

CHAPTER 16--CAPE YORK

A cacophony of howling dogs echoed through the air and woke Amanda up from any remaining thoughts of the events that led her to this place. These must have been the dogs she saw from the helicopter.

“How was your flight?” the man asked as he turned around to face Amanda.

“Breathtaking.”

She noticed Lars’ eyes shifting up and down her figure, sizing her up. Was he wondering what a young and attractive all-American girl was doing so far from home?

“Have you ever driven a dog sledge before?” Lars asked as he glanced over at the dogs who were still barking, but less so as the excitement from Amanda’s arrival started to settle in.

“No, this is my first time. First time to Greenland.”

“Let’s go inside and I will go over our plan and what you should expect. Then you need to tell me a little bit about yourself so I understand your limitations. The Arctic can be a very unforgiving place. There is no civilization to fall back on out here. We have only our wits and

imagination.”

“Wits and imagination,” Amanda repeated, wondering what he meant by imagination.

She took careful note of his outfit as he turned around. He was covered in a jacket made of animal fur with a bushy maned hood. It appeared to be some combination of seal skin and caribou, she wasn't sure. It was a sharp contrast to her modern day clothing. She had seen others in the earlier towns with similar outfits, but for some reason she noticed it more here. Her gut reaction was that it was a little off putting as she thought about it more, although she wasn't quite sure of why she had these feelings.

Maybe it was because he was native Danish and not Inuit. He didn't fit the mold of her stereotype, which was that only native peoples could wear fur. She wondered what other stereotypes lay hidden in the back of her mind about people who wore such clothes. What media impressions had been driven deep inside her? Were they less intelligent, less wise, primitive?

Lars led Amanda into a small wooden building. It was lit inside by two oil lamps. It was warmer inside than outside. Warm enough that Amanda contemplated even taking off her outer jacket.

Lars sat down and invited Amanda to do the same on a small bench. She set Polar Bear down on the floor next to the bench. When her vision adjusted to the inside of the building, the first thing she noticed was the man himself. He looked to be in his early forties, a little gruff, but a man who could take care of himself in any situation. He was here in this remote wilderness by choice, not by accident. At first glance, if there was an embodiment of a man who exemplified – only the strong can truly be gentle, then Lars could be it.

As she unzipped her outer jacket, she thought she caught a furtive glance from Lars directed at her chest.

“So you are here to find a polar bear.”

“Yes,” Amanda answered. His stature intimidated her.

“It looks like you have already found one,” Lars noted as he nodded his head at her stuffed, red bowed polar bear.

“Oh. Him. It’s a long story, but he is a good luck charm.”

“We will have plenty of time together for you to tell me that long story. I have many stories to tell to.”

Amanda grinned.

“Would you like some tea?” Lars asked, glancing over at a small thermos.

“Yes, please.”

“Have you ever camped before?”

“A couple of times, but it was only out of a car.”

Lars handed Amanda a plastic cup with a tea bag and poured her some hot water and filled up a cup for himself.

“Today, we will sledge for about 30 km before setting up camp. Most days we will try to average about 50 km. We will head out onto to the ice to search and then we will make our way to Savissivik. We will meet up with some hunters there. You can learn more about the traditional ways there. They will also know best where else to look if we are unsuccessful. From Savissivik we could sledge closer to Cape Melville. That is the edge of the nature reserve, or what you

would call, a national park. Then we will sledge back to Qaanaaq.”

“Sounds like a good plan.”

“You must know that I cannot guarantee that we will find a polar bear. Many times the hunters come back empty handed. Polar bears have one of the widest territories of any mammal. I know where to look, but we must be lucky.”

“I understand. My travel agent told me this.”

“Why did you come to such a far away place to see a polar bear? You could have just gone to Canada to see their annual migration on Hudson Bay.”

“Yes, I know. But, it seemed too much of a circ....a commercial atmosphere,” Amanda corrected herself thinking that he might not understand her choice of words.

“A circus?”

“How did you know that is what I meant to say?”

“I have been there myself.”

“You have?”

Lars nodded and sat up.

“Enough small talk for now. Let’s go outside and introduce you to the dogs.”

“Ok,” Amanda answered as she got up, surprised by Lars abruptness.

Amanda could see far out toward the horizon as she stepped outside the small shack. This place exuded an even greater sense of otherworldliness than Ilulissat or Qaanaaq. The sense of isolation was both liberating and frightening at the same time. Here she would be for ten days.

