

A DOOR IN DECEMBER

Part Three

Staggering past the fence, not knowing if she was dreaming or even alive, the Prime Minister forced her clenched fist to bang on the door. The wind was slicing into her like a glass knife, her body was jerked about with tremors, and her teeth were chattering so loudly that she thought they might dislodge her brain.

The door opened, and after a very long moment a voice said:

“What do you want?”

After a brief battle with her tongue, the Prime Minister said:

“Please let me in, I’m going to die out here otherwise.”

“Dressed like that!” said the voice. “I’m not surprised.”

The door opened wide.

“Thank you,” she managed to say, and stepped inside the house.

“Quickly, get by the fire,” said the voice. The Prime Minister looked around but could see no-one. Was it coming from a loud speaker?

“Down here,” the voice said wearily, as though this sort of thing happened all the time. She looked down and nearly shouted. Next to her was the smallest person she had ever seen, a woman who wore a green hat and dress and who scarcely came up to her knee.

“Hello,” said the Prime Minister, remembering her manners. “And thank you very much.”

“Not at all,” said the woman in the green hat, apparently mollified. “My name is Wool, by the way.”

“I’m - ” began the Prime Minister.

“I know who you are,” said Wool. “It’s my job, remember?”

And before the Prime Minister could ask Wool what her job was, she was being ushered into a large room with a roaring fire and a low table on which stood a large mug of something hot with cream in it.

“Drink,” said Wool. The Prime Minister drank, and once again the sugary gingerbread taste filled her mouth. She moved nearer to the fire, but already she felt better. She said so to Wool, who smiled tightly.

“Good,” she said, then:

“How did you get here, dressed like that?”

“Through a door,” said the Prime Minister.

“Was it a big black door?” asked Wool.

“Yes,” the Prime Minister answered, “How did you know?”

“I’ve been looking for it,” Wool replied. “Things have been going missing a lot round here.”

She sighed so deeply that her hat trembled on her head, which was when the Prime Minister noticed with a slight start that her ears were extremely pointy.

“Are you all right?” she asked, and this time Wool’s smile was warmer.

“When I heard you banging at the door,” she said, “I thought you might be him.”

“Who?” the Prime Minister replied.

In answer, Wool pointed at a portrait on the wall. It was of a jolly man, laughing behind an enormous white beard.

“Him,” she said.

"No," said the Prime Minister, "But I have seen him."

"What?" said Wool.

"I saw him," she repeated.

"Where?" Wool said, and there was urgency in her voice.

"In a dream," said the Prime Minister, a little embarrassed.

But Wool didn't seem annoyed by this at all.

"Tell me," she said, producing a small red note pad and an even smaller green pencil from her apron, "*everything*."

Soon the room was full of small men and women, each dressed in green and red and all talking at the same time. They brought with them maps and tablets and laptops and globes and sextants and they pointed and drew and shook their heads and argued until Wool shouted:

"BE QUIET!"

She turned to the Prime Minister.

"This island," said Wool. "Did it have any distinguishing features?"

The Prime Minister thought.

"There's a hill in the middle," she said, "that looks like a pig's head."

The room exploded into chaos again as everyone began to point and shout and click, until one of the small men said:

"There!"

He pointed at a screen.

"Pig Island," he said.

"Let's go," said Wool. She looked at the Prime Minister.

"Have you flown before?"

"Of course I have," she replied. "I've been in helicopters, and jets, and - "

"No," said Wool. "That doesn't count. I mean on a *sleigh*."

Before the Prime Minister could reply, Wool said to the person standing next to her.

"Get Sled Seven ready, now."

Sled Seven was red and gold, and harnessed to it was a team of reindeer.

"Team Two," said Wool, apologetically, "Team One went down with the boss."

She clambered into the sleigh and picked up the reins. The Prime Minister followed.

"Put these over you," said Wool, indicating a large pile of very warm-looking rugs.

Wool pulled on the reins.

The reindeer looked up.

She made a clicking noise.

The reindeer began to walk.

"Hut!" shouted Wool.

The reindeer ran.

"On, Desmond!" shouted Wool. "On, Marcia! On, Thompson! On, Garcia!"

And the reindeer left the ground and flew.

The Prime Minister had never been so frightened in her life as the sleigh raced higher and higher into the sky; but she had also never been so excited. Wool was right:

it was nothing like being in an airplane. They swooped and twisted and leapt as though they were on a lasso, they twisted and turned and even flipped upside down, and they went so fast that it seemed her breath would be pulled out of her body. Higher and higher they went, the moon over their shoulder, and even though they were above the clouds, she could see the lights of the world below them, as clear as the lights on a –

“Down!” shouted Wool, and the reindeer *dived* at the Earth below. Down they plummeted, faster and faster, like a meteor, until cloud became sky and night became day and sky became sea and in the middle of the sea was an island.

