

Chapter Fourteen

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I stopped at the settlement garage to pick up the Honda trike. Ignertok point was quite far from the settlement, and I might need the trike if I needed to bring things back. With something like reluctance, I kicked at the tires, examined the body of the trike for new bruises, and finally mounted the thing and turned on the ignition. The motor turned over on the first try, but that was about all it did. Even playing with the gears, I couldn't get the wheels to show the slightest inclination to rotate.

Patiently, I got off the bike and examined it again.

I couldn't *see* anything wrong, but what did I know about trikes?

I tried to start it again and repeated the the process two or three times before I conceded to myself that, yet again, the trike was on the blink. I left a note telling Enoki Amarok I was on my way to Ignertok point, and asking him to check out the trike. Enoki knew that machine as well as most men know their wives.

I stripped my backpack down to the essentials -- the camera, a lunch, one notebook, a few matches, a can of mace, and a small pocket knife. All together it weighed under five pounds.

After careful consideration, I decided I was just as happy to be on foot.

It would be six miles in each direction, but six easy miles over the gravel beach with only a few hundred yards of sedge meadow. Time enough to sort through my thoughts, and to explore the other Thule sites along the way.

It was a beautiful clear day. There was no rain, and only enough wind to discourage the mosquitoes. It was like a spring day in the Berkshires except that there was no sign of anything like a tree.

Once clear of the hamlet, I let my eyes scan the horizon. In the distance the land faded into the sea and the sea faded into the sky -- all of them the same dull blue grey of eternity. And like eternity, too cold for life. I could see the almost microscopic distinctions of colour and texture at my feet, but to my untrained eyes, the world for miles around me was essentially an undifferentiated continuum of blue and grey. I could just barely make out the distinction between sea and land, but I couldn't see where the sea ended and the sky began.

Enoki Amarok could see. I had been out with Enoki several times when he had seen a caribou and I had seen nothing -- absolutely nothing except a hillside -- barren and devoid of life. And even from great distances, Enoki was able to point out cairns and fishing places, as well as game.

Spotting game is not a question of eyesight -- with glasses my eyesight is better than 20/20. Spotting game is a matter of perception. You not only have to look, you have to be able to see. It's something like the first few times you listen to Inuktitut or some other entirely foreign language. You hear the sounds, but, until you can perceive

the patterns, those sounds remain an unintelligible continuum. There are no recognizable units in a continuum -- no meanings.

For me, there were very few recognizable units in an arctic landscape.

Enoki had taken my education in hand. He was trying to teach me how to see and not just how to look. Even I knew that any Kabloona turkey can set his eyes into the horizon and look like the Marlborough man. And even I knew that the Marlborough man would last about a week in the Arctic. At first I had resisted Enoki's tuition. I wasn't going to be a hunter so why should I learn how to spot game? Enoki had smiled and ignored my objections.

What could I say?

So there I was, out practicing my perceptual skills -- if only my Kabloona turkey mind would let me concentrate. But it wasn't easy to concentrate. For the first time in weeks, I could feel the sun beating down on me, I could smell the salt water and hear the waves hitting the raised beaches. I stopped to pick a handful of arctic poppies and set them in my hair. It was that kind of day.

It was good to be alive.

Until I reminded myself that I was walking to Ignertok to check out Martin Welche's tent.

Then my Kabloona mind started gnawing away at those other problems. With my eyes still scanning the hillside to the east, I began to think about Welche's death. Why had anyone bothered to kill Welche? Was BJ right? Could the KGB have involved anyone so incredibly incontinent in anything as delicate as the ARTHUR operation? And if Welche wasn't involved in ARTHUR, why was he killed? It wasn't to keep out the supply of drugs from the DEW line. Those DEW line personnel who wanted drugs would get them without Welche. To stop the traffic would require mass arrests and mass transfers of DEW line personnel. It would mean a scandal. Then again, perhaps Welche had been killed on a purely personal matter. But that made even less sense. Except for his noxious habit of using and dispensing drugs, Martin Welche was not the sort of man to excite enmity in others. Maybe he had been killed by some individual who hoped to acquire his entire cache of drugs?

Maybe. Maybe. Maybe.

I just didn't have enough information to piece together the puzzle. There were too many questions, and too few answers.

In any case, I intended to approach Ignertok Point cautiously. I had no intention of stumbling stupidly into danger. Please God, that dumb I wasn't.

