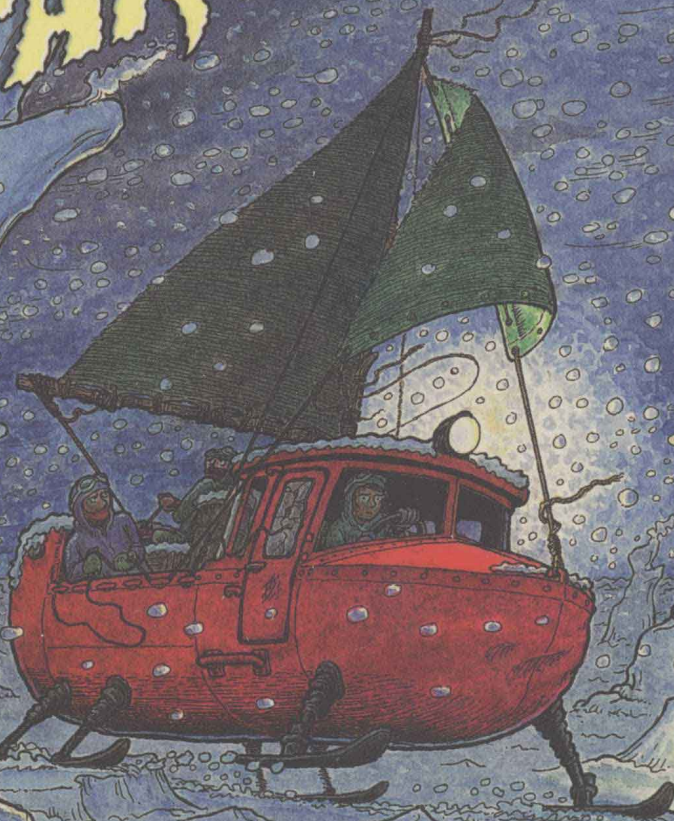


The **7** Professors of the **FAR NORTH**



John Fardell

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*To Jenny,
Joshua & Connor,
with love*

Prologue

'STOP HIM! KILL HIM!'

A lanky scarecrow of a man tore across the frozen ground, jinking this way and that as bullets blasted up snow and ice around him. *Cover . . . Get behind hut . . . Now where? . . . There – snowmobile! . . . Unguarded . . .* The man flung himself onto the large grey machine, gloved hands fumbling with the ignition.

PTANG! PTANG! Bullets on metal. *Come on . . . Start! . . . Come ON . . . Yes! . . .*

The engine roared alive, powering the vehicle forward at breakneck speed. *More men . . . blocking way . . . raising their guns . . . Straight through 'em! . . .* Scattering the guards, the fugitive forced the machine on at full throttle, long coat flying out behind, battered hat and face muffler covering all but his eyes. Haunted eyes; desperate eyes; searching for a way down to the shore.

Rocks. Have to jump 'em.

He zoomed the snowmobile up a snowdrift, into an arcing leap over the snow-covered rocks. **WHAM!** The vehicle slammed onto the frozen sea, almost jolting the rider from his seat, and sped onwards.

PTANG! PTANG!.. PFUT! *I'm hit! No - just a bullet grazing hat. Keep swerving. Are they following me? Bound to be. Keep eyes on ice ahead. Starting to snow again. Good - it'll cover tracks.*

The swirling snow closed in, obliterating the horizon ahead and the island behind, enveloping the rider and his vehicle in a white void.

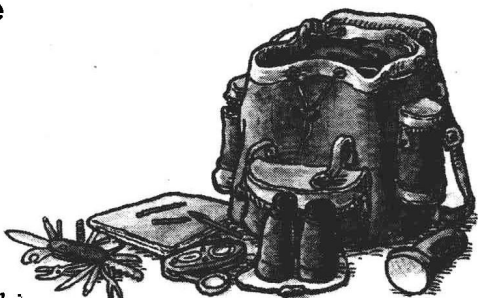
Set course: dead south. Any damage to machine? Seems alright. Fuel? Main tank full. Two spare cans; both look intact. Maybe I have a chance. A slim chance. Damn slim.

