

CHAPTER 15 – 77.5° LATITUDE

Qaanaaq, at 77.5 degrees latitude, was the second most northern airport in the world with a scheduled airline service. Longyearbyen in Svalbard beat Qaanaaq, but only by less than 1 degree. However, Qaanaaq was visited by far fewer people than the islands of Norway's Svalbard, revealed by the fact that there was only one hotel in town, with just five small rooms available. Amanda was one of the lucky visitors.

“We finally made it,” Amanda spoke aloud as she settled into her small hotel room with Polar Bear by her side. Polar Bear wore his usual expression, not flinching at any of Amanda's words as they cut through the warm air inside.

It had been an uneventful flight from Ilulissat to Qaanaaq. Qaanaaq has no tourist attractions such as the icebergs in Ilulissat. But, what it lacked in tourist attractions, it made up for in its resident's abilities to have survived this far north for so long.

“We haven't even begun our dog sledding adventure and I feel like this trip has been incredible already. What do you think?”

There was no answer.

“I'm going to get some snacks before we leave tomorrow. Do you want anything?” Amanda asked Polar Bear. “I didn't think so,” Amanda answered after pausing for a moment in silence.

Amanda picked up the small map on her room table and walked outside, heading toward the center of town. The first thing she noticed was that it was colder than Ilulissat.

The dryness of the air made the temperature of 12 degrees Fahrenheit more pleasant than it sounded. Amanda walked down the gradual sloping hillside that the town was built on, toward the city center and closer to the ocean, still frozen over in large part.

The homes in Qaanaaq were painted in similar colors to Ilulissat. Bright cheerful shades of blue, red, and green adorned the majority of buildings. She walked by the fire station. A shiny red Toyota SUV was parked out in front. Following the map, she found what she was looking for, a reddish brown building, home of the Kni shopping centre. Amanda wondered what sort of things they would sell in a shopping centre all the way up here.

More than she would have guessed was Amanda's first reaction as she walked into the warehouse atmosphere of the shopping centre. The colors of the fruit and vegetable section caught her attention. A tapestry of red, yellow, orange and green from apples, oranges, lemons, and other assorted fruits and vegetables filled her field of vision. No different than any other supermarket. It surprised Amanda to see such products available in a place where no trees grow. Amanda bought some fruit and some snacks. She wasn't quite sure what to expect on the dog sledding trip. Fresh meat, such as the kind she saw at the market in Ilulissat crossed her mind. Mary's tip sheet had warned her about that much.

Amanda decided to head back to the hotel and watch some TV in the shared living area. By the same time tomorrow, she would no longer be anywhere close to an electrical outlet.

The next morning arrived with bright blue skies. They portended a good start to Amanda's dog sledge adventure. The small hotel room with two single beds separated by the smallest of foot paths, filled with light. Luxurious this was not. Amanda woke early, dressed, washed up, and went out to have breakfast in the small dining room, carrying out her backpack and Polar Bear too.

The table was already set in the small dining room.

Nothing exotic on the table. Toast, jam, and some corn soup would be her initial fuel for the day. As Amanda finished her breakfast, the hotel owner walked in.

“Your ride to the airport is here.”

“Thank you Suusaat.”

“I will see you when you get back. Good luck. I hope you find what you are looking for. Expect the unexpected.”

She stood frozen as Suusaat’s final words echoed through her head. She came to, only to find Suusaat already gone. What was it about Greenland and the unexpected?

She put it aside and braved the outdoors again.

Emerging from the hotel, the bright light caused her to reach for her sunglasses. Just a few steps away was a small mini-van. She opened the door. A warm face greeted her.

“Kumoor”

Amanda looked at the man puzzled.

“It means good morning. You must be Amanda.”

“Oh yes.”

“I am Jaaku, or Jakob if you like.”

“Good morning Jakob.”

“Do you like Qaanaaq?” The man asked politely.

“I’m surprised how modern it seems here. I saw the large satellite dish at the top of the hill.”

“Many people are surprised by that.”

Amanda wondered how many people ‘many’ meant. Jakob continued.