“Amanda!” Lars shouted, noticing that Amanda had not followed him.

“Coming,” she shouted as she broke out of her trance and walked over toward Lars, the sledge, and the barking dogs.

“The first thing you need to know is that these dogs are not pets like you might have at home. Never treat them like that. They are not tame, only trained. They must be shown who is the strongest.”

Amanda looked at the dogs and wondered how they could be so wild. They looked so cute.

“There once was a famous Arctic explorer. He walked ahead of his dogs one time, tripped and fell. His dogs attacked him as he lay in a vulnerable state on the ice.”

“Attacked their own master?”

“These dogs are originally from Siberia. You won’t find these dogs in South Greenland. It is illegal to take them there. They are bred only here in order to preserve their purity. I use a whip to show them who is their master.”

The dogs were no longer howling as Amanda eyed each one of them, all twelve of them. A couple of them let out a slight snarl as she eyed them. Amanda was getting the sense that she would have to be cautious around the dogs. “How heavy are they?”

“The males weight a little over forty kilos, or ninety pounds on average. The females, up to about thirty-five kilos, or seventy pounds. A typical male stands about sixty-eight centimeters, or twenty-seven inches, while a female reaches sixty centimeters, or twenty-four inches.

“They look like dogs, but they don’t seem to sound like dogs. They sound more like wolves.” Amanda wondered aloud.

“Greenland dogs don’t bark. They howl and snarl.”

“Oh.”

“Over there is the sledge you will be riding on. Today you will ride the sledge.

Sometimes you will have to get off and run on the side. Later I will teach you how to drive the sledge if you wish.”

They walked over to the sledge. It was a simple wooden platform with a wooden seat back and wooden runners connected by wooden slats. All the pieces were lashed together with some rope and leather straps. A caribou skin lay on the platform.

“I have been told in the past that before wood became widespread, the Inuit used antler and bone and miscellaneous driftwood for the sledge. The runners were made of caribou and seal skins wrapped around frozen fish. They were soaked and frozen. Quite ingenious,” Lars commented as he saw Amanda inspecting the sledge.

“Clever. Why do you call it a sledge? I’ve been hearing that term but always thought they were just sleds.”

“A sled is smaller. A sledge like this, is much larger and carries much greater loads. A sled might be used for races and short distance trips with minimal supplies. It is designed to go fast. A sledge however moves slower, but moves a lot more weight, whether that be supplies or passengers, like yourself.”

Amanda nodded in understanding.

”Another difference is that sled dogs are often attached to run in two parallel lines. That works for forested areas and narrow trails, but not here. There are no trees here so there is more

room for the dogs to spread out. They are connected to this fan hitch. It gives them more space to go over rough ice or other obstacles. It is also better for running on thin sea ice where the risk of falling in is greater. It spreads the risk out.”

“I would have never thought. It’s so easy to have preconceptions about a place.”

Lars continued on with more advice.

“You will sit at the back of the sledge against the back board in front of me. I will be driving from behind you. You should sit with your legs on the sledge. We will be going over rough terrain sometimes. You may need to lean from one side to the other depending on the ground we are going over. Hold on to those straps except if we are just going over flat ground,” Lars advised as he pointed to the straps holding the caribou skin on the platform.

“Ok, got it.”

“Whatever you do, do not hold the sides of the sledge, your fingers can get injured that way.”

“No sides,” she repeated for extra assurance.

“Sometimes we will go over cracks in the ice, don’t be alarmed. It is easier for us to go over them if you stay seated on the sledge. Only if I say otherwise should you get up. You will need to get up and walk behind the sledge sometimes, if we encounter steep hills or ridges. Do you have any other questions right now?”

“What sort of supplies do we have? What will we be eating? Do we have enough food with us for the entire trip?”

“Some cookware, oil lamp, rope, fuel for the stove, tea, packaged soup, some butter and

sugar, and a lot of biscuits. We also have a tent to sleep under.”

“That doesn’t sound like very much food.”

“That is why we also have a rifle and ammunition, an axe, cutting knife, and ice chisel for the fishing line and hook.”

“A rifle?”

“There should be some meat stored at some way points, but we will need to kill some seals or walrus for meat. If not for us, then for the dogs. Polar bears are wild animals too and can be dangerous.”

