought the battery to life. Nothing. She pressed it to her cheek. Sydney was ten hours ahead of Norway. Nine o'clock in the evening. He might be out. More likely not. She shook the phone, a pointless gesture. Still nothing. He would be enjoying the reprieve from her annual message. She could send it later.

It seemed to Evie that enormous reserves of energy were required to be unkind. The crafting of those five words, even without dispatch, made her heart race as from some great exertion, and left her chilled in a way she had not, until then, experienced in the sub-zero temperatures that greeted the party's arrival in Longyearbyen two days earlier. She pulled the jacket hood over her head and began trudging the snowy incline back to the hotel.

For the second night, she had slept poorly, her body a confusion of hemispheres and time zones, lengthy transits through airports on one side of the equator and the other, and, truth be told, a little too much postprandial aquavit with her compatriots – mostly plant scientists, a few entrepreneur philanthropists, a couple of diplomatic minders. The hotel's central heating was overly enthusiastic. She had woken early, drenched in sweat. It was a state she hadn't suffered for the past dozen years or so, when, like a claret ash in autumn, she was shedding leaves. Drying up. Now in her sixties, she had entered the calm dormancy of winter and a generally reliable nightly hibernation.

The hill seemed steeper than it had when she left the team's accommodation an hour earlier, escaping the attentions of the group for the expanse of snow and solitude outside. They were a tribe on pilgrimage to their mecca, with a quality of animated anticipation that Evie found draining. It was not that she was too jaded to participate;

she simply found the irrepressible need of her species to give words to everything cheapening. To witness the miraculous was a privilege. To be required to publicly testify to it was a privation. Inevitably one perjured, whether by understatement or embellishment. Perhaps this was why she had chosen to work with plants: their blessedly silent celebration of the miracle of being.

Cresting the hotel driveway, Evie breathed deeply. She had not smelled blue before this trip. Green, yes, along spring streets canopied by mature oaks; the sod green of freshly laid turf. Brown, too: after a bobcat had ploughed a loamy plot, unearthing root lace, cicada nymphs and indignant worms; after trucks had discharged their topsoil for her crews to rake smooth, ready for a planting. But not blue. Not this endless glacial night smell of blue. It did not belong to her, but she sensed she might quickly grow to belong to it. The aloof quiet. Its otherworldly indifference.

The hotel's formal reception was up a flight of stairs, past historical photos of the valley's coal mines on walls the colour of Scandinavian butter. At the ground entrance were benches where patrons were expected to remove their shoes on the tiled floor, the transition from snow and slush to the polished parquetry of the upper level. Warm air blew from a vent immediately inside the double-glazed doors. Evie sat in its flow, thawing, unlacing her snow boots.

'I wouldn't bother.' The eager young official who had joined them from the Australian embassy indicated outside. 'The minibus out front. It's ours. The Crop Trust team is already here, in the reception lounge with the ambassador and the rest of our group. They'll be on their way down any minute.'

'I need my camera,' Evie said. 'I've arranged to visit some glacial ice caves after we make the seed deposit. I was hoping to be dropped at the tour company's office on our way back from the vault.'

'Five minutes?' It was less question than polite instruction.



They drove north through the township, a gradual descent towards the grey waters of Adventfjorden, alongside utility pipes constructed a metre or so above ground to protect them from permafrost. On either side of the icy road, red sticks marked the verge beyond which banks of snow hid the sudden falling away of the ground. Skirting the bay, Evie knew they were heading back in the direction of the airport, though she didn't recognise the route, having landed at midnight from Oslo. Bleary-eyed, she had seen the entrance to the seed bank that first evening through the airport shuttle window, a distant beacon of opalescence in the side of a black mountain. It was as though the artist who designed the vault's glass facade had carved a neat rectangle from the aurora borealis and set it in Platåberget's snow. It shimmered there, trapped, while overhead the elusive northern lights came and went at whim.

