RED FEVER

CAROLINE CLOUGH



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To all my family

1. A Mad Mission

A heavy white mist clung to the world, blurring the edges between sea and sky. Toby crouched low on the front deck of the boat as it sliced slowly through the grey waters. His eyes strained through the murkiness, alert to any danger that may lie ahead. The damp air seeped through his clothes and he shivered with cold but also with fear of what he had to do next. This was a mission Toby might not return from. His dad was mad to even think of it.

"Dad! Whoa! Slow down," Toby cried. "I think I can see something. About twenty metres ahead."

"Keep watch for any rubbish!" his dad shouted from the wheelhouse, as he steered round the floating flotsam of plastic drums, bottles and a scum of random litter.

The purr of the boat's engine fell to a stutter and the boat rolled lazily on the oily swell. As Toby hung as far out as he dared from the bow and peered through the fog, a slight breeze lifted and cleared the path ahead.

"Dad! Look!" Toby gasped. Looming through the whiteness, towering over the boat, the large rusted legs of the oil platform came into view. Toby fell backwards as his eyes followed the height of the legs from sea level up and up until they disappeared into the grey gloom.

"Toby! Get ready!" his dad commanded.

Toby picked himself up and grabbed the rope with shaking hands. He could now hear the ghostly creaking of the giant structure as it sighed and groaned in the surging sea, and he could see the twisted red-brown girders hanging high above his head as the boat bobbed underneath. So this was what an oil platform looked like after it had been left to the ravages of the sea for three years. His dad had worked on one similar to this, but further out into the North Sea.

"Are you ready, Toby?" his dad barked.

"Yep!" Toby replied, leaning out from the bow, the thick heavy rope coiled in his hands, ready to throw it on to anything it would catch on. Some of the diagonal bracing struts had been smashed by storms and dangled uselessly in mangled knots of metal from above. With a grunt Toby threw the looped end of the rope over a broken spar.

Strange to think that he, Toby Tennant, had never even been on such a boat until a year ago. He'd hated sailing. Now, here he was expertly tying one up to an oil platform. Crazy.

"OK, Toby, get going."

"Yes, Dad."

"And be quick. There could be pirates in the area!"

Thanks, Dad! That's all I need — something else to worry about. As if this thing exploding or sinking whilst I'm on it isn't enough, thought Toby.

He climbed on to the side of the boat, and readied himself for the leap on to the rusted ladder that swung from the leg of the platform.

"Got the walkie-talkie?" His dad yelled out his last instructions.

Toby sprang like a cat, but just as he leapt a wave hit the side of the boat, swinging it and him away from the platform. With an extra effort he threw himself towards the corroded metal ladder. He didn't want to land in the freezing, dirty water. He wouldn't last long.

"Ah!" Toby cried as the force of the jump carried him bang up against the slimy seaweed-draped tower, and he landed heavily on a rung of the ladder.

"Oh!" Red-hot pain seared a path from his hand to his brain as his right hand took the brunt of the landing, caught between the ladder and the tower. The tower's

patchwork of seaweed hid a coating of razor-sharp barnacles, encrusted on to the metal. Toby's nylon gloves ripped easily as his hand raked across the jagged shells, tearing a large bloody gash across his knuckles.

A wave of nausea washed over him as, through the fog of pain, he heard his dad shouting something about the wind getting up and to be quick.

Quick, thought Toby. *Must be quick.* He gritted his teeth and, pushing through the pain, forced himself to place his foot on the next rung of the ladder. The thick soles of his boot slithered forwards then found a grip on the slippery metal. He heaved himself up, using his good hand. As he climbed, the strong pungent smell of seaweed filled his nostrils and the noisy calls of hundreds of seagulls wheeling and diving around him made him feel dizzy.

It took all of Toby's strength to hoist himself up the twenty metres, placing his feet carefully on each rung to test if it would take his weight. As he removed his foot each time, pieces of rust scraped off to float slowly downwards into the murky space below.

Mustn't look down. Keep focused on going up; that's what Dad always says.

Toby tried to remember the rules of climbing, which his dad had taught him out on the sea cliffs near their home. That all seemed a very long time ago now. That

was before all this — before the red fever had killed his grandparents, his friends, almost everyone he had ever known, and most of the population — before the world had gone mad.

"One elephant, two elephants, three …" Toby tried counting aloud to match the rhythm of his slow ascent. His hand throbbed but he kept going.

He could now see the huge underbelly of the platform appearing from the mist. Ropes and bundles of wires and pipes hung down like giant strands of hair. He felt sick, whether it was from the pain in his hand or the fear which gripped his stomach, he didn't know.