“We also have a modern power station, a heat station which supplies most of the homes in the central district, an incinerator for trash, and we have a water station too. We melt ice collected from the mountain behind the city or we collect the meltwater from it during the summer. Qaanaaq is very modern.”

“Yes, it is.” She was taken aback by how proud the man seemed of the modern technology the city had. “I was surprised you had so many fresh fruits and vegetables too.”

“Oh yes, we have fresh food deliveries two times a week. Supply ships come every year in August and September

after the pack ice has fully melted with more food, oil, fuel, and building materials from Denmark.”

“So that’s why the selection is so good.”

Jakob nodded and began the short drive to the airport. With the small van approaching the airport, Amanda noticed a four arrowed sign that she didn’t see before.

Pointing in different directions it read:

Qaanaaq
Grise Fjord 367km
Nordpolen 1393km
Kobenhavn 5770km
Centrum

She was a long way from civilization as she knew it, and she would only get further away.

The recently constructed Qaanaaq airport terminal and control tower building stood out in bright blue against its monotone surroundings.

“We are very proud of our new airport. Before it was built in September 2001 the only way to get here was to fly to the US Thule Airbase,” Jakob remarked as he pulled up to the terminal.

“I didn’t know that it was so new. Thank you for the ride.”

“I will see you again when you return by dog sledge.”

Amanda smiled and headed in to the terminal building with Polar Bear and her two packs.

“Miss, your helicopter is waiting for you,” the agent advised as she handed Amanda back her ID and ticket.

Amanda turned and looked out the windows to the tarmac and saw the bright red paint job of the Air Greenland helicopter waiting for her. This was not a typical scheduled flight though. This was the special charter that would take her near the edge of the coast and to the ice floe edge to search for a real polar bear in the wild.

She walked out toward the helicopter wearing her trusty backpack and holding on tight to Polar Bear as a gust

of wind blew across the tarmac.

The pilot emerged from the helicopter and motioned Amanda into the back. She climbed into the helicopter and saw two bench seats. She was the only passenger. She tossed her packs and Polar Bear in the backseat. He shut the door and latched it tight. As the pilot climbed into the front seat, she made eye contact with him as he got comfortable. The pilot did not appear to be a native Inuit.

“My manifest says only one passenger.”

Amanda gave him a befuddled look.

The pilot nodded his head in Polar Bear’s direction.

Amanda caught on. “He’s my good friend. He looks big but he doesn’t take up too much space. The agent said he was ok.”

At this point Amanda had thought of every excuse possible to explain away why she was carrying around a large stuffed polar bear. She decided she might as well have some fun.

“No problem. Maybe you will see the real thing out there,” the pilot answered along with a hearty laugh.

“I brought him for good luck so that I will,” Amanda responded as she came up with another excuse to avoid telling the whole story.

“It’s a big good luck charm.”

They both laughed.

“This is my first time in a helicopter, will I get sick?”

“Should be a smooth ride today, I think you will enjoy it. Please put these headphones on, it will help us talk to each other by canceling out the rotor noise.”

Amanda grabbed the headphones from the pilot’s outstretched arm.

The engine started and the rotor blades began to turn. In a moment, they were off the ground heading toward the coast. This was Amanda’s first helicopter flight, but fifth flight on this trip. She looked out the window as the blue Qaanaaq airport terminal became smaller and faded from view.

The pilot was right, it was a very smooth ride and a wonderful sensation to be slicing through the air and skimming over land. The difference between this flight and the earlier ones to get to Qaanaaq is that she was much closer to the ground. Details that would be too small in a jet or propeller driven plane presented themselves in their full glory.

“What kind of helicopter is this?”

“It is a Bell 212,” the pilot answered.

“How fast are we going?”

“Top speed on this helicopter is 185 km per hour with a range of 370 km. We are now at 135 km per hour and increasing. It is about 180 km one way. Feel free to ask me any questions about what you are looking at.”

Amanda did some quick math in her head. “Isn’t that cutting it close with your fuel?”

“I stop at the US Thule base on the way back.”

“The US base?”

“I’ll show it to you when we pass it.”

