

ONE

The Scientist

Maggie looked up from her phone's screen as the taxi made a sharp turn, passed Palmerston Park and merged onto High Street, en route to the Southampton Docks. This year's English winter was overly dreary and wet. Droplets of rain glistened on the window, and beyond it the city rolled by like fleeting thoughts shrouded in patches of darkness. Night owls were strolling the burnished streets among flashing neon signs and revelers were milling around pubs and nightclubs in droves—laughing, cheering and singing random, profanity-doused songs. But none of this interested Maggie. Her mind was elsewhere.

She drew her attention back to the phone and continued typing the text she had started after getting into the taxi twenty minutes earlier. Her hands quivered, as did her mind. She hadn't received any updates about Martin's condition for three days, and it was driving her raving mad. She had been by his side every day since the accident, but her return to work had drawn imminently closer, and lately news from the hospital was coming in dribs and drabs. Even more so now that Martin's sister had assumed her own form of guardianship over him, which included shutting Maggie out completely. Officially, she knew she didn't have a leg to stand on. She wasn't his wife or the mother of his children, but they had been engaged for six months. Maggie thought that must count for something. She *deserved* to be kept in the loop.

Instead, she had to beg and plead for news, only to receive the vaguest of replies several days after.

He's stable. Thank you for your thoughts, was Imogen's last response. Maggie could still feel the icy disdain that Imogen had soaked the message in as she recalled it once more, and it was just as cold as it had been when she read it for the first time two days ago.

Martin's sister was an unpleasant woman, and that was putting it mildly. Maggie had once told Martin (after a few glasses of Chardonnay) that if his sister was ever to be reincarnated that she would surely return as an ill-tempered pug. She already shared the bulging eyes and the throaty, heaving noises that the breed made when they got excited. Not too much of a stretch of the imagination, then. Martin always responded indifferently to Maggie's mocking of Imogen, as if he secretly wanted to entertain it whilst also avoiding encouraging the behavior. This had resulted in a few arguments over the two years they had been together prior to his proposal of marriage, but they always found their way back to each other. That was what Maggie missed the most about him—his ability to forgive and his kindness, his warmth.

A shudder ran up her spine as she involuntarily relived the day her fiancé fell from the balcony of their eleventh-floor apartment. That Saturday morning had started out just like any other—coffee in bed, which led to sex as it often did and afterwards, as Maggie was taking a shower, a conversation had taken place about a trip that Martin had been planning with two of his friends. Lionel was Martin's best friend and had been obsessed with Scottish castles since he was a young lad. This had prompted Martin to plan a trip for the boys up to Edinburgh for Lionel's birthday, which had been a week away. As he was running through

the itinerary with Maggie, she had made the mistake of cracking a joke about the whole endeavor, saying that they'd all better remember to phone their mummies before bedtime. Martin's mother had passed away only a year earlier, and the second the words left Maggie's mouth, she had regretted it, biting her tongue and cursing herself under her breath. From within the glass enclosure, she could clearly tell that Martin's mood had changed. After her comment, he had turned abrupt and gave mere one-word answers as she kept asking questions, trying to sound enthusiastic and supportive of the planned holiday in an attempt to sweep her unwelcome comment under the rug. When that didn't bear any fruit, she apologized while frantically drying herself off so she could get to the bedroom and look him in the eye, to see if she had actually hurt his feelings. But as she exited the bathroom, she found the bedroom vacant. No sign of her fiancé.

With a towel wrapped around her body she searched every room of the house, and when she walked out onto the balcony and looked over the edge, she saw Martin's rigid body suspended in a palm tree, eleven floors down. The shock was so great that Maggie vomited upon laying eyes on the scene beneath her. He was splayed out with his arms above his head and both his legs were contorted unnaturally. Most telling of all was that Martin wasn't moving. She screamed.

While sitting on the brown leather couches in the hospital lobby, waiting for the surgeons to put the man she loved back together, she had cursed herself once more for being so insensitive and so bloody stupid. This opinion of herself was shared vehemently by Imogen after Maggie had explained to her what happened. The enraged sister had demanded to know every detail of their exchange that morning. Imogen had been furious, telling Maggie that she wasn't good enough for her brother and that she had warned him about moving in with her. It

wasn't the words that Imogen said that hurt her; it was the *way* she said it. She was hateful and aggressive as her tongue spewed its own form of venom. Maggie knew Martin had not completely processed his mother's passing yet, but to jump to his death because of a horrible joke she had made had completely taken her by surprise. He was the furthest thing from suicidal, and they had their entire future together ahead of them. This was the thought that kept running through her mind when she had gotten over the initial shock of it. Why? Why would he jump? It didn't make any sense.

"What're ye off to the docks for then, Ruby?" the seasoned taxi driver asked from behind the glass window that separated them. Tufts of curly orange hair were peeking out from under the back of his cap.

"Excuse me?" Maggie said as the driver's voice hurled her back to the present.

"What's your business at the docks, if you don't mind me asking? Not many cruise ships departing at this time of night."

"Oh! I'm a marine biologist. We're off to the Puerto Rico trench for four weeks." Maggie blushed. She didn't enjoy talking about herself, even to strangers. Then a thought occurred to her. "Who's Ruby?" Maggie asked. She wasn't sure if she had heard him correctly through his heavy Irish accent.

"What?" He sounded shocked.

"You just called me Ruby."

“Well, that’s you, isn’t it? Said so yourself when you got in the car.” The man behind the steering wheel scoffed, then snorted. Maggie thought he didn’t seem altogether there.

“I think you have me confused with someone else,” Maggie said, becoming increasingly weary of the man following their unusual exchange. “Are we almost there?”

