

CHAPTER 28--TOUCH

Sunlight seeped through the cracks of the igloo's wall of ice blocks. It awakened Amanda. Kampe and Lars were already outside. How did they wake up so early Amanda wondered.

"How are you?" Lars greeted Amanda as she emerged from the igloo.

"Feeling better and warmer."

"Are you still sad about losing your stuffed animal?"

"Yes," Amanda answered unequivocally.

"I know nothing can make up for your loss. At least you got to see a real polar bear in the wild. You can live with that memory."

Amanda nodded in agreement without verbally confirming.

"In my travels, I have had good and bad moments. Sometimes they occurred very close to each other on the same trip. It may be hard now, but the bad moments fade away and the better memories shine brighter. I hope this trip will one day be like that."

She didn't respond.

"Can you help me pack the sledge for our return trip back to Savissivik?"

"Of course," Amanda agreed quickly, thinking that anything she could do to take her mind off her loss would be good. She spotted Kampe walking back with his rifle. "Where did he go?"

"He was out hunting for seals, it doesn't look like he was successful."

Several of the dogs started to howl as Kampe approached the igloo. Kampe and Lars immediately looked around with a sense of alarm.

"What's wrong?" Amanda inquired.

"I'm not sure," Lars responded.

Kampe shouted and pointed off in the distance by a snow ridge. An Arctic fox trotted across the ridge top.

Amanda looked up and didn't notice anything. "What is it?"

"It's an Arctic fox."

Amanda looked more carefully. She spotted it.

"Where there is a fox, there may be a polar bear," Lars explained.

The three of them gazed intently at the ridge top. Suddenly, slowly emerging over the ridge was the unmistakable face of a polar bear. Amanda without thinking took a few steps forward to get a better look. "Don't scare it off!" Amanda exclaimed.

Kampe took heed of Amanda's words and went over to calm and quiet the restless dogs down.

“It might be hungry looking for food,” Lars warned as he went to grab his rifle. “I wouldn’t get too close.”

Amanda stared at the bear, her second sighting in as many days. The bear began to crawl closer to the three of them. It moved down the ridge. As it moved forward slowly, Amanda thought she saw a flash of red around its neck. She blinked and rubbed her eyes. Was she hallucinating? Was it the effects of being cold? She saw it again.

Had the red bow of her stuffed polar bear somehow managed to get stuck on the other polar bear? No, that seemed too implausible. Had her stuffed animal somehow become real? This made no sense at all. It seemed even more implausible. How could she even have such a thought? Her bear was a stuffed animal, not real, despite the emotions, imagined conversations, and personality she had given it all her life.

She tried to remember the day before. She closed her eyes for a few seconds and thought about the accident earlier. She thought about how she ended up on the ice after being thrown off the boat. She knew she didn’t crawl up on the ice, or at least she didn’t remember that. Then it struck her. Could it possibly be that the feeling she felt of being carried over water was from a polar bear? Her Polar Bear? Everyone had been telling her to expect the unexpected. Maybe it had something to do with the lost nuclear cargo.

Lars emerged from the igloo with his rifle while Kampe came back from quieting the dogs. He was carrying his rifle too.

She turned around to see if Kampe and Lars had noticed anything unusual about this bear. She wasn’t that far in front of them, but perhaps she had a better angle. She looked again at

the bear. She could see no red. Perhaps her imagination was getting the best of her. Perhaps she was imagining only what she wanted to.

The bear raised its head higher as if sniffing the air. Amanda clearly saw the red bow this time. It was unmistakable. Perhaps a magic of a different sort was working.

“Put your guns down!” Amanda screamed back. “I thought I saw a red bow on the bear.”

Kampe and Lars looked confusingly at each other, but walked forward to take a closer look. They joined Amanda. The bear’s head was down.

“We shouldn’t get any closer, the bear could charge us and we might have to shoot it. What did you say?”

The bear approached slowly and lifted its head up again.

“Do you see it? Do you see it? Do you see the red bow?”

Neither of them could find the words to respond. Unsure of what she meant.

She turned toward Lars and grabbed the top part of his rifle. She pushed it back toward his body and shook her head from side to side. She then pushed the rifle butt to the ground.

