

CHAPTER 25 – METEORITE LAND

It was early afternoon as Amanda and Lars sighted Savissivik. When they approached the gradual sloping hillside on which the village was built on, they left behind the coastal mountains they had been tracking. In front of them the tiny village stood out against the vast expanse of white.

The now familiar home shades of red, yellow, blue, green and gray came into view. The contrast was even more stark than in Ilulissat or Qaanaaq. Amanda felt a sense of relief upon arriving in town. The last couple of days they had been sledging, they had seen no other people or man made structures. It redefined the word remote in her vocabulary. Despite her sense of relief, she still had a strange feeling, as if they and the people in this town were the only people left on Earth.

Lars commanded the dogs to stop as he neared the center of town. “Welcome to Savissivik. This place is also known as meteorite land. In 1968, a 900 kilogram, almost 2,000 pounds, meteor was found here. It is the world’s sixth largest meteorite ever found. Meteorites have a high iron content. The iron found in this area was used in Inuit tools. Savik means iron knife.”

“Is the meteor still here?”

“No. It’s at the Denmark Geological Museum now. However, you can see part of a smaller meteor at the Thule Museum in Qaanaaq.”

Not only did this town seem remote, but it also had a cosmic connection. At least there was some truth in the name of the town she thought. It was a simple thing that could be

manipulated she learned in marketing. The best one of all was creating a myth of nature by using catchy names for a subdivision or street name. Names like Oak Creek, Chestnut Grove, Riverside, and Woodside. Never mind that these natural features had all been lost or destroyed. Then there were the places, apartment complexes usually, named after some exotic locale faraway. Barcelona, St. Tropez, or Innsbruck. Or simply names that described a place in a 'soothing' manner, whether or not it was actually true. There was a list of top ten place names she recalled reading, but she only remembered the first and last ones. The 287 places named Fairview and the 140 places named Pleasant Hill.

Amanda counted the number of buildings that they had passed and those that were in front of her. She counted about twenty five small buildings. "How many people live here?"

"About eighty."

Several villagers approached and greeted Lars. He talked to them in a way that only long time friends could. Amanda waved to the villagers as Lars introduced her while speaking Inuit. She muttered a few of the words that Lars had taught her over the last couple of days, but mostly just smiled.

Then, dashing around one of the buildings a stout man bounded toward Lars and gave him a big hug. He looked to be in his early thirties. It was the man who Amanda would later come to know as Kampe. The man who would try to satisfy the primary reason Amanda came to Greenland for. For the moment he did not introduce himself to Amanda. Instead he approached the dogs near Amanda and began to comment about the dogs that had carried Lars and Amanda over here.

"What is he saying?"

"He said that he saw us approaching from up the hill. He said our dogs are very tough and work well together as a team."

Kampe continued to circle around the dogs, making comments as he visually got excited.

Amanda gave Lars a questioning look.

“He said he saw the dogs become more excited and run faster as they approached the village. They were happy to see him and the rest of his friends here in the town.”

“He saw all that?”

“Dogs can become bored running across the long distances of flat snow and ice. They are no different than you or I. When they see something different, they can get excited.”

Kampe continued to comment about the dog team.

“He said that it is clear that our dog team has grown up together. He made a particular comment about the ones in the middle, as those are the strongest.”

“What do you mean, grown up together?”

“Greenlandic sledge dogs have a strong pack and territorial instinct. There is a fixed hierarchy with few fights. The alpha dog keeps order. If an adult dog is introduced into a pack it will rarely survive. Newcomers are not accepted unless they integrate as puppies. The puppies need to be submissive or they could get killed by an adult in the pack.”

Amanda looked on, amazed by the observations and unerring eye of Kampe. He turned and smiled at Amanda as he seemed to compliment her.

“What did he say?”

“He said your dogs are good and pure. None of them have blue eyes.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means that there has been no cross-breeding with other non Greenlandic dogs. Pure breeds have eyes that are dark brown to amber in color.”

Amanda smiled back. ”

Kampe responded by asking Amanda a question.

“He asked if you have found what you are looking for?”

“How does he know I am looking for something?”

Kampe answered again in Greenlandic.

“He said no one comes this far without looking for

something.”

Kampe was wiser than he might appear Amanda realized. She answered, “I’m looking for a polar bear.”

Kampe responded excitedly before Lars could translate Amanda’s statement. “Nanoq! Nanoq!” He pointed at his legs.