As they pulled into the parking bay, Evie checked her phone one last time. She sensed the woman beside her scrutinising the blank screen.

'Don't expect it to cope with these temperatures,' the agronomist said of Evie's mobile. 'Quite the dinosaur. And they didn't survive the Ice Age either. Pretty much the antithesis of our seeds.' It was an ambitious sentence for a person with a slight lisp.

Outside the vault, plastic caskets were being unloaded from a van that had joined them from the research centre where Australia's seeds were housed between their security clearance at the airport and the official transfer. A media officer shepherded the team into a fan flanking their boxes for photographs. Later that day, pictures would be sent to wire services, announcing Australia's first deposit at the global facility. Perched behind his tripod, the photographer held up a hand to fix the group's attention.

'Welcome to the Noah's Ark of the plant world,' pronounced the seed vault's chief from her position in the centre of the frame. And to the photographer, 'What would you like us to say on the count of three? Not *cheese*, but *seed*?' Obliging chuckles on each side.

The woman's smile was generous, inviting. Her lips were frosted in a neutral tone that blended with her flawless North European

skin, immaculate blonde mane and camel-toned down jacket. The self-confidence of the Nordic palette, thought Evie. They understood the difference between demanding and commanding attention. The power of pale understatement in their wardrobes, their skin tones, their interior design, the bleached timbers of their furniture, even their anaemic butter. A washed-out beauty that mirrored the blanched skies of the midnight sun. Beside it, North Americans looked gaudy, Australians garish. Hydrangeas, Evie mused, recalling the floral arrangements that decorated the Oslo hotel where she had recuperated for a few hours on her way through. The Nordics always had them white, where Americans preferred pink, Australians blue. The litmus flower of a nation's aesthetic.

'One, two, three . . .' the photographer prompted.

'Seed,' the gathering chorused, breaking into convivial laughter.

Evie wondered whether Noah sometimes wished he had left the family behind, sailed off peacefully by himself in his ark, a lone *one* in charge of the two-by-twos. No fanfare. No collective congratulations when the first drops of rain splattered on the deck.

*Curmudgeon*, she silently chastised herself. *This is not like you.*

Maybe it was a result of jet lag, sleep deprivation, this churlish resistance to the bonhomie of her compatriots. Or perhaps it was the canker spreading from her phone. *Enough*, she scolded. Above them, the snared borealis beckoned, shards of green-blue mirror and cut steel that scattered the heavens on the snow around the vault. When the agronomist squeezed her arm excitedly as they left the photo shoot, Evie gave a companionable squeeze in return and said, 'I know.'

The group followed the boxes of seeds over a metal grille bridge to the vault's outer door. Evie was relieved to find it warmer in the anteroom than outside, still a few degrees below zero, but relatively balmy. From a row of hooks along the wall, they each took a navy snow suit, a blue helmet and a pair of crampons, the armour of safe passage through more than one hundred metres of ice-bound tunnel. In the middle of the mountain, an Aladdin's cave had been hollowed

and filled with botanical treasures, frozen at an unchanging minus eighteen degrees Celsius.

The walls and ceiling of the main chamber were a deceptively static pavé of fine ice crystals. They swelled, glittering, in gentle waves and spilled out around the edges of the concrete floor. The room brought to mind an ancient temple Evie had once visited in Cambodia, fat pythons of *Tetrameles nudiflora* root strangling the sandstone blocks of the galleries, the slow, muscular flexing of the natural world around human construction. Here, the ice seemed a living organism, spreading surreptitiously through the dark.

Of the three caverns built to house the world's seed diversity, the one in use was a suite of cobalt and orange shelving, electrical pipes and ducting for the air conditioners. They entered it reverentially.

Their Crop Trust host broke the silence. 'It might look like a maintenance room, but it always reminds me of a cathedral.' Above them, the Gothic ice ceiling stretched the expanse of the grotto; throughout, the seeds' life support system hummed quietly, like a pipe organ filling its chambers in preparation for a hymn. 'A temple to creation. Majestic, and catholic in the broadest sense.'