The reindeer circled the island and, in a manoeuvre that seemed impossible yet also simple, Wool landed the sleigh in a spray of sand and seashells. They got out. Wool untethered the reindeer and gave them carrots. The Prime Minister remembered something, reached into her pocket and took out a carrot which she gave to the lead reindeer.

Wool gave her a look and said:

“Show me where you last saw him.”

The two of them walked along the beach until they found the debris of a bonfire. It was ashy and dirty and dead and footsteps led away from it, footsteps that seemed more like stumbles in the sand than anything else.

“Quickly!” said Wool and broke into a run. The Prime Minister followed.

“Over here!” she heard Wool cry.

Lying on the ground a few meters away was a man. He wore red and white underpants and his skin was red and sunburned and his white beard was thick and tangled. When she saw him, Wool burst into tears.

“We’re too late!” she cried. “And it’s all my fault.”

“And I thought you were the practical sort,” said the Prime Minister. She picked up a coconut and smashed it on a rock. Then she dribbled the coconut’s juice into the old man’s face. He coughed, spluttered, and sat up.

“Hello, Wool,” he said through cracked lips, “How did you find me?”

A few minutes later, they were up in the air again. The old man, much revived and wearing fresh clothes, was combing his beard which, the Prime Minister noted without much surprise, seemed to be trimming and washing itself as he did so.

“That’s better,” he said, then, to her:

“I owe you my deepest gratitude.”

“That’s all right,” said the Prime Minister. “Wool did all the work.”

“I did!” Wool replied. “But,” she conceded, “I couldn’t have found you without her.”

She turned to the old man.

“What *happened*?” she asked.

He sighed deeply.

“I was taking Team One out to test Sled Eight,” he said. “And then we ran into a storm, and there was a fault with Sled Eight and -”

“Poor Team One,” Wool said, sadly.

“Oh, they’re fine,” replied the old man. “As soon as they were free of the sled, they flew off. Probably having a nice holiday in Lapland. No,” he went on, “it’s not the reindeer we need to worry about.”

The Prime Minister stood in silence as sack after sack was loaded onto the sled. They had only been back at the North Pole for a few minutes but already everyone was busy loading up the sled, and no matter how many sacks went on it, the sleigh never got any heavier or any fuller.

“What’s going on?” she asked Wool.

“We’re getting ready,” said Wool. “We’re a little behind, but there’s still time.”

“Time for what?”

Wool gave her an old-fashioned look.

“Christmas, of course,” she answered.

The old man, who was now looking as rosy-cheeked and merry as his pictures, came over to them.

“All ready?” he asked.

“All ready,” Wool replied.

“Good,” he said. He looked at the Prime Minister.

“Will you come with me?” he asked.

“Where?” she asked, and the old man actually took a step backwards in surprise.

“She’s forgotten,” said Wool. “They’ve all forgotten.”

“Then,” said the old man, getting onto the sleigh, “it’s time they remembered.”

And he reached down and pulled the Prime Minister up onto the sleigh.

The sleigh flew up again, and on through the night. It flew in circles, it swooped and plunged and for one glorious moment – she reckoned the old man wanted to show off – it looped the loop. It flew all round the world, and did it in a night. They visited every house in every land, every child and every adult. She saw streets ablaze with light, and trees with presents underneath. She saw children peering downstairs and adults sending them back to bed.

And she remembered. She remembered being with her mum and dad. She remembering the joy of opening presents, and the warmth of being with people she loved. She remembered the pleasure of giving, and the understanding that others didn’t have what she had.

The sleigh landed at the end of Downing Street and the old man helped her down.

“I remember your name!” she told him.

He smiled.

“I remember yours, too,” he said. “Merry Christmas, Susan.”

She walked to the front door. It had a green wreath on it, made of –

“Holly,” said the Prime Minister.

“Good, isn’t it?” said the constable on duty. He blew on his hands.

“I’ll make you a hot drink,” she said, and before he could say anything, she went into Number 10.

There was an enormous Christmas tree in the hall underneath an abundance of tinsel. Decorations filled every inch of available space and there were hundreds of cards strung up all over the place.

“Happy Christmas, Prime Minister,” said Pomfrey.

“Happy Christmas to you too, Clive,” she replied. “Would you like a hot drink?”

Pomfrey looked surprised, then tried not to look surprised, then just gave up and looked surprised.

“Yes please,” he said.

She stood on the step with Pomfrey and the constable, drinking hot chocolate with gingerbread and cream in it.

“It’s going to be a good one this year,” said the constable.

“I hope you’re right,” Pomfrey replied.

“Oh, it is,” the constable answered. “I can always tell. Look!” he said, and pointed upwards.

“A shooting star!” exclaimed Pomfrey.

They watched as the bright object streaked like silver across the sky.

“I’ve never seen a shooting star do a loop the loop before,” said the constable.

“I have,” said the Prime Minister, and they both looked at her.

She smiled, and raised her mug to the sky.

“Merry Christmas, everyone!” she said.