And while I was at it, I would start finding and mapping the Thule sites. It would be good discipline for the mind. Enoki had told me they were stretched out along the coast about a mile from the settlement. I started looking for the obvious signs. From a distance, spotting archaeological sites is even more difficult than spotting game. That's because sites, by their very nature, don't move.

With something approaching Zen meditation, I cleared my mind to look.

I scanned the beaches ahead of me and then, turning slowly, I looked up into the hills to the east. Finally, I turned back to scan the beach to the north just in case I had missed one of the sites in passing.

Looking back I saw a man in the far distance walking along the shore line, and I lifted my hand to wave a greeting.

It was an arrested gesture.

One moment the walking thing had looked like a man, and the next moment it had looked like an animal.

In fact, it was too far away to tell.

Most likely it was a caribou. Only it didn't seem to be the right colour and, although I couldn't really judge size from the distance, it looked too big to be a caribou. Then it moved -- no it wasn't a caribou and it seemed too clumsy to be a man. In the distance it was such a little thing -- so nebulous.

And then I recognized it for what it was -- a polar bear.

In those first few seconds, I was barely conscious of my own fear. I felt myself rooted to the spot, I felt the pebble in my boot, the harshness of the wool around my neck, the perspiration in the palms of my hands. But I didn't feel fear.

I was alone in the middle of the arctic wastes -- alone sharing the universe with a polar bear.

Had the bear seen me? I couldn't *know* that. I forced myself to stand perfectly still and, for a few endless minutes I watched it move. It didn't seem to be aware of me. At first it was moving on its hind legs like a big oafish clumsy person, and then it went down on its forelegs and started loping down the beach toward me.

Very slowly.

Or perhaps everything seemed to be happening in slow motion.

I felt the cold wind hard in my face. That was good. That meant I was up-wind of the bear. Could it smell me? I knew nothing about a polar bear's sense of smell, but it seemed unlikely. But I knew that even if it hadn't seen me already, it was likely to notice me if I moved. It seemed so small from a distance.

My eyes told me it was tiny. My mind told me it probably weighed over 1,000 pounds and stood 12 feet tall.

I remained very still, barely breathing.

It kept coming along the beach toward me.

I was going to have to do something.

I had no gun to defend myself.

What did I have?

What could I do if it continued toward me?

I remembered the mace. It was a symptom of how confused I was that I hadn't thought of it to begin with. Even at the risk of attracting the bear's attention, I had to get to the mace. Slowly, with my fingers grown clumsy with fear, I worked my back pack around to where I could open it. My eyes were still fixed on the bear, and it took forever to undue the knot but finally I had my hands on that aerosol can of mace.

The bear had turned westward -- toward the sea.

Slowly, I laid my back pack on the ground, lifted off the protective cap of the can, and pressed the aerosol button. There was a little hiss of escaping air and then -- nothing--absolutely nothing. The can was a dud. I had checked it just two days earlier and it had been full.

I knew the mace wasn't much of a defence, but without that mace, I was virtually defenseless.

The bear was still looking away from me -- out to sea.

Slowly, I turned scanning the horizon for someplace to hide.

There was nothing out there. Everything was equally threatening -- equally merciless, cold, wide-open, barren. No where to hide. The sea was out. The mountains? No help in the mountains. None. My only hope was to find something like a tree or a fence. Polar bears can't climb, but they don't have to. There are no trees in the Arctic. Was there a fence or a building anywhere in the area? What had Enoki told me about the southern end of the island? I couldn't remember, but I thought he had said *something* about a camp. I hadn't passed anything like a camp since leaving the settlement. That meant the camp, if there was one, was still to the south. I could see nothing to the south but more wide open space.

I turned back again to look at the bear. It had seen something in the water. I watched as it loped off to the water's edge and into the sea. In the water it moved with real grace -- almost beauty.

I watched mesmerized. Then it disappeared under the water. One minute -- two. Together with the bear, I was holding my breath. I was hoping that it would surface far out to sea. Hoping that it was going away.

Finally, it surfaced -- right at the shoreline.

It had something in it's paws. A fish? Probably an arctic char. The fish would give me a few minutes to start moving.

I felt in my backpack for my camera and my knife. The knife I put in my pocket, and the camera I placed under a rock. God willing, I would come back for the camera.

