

CHAPTER 14--DARK AND LIGHT

One transatlantic flight, a night spent at an airport, and the flight to Greenland was starting to make Amanda feel a little beaten up. She was looking forward to getting to Ilulissat to do some real on the ground exploring. It was now 12:30 p.m..

Now settled into her window seat, Amanda thought about what the woman had said. Here she was on a mission to see polar bears in the wild, while those who lived on Greenland hunted them. It made her a little uncomfortable. She wasn't sure what to think. Perhaps she would understand this conundrum later. Amanda glanced outside, no jet engines on this plane. The black propeller blades began to spin as she continued to stare outside. Soon they were just a blur.

The fifty passenger Air Greenland DASH-7 started down the runway with all four propellers spinning away in a loud steady hum. In a few moments the plane was aloft flying north up the coast.

There were more mountains and pack ice as Amanda looked outside. She was amazed at how in around 24 hours she had made it to a place that might as well have been on a different

planet. The miracle of flight she mused. The short forty-five minute flight didn't leave much time at cruising altitude before it began to descend into Ilulissat. Amanda looked out and was taken by the sight of giant white icebergs dotting the sea. It was a fascinating sight. In the distance was the ice cap. Another closer look, and the town and harbor area with several boats, mostly trawlers, frozen in place by the surrounding ice, came into view. Amanda's heart skipped a beat in anticipation.

The small handheld sign stood out like a lighthouse in complete darkness. While Amanda didn't know anyone in Greenland, it was a good feeling that at least someone knew of her. She walked up and introduced herself.

"Hi, I'm Amanda."

"Welcome to Ilulissat. Can I help you with your bag?"

"Yes, please." She let him take her large backpack. She held on tight to Polar Bear and her smaller bag. "What's your name?"

"Josef." He was a middle aged Inuit man with dark uncombed hair and a moderate build.

"Nice to meet you Josef."

"Where are you from?"

"I'm from America."

"Where in America?" the driver asked energetically.

"Seattle, Washington, do you know it?"

"That's where your president lives right?"

"Oh, no!" Amanda laughed. "That is Washington D.C., I live in Washington State, all the

way over in the opposite corner.”

“Confusing. How long are you in town for?”

“Only for one night. I go to Qaanaaq tomorrow to go sledding.”

“Colder there, ma’am.”

“It’s quite cold here already.”

“Not as cold as it used to be. Not as cold. . .” His words became muffled as he gunned the small van up a hill. Within minutes they had arrived at the hotel.

Amanda soon spotted five aluminum clad igloos perched on a small hill overlooking the water. One of them would be her home for the night. She checked in and went to her room.

It was furnished in a contemporary Danish style with yellow bed sheets and a blue-green blanket folded up on the mattress. A blue curtain was parted to let in the sunlight. It was more modern than she thought it would be. There was a shower, toilet, color TV, radio, telephone, hair dryer, and even a coffee maker.

The room could be like any other hotel room in the world except the room was shaped like an igloo. The curved walls met at the center where a round window was placed. Any thoughts of resting were drifting away as Amanda began to relax in her hotel room. Her sense of adventure was getting fired up. Amanda warmed up with a cup of hot tea and a nice hot shower. She bundled up for the walk to the front desk.

Amanda prepared to face the cold again. There was her expensive winter jacket covering several layers, her wool scarf, and hat. Her warm spandex pants were covered by snow-proof ski pants. Her extremities were covered with double layered gloves and waterproof hiking boots.

She had come prepared and left nothing to chance. She waved goodbye to Polar Bear and made quick work of the 100 meter walk to the hotel lobby and restaurant.

“Hello!” Amanda greeted the clerk again.

“Did you like room?” The clerk asked in a fragmented English accent.

“Oh yes, it is very unique. I like it very much.”

“Good. How can I help you?”

“I am only here for one day before I fly to Qaanaaq. I am hoping to hike to a better vantage point to see the icebergs. Do you have any maps?”

“Yes,” the woman answered. She pulled a map out from behind the counter and handed it to Amanda.

“You may borrow this hiking map. Please return it when you come back.”

“Thank you,” Amanda answered as she placed the map in her backpack.

“Is there anywhere else you recommend?”

“Many people like to go to local market. We call it kalaaliaraq.”

“Where is that?”

The woman pointed toward a spot on a map underneath a plastic sheet on top of the counter.

“Is it open all day?”