“Oh,” Amanda replied meekly. She thought about the man butchering the seal and walrus earlier in the market. It was so natural for the Inuit to hunt. Her closest encounter to hunting was driving around to a different supermarket. Eating seals and walrus was no different than eating a cow or chicken she thought. Amanda tried hard to get rid of the image of the “cute seal” in her mind. She couldn’t even contemplate witnessing the shooting of a polar bear.

“What kind of fish are out here?”

“Halibut, various species of catfish, polar cod.”

At least these sounded familiar to Amanda.

“I will teach you some command words in Greenlandic now. More as we go along. You can at least understand a little of what I am saying to the dogs. When you are ready to drive the sledge in a couple of days you can use them. Don’t say them too loud right now. The first word you should learn is ili-ili (ele-ele). It means to pull to the right.”

Amanda repeated the word.

“The second word is iuu-iiu (eoo-ooo). That means pull to the left.”

Amanda tried the next one.

“Then there is unigit (oo-ne-get) which means stop, and taama (da-ama) which means get going.”

Amanda spoke these two words softly.

“Sounds good. You are on your way to being a true polar explorer!”

“Inuit has a nice melodic sound.”

“You might want to consider wearing some different outer clothing too. There are several different sizes in the shack of seal skin boots, caribou socks, hooded coats, trousers, and mittens. You can go try them on inside right now while I finish preparing the sledge.”

Amanda put on a face of befuddlement. She was ready to try different foods but now he was asking her to wear animal furs. Everything she had been told since childhood was that furs were bad and evil. Why did she need to wear any furs? She had her expensive name brand ski jacket, snow pants, socks, gloves, waterproof boots, and even high tech ear muffs.

She went inside the shack. As she looked around she noticed several piles of folded and sorted clothes that she didn't take note of earlier. Next to the piles was a wooden crate with an assortment of paired socks, gloves, and boots. Amanda picked up and tried out each fur item until she had a complete outfit. She straightened herself up and looked at the wall pretending there was a mirror. She started to cry. She always thought of herself as an animal lover and here she was doing what seemed to be heretical to her belief system. Combined with the rawness of the butchering at the marketplace in Ilulissat, she could no longer contain her feelings anymore.

In her heart she knew that this is how the natives here had lived forever. But, she was not ready to make the leap just yet. She changed back into her high tech clothing and put all the furs in a little pile. Furs were primitive. Her modern outfit was the result of millions of dollars in research and development. She picked up her backpacks and stuffed polar bear, dried her tears, and ran outside.

Lars looked up and noticed Amanda in her same clothes. “Decided not to wear any of the clothes?”

“They didn’t fit very well,” Amanda said with little outward emotion.

“I need to get the oil lamp and a few other supplies from inside the shack. You can admire the view. We will be ready to go then.”

Amanda nodded.

“Strap your stuffed animal to the seat back along with your backpack. Here is a rope you can tie around him as you won’t always be sitting. Get up if you get cold from just sitting there. You can hold on to the post behind you and run with the sledge. “

”Run? I’m not sure if I’ll be able to keep up. Your dogs look very fit.”

“Don’t worry, we won’t get too far in front of you.” Lars let out a hearty laugh. He went inside the shack to get the remaining supplies.

Amanda pulled out a small blanket from her backpack and draped it around her stuffed Polar Bear’s body. She then tied her backpack and stuffed Polar Bear against the backboard.

Looking up and out toward the endless horizon, she walked a few steps closer, as if it were a place she could go. The emotional breakdown in the shack resonated in her mind. She

was traveling through a very different world and adapting was proving difficult. The cold, no problem. The lifestyle, more different than she imagined.

Lars snapped Amanda out of her trance as his voice cried out from behind her that they were ready to go.

The dogs were howling in excitement and ready to get moving. Twelve of them were attached in a fan shaped orientation. The crunch of Amanda's boots against the hard ice and deep breaths were the only sound interrupting the chorus of howls as she went to go sit on the sledge. Lars looked up from working to fasten supplies to the sledge. He smiled and got back to tying down supplies.

Amanda wondered if Lars thought her to be strange for bringing along a big stuffed polar bear. Her earlier excuse that it was a gift for a friend would not work out here, but Lars asked no particular questions about why she was carrying what was certain to be a strange sight here or anywhere. Like he said earlier, there was plenty of time for them to share stories.

"We are ready to go," Lars proclaimed as he looked up.

Amanda sat down and made herself as comfortable as possible on the sledge. Her heart skipped another beat in anticipation.

"Taama! Taama! Taama!" Lars shouted out at the dogs. They were off.