There was no point in trying to return to the settlement. To do so I would have to pass within sixty feet of the bear. Instead, I turned, and continued along the beach heading south.

All I was doing was putting distance between me and the bear.

I had no plan.

I couldn't out-run the bear, and I doubted that in this situation I could even out-think the bear. I didn't know what it meant to hunt, and I didn't really know what it meant to be hunted either. If the bear had only been human, I felt certain I could have out-manipulated it. But the bear wasn't human.

I tried, but I couldn't move quickly. The shale seemed to be twisting away under my feet. I wished I had stopped before to get that pebble out of my boot.

I looked back to see the bear in the distance. It had finished with the fish. Slowly, seemingly inexorably, it had begun to shuffle in my direction.

I made myself remember everything that Enoki had told me about bears. There is an established procedure for running away from the bear. I had to force myself not to panic -- I had to force myself to use the procedure. And, somehow, I had to stay ahead of that bear long enough to reach the camp. There might even be people at that camp. People with rifles. Please God, there would be people with rifles.

Somehow, I was going to reach that camp.

What had Enoki said? Distract the bear. Leave it things to paw through and to eat. If the bear is feeling lazy or well fed, it will allow itself to be distracted.

I dropped the pack from my shoulders. My first offering to the bear. And, without looking back, I started to jog again. I ignored the slippery shale and the blister forming on my foot just as I ignored the fear that had settled into the pit of my stomach.

Five minutes later, I glanced back to see the bear playing pitch and toss with my backpack. The bear looked like nothing so much as a big oafish child -- a very retarded child. Playful but not quite human. As I watched I unzipped my parka, and left it as a second offering before I turned south again.

And all the while I was praying. God would be on my side -- or would he? I hadn't been leading a particularly virtuous life those last few weeks. Maybe the bear was a judgement on me.

I ran, and I prayed.

I looked back one more time to see the bear still pawing at my backpack -- batting away at the nylon fabric. Each casual slap with the paw was enough to slap off a human arm or leg or a face. I had heard of polar bears destroying whole helicopters to get at a single peanut butter and jelly sandwich. With luck it would take a few more minutes to ferret out the food in my pack.

I was going to need every precious second of that time.

A hundred yards later I looked back again -- the bear had finished with my pack. It was coming toward me -- its head swinging back and forth as it seemed to be tracking my scent. It was moving slowly -- ponderously. It was in no hurry. I reminded myself that a bear could sprint at thirty-five miles an hour. It was certain to find the parka next, but the parka could not be expected to hold its interest even as long as the backpack had. There was no food in the parka.

With near paralyzed fingers, I began to unbutton my shirt and, still running, I pulled it off and left it for the bear. It might or might not slow him down. But I had no other choice but to leave it more of my clothes. There was nothing else I could do except lie down and play dead, and I wasn't ready to lie down and play dead.

Not yet.

The bear was less interested in the clothing than it had been in the backpack. It probably just stopped by the parka for a minute or two, and sniffed at the shirt for perhaps a fraction of that time.

I was running out of time, and there was still no camp in sight. I should have been cold but I wasn't. Actually, I didn't know if I was hot or cold. I did know that breathing

was getting much harder, and that my legs felt like they were made of lead. Somehow, I shucked off my jeans.

Thankfully, I have always preferred loose fitting jeans. I left them for the bear.

Moments later, I realized that I had left the knife in the jeans. The knife was my only weapon.

No matter.

The knife would be useless on the bear, and I wasn't thinking of suicide.

Not yet.

I had nothing left but my underwear. I couldn't give it my boots. My boots were my last hope. There is no way I could have run on that shale without boots.

And then, quite suddenly, I was very much aware of the fact that I was wearing almost no clothes.

It should have been irrelevant, but it wasn't. It seemed very important somehow. It wasn't the cold -- it was the feeling of exposure, of vulnerability. The jeans and the shirt and the parka were, in themselves, no protection from the bear, but, without them, I was almost without humanity.

I felt my nakedness.

I kept going, but I was fast losing all hope.

Then I lifted my eyes eastward to the mountains of the PreCambrian shield. I was looking for something -- anything that might help. What I saw was that the mountains, falling toward the water, were going to cut off my path along the beach. I wasn't going to be able to get around those mountains. It would, quite literally, be the end of the road for me. I let my eyes wander down the ridge of hills looking for some sort of path that would continue along the beach.

And then I saw it.