“Yes, best when the fisherman and hunters return. We have shuttle bus, takes you from our hotel to center of town. Ask to stop at the harbor. I will call it for you. Please sit down.”

Amanda turned and sat on the bench. She pulled out the hiking map from her small

backpack. She turned it over and realized the hike had a detailed description.

Hike to Sermermiut

Trail open all year. Route marked with yellow stones. Starts from old heliport.

Leads to cliff view over icebergs and some ruins of old Inuit settlement. 1.5km each way.

Approximately 30 - 45 minutes each way depending on walking speed and trail conditions.

This trail is one of the best trails to view the ice fjord. Glaciers are calved from the

Ilulissat Glacier (Sermeq Kujalleq) most frequently in the summer. They take 1.5 years to

travel the 45km from the mouth of the fjord. The fjord is 7km wide. The icebergs move

relatively freely through the 600 meter deep fjord before arriving at the mouth which is

only 200-300 meters deep. A boat trip is recommended when they start in May.

Kællingekløften (Suicide Cliff)

A short walk east from Sermermiut is a small path that leads to a narrow 35 meter tall

cliff. Old women used to throw themselves off the cliff during times of extreme famine.

In the pre-colonial period, committing suicide was more accepted and sometimes the only

possibility of saving the rest of the settlement, including children and young people, from

extinction due to insufficient resources.

Ice Fjord Hike

Follow the blue stone path east for approximately 1 hour from Kællingekløften along the

icefjord. You will pass Holms Bakke / Seqinniarfik. A little further along the rock face

you will pass a lake, the route ends at the quarry.

Celebration of Light

You may wish to detour and climb the hill to Holms Bakke. It is just past the second Inuit grave. Every year on January 13 at 12:45 p.m. the people of Ilulissat meet at Holms Bakke to celebrate the sun on the horizon after 6 weeks of 24 hour darkness.

This sounded interesting. Conflicting thoughts entered Amanda's mind. On one trail system was both a suicide cliff and a place of celebration of light over darkness. Why would two very different places be located right next to each other?.

"Miss, the shuttle bus is here to take you to town," the clerk announced breaking Amanda's concentration on the map.

She walked outside and boarded the mini-van.

"Hello again."

"Hello Josef. Can you please take me to the market?"

They pulled away from the hotel and headed toward the bridge to cross into town.

"After the market, I'm going to hike to see the icefjord. Do you know where I start the hike?"

"At the old heliport. I can wait for you at the market then I can take you there. It is not busy this time of year. "

"Excellent."

The mini van drove toward the center with a thankful Amanda realizing how helpful a brief rest in a hotel room could be. She must have been half asleep on the ride over as she didn't notice quite as much as she was now.

Richly colored homes and buildings painted blue, red, green, yellow, and dark turquoise stood out against the barren land surrounding them. A church spire reached high into the sky. The visual contrasted with the auditory as the sound of dogs howling in the distance punctured the otherwise still air.

“The home colors are so beautiful here.”

“Most visitors never learn the true story of why they are colored the way they are.”

“Why’s that?”

“The home colors were not painted for only beauty before, but economics. Red was the cheapest paint, then blue, yellow, and green. The most expensive and least durable color is white, it is a mark of status. Now, all the colors are standardized.”

“That’s interesting. The final result is beautiful. There must be a lot of dogs here too.”

“Several thousand. It just depends on who you ask.”

“That’s a lot. Are there any good restaurants in town?”

“You could try the Hong Kong Grill Bar in the center of town.” Josef pointed in the general direction as he steered the van. “The restaurant at your hotel is good too. Brasseries and Bar Takanna.”

“Hong Kong?”

“Yes. Good food. Many people are surprised when I mention it.”

“Surprising to me.”

“Greenland can be a strange place. Expect the unexpected.”

Something clicked in Amanda’s brain. This was the second time she had heard someone

say this. A few minutes later and the mini-van had arrived near the center of the town.

“Here we are. The market is just up ahead by the docks. I’ll wait here. If I’m not here, it means the hotel has called me back. You can walk around town and come back. I won’t be gone for very long.”

“That’s great,” Amanda answered as she pulled the sliding door open. She closed it with a thud and walked toward the market.

Amanda wasn’t prepared for what she was about to see and smell. As she walked toward what she thought was the market, her eyes were transfixed by the huge carcass of a walrus, tusks and all else attached, lying motionless. She froze for a moment unsure of how to react. This is why the clerk said people visit the market. There was nothing like this back in Seattle.