She guided them down the aisles between other countries' deposits: South Korean seeds next to North Korea's, in front of boxes from the United States. 'You never know who will be sitting with you in your pew, and it doesn't actually matter. How the United Nations might be, if only we could keep them all this cool.' Once more, her broad beatific smile. 'So far, all deposits, no withdrawals,' she said, neatly summarising the fragile state of the world in her attempt to cross her gloved fingers.

The woman stopped in front of a gap on her left. 'This will be Australia.'

They began filling their shelf with boxes bearing taped quarantine seals. So routine, Evie thought, so ordinary, as she manoeuvred a selection of seeds she had identified for doomsday storage into its designated position. Like five loaves and two fishes, they were nothing

really; unremarkable until the feeding of the five thousand. She rested her hands on the box. A blessing of sorts. She did not expect to see her seeds again. The prospect of some catastrophe so dire befalling her country that there would be no remaining local stock seemed preposterous. *Yet this is what we do*, she said to herself. *Plant seeds in soil because we believe in the future; plant them in ice because we doubt it, yet can't help but hope for it.* She wanted to say something profound to her seeds in farewell, to deliver a suitable benediction, but all she managed as she ran a final hand over the lid of the box was, 'Stay cool.'

Only as Evie left the vault did she find the words she would like to have said: *Once you saved me; I'm returning the favour.*



When the minibus took off, having dropped her outside the Longyearbyen Wildlife Expeditions office, Evie had her first misgivings. The day's attempt at light was already beginning to fade and she watched, from across Adventfjorden, the brooding grey of a storm finding its way towards the glacier which, in a rash moment, she had committed herself to climb. It was an eleventh-hour decision made soon after her arrival, and her tight schedule in Svalbard meant she'd had to book a private tour to the ice caves beneath the glacier rather than joining one of the company's scheduled offerings. Without that sense of obligation to her guide, Ragnar, she would have happily headed back to the hotel with her companions for a celebratory aquavit. A light flurry was beginning to fall and she opened the door without further hesitation.

'The aurora australis,' her guide said with gentle humour, looking up from the equipment he was sorting as Evie entered the cosy room. She felt as she had the first time she met him, his brown eyes in perpetual smile, as if there was always some joke to be enjoyed. She felt comforted. Mostly. Possibly a little unsettled by his beauty.

'Shoes?' Evie asked at the doorway.

He assessed her snow boots for the trek that lay ahead. ‘They’ll do.’ Then, ‘No need to take them off now,’ in answer to her actual question. ‘We’ll use crampons. I’ll carry snow shoes in case.’

‘Are you worried about the storm?’

Again the eyes, the crow’s feet at their edges, the grey-flecked beard expanding with his grin.



‘Evie.’ He practised her name as they walked up the first shallow incline towards the glacier. ‘Evie Australis.’

He pulled his polar fleece buff higher and stopped Evie to do the same to hers, so that her chin, mouth and nose were protected from the cold. She had left the shelter of the jeep only five minutes earlier, but her nasal passages were as icy as they had been in the seed bank. ‘Better,’ Ragnar said, scrutinising her face, and beckoned her on. ‘You got to the vault? You gave it your seeds?’

She nodded. It was becoming hard to maintain a conversation as the slope steepened.

‘How was it?’

She climbed a few metres further, pressing through the snow with her hiking sticks, before answering. ‘They call it a library for thirteen thousand years of agricultural history,’ she said, panting deeply through the buff. ‘Just one room, but it holds the world.’

He stopped to give her time to catch her breath. They turned, facing the valley. Dark snow clouds had settled over the harbour. At their backs the sky was clear.

‘You’re sure you’re not worried about a storm?’ she asked again.

He laughed. ‘Are you looking for an excuse?’

