

CHAPTER 17--OFF ON THE SLEDGE

Amanda settled in front of stuffed Polar Bear and watched as the sled glided across the Baffin Bay ice. Behind her were majestic snow capped mountains. Ahead of her, miles and miles of ice. It was like a white desert. A desert where you could forget your name before you even spelled it out loud.

The sound of the sledge rails against the snow and ice became a predictable and calming sound of progress, like the hum of a car engine on a baby. It was interrupted every few minutes by some grunts from Lars and his occasional yelling of directional commands. Now, if she could only remember which one meant right and which one meant left. Or did they mean fast and slow?

The ride was less bumpy than she thought it would be, except for the every now and again bone jarring mini-hop of the sledge as the ice and snow changed elevations. The cool wind blowing against her face combined with the movement of the sled prevented Amanda from napping.

She was becoming a little sleepy from just being a passenger on the sledge despite the newness of the experience. Amanda was looking forward to stretching her legs. Her moment came none too soon as Lars called the dogs to a halt.

“This is a good place to stop.”

“Oh, good. I need to stretch my legs.”

“Are you hungry?”

“A little.”

Lars reached into his backpack and handed a few biscuits to Amanda.

She popped a biscuit into her mouth and almost gagged. “What is this!? They’re so hard. Are they frozen?”

“Maybe you don’t like them because these biscuits are made by a Danish dog biscuit company!”

“It’s dog food?”

“No, no, no.” Lars let out a hearty laugh. “They just happen to make dog biscuits too.”

“Boy, that makes me feel better.”

They both laughed.

Lars abruptly turned serious and looked up ahead. “Do you see how it is no longer flat up ahead?”

Amanda followed his lead and looked up. Ahead of them, the flat expanses of ice that Amanda was becoming accustomed to, changed into what looked like at this distance, white walls rising up from the ice.

“What is it?”

“That is the beginning of some pressure ridges.”

“Pressure ridges? What are those?”

“It is when an area of younger ice becomes crushed and compacted by surrounding stronger ice due to converging winds. This area of ice then gets pushed up into mounds and ridges.”

“How high are those ridges?”

“Maybe four to six feet high. They can get more than two to three times as high as that.”

“Can we go around them?”

“Around some of the bigger ones, but it looks like these ridges continue for a long way. We will go over them. When we do, you will need to get off.”

“I’m ok with that. How far do the ridges go out?”

“We won’t know until we are there. They don’t go out very far except in unusual circumstances. This is a place where you should be extra careful. Where there are pressure ridges, there may also be leads.”

“Leads?”

“Leads are like cracks in the ice. Channels opened up by divergent winds.”

“Like a river?”

“Sort of. You can spot new ones by looking for frost smoke.”

“Frost smoke?”

“Look for smoke from the water being exposed to evaporation and condensation. But,

leads don't only appear where there is smoke. You need to pay extra attention or you could fall into the icy water."

Amanda's eyes bulged open wide and perked up.

"How do you know which ice is safe to walk over?"

"You can look at the color of the ice. If it is dark, then the seawater is not very far down and that means the ice is thin. It could also mean that the seawater is in the layers of ice and hasn't fully frozen yet. If the ice is light colored or gray then it is usually safe to travel over. Sometimes it is necessary to use a pole with a hook to test the ice. It's the same pole used for hunting.

Amanda didn't have a pole.

"If the ice is thinner, is it better that I get off the sledge so it isn't so heavy too?"

"It sounds like a good idea, but it is better to stay on the sledge as the pressure from our feet on a particular spot of ice is greater than the pressure from any single point off the sledge or dogs."

"Interesting."

"Some of the Inuit hunters can walk on thin ice like polar bears, who distribute their weight better, but it takes a lot of skill."

"Mimicking nature?" Amanda glanced at stuffed Polar Bear and smiled.

"Yes."

"Another thing I've noticed about the ice here is that it isn't like the ice I remember ice skating on as a kid at the lake. Or even the ice and snow when I was hiking around Ilulissat. Is

there something special about it?”