She mustered the courage to walk around the large, brown colored, dead walrus, sensing that it might come alive and jump up at any moment. She was rewarded by a brilliant color of red covering much of the snow before her. It was blood. A man was butchering the carcass of a seal. It was a spotted ring seal, or what was left of one. Amanda watched both in horror and raw fascination. A few feet away was a boy sitting near a wooden rack where some unidentifiable meat was drying. The boy ignored Amanda. Some women were chatting by another building while also cutting up some meat. Some animals skins were drying by a wooden rack over by the women. They looked like seal skins to Amanda.

Amanda walked around a few more minutes in a dazed and confused mood. She turned to walk back to the van and saw that the walrus was being butchered now. It looked nothing like its former self. A pool of blood was frozen on the ground next to it. Amanda hurried on. Her first

encounter with the wildlife of Greenland, was dead wildlife.

Returning to the van, Josef drove her to the trailhead where she began her hike.

Amanda gazed upon the scene before her. Floating out in the partially frozen fjord were towering masses of ice, the huge icebergs she saw from the plane window. It was a sight unlike anything she could have imagined. Some were floating, others were stationary, surrounded by pack ice. They were like giant puzzle pieces in the ocean. Yet these would never be put together. They were fated to drift away and melt.

Many of the icebergs stood more than 200 feet tall out of the water. The size of the icebergs before her only hinted at their true size. The portion of an iceberg floating on the water is often only 1/5 to 1/9 of its entire size Amanda recalled.

Amanda tried to count them, but there were just too many. She gave up. She sat down on some rocks and was mesmerized by the milky white color of the icebergs. The silence was deafening. The eerie silence was punctuated only by an occasional wind gust. Amanda could hear her own heartbeat. No cars, no footsteps, no birds, no voices. Not another human being in visual sight. How could so much be so quiet?

Cool air blew on her face, but it didn't feel as cold as she thought it would be. Perhaps it was the magical setting before her refocusing her attention away from herself. Or maybe it was her layers of clothing.

She saw a sign that had escaped her attention earlier as she walked back on the trail. It read:

Sermermiut was inhabited from about 1400BC to 1850AD. This was the largest known

settlement in 1737 AD. It was surpassed by the opening of a harbor and trade station is what is now Ilulissat. This area is a good place for settlement due to the melting glaciers giving off large amounts of oxygen. The oxygen helps to encourage high densities of fish and seals. Continuing on the trail takes you to Kællingekløften (Suicide Cliff).

She continued hiking. There was plenty of daylight left. It wasn't long before she approached a small sign that said Kællingekløften. She stopped for a moment and looked at the rocky terrain before her that ended with a sharp cliff drop. Her body became numb as she imagined old women running toward the cliff. Did they cry? Did they scream? Did they take a running jump or just stand and fall over? Did they close their eyes? Were they scared? A loud splash interrupted her train of thought.

It came from the cliff bottom. Amanda looked around. There was no sight of anyone. She thought she heard footsteps, but it was just the quickening of her heartbeat. Amanda stepped back wondering if there were spirits in the area. She shivered.

Amanda's curiosity got the best of her, she had to investigate the splash. Or was that just her imagination too? She slid her feet toward the cliff edge, all the while looking around as if someone might come running up to her and push her over. She walked to the edge and looked over. There was nobody there, just ripples in the sea. It must have been a rock, it must have been a rock, Amanda thought to herself.

She stepped back and felt her head spin in a momentary state of vertigo.

“Who's there?”

No answer.

“What do you want?”

Still no answer.

She turned around. Perhaps there was somewhere else she could go and brighten her mood. This cliff was a little depressing and spooky. She decided to try for the top of the hill called Holms Bakke, or Seqinniarfik.

Amanda reached the top of the small hill and looked out, it was no less of a stunning view. She imagined a world filled with darkness, then emerging from that darkness with the arrival of the Sun. It must be quite a sight. Perhaps like a feeling of good over evil. Or maybe, above all else, that hope will return.

The dark days after Stephanie was killed came to mind again. Amanda had come on this trip to make sense of where her life was going. Now, she was revisiting the topic of death, a subject that she had never felt comfortable talking about. It didn't seem to bother her very much up here. Maybe it was because there was nothing else to cloud one's thoughts out here. It was just her and the nature around her. It was simple. Perhaps like life itself. Birth and death. Darkness, then light, a natural cycle. In a more useful and practical sense, it was like sleeping she realized. Everyday you awoke from the darkness of sleep into the light of a new day.