Her eyes were weeping from the cold; her nose would not stop running. She wiped both on the back of the snow mittens he had given her, thinking he should probably have asked for a laundering deposit. She looked up at him sheepishly. ‘Maybe. Who’s asking?’

‘The guide who’s going to get you to your caves and back. Two days ago, you were so insistent. What happened?’

She remembered the compulsion, but was uncertain of the reason for it. It was to do with the text message she proposed to send Paddy. His fascination with enclosed spaces, with idiosyncratic shelters, which in his architectural thesis at university had manifested in the design of an ice mansion. The precarious promise of refuge, destined to melt. She was visiting the ice caves because he would have, and, despite everything, after all these years she had not shed her inclination to know him.

‘I’ve remembered I’m not young.’

‘Nor me.’

She thought he was, though; younger by a good six or seven chronological years. At least ten to fifteen in fitness. Beneath the layers of merino, down and Gore-Tex, Ragnar was clearly lean and muscular.

‘You set the pace,’ he reminded her. ‘If we hurry, we make mistakes. The caves are not about to melt.’

He maintained a patter of light conversation throughout their slow ascent, stopping occasionally to point out a landmark, to give her a reason to rest. He explained the glacier’s formation and identified reindeer droppings, small pellets in winter when there was little to forage. He interpreted the deposits of glacial till, the moraines, the varve layers, added annually, and the strata of his own living: his life in Oslo until his boys were grown; the move to Longyearbyen that was only to have been for a couple of years but had somehow stretched to seven with the establishment of the adventure tourism company; the way he craved the forest when in the barren beauty of Svalbard, and lay awake at night conjuring the uninhabited tundra plains during the low season months he spent in his spruce-surrounded house south of Oslo; how it was possible to be content even while in a state of quiet yearning. She paced their climb to the rhythm of his words. And sometimes she found that she had lost the words and was only listening to the lulling timbre of his voice.

‘What seeds did you bring from Australia?’ he asked out of the blue.

‘Oh,’ she said, startled at being expected to take some responsibility for conversation. ‘Oats, canola, lupins, broccoli.’

‘You’re a farmer?’ Teasing, he turned to face her.

‘A landscape architect, but I work with seed banks too.’

‘Designing gardens with broccoli and oats.’

She laughed, a gasping effort. ‘Those were the crop seeds the team’s agronomists brought. You wouldn’t have heard of mine. Yam daisies. *Microseris lanceolata*. Pretty yellow flower with a thick root that’s edible when baked. Our native peoples have cultivated them for thousands of years. Most people mistake them for dandelions but they’re proof that Australia’s Aborigines were the world’s first gardeners, the first farmers.’ She dug her walking sticks into the snow on either side of her, breathing heavily. ‘Ragnar, I have to stop now.’

‘It’s only a little further. See where it looks like there’s a triangle cut into the ridge? The entrance to the caves is just below that.’

‘No, I mean I have to stop talking or I won’t make it. It’s one or the other, walking or talking, not both.’

He studied her face closely. She knew her eyes hadn’t frozen because they wouldn’t stop watering, but her lashes were heavy grilles, a prison of ice through which the world came to her blurry and distorted.

Ragnar pulled off a mitten and pressed his palm against her cheeks, watching for the colour in the skin when he withdrew his hand. ‘It’s all right, no frostbite. But try to keep the buff a bit higher.’ He rotated the roll of polar fleece so the section that had covered her mouth, frozen solid with her moist breath, was at the back of her neck. He stretched the pliable front over her ears and nose. ‘Baby icicles,’ he said, running a fingertip along her eyelashes. He held his palm softly over her eyes until the lashes melted and she was no longer looking through frosted glass.

Evie could not recall the last time she had been touched with such tenderness by a man, nor did she want to. Had she thought too hard, she would have undone her guide’s efforts to thaw and dry her face.

‘Ready, Australis?’