Nearly seven hundred miles of rugged, treacherous sea ice lay between him and the northern coast of Russia. Air temperature: minus 55°C . . . Food rations: inadequate. With the added danger of enemy snowmobiles and enemy planes, death seemed almost certain.

But I have to try . . . Have to alert the others . . . Tell them Murdo's secret . . . If I fail, it's the end of everything . . . The end for all humanity . . .

Chapter One

Eleven-year-old Sam Carnabie sat on the edge of his bed and finished packing his



favourite things into his small rucksack. Actually, the rucksack itself was one of his favourite things. It was a recent present from his dad. Not a Christmas or birthday present either, but one of the I-saw-this-in-town-and-thought-you-might-like-it presents with which his dad occasionally surprised him. It was made of strong grey-blue canvas and brown leather and looked tough enough for a real expedition. Best of all, it had loads of compartments and side pockets with chunky brass zips.

His ordinary stuff, such as clothes, toothbrush and comb, fitted easily into the main bag, leaving the side pockets free for his most prized possessions:

A Swiss army knife (with 14 different blades and tools, including screwdrivers, pliers and a small hacksaw).

The binoculars he'd got for Christmas (really compact but very powerful).

His combined-travel-alarm-clock-compass-and-magnifying-glass (water resistant to a depth of 30 metres).

The torch he'd got for his last birthday (which could be set to white, red or green, wide beam, narrow beam, constant or flashing).

Sam sighed. What a waste – all this stuff perfectly packed, the first Saturday of the Easter holiday and he wasn't going on a real expedition at all, but for a week-long visit with his parents to his Great-Aunt Roberta's oppressively tidy house in Reading. Great-Aunt Roberta liked cats and china ornaments of cats but didn't much like children.

Well, it couldn't be helped. Sam's parents, both food scientists, had to be in Reading for the week to attend a conference (New Developments in Canned Vegetable Technology) and all the school friends with whom Sam might have stayed were away for the holidays themselves.

Remembering from previous visits that there wasn't even a proper park near the house, Sam slipped some pencils, pens and a well-used notebook into the back of the rucksack. The notebook was half-full of drawings he'd made of his inventions: a pedal-powered airship, a wind-driven cable-car system, that sort of thing. At least he'd have plenty of free time to draw some more.

The overcast weather did nothing to improve Sam's spirits as he put his rucksack onto the back seat of his parents' car. His mum had just brought the last suitcase out of the house and Sam was about to get into the car himself, when a bright yellow motorbike and sidecar swung round the corner and rumbled to a halt in front of them.

Sam stared at the vehicle. It looked out of place in their ordinary Hertfordshire suburb. The massive bike was festooned with metal tubes, lamps, dials and dozens of complicated gadgets, the functions of which Sam could barely begin to guess. The sidecar was long and torpedo shaped, topped by a Perspex canopy. It looked to Sam just as if someone had sliced the middle out of a small aeroplane and streamlined the ends. The whole magnificent miscellany of sunshine yellow and shimmering chrome

radiated an enticing smell of engine oil and old leather which made Sam's tummy tingle inside.

The motorbike's rider, a gangly man wearing a blue greatcoat which had seen better days, gave a cheerful beep on the horn and waved to them. The sidecar's two passengers, a brown-faced boy and girl, also waved. Sam looked at his parents. They were smiling and waving back.

'Bang on time,' said Mr Carnabie. What did he mean, bang on time?

The rider pulled off his leather goggles and helmet, revealing a pink beaming face and a bald domed head, fringed with wiry white hair. As he dismounted, the boy and the girl hinged back the middle section of the sidecar's Perspex canopy and clambered out. The boy, Sam reckoned, was about his own age, the girl maybe a year older. Sam decided that, whoever these people were, he liked them.

'Professor Ampersand!' said Mrs Carnabie, giving the old man a hug.