She laughed out loud as if being violently tickled. Her puffs of breath drifting with the wind. It was all beginning to make sense.

Perhaps this place and the Suicide Cliff were symbolic of her journey to Greenland. From sorrow and confusion, to joy and understanding. From death comes life. Amanda resolved that one day she must return here to see that January day for herself.

Amanda woke up. It was still dark outside as she looked at the porthole in the top of her hotel room. She couldn't sleep anymore. Her flight to Qaanaaq did not leave until later in the morning. Thoughts were swirling around in her mind. She needed to write.

Amanda pulled out her small diary, turned on the light, and began to do just that.

My 1st Day in Greenland

I'm finding this place to be a little confusing. Here I sit in the comfort of my modern hotel room yet just earlier yesterday I was witness to such a raw display of how the people here live off the land with nature.

I find it an interesting contrast that if anyone back home saw on TV the sight of "poor, cute" seals being butchered, they would cry bloody murder. Here it is just a way of life. I wonder if the Inuit view any of the animals as cute. Perhaps not.

What a different concept of nature. I wonder what they would think of our mass slaughter of cattle, chickens, pigs, and other animals. What would they think of our zoos? Perhaps we aren't so different after all. Or maybe we are.

Amanda reflected for a few moments on the Suicide Cliff. She realized that these people were making a choice to die. She recalled her conversation with Ruth at the zoo about confined animals. Was it better to let the animals live a longer life in captivity or a shorter, but freer life in the wild.

She wondered about the right to die debate again. It was taken to its ultimate conclusion here. This was freedom. Why would people try and take this away from you? What if Stephanie had ended up in a vegetative state? Maybe she was lucky to have died without suffering for too

long. She would have to write a living will someday. She began writing again.

It was pretty eerie being out there by Suicide Cliff. Old women killing themselves for the good of the rest? What a clash with how people behave today. Here the people sacrificed themselves for the rest of the group. How many people today would make a deliberate early exit and not be an undue hardship on the rest of the family? What does it say about us when we take so many drugs to live longer? How many people are trying way too hard to look young? How many people are trying so hard to artificially extend their existence? Now that I think about this, I do remember reading about a man in San Diego who was diagnosed with incurable cancer. He rented a bi-plane and jumped out without a parachute to avoid burdening his family.

I wonder why people try so hard to live long lives? Maybe they worked too hard during their prime years, delaying gratification until some magic pre-determined age by some bureaucrats. Hmmm. . . that reminds me of someone I know all too well who has been going down that path. The number keeps moving higher due to the financial problems of social security. I probably won't get anything.

How many people think that retirement is some kind of paradise? They don't mention that you might get in a car accident and die! Maybe because people think there is a heaven, they don't bother to live fully in this life. They think something so much better is waiting for them.

Perhaps the people that killed themselves are honoring their own lives by being masters of their final earthly destiny instead of just starving to death.

It was one thing to write about something in the abstract, quite another to relate to it on a personal level. Even though the relationship with her parents wasn't the greatest, she still worried about them, as a good child would. What happened if they needed to be taken care of in a nursing home? What an unpleasant thought. A nursing home, was that like a zoo? A place where people doted on you in your final days. You would forever be remembered as the Elvis on the decline, not the healthy, vibrant, energetic person of your youth.

"Live free or die," she whispered to herself. Amanda was getting a sense of how she would live the rest of her life, though she couldn't quite articulate it. She didn't want to go out ebbing away like a slow drain. She would go in a blaze of glory. Like that classic Hollywood movie – Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid.

One positive thing about going out in a blaze of glory, was that you didn't have to worry about accumulating so much money for health problems. When the rope was near its end, you would just go. Multi-million dollar health insurance policies? Naw, if it took that much money to keep you alive, you would just as soon be dead.

Amanda realized at this moment she was thankful to be where she was. She was about to embark on a grand adventure to find a polar bear in the wild. She was in one of the most remote spots in the world. Living life, not reading about it. She had chosen experience over material goods and status this time. Perhaps Mary was right, this trip would be the start of many more adventures.

Amanda put her pen down and got ready to go back to the airport for her flight to Qaanaaq. Then she stared outside the window and watched the sky brighten outside.