“Don’t forget, this is frozen salty sea water we are traveling over. There is a top wet salty layer on the surface even at these temperatures. It stays a little mushy due to the excess salt.”

Lars motioned Amanda to get on the sledge.

“Is there ever a danger of just mushing out into a patch of open water?” Amanda wondered out loud in an attempt to further understand this new world she found herself in.

“You can look for open water in the distance by looking at the cloud bottoms and see whether they are light or dark. If they are darker that means the clouds are over open water. If lighter, then it is ice. Ice reflects more light than open water.”

Amanda took another look at the sky. “What if there aren’t so many clouds like today?”

“Then you can look at the color of the sky.”

“The color of the sky?”

“Snow on ice reflects about 80% of light. Bare ice, about 65%. Melt ponds reflect about 35%. Open water reflects back only 7%, it absorbs 93%. The scientific term is called albedo.”

“I never realized there was a difference.” She took another look at the sky, then she realized how much her vision of the world had been reduced to black and white. Her vision wasn’t fine tuned to see the shades of blue, or even the shades of gray, not just of ice, but of perhaps life itself.

“Nature gives off subtle hints. We can choose whether or not to learn from it at our own peril.”

“Open water only reflects back 7%?”

Lars nodded his head.

“Then the sky above the water will be a lot darker?”

“The sky will be a darker shade of blue than if it was over ice. It’s as if the sea swallows the sunlight.”

“I’ll have to pay closer attention.”

“There are many subtle cues. In time, one learns to see them by second nature. If one doesn’t die in the process. Don’t expect to pick it all up right away. A simpler thing to look for is frost smoke, or what you might call fog, similar to how you spot leads.”

Amanda was getting a serious lesson about navigating the ice from a master. She realized there was a lot more to learn than at first glance.

“I see you are concerned about the ice conditions.”

“Yes, yes.”

“That is a good trait to have. It will keep you alive out here.”

“Isn’t that your job?”

Lars let out another hearty laugh.

Amanda sat back on the sled as they headed off toward the ridges. They reached the area of pressure ridges before she could give much more thought to Lars’ advice on staying alive. The terrain became a jumble of mounds, sawtooth like ridge tops, and depressions. Amanda got off and walked ahead to the side of the dogs as Lars deftly maneuvered the dogs and sledge up and over the ridges. Smoke rose up from behind one of the ridges. Amanda wanted to investigate, but thought better of it and decided to avoid it for now.

As they traversed the last of this group of pressure ridges, Amanda felt a surge of confidence in overcoming the first challenging terrain that the Arctic sea had presented. Not spotting a polar bear yet, Lars steered the sledge back toward land and off the sea ice.

A small rocky mound appeared out of nowhere as they headed further inland. They had arrived at the first night's campsite.

“What is that pile of rocks? Is it some sort of marker?”

“That is storehouse for frozen meat. I put some seal and walrus meat in there earlier. We can eat some of it and use the rest to feed the dogs. Let us setup our tent first.”

Amanda grinned for a moment, her moment of truth was coming up. She was going to be eating a poster animal of countless environmental organizations. She could avoid not wearing seal skin clothing, but there was no way out of this. Her stomach grumbled. The biscuit she had crunched through earlier was a mere stopgap to satisfying her stomach.

Lars unpacked some caribou skins from the sledge and directed Amanda to help build a tent over the sledge. Using some sticks from the sledge, the two of them put up the caribou skin tent without much effort. A caribou skin was layered over the sledge too.

“Is the sledge like a platform to keep us off the snow?”

“Yes, it is much warmer that way. The ice is very cold, the caribou skin is a good insulator.”

Amanda wondered how much colder it could get as the sun went down and the temperature began to drop. She pondered the cold as Lars left to retrieve some meat. Amanda noticed the dogs perking their ears up on alert, ready for a much deserved meal.

The dogs were jumping up and down as Lars threw raw meat at them making sure each of the twelve dogs received something to eat. The dogs were like cars Amanda thought. They needed 'gasoline' too. Amanda's stomach was grumbling as she saw the dogs eat first. Lars finished feeding the dogs and walked over to Amanda with a large plastic bowl.