He walked ahead now, through the fast-descending darkness; slow, short steps. The half-light of afternoon was surrendering to the true black of the approaching night. She placed her feet where he had, the deep imprints he left in the snow sparing her the additional exertion of carving her own path through the thick white carpet.



‘My igloo,’ he announced, thrusting his hiking poles into the snow beside a small, dome-covered hole. Three squat walls fashioned from blocks of ice preserved the entrance to the tunnel. Around and over them, winter’s flurries had shaped a compact shelter.

‘The caves shift a little every year with the glacier. There’s some melting in the warmer months. Different channels are formed, the entrance moves. We hike up in late summer to find it again, record the GPS coordinates. Even so, it can drift between then and winter, when the water freezes and the new caves are formed. Time for headgear.’ He secured a headlamp to each of their helmets.

‘It will be warm in the caves – much warmer,’ he assured her, as she replaced her hood with the caving helmet.

‘How cold is it now, outside?’

‘Minus twenty, give or take. It’ll be a little less than zero in the caves. When we get down, we’ll have a warm drink and then we go exploring. We’ll stay an hour or so, no longer – the snow is coming in. It’s not a problem,’ he added swiftly. ‘Going back down is the easy part. You made it, Evie. Maybe now you can talk to me again.’ She thought he winked, but it was hard to tell in the dark, and when he switched on his headlamp his face was lost to her.

The tunnel was a steep descent of steps carved into the compressed snow. Along stretches of the shaft, regular traffic had collapsed the seasonal stairwell. Evie rode these passages like a bobsled, sitting in the narrow channel, using crevices in the ice walls to propel herself forward until gravity, momentum and the slipperiness of the floor

beneath her took over. She imagined how Alice felt, following the White Rabbit down his hole to Wonderland. She tried to leave aside her old woman doubts that she would ever be able to get back up.

Some forty metres below the igloo entrance, the snow gave way to ice and rock. Ropes were pegged into the walls where the drops were especially hazardous and footholds had been gouged in the glacial ice. Squeezing through a particularly tight pass, Evie rounded a bend beyond which her guide's headlamp beckoned, spreading a diffuse glow into the first in a series of more generous cavities. He had set his light on a low, ice-rock bench where a thermos and cups were laid out, a packet of chocolate cream biscuits already opened, welcoming her arrival.

'Coffee or blackcurrant?' he offered.

'Blackcurrant.' She took off her gloves. The cave was warm, as he had promised, though the steam rising from her green plastic cup and the quick cooling of the fruit tea reminded her that it was all relative.

'Better?' Ragnar asked as she drained the mug. She handed it to him, nodding.

He led her through chamber after chamber of glittering crystal sculptures, ice curtains and icicle chandeliers, swirling glass murals, ancient patterns and sandstone sediments. Over the years, she had learned to read the stories told by the growth rings in a tree trunk, wide circles of an early spring or abundant rainfall, narrow ones during drought, the scars of old fires. But the glacier described itself in a language she could not decipher, arousing in her the concentrated awe that foreignness inspired, and wonder at the modesty of buried beauty.

'It's time,' Ragnar said.

Beyond the quiet, he seemed to be hearing the storm's advance, the black afternoon thickening far above them.

'If you follow me again, it will be easier to find the footholds,' he suggested.

Part way up, she was in a congratulatory conversation with herself about the ease of the ascent when her foot slipped and she slid several

metres back down the tunnel, until the snow piling beneath her became a brake. She knew immediately she was in trouble – the throbbing warmth in her right ankle, the nausea. Above her, she heard Ragnar stop.

‘Evie?’

‘I’ve twisted my ankle. Just need a few minutes,’ she panted through the pain. She pressed her forehead into the cold pillow against which she was leaning, hoping not to vomit.

He was beside her before she was able to compose herself. He removed her boot as gently as he could. The ankle was swelling and in the light of his headlamp the first signs of bruising were visible. Supporting her heel in one hand, he palpated the joint.