'It's great to see you!' exclaimed Mr Carnabie, shaking the professor's hand warmly. 'Sam,' he went on, 'this is an old friend, Professor Alexander Ampersand. He attempted to teach applied technology to me and mum when we were at college. He's a remarkable inventor.'

'Delighted to meet you at last, Sam,' said the professor, shaking his hand.

'And this must be your great-niece and great-nephew – Zara and Ben, isn't it?' said Mrs Carnabie.

'That's right,' said Zara.

'Hello,' said Sam, still somewhat perplexed.

'Uncle Alexander built this himself,' said Ben proudly, noticing Sam looking at the motorbike and sidecar.

'Well, I sort of put it together from various bits and

pieces,' said the professor, modestly, 'and added one or two wee ideas of my own.'

'Do you want a closer look?' Zara asked Sam.

'Yeah!' Sam walked over to the machine and examined it closely. He could almost feel what it would be like to hurtle along in the sidecar, strapped into one of the seats, which were arranged one behind the other in the long cockpit.

'Professor Ampersand rang us last night, after you'd gone to bed, Sam,' explained Mrs Carnabie.

'We've just been down in London for a couple of days,' said the professor, 'and I thought we'd drop in on our way back home to Edinburgh.'

'When I told the professor that unfortunately we were going away ourselves,' continued Sam's mum, 'and happened to mention that you weren't exactly looking forward to it, he very kindly offered to have you to stay with him and Ben and Zara in Edinburgh for the week.'

'We *were* going to tell you first thing this morning,' said Mr Carnabie. 'But then we thought it'd be fun to save it as a surprise.'

'We'll miss you, of course,' Mrs Carnabie assured Sam. 'But you might have more fun in Edinburgh. It's up to you. What d'you reckon?'

'I would,' advised Ben. 'Before they change their mind.'

'We'll have a great time,' promised Zara.

'You really mean it?' Sam asked his parents, a grateful grin breaking across his freckled face.

'You'd better get your bag,' said Mr Carnabie.

Scarcely able to believe his sudden change of fortune, Sam took his rucksack from the Carnabies' hatchback and dropped it into the cockpit of the gleaming yellow sidecar.

Chapter Two

After a quick cup of coffee and a brief exchange of hugs, kisses and phone numbers, they were off. At the main road, the two vehicles parted. Sam gave a last wave to his parents and a last glance at their now vacant back seat as their car disappeared southwards, to pick up the M25 and M4 to Reading. Professor Ampersand opened up the throttle and the motorbike engine gurgled contentedly as they sped northwards to join the M1.

Ben had insisted on giving Sam first turn in the front seat of the sidecar and had made himself a makeshift seat (a toolbox with a folded rug on it) between Sam and Zara.

'The seats swivel round, see?' Ben pointed out. 'So we can talk to each other more easily. You have to lift your knees right up so you've room to turn.'

Sam spun round and faced his new companions.

'Do you live in London?' Sam asked. 'Are you having a holiday with your uncle in Edinburgh?'

'Oh no; we live with Uncle Alexander all the time,' explained Zara. 'He adopted us when our parents were killed in a car crash, when I was two and Ben was one.'

'Oh,' said Sam, wondering if he ought to say he was sorry.

'It's OK,' said Ben. 'It's sad, but we were lucky to have Uncle Alexander. And we don't really remember it happening.'

Sam realized that they'd explained all this to people many times before.

'Uncle Alexander was always Mum's favourite uncle,' said Zara.

‘The rest of Mum’s family never had much to do with her after she went to work in Tanzania and married Dad,’ said Ben, ‘even when they came back to Edinburgh and had us.’

‘That’s sad,’ said Sam.

Zara shrugged. ‘Their problem. Uncle Alexander’s all we need. Anyway,’ she continued, breaking the rather serious mood, ‘how d’you like travelling by sidecar?’