Stop being such a baby, he told himself. *Get on with it.*

At last he could see an opening above. The next step up was on to solid metal steps and then up on to the top deck. There were even more seagulls nesting on the upper scaffolding. They were huge beasts, squawking and screaming at each other, squabbling over bits of litter. A couple of them spotted Toby and, stretching out their huge white wings, dive-bombed him with open beaks.

"Get lost, you morons!" he shouted, batting out at them with his good hand.

Toby ran along a walkway towards what looked like the entrance doors to the main block. He tried not to look through the metal grid floor to down below, where the angry sea could be glimpsed through the swirling mist.

The doors to the block were swinging gently, half off their hinges, creaking eerily in the salty breeze. He bashed through them, kicking aside the mounds of plastic bottles, papers and soggy cardboard boxes that the wind had blown in.

"What a stink!" Toby cried out, covering his nose with his cagoule sleeve. The ripe stench of rotting matter hit him as he pushed his way along the corridor.

Toby was aware of his heart pumping fit to burst. He felt his nerves, raw and on edge. He didn't know what he was going to find. Dead bodies? Skeletons picked clean by the seagulls? He scanned each room quickly as he passed it, but the place was bare apart from litter.

Toby felt uneasy, as if someone was watching him. He wanted to run and run so fast that his legs would skip over the waves and carry him home, to his real home. He wanted to wake up in his bed tucked under the eaves in his parents' cottage and find that this had all been a bad dream: that his little sister was well again and that his mum was alive.

GET A GRIP! Look! Keep looking! It's got to be here somewhere.

His dad had told him where the muster points would be for an emergency, where he would find a diagram and the location of the medical bay. But as panic started to take hold of him, his dad's plan flew from Toby's head.

He just wanted to find the medical bay — *now*. He tried to push through large double doors but the damp sea air had warped them and they were stuck shut. He took a jump at them and kicked out hard with his boots.

BANG! The doors burst open with a noise that echoed through the whole empty building. Toby stopped and listened. Was he imagining things or could he hear someone singing? Was this what happened to mariners in the old days? They went mad hearing noises and thought mermaids were singing to them?

"Keep moving!" he shouted out. This was madness. This whole idea was crazy. How could his dad do this to him? How desperate must his dad have to be to send his only son on to a deserted oil platform?

But Toby knew the answer. They *were* desperate. If they didn't find help for Sylvie soon, it could be too late.

The canteen was scattered with broken tables and chairs. At the back of the large room Toby could see the kitchens. Someone had broken all the plates and cups and saucers. The floor was covered in jagged shards of crockery.

He turned and pushed his way on down another corridor, kicking through mounds of printed papers with diagrams and pictures — manuals for the daily workings of the platform. Then he saw the white door with a green cross on it. Here was the medical bay. He pushed hard at the door. It swung open, but inside the room was empty.

Everything had been taken.

"No! No! NO!" cried Toby. He felt a hot rush of tears spring to his eyes and the knot of panic rose further in his throat. Someone had been here. Someone had beaten them to it. The cupboards had been torn from the walls and empty broken bottles littered the floor. Packets of Gamgee and lint dressings lay torn and discarded on the plastic chairs that sat lonely and unwanted in the large white room. He rushed to the medical cabinets with shattered glass doors but they were empty. All the medicines had been taken.

Toby stopped suddenly and listened. What was that? Was he imagining noises again? But as he stilled his breathing, he could just make out the faint boom of a foghorn coming from somewhere far below.

"Dad!" Toby cried and, turning on his heels, started to run back, stumbling over the piles of rubbish. But he couldn't remember the way he had come. All the corridors looked the same; every door led to another door that looked just the same as the last one. Toby felt the panic rising into his mouth now, threatening to choke him.

Think! Think! Be logical — there must be a main corridor with others leading off it. Just need to concentrate. Need to slow my breathing. Breathe — one elephant, two elephants …

As he came round a corner Toby recognised the

double doors of the canteen.

Not far now. Keep breathing!

He could still hear the distant *boom, boom* of the boat's foghorn sounding out into the mist below. There must be something wrong. What had his dad said about an emergency? Ah, the walkie-talkie!

Toby pulled it out of his cagoule pocket and frantically jabbed at the ON button. He put the walkie-talkie to his mouth.

"Dad! DAD!" he shouted into it. "What's happening?"

"Toby! Get back here now! Get back, Toby! NOW!" his dad screamed down the line.