‘It’s just a sprain, not severe, but the climb will be a challenge, and then the hike. The dark; the snow. We can do it, I can help you – possibly not a piggyback the whole way—’ he smiled ‘—if you have to get back down tonight. But I wouldn’t recommend it. Better to give your ankle some recovery time. We can stay overnight, leave in the morning when the storm has passed and there’s light.’



Resting with her leg elevated on the rock bench, she watched Ragnar set up their makeshift shelter in the chamber they had used earlier as a staging post for their exploration.

‘We’ll save your headlamp,’ he had said on their return, removing her helmet. ‘Once mine runs out, we can use yours. There’ll be light all night if we need it.’ He had bandaged her ankle to compress the swelling and found a place where she could recline against her daypack in comfort.

‘I’m sorry,’ she said as he unpacked his emergency equipment. ‘I did warn you, I’m not young.’

He simply laughed.

‘You know, I usually charge extra for an overnight glacier expedition,’ he said, unfolding an insulated bivouac and spreading it on the cave floor. ‘But for you . . .’

Evie took her phone from the bag behind her head and unzipped her jacket. She slipped the mobile into the cup of her bra.

‘Unlikely,’ Ragnar judged her effort, ‘but worth a try.’

‘Will there be people worried about you?’

‘My staff know where we are. They’ll guess we’re sheltering overnight from the storm. If we’re not back by mid-morning, they’ll come looking.’

‘You don’t have family in Longyearbyen?’

‘Just Oslo.’ His answer gave her no further insight into his domestic circumstances. It did not seem that he was being guarded, just that he didn’t regard it as relevant. He came and sat beside her with the packet of biscuits.

‘Dinner?’

‘Later perhaps.’ She reached into her bra for the phone and held down the key that switched it on. Her unsent message lit the screen for an instant and succumbed again to the cold.

‘Someone special needs to hear from you?’

‘An old flame.’

‘Any flame would do at this point.’

‘So, the calm exterior is an act?’ She smiled at him. ‘We’re actually going to die?’

He grinned. ‘Not tonight. Not in Longyearbyen. You know it’s forbidden to die here? If you’re getting close to that stage of life, you have to leave. Corpses can’t be buried in the permafrost. They don’t decompose. The cemetery was closed about eighty years ago, except for cremations, ashes. There’s a story that scientists found live samples of the Spanish flu virus in the remains of a group of fishermen and miners buried there during the epidemic of 1918. Seeds, viruses – the ice preserves it all, good and bad. But come and get warm for now.’

They lay together on the bivouac and he pulled its fold over them. Beneath her layered clothing and the insulated cover, beside his warmth, she soon felt hot.

‘Too efficient,’ she said, sitting up to remove her down jacket and rolling it into a pillow. She turned on her side, a careful negotiation with her injury. As quickly as she had overheated, she cooled. She shuffled her body back towards Ragnar until she was sharing his warmth. He relaxed into her without hesitation, his forearm reaching across her chest, holding her. She hoped he could not feel the private things: her heart, her lungs; the sudden drumming, the stilled breath. It was like *linie* aquavit, the scent of him: warming, mellow, piquant with spices – caraway, anise, fennel, cardamom. Within her, glacial ice was melting, running underground, carving new caves, an unforeseen spring. Astonishing. It almost made her laugh that her unpractised body could still do this. It was enough simply to know that it was possible.



At some point, she realised he had fallen asleep; at another, that she had too. And later, she woke lying in Ragnar’s arms, head on his chest, his soft-bearded chin resting in her hair. She thought he may have kissed her forehead, some old habit she assumed belonged to another woman until she heard him sigh, ‘*Evie Australis*,’ before he settled back into sleep.

Drifting, she travelled like moonlight across the ice, the snow, along the glinting spines of mountains, through silver valleys, under the bewitching northern lights, to her seeds in the vault. She crawled in beside them, joining their long, cold sleep, their patient waiting.