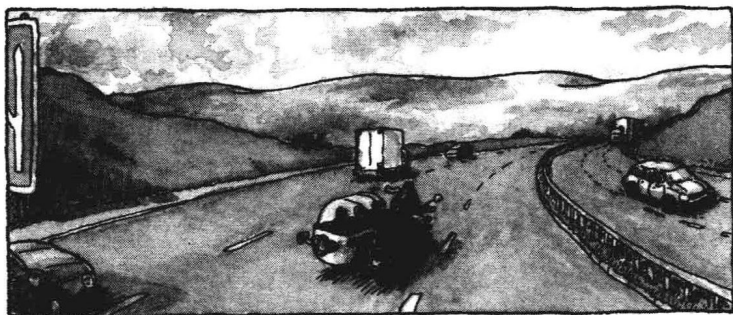
‘It’s pretty cool!’ answered Sam, enthusiastically. And it was. Sam had never enjoyed a road journey so much before. He enjoyed the scenery rushing past the bubble canopy, making him feel he was flying. He enjoyed the excited looks and waves they got from other drivers and their children. He even enjoyed taking his turn on the toolbox seat, after they’d stopped for lunch and petrol at a motorway service station.

Most of all, though, he enjoyed being with Ben and Zara. They proudly explained the inventions their great-uncle had incorporated into the motorbike and sidecar – the exhaust-heat-recycler which powered the lights, the solar-navigating device which almost worked perfectly as long as you knew what time it was and the sun was out, the gadget on the engine which conserved fuel when the bike was coasting down hills. ‘He wants to convert the whole engine to run on hydrogen,’ said Zara. ‘We were down in London researching it. It’s much cleaner than petrol.’

They persuaded Sam to show them his notebook of inventions, they showed him some of their drawings and they chatted away about everything and anything.

Even the weather became more exciting as they got further north – more varied, with a blustery March wind buffeting mountains of cloud across an ever-changing sky; patches of pale sunlight shifting here and there on the hills

ahead; occasional showers of rain spitting on their Perspex canopy as they sped on their way. Adventure weather, thought Sam. Just right for an expedition into the unknown.



It was early evening when they finally reached Edinburgh, the city's floodlit domes and spires looking majestic against the darkening sky. They motored west along Princes Street, passing beneath the colossal castle, which seemed to grow out of the rock on which it sat. Sam wondered what kind of house Professor Ampersand and his great-niece and nephew lived in.

Five minutes later, they turned into a short road called Pinkerton Place and slowed down opposite a terrace of ordinary-looking stone-built houses. Professor Ampersand turned the handlebars sharply and, to Sam's alarm, drove directly towards one of the two front windows of the second house from the end, number twelve. Before Sam had time to cry out, the professor pressed a button on the bike's headlamp and instantly the entire window started to slide upwards into the wall above it. At the same time, a metal ramp unfolded itself from the low window sill, clattering across the width of the pavement and onto the road.

As they reached the ramp, a loud explosion interrupted the window's ascent and a shower of blue sparks cascaded from the top of the window frame. With a screech of brakes, the professor brought their vehicle to a violent halt. He leapt from the bike, ran up the ramp, grasped the bottom of the stuck window and shook it vigorously. It shot upwards with the professor still holding on, before reaching its uppermost position with a jolt. Professor Ampersand let go, landed feet first, fell over, performed a rather inelegant backward roll down the ramp and sprang to his feet again in front of the bike.

'That window's always jamming,' he observed, nonchalantly, the last of the blue sparks illuminating his shiny bald head. 'The wood must have swollen up with all the damp weather we've been having. No harm done.'

'**NAE HARM DONE! YE CALL IT NAE HARM TAE NEARLY ELECTROCUTE THE WHOLE STREET?**

Everyone turned to look at a scrawny, middle-aged man, standing in the doorway of the house next door on the left. He had thinning grey hair, Brylcreemed straight back from his rat-like face.

'Evening, Mr Skinner,' called the Professor, smiling politely. 'Nothing to worry about. Just a wee technical malfunction.'