Amanda noticed the polar bear skin pants he was wearing for the first time. Somehow they had just blended into the rest of her new surroundings. She was reminded of the boy yelling at the airport. It wasn’t exactly what she had in mind for the fate of the polar bear she hoped to find. She wasn’t sure how to clarify that she wasn’t here to hunt a polar bear, only to see one. Amanda couldn’t think of what to say. She was caught off guard by Kampe’s energy, and in a momentary state of shock.

Lars interrupted and spoke in Greenlandic to his friend.

Amanda awoke from her moment of shock. “What did you tell him?” she asked firmly.

“I told him we were looking for a polar bear on the pack ice but that we had no luck. I told him you weren’t here to hunt and kill one, only to see one.”

“What did he say then?”

“He didn’t…” Lars was interrupted as Kampe all of a sudden noticed Amanda’s stuffed polar bear’s head sticking out from behind the blanket that had covered him up to his neck. Kampe ran over to the sledge and looked at the stuffed animal as if he had never seen a polar bear in his life. He circled the sledge. He pressed his face closer to the stuffed bear, sniffed it, then backed off. He pulled back the blanket and touched it, realizing it wasn’t real. Then he started laughing, uncontrollably laughing.

Now he was attracting the attention of several other villagers who also approached Amanda’s stuffed polar bear. Many of them were wearing polar bear fur pants too.

Several of the kids shouted “Nanoq! Nanoq! Nanoq!”

Kampe motioned the others to quiet down. He finally

introduced himself to Amanda, in broken English as he pointed to himself. “Kampe. Kampe. Best hunter. I find you polar bear.”

Amanda wasn't sure what to be more surprised by, his broken English, or if in a strange sort of way, maybe he understood Amanda's quest. She stared at him for what seemed like an eternity then pointed at herself. “A-man-da. A-man-da.” She then pointed at her eyes as she pointed out in the distance, she repeated “Nanoq. Nanoq.”

They both smiled as they seemed to arrive at some common understanding.

With introductions out of the way, Kampe helped Lars to tie up the dogs and unload some supplies from the sledge. Amanda decided to tour the town. A half dozen Arctic rabbits were hanging from a line next to one house. It was an unexpected sight, but certainly not out of place. She was becoming well adjusted and ready for the unexpected.

Amanda looked around some more and noticed a four posted platform raised about six feet off the ground with an upper railing. A seal skin was hanging to dry from the upper railing. She had seen a similar structure in Qaanaaq. Perhaps they would be drying the seal skins that Lars brought from their hunting earlier. She noticed numerous polar bear skins being dried as she continued to make her way around the town. It was very surreal. The raw existence that these people lived, impressed Amanda despite her love of animals. Every time she saw another animal skin being dried or worn she got a strange feeling as if the skin could come alive at any moment.

If worn, man and animal would merge and become one she thought. Maybe all the animals had spirits after all. Maybe this place was driving her mad. Much to her surprise, she hadn't shed any tears about the polar bear skins, yet. There was no denying the integral relationship between the polar bear and life here. She thought about the attitudes at the zoo at home. Or the beliefs of her friends. Her world was indeed, a separation from nature.

She returned to where the sledge was and found Lars feeding the dogs. She looked at the dogs differently this time and noticed how the dogs took turns eating, but not in a strict hierarchy, but more like a sense of co-operation.

Amanda followed Kampe and Lars into Kampe's small home as they had finished with the dogs. His wife was warming up a teapot. She invited Amanda and Lars to take a seat at the small table.

“Do they have any kids?”

“Two children. They are over at the local school,”

Lars answered.

Using Lars as the interpreter, Amanda managed a simple conversation with Kampe and his wife, Suusaat, going over the basics of what life was like. They talked about the different foods they ate what they thought of the modern world, what kinds of things the children learned in school, and their hopes for the future. Amanda felt like she was interviewing them for a National Geographic special.

Suusaat excused herself to go outside and pick up the children. As if on cue, Kampe rummaged under a table and brought out a small radio.

“Radiu!” he announced. He turned it on. Static. He fumbled with the dial until a familiar melody blared out of the tiny box. It was an American country music song.

“Huh?” Amanda thought there must be some sort of trickery going on.

Kampe closed his eyes, stood up, and started to shuffle dance to the music. The sight was surreal.

“Where is that music coming from?” Amanda asked trying to be heard over the blare.

Lars answered. “It's from the Thule airbase. Near Qaanaaq.”

“That is the base the helicopter pilot pointed out as I flew by on the way to Cape York?”

