

THE
ARCTIC
FURY

A NOVEL

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CHAPTER ONE

Virginia

Massachusetts Superior Court, Boston
October 1854

In the front row sit the survivors.

Virginia can see them clearly from her seat in the dock. Even when she looks away from them—toward the judge, the jury—she still feels their presence. Five women, broken and brave, who came to this courtroom against all odds. She wonders if they feel jarred, the way she does, minding the rules of civilization again: caring what they wear, watching what they say, wondering how their actions make others feel. They were free of all that, not so long ago. Then again, what a steep price they paid for that fleeting freedom.

Only five. Not all who survived, that's a mercy, but all who choose to stand up and be counted as survivors. She feels the ones who aren't there as much as the ones who are. If she closes her eyes, she can see each of the lost before her. One laid out cold and blue as cornflowers. One swallowed by the ice, its hungry maw open just wide enough to devour. One bathed, writhing, in blood. Each a pinpoint tragedy Virginia will never forget, never stop regretting.

Even the ones who sit here today are missing parts of themselves they'll never get back. How many fingers, how many toes? One ear, Doro's. The right, if she remembers correctly, and how could she

forget? Also lost: a sliver of each of their souls, including Virginia's. She does not close her eyes to picture any of that, any of those losses. She knows them well enough.

Five women present and willing to be known as survivors of the expedition, not counting Virginia, who had no choice about whether or not to be known. If they had to be counted—in happier times, they joked about it, a welcome thing, an optimist's dream—there should have been eleven. Virginia the twelfth. That was the size of the expedition they'd planned for, though not what they'd launched with, and certainly not what had returned. The numbers don't add up, but then again, the numbers have never added up correctly. That was Caprice's fault. Virginia should be done with her anger at Caprice by now, but she's not. She may never be done.

"All rise for the Honorable Judge Elton Miller," calls the bailiff. Virginia rises.

The judge is younger than she would have thought, though not young, exactly. Dark hair instead of white, not a flash of gray among the jet. Her eyes land on a reddish streak along his jaw. Careless with his razor? A stumble in the night? She is sick of analyzing injuries. Siobhan should be here to do that. But Siobhan, like so many others, is not.

"You may be seated," the judge says, and the whole courtroom dissolves into soft rumbles and thumps as they shuffle to comply, exactly like a congregation. Virginia half expects to hear an organ lumbering into the opening strains of "All Things Bright and Beautiful."

Instead, the not-old, not-young judge continues, "We are here today to hear the case of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts versus Miss Virginia Reeve. How do you plead, Miss Reeve?"

From the defense table comes a reluctant but forceful voice. Higher than it should be. Virginia winces at how young he sounds.

“Judge, the charges,” says her counsel, whose name is Clevenger. He looks young as well as sounding young, all apple cheeks and skinny limbs. Clevenger is the tallest man in the courtroom, yet somehow, at least to Virginia, he seems to take up the least space.

The judge blinks. “Come again?”

Her counsel shuffles papers, makes another attempt. If Virginia were the lawyer, she tells herself, she would make a stronger beginning. *If ifs and buts were candy and nuts*, Ann would have said to that. Poor Ann.

And poor Virginia. Five faithful, living women in this courtroom form a silent, united line, and it’s the voices of the other seven who won’t shut up.

“I believe the charges should be read first? And I will tell you how she pleads?” says her counsel.

“Oh, I apologize, Your Honor!” booms the judge, not a whit of apology in his voice. “I forgot to address you as Judge! And in your own court no less. What an embarrassment.”

More twitching, more shuffling of papers. “Your Honor, I’m not a judge.”

The judge says, with great relish, “Precisely.”

Virginia’s counsel is silent.

“Now may I proceed?” asks the judge, though it’s not really a question.

“Yes, Your Honor.”

“Rise,” says the judge, though Virginia doesn’t hear him until he repeats, more stridently, “Rise.”

Virginia rises.

“Read the charges,” he says to the bailiff.

“One count of kidnapping and one count of murder,” the bailiff says, “in the death of Caprice Collins.”

Whispers zip around the courtroom, a handful of flung pebbles skittering on slick ice. But from the row nearest Virginia, there is

only a thick, welcome pocket of silence. She feels herself resting on it like a pillow. Shock and surprise may bubble over everywhere else, but nothing surprises the survivors. The capacity for surprise was blasted out of them, frozen out of them, wrenched out of them in the Far North. They froze solid up there. While their bodies are warmer now, something within them has never thawed. She doesn't believe it ever will.

The judge turns away from Virginia, away from the lawyers and the women who sit in the front row, away from the unknown faces who make up the audience for this—what? Circus?

“Men of the jury,” he addresses them ponderously. “Know that the prisoner at the bar, Virginia Reeve, has heretofore pleaded and said she is not guilty of each count of the indictment. For trial, she puts herself upon your good judgment to try the issue. If she is guilty on either or both of said counts, you are to say so, and if she is not guilty on either or both of said counts, you are to say so, and no more. Good men and true—stand together and hearken to your evidence.”

Of Virginia herself, he shows no awareness.

His heavy indifference, she thinks, threatens to sink her. She cannot let herself be drawn down. She has endured worse than this man's disdain. And she has a choice in how deeply she lets him cut her. She turns her attention away from him, toward the only people in the courtroom she truly knows.

The five survivors buoy her up with their silence. She fears the words they may speak when called upon later—not to mention the words of others with damaging, dark things to say, true and otherwise—but for now, their quiet reassures her. All she wants from them right now is nothing, and that is exactly what they have left to give.