'**THE ONLY TECHNICAL MALFUNCTION IS IN YER HEID, YE BARMY AULD BAMPOT!**' exploded Mr Skinner, '**YE SHOULD BE LOCKED UP IN ONE O'THEY MENTAL HAMES! ENDANGERING PUBLIC SAFETY; OBSTRUCTING THE PAVEMENT; LOWERING THE VALUE OF MA PROPERTY WITHYER INFANTILE MACHINES!**' He spat contemptuously at the motorbike and sidecar, then

stared more closely at the cockpit. At the passengers. At Sam. 'My *god!* Dinnae tell me they've let ye tak on *another* young brat! Ye're no' fit tae look after yersel', never mind yer delinquent weans!'

'Mr Skinner, I think we've heard your offensive views on the children rather too many times before, don't you?' said the professor frostily.

'I'M GOING TAE CALL THE SOCIAL SERVICES AGAIN! I AM!' ranted Mr Skinner. **'IT ISNAE RIGHT, LETTING A WEIRD AULD NUTTER LIKE YOU LOOK AFTER WEANS. IT'S LIKE LIVING NEXT DOOR TAE A CHILDREN'S HAME! IT'S -'**

'Goodnight, Mr Skinner,' interrupted Professor Amper-sand. 'Why don't you go and get yourself some much-needed beauty sleep?' The professor clambered back onto the bike and restarted the engine, drowning out Mr Skinner's reply. They sped up the ramp and in through the now open window of 12 Pinkerton Place.

Chapter Three

It was dark inside the house but, by the light of the headlamp, Sam could see that the short ramp led them onto a round metal platform standing about half a metre above the floor.

The professor stopped the bike and pressed another button on the headlamp. Almost immediately, the platform spun round so that the bike faced the window through which they had just entered. The ramp outside folded itself back into the windowsill and the window slid shut, this time without getting stuck.

'Don't take any notice of Mr Skinner,' said Zara to Sam. 'He's always like that. His problem.'

Ben hinged back the sidecar's canopy and scrambled out onto the platform. He snapped his fingers twice and the space suddenly became filled with light.

Sam climbed out of the sidecar and looked around. If the outside of the house had looked disappointingly ordinary, the interior more than met his expectations of what an inventor's home ought to look like.

The entire ground floor had been knocked through into one huge room. The space was illuminated by an extraordinary miscellany of lights. Old car lamps and railway lanterns dangled beneath two high metal walkways that stretched along the side walls of the room. A chandelier made from old milk bottles gleamed above the far left-hand corner. In the centre of the room, a galaxy of fairy lights spiralled around what appeared to be a bushy green tree, reaching up through a hole in the high ceiling.

‘Are the lighting circuits on some sort of sound-activated switch system?’ Sam asked Ben. He snapped his fingers twice to test his theory out.

Zara laughed as the room plunged into darkness again. ‘Ben was hoping you’d be mystified,’ she said, snapping the room back into brightness. ‘He tries it on everyone who visits.’

‘It’s really brilliant, anyway,’ Sam said hurriedly.

‘You’ll not mystify this lad with our wee gimmicks.’ Professor Ampersand smiled. ‘I can see you’re going to be right at home here, Sam.’

Taking their bags from the sidecar, the children followed the professor down from the motorbike platform. To one side of the bike entrance was another front window; to the other side, the front door. Standing beside the door, the professor peeled off his helmet, goggles and gauntlets and removed his coat, revealing a stained, scorched and dilapidated red pullover.

‘D’you want to hang your coat up, Sam?’ asked the professor. Sam couldn’t see any coat hooks until the professor pulled a small lever in the wall. Four brass hooks descended from the ceiling on chains. ‘Saves space,’ explained the professor, as their four coats sailed upwards and dangled above the front door. ‘Come on, let’s get some food on.’

Sam could see why space-saving devices were necessary. Down both sides of the room, between the metal pillars supporting the walkways, stood rows of sturdy wooden benches. On one bench, a small rocket appeared to be nearing completion; on another, a machine involving bits of an old grandfather clock and a wind turbine was under construction. Some of the benches were awash with sheets of pencil drawings, diagrams and plans; others supported precarious arrangements of tripods, Bunsen burners and test