“Yes. Sometimes they play pop music. It is very funny. They have a pretty powerful transmitter. Not much interference up here.”

“Surely,” the bizarreness of the scene still resonating in her ears.

While Amanda was surprised by the music it did have a certain calming effect on her. In a world of so much unfamiliarity, even a little piece of home seemed to calm her nerves a little. She thought of home, work, her friends, all the creature comforts, and all the complexities. Something which she was forgetting about more and more as the days went by. Life seemed so much simpler out here without all the noise of the modern world. Yet here they were inviting it in, at least one of them.

“What does he think about America?”

Kampe’s enthusiasm for the country music went on unabated. Lars didn’t even try to interrupt his enjoyment and answered Amanda’s question directly.

“I can’t speak for Kampe, but I know many of the older Greenlanders like Americans. The Americans helped to open up Greenland during World War II from my country’s trade monopoly which lasted from the late 1700s to the end of World War II. In the 1960s, my government decided to change forever the way the Greenlanders live. Instead of letting the Inuit rely on traditional ways of hunting and living off the land, my government changed the Greenlanders into commercial fishermen by closing roughly half the towns along the coast.”

Amanda glanced at Kampe. He was still dancing around to the music with his eyes closed.

“The Danish government built housing blocks in Nuuk, Sisimiut, and Maniitsoq, among others. Many Greenlanders were moved into these four story, gray, charmless, sharp edged rectangle buildings. Many of them are named simply Block A, Block B, Block C, Block D.”

“Sounds like government housing projects in the US.”

“Perhaps.”

”They know it is a double edged sword. Many Greenlanders are embracing the modern world, I know many of them have computers for one. Yet, they are trying to hold

on to past traditions, the very source of their identity. They know that my country subsidizes their entry into the modern world. Around US \$400 million dollars per year. The better question is whether they were better off in their previous world.”

She listened without speaking.

“It is important to make a distinction between those who continue to live much like their ancestors, such as the Inuit here in Savissivik, and those who live in towns. Kampe may very well not have too strong of an opinion about America or Denmark. We’ll have to ask him.

Their whole conversation went on oblivious to Kampe who entered into almost a trance like state listening to the American country music. Lars raised his voice and snapped Kampe out of his trance.

“What? You not dance?” Kampe said in broken English. It was barely comprehensible over the radio blare.

Amanda disguised her chuckle at the sight of Kampe speaking English.

Lars explained his conversation with Amanda then asked him the question that she had asked initially -What did he think about America?

Kampe sat down at the table and lowered the volume on the radio. “I like music,” he answered in broken English.

Lars responded in Greenlandic then translated for Amanda. “I told him he can say anything he wants, and that you are very open minded.”

Kampe turned off the radio and took on a serious look. He began to speak in Greenlandic to Amanda. He suddenly came across far different than his goofy demeanor that he presented to Amanda ever since they met. She waited patiently for him to finish so that Lars could translate. He finished by looking at Lars squarely in the face.

“He said that first of all, you are the most peculiar and charming American he has ever met.”

Her face turned red.

Kampe chuckled.

“He also said that your government disrespected his people when they, along with the Danish government, all but forcibly moved his fellow Inuit from their ancestral home in Thule in 1953. He says that whatever the reason the base was built for before, has long since past. He says that your government’s missile defense system has caused worry and fear among many in the area. By continuing to have a presence in Greenland it raises the possibility that in a war, his home would be one of the early victims. He asks if you have seen the toxic dumpsites, tens of thousands of empty fuel barrels, and scrap metal.”

Amanda nodded her head from side to side. “How many families were affected?”

“Thirty families.”

“Were they ever given any compensation?”

“In those days, the Greenlanders didn’t use cash. There wasn’t much that they wanted from the modern world. In 1999, a Danish court awarded compensation, but did not recognize their claim to return. Which is an interesting way of just saying, everyone can be bought. Illegally exiled, but no right of return. They were awarded US \$3000 each.”

Amanda calculated the time difference. “After forty-five years?”

“Yes.”

She swiped her eyebrow. For a moment, time stood still as she made mental comparisons of this treatment of Inuit with the treatment of Native Americans in her homeland. It led her to think of America’s history of slavery and wealth inequality, but it would only be later that she would learn the Danish ‘only’ transported 85,000 African slaves to the New World, and the nearby Dutch, had managed to transport several million. It was only later she would fully realize the difference in thinking between Scandinavians and much of the rest of Europe, and by definition, her homeland.