“Aye. Apologies, miss. The old brainbox isn’t what it used to be I suppose,” the driver said sheepishly. Maggie decided not to respond. She hoped that whatever was the matter with this man, whether he had been drinking or whether he was just a bit confused between his fares for the night, that she wouldn’t have to deal with it for much longer. She didn’t want to distract or antagonize him and conflict was something that she preferred to avoid altogether, so she kept quiet and refocused on the text message. As her fingers graced the phone’s keyboard, it rang, and she jumped in her seat.

“Where the hell are you? I’m freezing my testicles off here!” Dr. Howard Simms’s voice was as high-pitched and annoyed over the phone as the day Maggie had met him at the Rothera Research Station in the Antarctic ten years ago, when she had been a fresh graduate sent to the polar region to complete the practical leg of her doctorate degree. Even though Howard had been her senior back then, she had since moved swiftly through the ranks of the National Oceanography Centre in Southampton and was now *his* senior, much to his dissatisfaction. He never showed it, but Maggie knew it had been a severe bruise to his ego. Aside from that, she found him to be comforting and gentle in his own way and, over time, he had developed into a father-figure of sorts. She valued his opinion, both professionally and personally.

“I’m in a taxi. Should be there in a few minutes. Is everything alright?” Maggie asked as the device vibrated in her hand. She checked the screen. It was a text from her mother that read: *Hello Margaret. It’s twenty-five years today. Thought I’d let you know in case you were too busy and forgot.* Her heart sank, and she reluctantly placed the phone back to her ear.

“Well, you’d better get your behind here rather quickly. There’s a poorly dressed man from the grant office here looking for approval paperwork for the submersible. He says he’s going to offload it from the vessel if you don’t get here soon. Dreadful fellow. Vulgar.” Howard’s scoff was almost tangible, even over the phone, and Maggie guessed her old friend was staring the man in the face while stating his opinions. It wasn’t uncommon for him to be openly brash toward people he disliked.

“Hang on! He wants to do what?!” The shrill in her own voice surprised Maggie and she cleared her throat. The taxi made another wild turn, and the bridge and roof-mounted radar equipment of a large vessel came into sight through the windshield. The ship was hulking over the tops of other smaller boats berthed at the dock. “Hold him off please, Howard. I’m almost there,” she said and ended the call.

Her thumb slid over the fingerprint scanner on the phone’s screen, brought up the messaging app and switched from the unfinished text she was typing to Imogen to her mother’s message, but frowned when she saw it was gone. Had she deleted it? Maggie knew her mother wasn’t the kind of woman to consider the feelings of others before saying her piece, so if she had deleted the message, it must have been by mistake. She felt a lump form in her throat. Has it really been that long? It couldn’t be.

Her young sister's face floated before her as Maggie's mind traveled back twenty-five years to that cruel but warm summer night on her aunt's farm in Essex. The image of the wooden well with the muddy doll lying next to it will forever be ingrained into her memory, haunting her like the proverbial monster that invaded the dreams of children. She recalled the damp smell in the police station later that night, and the detective's rough hands resting on the table as he questioned her. Maggie couldn't remember his face, but she could see the leathery texture that his hands were wrapped in before her like it was yesterday. His knuckles were red and thick, and his voice was gentle, yet deep and gruff. He was kind and tried to be respectful of the fact that she had just lost her sister, using words like *darling* and *poppet* when he spoke to her. She had found that oddly comforting at the time and often traveled back to that memory and wondered what had happened to him. She hadn't met many kind men in her life, but that one was worth remembering.

"*Matilda ...*" she whispered and winced as the name rolled over her pursed lips. Maggie took a deep breath and as she typed a message to her mother, the taxi came to a screeching halt, making her slide forward on the imitation leather seat.

"There ye are, missy. Sorry... er... never mind." The red-haired driver blushed, exited the car, and unloaded Maggie's bags from the trunk.

Maggie pressed *send* on the text, pocketed her phone and stepped out into the faint rainfall that left a rolling cloud of fog hanging in the air. From underneath her black umbrella, she laid eyes on the vessel they would spend the next four to five weeks on: the *RRS Pioneer*. It loomed like a behemoth over the dock, and it heaved lightly in the frigid wind as if it were

gulping deep breaths of air. Maggie guessed it was about a hundred and sixty meters long and reached forty-five meters into the sky. It was much larger than the vessels they usually had access to, and according to the briefing email she had received from the captain, it was the new state-of-the-art flagship carrier of the British Antarctic Survey Institute. The captain also stressed that they were *very* lucky to have been issued this ship. It was scheduled for berthing and routine maintenance, as all BAS missions were on hold until after New Year's Eve, which was a week and a half away. The NOC had decommissioned Maggie's regular vessel early and she came within inches of having to cancel the entire trip. Had it not been for Howard's contacts within the BAS, that certainly would've been the case.

Maggie paid the driver and was rolling her suitcases toward the gangplank when an icy hand took a hold of hers. She jerked her hand away, then turned to see Howard smiling at her from under a black fedora. The lines on his clean-shaven face were deeper than she remembered, but his blue eyes were as welcoming as ever.

"Hello, darling!" he said and kissed her cheek. "My, don't you look the worse for wear?"

"Hello, Howard. Always with the compliments." She let go of her bags and hugged him tight. A warmth of familiarity washed over her, and she could feel the stress of the past few weeks ease slightly for the first time since Martin's accident. "I've missed you," she said and kissed him on the cheek.

"Careful now, we wouldn't want these strapping young sailors to think I'm into girls. I'm on the market, you know." Howard smiled again, motioned to the uniformed shore crew that were standing around idly and took one of her bags. "Let's get you out of this dreadful rain."

As they set foot on the main deck, Maggie couldn't help but feel a flicker of unease run down from her chest and into her stomach, as if something foreboding lay in wait for her deep within the bowels of this steel colossus.