"Our turn to eat now," Lars noted as he thrust the bowl out toward Amanda with chopped up bite sized pieces of meat. She hesitated despite her hunger pangs. "Have you eaten seal meat before?"

Amanda swayed her head from side to side.

"You'll like it."

"You can eat it raw?"

"Yes."

Amanda picked up a blood stained piece of the meat and took a bite. It tasted better than she thought. She chewed up the rest of the piece and grabbed another. Soon her animal instincts took over and she grabbed several more pieces. Every piece brought warmth to her body, more important as the sun retreated.

While the changing of season meant that daylight was getting longer and longer, it would still be about a month until the day of the midnight sun would arrive. Once that day arrived, the sun would not set completely until late August. The sun was fading from view in a glorious sunset on Amanda's first night outside in the cold Arctic. It soon became dark with only the light of the moon, stars, and an oil lamp inside the tent. No four walls nor heater here.

Amanda settled into the warm tent with her cup of tea. She realized the strange situation

she had managed to put herself in. Here she was in the middle of nowhere in a small tent with a man she had only met earlier in the day. What would her friends think?! She needed to know more about this mystery man who she was putting so much trust in.

“How long have you been sledging?”

“I have lived part-time in Greenland for twenty years. Sledging every year since I arrived from Denmark.”

“How many of these sledge trips have you made?”

Maybe 100 short trips from Ilulissat. Those are summer trips - sometimes just a day or two long. These long expedition style trips up here, less than twenty over the last ten years. You are among a select few.” Lars warmed his hands around his cup of tea.

Amanda pondered his answer. One of the select few she thought. Lucky? Her initial round of adrenaline and excitement was being tested as darkness set in and the temperature dropped even though it was warmer inside the tent.

Lars added. “I am a wildlife biologist by training. I have been to many places in the Arctic.”

“You must know a lot about polar bears then.”

“I have learned more than the average person,” he answered with complete modesty while shrugging it off with a laugh.

“How did you end up here in Greenland?”

“I ended up marrying a native Inuit on one of my early trips to Greenland. Living and growing up in Denmark, Greenland was always this mysterious place for me. It is a part of

Denmark, and yet it isn't because it is so different. This land captivated me right away. My wife and our son live part of the year in Greenland and the rest in Denmark. ”

“Do you live in Qaanaaq?”

“No, we live in Nuuk, the largest town. It is much warmer there, but I've been a regular visitor up to Qaanaaq to run sledge tours and study the wildlife.”

“What is your wife and son's names?”

“My wife's name is Makkak. My son's name is Jakob.”

“Those are pretty names. What is your last name again?”

“Mortensen”

“Is that common?”

“Last time I checked it was the twentieth most popular surname.”

“What are the most common ones?”

“Jensen, Nielsen, Hansen, Pedersen, and Andersen I think. Your last name, Foster, is that common?”

“I've met a few other Fosters in my life, I don't think it is that common.”

They chatted about surnames. The last time she had given any thought to surname popularity was at a water cooler discussion, which resulted in a discussion about the most common Korean surname. It had been quite a debate. It wasn't until someone took the effort to research it on the Internet that the truth was known. She had long since forgotten that Kim at 21% was the most popular, followed by Lee at 15%, and Park at 9%, but it did kindle some interest in her on how family names might shape a nation over time. If many people had the same

or similar last name, might they be more prone to clonish, clannish, or cultish behavior?

Lars noted that Danes did not adopt surnames until quite recently, in the mid 1800s. He explained the naming system used prior, the patrynomic naming tradition. It was once common throughout Europe, but now no more. In the patrynomic system, last names were not carried on. Instead, last names were formed by adding on -sen, meaning ‘son of’, to the first name of the father. Other last names were formed as a result of occupation or craft, farmstead, place of origin, nicknames, or even of the landlord in a serf economy. When surnames were mandated and ‘frozen’ in Denmark, most had been using the patrynomic convention, thus the prevalence of -sen. He compared it with the British and Irish who adopted surnames much earlier between 1100 and 1400AD. He gave an example of how it might work with more English sounding names: JOHN Robertson – Andrew JOHNson – Peter ANDERson – Micheal PETERson – Brent MICHAELson – Rick BRENTson.