She looked at Lars complexion and thought she caught a glimpse of a tear. It reminded Amanda of her earlier

suspicion, that only the strong could truly be gentle.

“The hunters took their case of returning to their original lands to our supreme court. They lost.”

Amanda pursed her lips in a show of disgust. “How big is the base?”

“There are only 120 American military personnel, but there are about 500 Danish civilians, and 100 Inuit civilians.”

“Sounds very small.”

“Even if it is small, the impact can be much larger. In 1968, a B-52 bomber carrying nuclear weapons crashed and triggered some conventional explosives it was carrying. This spread its nuclear cargo of four weapons over the ice, about twelve miles from Thule base. The upper layer of snow was removed with the help of the Inuit. About US\$15 million dollars was paid to 1,700 Danish and Inuit workers for radiation exposure. Hunters and fisherman avoid the area to this day.”

“It all seems so pristine though.”

“Looks can be deceiving. Sediment was measured in the area of the crash in the early 1990s and radiation levels were found to be one thousand times higher than before in shellfish. Currents can spread the effects over a much wider area, just like Chernobyl. I’ve heard rumors of mutations and strange behavior in some animals though I have never witnessed it myself. Who knows how these toxic materials affect the food chain. I have even heard of polar bears acting strangely.”

Amanda shook her head. “War and weapons.”

“Official Danish public policy had been that no nuclear weapons would be stored on Greenland. In 1995 it was leaked that nuclear weapons were stored on Greenland contrary to public policy by secret agreement. We called it Thulegate.”

“It sounds like the arrogance of government.”

“The base has been in the news recently too. A few years ago your secretary of state, Colin Powell, came to sign an agreement to upgrade the radar station. People fear that

this is the first step before the installation of interceptor missiles there. On the positive side, there were agreements, non-binding, that involve increased trade and economic ties and environmental and technical cooperation. Your country has also agreed to upgraded environmental protection standards in the Thule area, as well as including Greenland in various economic and research projects.”

“To clean up those barrels?”

“Yes. To clean up fifty years of chemical and general waste. I only wonder how effective that will be. There were also provisions for guaranteed fish exports to the US and university admission to Greenland students. If you ever get a chance to see the base up close, you will see the Greenland flag flies alongside the Danish and American flags on the base. I think it is a tentative first step in the right direction, all things considered.”

“Aren’t there other places that a base could be located for missile defense?”

“There are already bases in the UK, and in several of your northern US states that support the missile defense. I’m not sure why it needs to be in Greenland of all places.”

“I guess it all kind of takes me by surprise. It is as if there is no place left in the world that hasn’t been touched by war or some sort of capacity to make it.”

Lars was about to respond when Kampe interrupted in Greenlandic, though he did not understand their entire conversation.

“He says enough talk about the US base! He will help you find your polar bear. He says there aren’t as many polar bears as there have been in the past. The ones they have caught are getting smaller too, but he knows where to go.”

“Ask him why they are getting smaller.”

Lars continued to interpret both ways.

“He says he isn’t sure why, but that maybe it is because the ice is melting sooner so that the bears do not have as much time to hunt seals on the pack ice before returning to Canada. He said he was traveling on the pack ice

recently and saw a polar bear hunting beluga whales. He said he normally would not hesitate to kill it, but for some strange reason, he decided to respect it as a fellow warrior and left it to hunt.”

“It sounds like the bears are getting smaller here for the same reasons we talked about before. Can you clarify to him that I am not here to hunt again?”

Lars restated Amanda’s purpose in coming to Greenland.

“He said he understands, but hopes you don’t look badly upon him for wearing polar bear pants.”

She thought that to be an interesting observation.

“Tell him I think no such thing. Tell him that they should be proud that they live in such close connection with their surroundings. Tell him I like his waterproof seal skin boots. Tell him I feel the spirit of the polar bears all around the village.” Amanda wasn’t sure just what got into her, but this place was definitely changing her outlook.

Kampe responded.

“He said he is happy that you are beginning to understand their ancient ways. Maybe you will learn more about the true spirit of the polar bear. You will learn to respect it as both foe and friend. He says he isn’t sure of your religion, but he believes all things have spirits. Only when we respect and let these spirits inside our very core can we truly understand what they represent. The spirit of freedom itself.”

Suusaat arrived back with the children. She prepared dinner while Amanda amused the children until going to rest in a small guesthouse nearby. She fell asleep with her most intense dream about meeting a polar bear yet, and wondering if she would fully understand the spirit of freedom too.