Kampe’s eyes widened, but he seemed to understand Amanda’s request by offering little resistance. How could he though? He didn’t really understand English.

Lars blurted out “Are you saying what . . .”

Before he could finish his sentence, Amanda moved closer toward the bear.

Any fears she had about approaching this potentially deadly animal had disappeared. She had a connection to this bear. It knew her. She felt a sense of calmness and confidence as she approached closer.

“Amanda!” Lars shouted. He started to chase after Amanda, but Kampe grabbed the back of his coat and held him back, muttering a few words in Greenlandic.

Amanda moved ever closer to the bear. Despite her confidence, her natural instincts had not gone away completely. They planted seeds of doubt that she tried hard to ignore.

The bear grunted.

Amanda got on her hands and knees. She was going to slowly crawl the rest of the way. She didn’t want to scare it. She continued to muster up the courage to get closer. She was now fifteen feet from the bear.

The bear crawled forward to meet her.

She was confident that some how she was doing the right thing, but still trembling with apprehension. She could hear the bear’s every breath. “Polar Bear, Polar Bear,” she cried out in a childlike voice. “What happened?”

There was no response only grunting from the bear as it cautiously moved forward in a non-threatening manner. Now, it was ten feet away. It moved its head around again.

“Oh, shit.”

The red bow wasn’t there!

Amanda was still on her hands and knees, but it was too late. If she moved she might startle the bear and it might attack. She could only do one thing, wait.

Her speed, if she didn’t trip and fall might be three to four miles per hour at best. If this bear wanted to kill her, she would already be dead. She remembered hearing that polar bears could run up to twenty-five miles per hour on ice in a short burst. Younger bears could go up to

one mile at this speed.

The bear let out a puffing sound. It was waiting for Amanda.

Amanda's face reflected a state of confusion, unsure of whether to back away slowly or lie still.

The bear puffed again as it moved forward. It was only five feet away. The bear's breath drifted up toward the sky. Then it abruptly sat on its butt. Still looking forward, it then put its nose into the air. It was as if he was doing some form of polar bear yoga. It was trying to appear anything but threatening to Amanda, as much as a large bear could. Then it did a belly flop and rolled around on the ground and settled in a low crouched position. It put its paw forward toward Amanda. The paw was only a couple of feet away.

Amanda looked around and had a strange thought as she glanced at some of the snow drifts. They appeared to take the form of the some of the shapes she had seen in the Aurora Borealis. Spirals, undulating waves, snakes, and even a genie coming out of a bottle. It was magic uncorked.

She refocused her attention and courageously moved her arm toward the bear's paw. They touched. She could see the bear's claws. She could feel it as her hand glided over the bear's fur. She brushed the fur some more. The bear puffed.

It slowly dragged its paw away and sat up on all four of its legs. Amanda was alarmed as the bear towered over her crouched body which was flush with the snow.

The bear turned as if it was about to run away and go back over the ridge, when it turned to face Amanda again. She could feel every breath it took in slow motion. It gingerly stepped

forward and craned its neck out toward Amanda. It stood motionless, patient.

Amanda realized the bear was waiting for something. She was confused as to what it was. Calmly she sat up on her knees, undeterred that she was face to face with a real polar bear, the largest predator in the Arctic. The bear leaned forward a little more. It kept staring at Amanda. It perked its ears.

She could see the bear's true black skin on its face, covered with a healthy amount of fur, colored white as it shone in the sun. She could see its muscles quivering. They both stood motionless until Amanda finally realized what the bear was waiting for, or at least so she thought. She put her trust in her instincts by crawling closer, then leaning forward and closing her eyes. She rubbed her nose against the bear's big black wet nose. They exchanged rubs several more times. The motion felt familiar, the setting, unworldly.

The bear backed away.

They exchanged another firm glance, then the bear turned around and ran up the snow bank. It turned around one final time and sniffed the air.

Amanda waved.

The bear gazed intently for a few more moments then ran off.

She closed her eyes wondering if this was all a dream. She heard footsteps running up behind her.

"What just happened?" Lars exclaimed in disbelief.

She turned until she was looking at Lars squarely face to face. She was in an almost dream like state. "Things aren't always what they seem."