“What about daughters?”

“The equivalent for Danish girls is the addition of – datter. Like Jensdatter, daughter of Jens, Poulsdatter, daughter of Poul, but these last names are not common in Denmark. I hear the use of this sort of naming is common in Iceland though. The ending is -dottir, not -datter though.”

Now Iceland was a country Amanda needed to visit. Male chauvinism, she miffed. Maybe she should change her last name to Deborahdatter, after her mother’s first name. After all, her father was a home wrecker. Better to have a last name as the daughter of Deborah, rather than Peterdatter, the daughter of Peter, her father. Girl power!

“Do you think there is any lasting effect of such a recent change?”

“Perhaps it helps contribute to our sense of individualism, different than your American definition. Yet, it maintained our connection with the immediate past. Since identifying by last name was never very important, I think it might be a reason some like to consider the Danes as a group of tribes. We’re connected to each other, but individuals at heart. Not because we’re told to be unique, but because we are unique. I find it hard to explain. Maybe I’m not using the right words.”

“That’s ok. I think I understand what you are trying to say.” She remembered a phrase from long ago at a childhood friend’s house – that’s not how a Miller would behave! Her friend cried after that argument with her father. But what if everyone had a different last name? A statement like that could never be used. One would no longer be tied to the legacy of the past, whether it be good or bad. No family name pride to uphold. That’s it, she would change her last name, maybe Debdatter. Deborahdatter was too long. Then she could be free of the legacy of her parent’s miserable love life and resulting divorce. She began to wonder how one would see themselves if everyone in her family, everyone in a society, had a different last name.

What about the names of the Inuit? Their real names, not just the ones they used for convenience with visitors. Were they like the names of Native Americans? Like Sitting Bull, Soaring Eagle, Sky Spirit, Crazy Horse, or Looking Glass?

Her thoughts soon turned inward. What if she didn’t have a name? What if she forgot her very sense of self? She could forget it out here in this vast expanse of whiteness.

She snapped out of it. “You have a fascinating life story. Is it hard coming from two very

different places? I mean the both of you coming from a different culture?”

“Oh yes, sometimes we have misunderstandings, but we love each other very much, so it is not so hard in the end. We also travel as a family quite a bit. I’ve taken my family to quite a few countries. My work in biology has taken me to all seven continents.”

“Must be exciting.”

“I enjoy it, would you like a refill?”

“Yes, please.”

Lars poured her a second cup from the flask. “I’ve spoken too much. Tell me about yourself.”

“What would you like to know?” Amanda answered unsure of what to say about herself.

“Whatever you think sounds interesting to others.”

“Well, I was born in the Seattle area. I have lived there all my life. I am a marketing consultant. I have never been married. My life sounds boring compared to yours.”

“Now, now. What do you like to do?”

“I enjoy my time with friends. I like to go hiking and skiing. This learning about cultures through travel is beginning to be fun, although I seem to understand office politics more than anything else now.”

“That sounds a little more positive.” He ignored Amanda’s self-deprecating comment about office politics.

“A little,” she mused.

“We all have our interesting aspects. Sometimes it just takes some prodding and a little

time for them to come out and reveal themselves. Next time you can say you enjoy traveling to Greenland. How many people can say that?"

"That's true." She wondered if Lars might want to know about her stuffed Polar Bear too, but he didn't ask, so she decided not to bring up the subject.

"If you are brave, you can go outside and look at the sky, it is a clear night. You might enjoy it. It could be another hobby you mention if someone asks about your interesting experiences in life."

She gave Lars a puzzled look.

He didn't answer, instead he nodded his head toward the tent exit.