“Can anyone charter these helicopters?”

“We have four of these Bell helicopters, and three Eurocopter AS 350s, and two big Sikorsky S-61s. They are all based in different cities and can be chartered by anyone, we have all the major areas covered. Most of the time I fly a regular schedule, but other times I fly in support of scientific expeditions. I have even done a few medical evacuations and rescue missions.”

“Rescue missions?”

“Sometimes hunters get trapped on floating ice.”

Amanda’s head perked up. “Floating ice?”

“Sometimes hunters will be on the pack ice and the piece of ice they are on will separate from the other ice and they get pushed out into the open water. They either have to wait until it gets pushed back or pray that they will get rescued by a helicopter.”

“Pray?”

“There are no mobile phones out here. Sometimes people bring radios or satellite phones. I don’t think Lars has

one. He's too good for that. I don't ever recall picking up a tourist."

"That's comforting." Amanda's eyes bulged wide open. Amanda wondered just how many tourists made it out here. Even if a tourist disappeared, would anybody notice out in this vast wilderness. What had she gotten herself into.

The pilot turned around and grinned at Amanda. Amanda grinned back and looked out the window instead. Looking out the window she noticed that not all of the ocean was frozen over. She hadn't noticed it earlier. There were large sections of open water and what appeared to be channels of open water going off in different directions, like breaks in the ice.

"Why is the water not frozen everywhere this time of year?"

"It is the North Water polynya."

"What is that?"

"A polynya is an area of open water surrounded by pack ice. They form when warmer water is pushed up from deeper below. The warm water either melts the surface ice or prevents it from forming. The North Water is the largest here. It stays open year round, but contracts into a smaller area further north as winter arrives. Then it grows again during the spring and into summer. It becomes ice free well before most of the strait is ice free."

"What about the channels down there?"

"Those are shore leads. They form due to wind and currents preventing pack ice from establishing themselves. Mammals like bowhead and beluga whales and narwhals use the shore leads to navigate. Many of the shore leads stay open year round."

Amanda continued to look in fascination at all the forms of ice as they flew over them. While seeing the icebergs in Ilulissat was magnificent, this was a different visual stimulus. She couldn't help but think how special this moment was. How many people would ever get to experience such a different world first hand?

“If you look out in the distance you will also see the US Thule airbase. I fly there often. The area is also known as Pituffik.”

“What did you call it again?”

“Pituffik. It’s the name of the hunting village that used to be there. It means – where dogs are tied up.”

“That’s funny. Why does the US have a base up here?”

“It is a radar station. I think it is being used for your missile defense system too.”

“It seems like America has bases everywhere.”

The pilot didn’t respond to Amanda’s consternation.

“We are approaching the landing zone by Cape York.”

A tiny settlement along the frozen shoreline came into view. Or rather, a couple of small buildings. She saw movement as the helicopter drew closer. They were sledge dogs. Amanda counted about a dozen. A human figure stepped outside of one of the small buildings and looked up.

“When we land I am not going to shut off the engine. I will keep the rotors spinning to avoid applying the full weight of the helicopter on the ground. It may be a little hard to see, but take everything, get out, and walk towards the building. Lars will take over from here.”

“Ok. Thanks.”

The helicopter set down away from the building. Amanda grabbed her backpacks and Polar Bear, then jumped out. She gave a thumbs up to the pilot. The wind from the blades was kicking up snow and made it hard to see. The helicopter lifted off again and zoomed away. The swirls of snow began to settle. A figure emerged from the swirl and greeted Amanda.

“You must be Amanda.”

“Yes, yes. I am. You are Lars?”

“Good to meet you, Amanda.”

“You too,” Amanda answered in a partial state of shock. While she had gotten used to the small town

atmosphere of Greenland towns, now she was in a different situation entirely. She was in the middle of nowhere.

“Follow me, I have a lot to teach you before we go.”

Lars turned around and walked toward the building.

Amanda took a deep breath, turned around, and took one last glimpse at the helicopter in the distance. She thought about getting stuck on a piece of floating ice. What had she gotten herself into?