"Ok, I'm game," Amanda muttered out loud. She threw off the warm caribou blanket and put on her gloves and boots and parted the skins and stepped outside.

It took a moment to adjust to the darkness from the oil lamp lit tent. She first saw the sledge dogs sleeping. A feeling of vulnerability washed over her as she found herself enveloped in the darkness in complete silence by herself. No noises but the wind and her own heartbeat. No traffic or street lights. No cars driving by or their headlights. No lights shining through the window of a nearby home. No tree leaves rustling. No voices of fellow campers. It spooked and invigorated her. Yet, as her eyes adjusted, it seemed as if the area was not as dark as it could be. She looked up in the sky.

She was mesmerized. Dancing in the dark sky were green and yellow bands of light taking on different shapes. The lights flickered and moved around in the sky like a curtain in the wind. Other bands of light arced and streaked across the sky in an electrifying show. She lay

down with her back against the snow and stared at the spectacle, oblivious to the cold. This was magic. She tried to imagine the shapes the lights were creating as if she were staring at clouds, but they were dancing with too much energy.

Amanda could have fallen asleep under the lights, but the cold was getting the best of her. She climbed back in the tent. “That was quite a show! At times, it was like a tornado of light. Other times, it was like a curtain extending across the sky. It was interesting how I could see the light glow off some icebergs in the distance too. They were like shards of glass.”

“I knew you would enjoy it. I was beginning to wonder if you would ever come back in.”

“Are those the Northern Lights?”

“Yes, also known as the Aurora Borealis.”

“I never could have imagined them to be so beautiful.”

“What colors did you see?”

“Green and yellow.”

“Those are the most common colors. Sometimes they are blue and violet. If you are lucky you will see a red light show, that is the least common.”

“What causes it?”

“The light is caused by solar particles that are thrown out from the sun during solar flares and explosions. When these particles reach our Earth they are captured by our magnetic field and drawn toward the Earth’s two magnetic poles. It is there they hit our atmosphere. The collisions between the particles and our atmospheric gases cause the energy to be emitted as a photon or light particle. Those collisions create a flash. The aurora you see is made up of many of these

particle and gas collisions. What you see with your eyes is the result of at least 100 million photons.”

Amanda realized that Lars had a knack for explaining many things in precise scientific terms. “Wow. Are they there every night?”

“They are more common in late Autumn and early Spring. You can see them every clear night. More common at solar maximum than solar minimum. Which is just a fancy way of saying that you’ll see more light when there are more solar flares and explosions during a maximum, which occurs about every eleven years.”

“Fascinating.”

“Of course, it needs to be dark too, so you won’t be able to see them if you were here closer to the day of the midnight sun, even though they would still be occurring.”

“Are they always so bright?”

“Sometimes the lights are as bright as the moon. Sometimes they are so dim that you can see the stars right through them.”

“I wish I could see those back home.”

“Even if there was a possibility, there would be too much light pollution.”

Amanda closed her eyes and envisioned the lights dancing right in front of her face.

“The Inuit believed, or believe, depending on who you ask, that the lights are the spirits of the animals they have hunted. Seals, fish, caribou, beluga whales, or even polar bears.”

Amanda opened her eyes. Polar bears she thought to herself. “What do you believe?”

“Being a scientist, on an intellectual level, I am comfortable with the scientific

explanation. I have spent many nights alone out here though. Sometimes, I'm not sure what to believe. You hear strange things when you are by yourself. You wonder if you are going crazy or if there is something out there. Some groups have believed that the lights are the spirits of their people. In times long past, people believed the lights were a sign of war or famine. Or even simpler, reflections from campfires and torches. In the absence of conclusive proof, I'll have to be content with them being just photons."

Amanda didn't answer as she was starting to drift off to sleep.

"If you wake up in the middle of night and you hear the dogs making noise, then it could be a polar bear. Most visitors would be concerned." With that, Lars stopped speaking and closed his eyes too.

Amanda smiled and let out a deep breath, her breath visible in the cooling air. She hoped the dogs would be her alarm clock.