Nestled into the spot where the mountains came down to the sea was the campsite.

I couldn't see any sign of people. If there was someone there, they probably didn't see me, so with what seemed my last breath, I called out for help and continued running. There was no answer. From the distance, the camp building looked like a tar-paper shack from a South American slum -- I wondered whether it would withstand the bear. It just might and, in any case, there was bound to be *something* in the camp to use against the bear.

The camp looked about two hundred yards away.

Trying not to think about it, I shucked my bra as a last appeasement to the bear and, with my hands crossed over my chest for support, I started sprinting.

Between me and the camp was a river and like most rivers in the area its banks were in sedge meadow and muck. You can't sprint through sedge meadow. I moved across that river bank in an absolute nightmare of slow motion. I was wretchedly conscious of the apple green moss and the flowers. In its own way, a sedge meadow is beautiful. But with each step, my boots sank deeper and deeper into the muck. The muck, like quicksand, was grabbing at me -- refusing to let me pass. I could hear it sucking me up.

Finally, I was through the meadow and wading the river. The cold water was battering at limbs already numb with cold and exhaustion. Once through the river, I started up the other bank -- there was less muck on the south side.

Shale had never looked so good. There were only about a hundred more yards to go before I reached the shack and whatever safety it represented.

Out of habit I looked back once more to see the bear picking over my bra, and -- perhaps because I wasn't watching my step -- I tripped. I put out my hands to keep myself from falling but it was too late. I fell hard. I had to get up, and just then I wasn't sure that I *could* get up. I was scraped all over from the shale and I thought I might have broken my ankle.

I pulled myself up. It was torture. But I knew that I had to keep running. With the first step the ankle buckled and I fell again. I *couldn't* run.

The bear was gaining on me, but it was not moving as quickly as it had been. I wasn't even certain it was coming toward me.

I couldn't run -- I couldn't even walk. By sheer force of will, I managed to drag myself another fifteen feet, and I dropped to the ground in an incline full of poppies -- yellow and white arctic poppies.

I was conscious of the wild flowers, delicate, transient.

I was conscious of the warmth of the sun and of the pebble in my boot.

I was glad I had kept my glasses. It was important that I could still see.

The campsite was barely two hundred feet away, and I knew I would never make it.

Maybe if I didn't move it wouldn't see me -- with God's help.

Now, all I could do was wait, and play dead.

The bear was very close. I could see it no more than twenty feet away. It was sitting back on its haunches and moving its head, almost bird-like, first in one direction and then the other -- as if looking for something. The smell of the bear was overpowering. I had never smelled anything so awful in my life. With body odour like that you could use mace as a cologne. Then it was facing me again. An ugly, ugly thing. It was a dull yellow white except for the black eyes and nose and the gaping cavern of a mouth. Its posture seemed grotesque, its features inhuman and cruel -- a monster with an appetite.

It was going to eat me and there wasn't a damn thing I could do about it.

I wanted to be able to faint. I wanted to be able to go suddenly unconscious in a field of flowers knowing that I didn't have to see or feel anything until I was safely dead or until the bear, thinking I was dead, had gone on its way. But I knew I wouldn't faint. I was not the sort of person to be able to faint. Instead, I started to prepare myself for death.

Shma Yisrael, Adonai Elohenu, Adonai Echod.

Hear O Israel the Lord our God, the Lord is One.

Blessed be the name of his glorious kingdom from this time forth and for evermore. . . .

I forced myself to act dead. I lay there huddled into a knot -- a near naked, pathetic, and almost comic figure. Naomi Solomon, doctoral candidate and CIA agent extraordinaire, lying curled up like a baby in the arctic wind waiting to be eaten by a brutal senseless brainless creature.

Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One. . . .

If I was going to die, I would be prepared for death. There was some comfort in that. And, with a kind of critical detachment, I wondered if my father over two thousand miles to the south was repeating the same prayers. I knew that my brother, in Israel, was probably welcoming in the Sabbath with those words. I wasn't going to die like an animal. I was going to die with a benediction on my lips. But the indignity of it. The indignity of lying out in the middle of the wilderness -- naked except for a scrap of underwear and my boots -- and waiting for a dumb animal without feeling, or intelligence, or compassion to come and just slap me out of existence.

Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One. . . .

Really, it wasn't so bad. There were much worse ways to die. Infinitely worse. I could die, like my father's family had, in a German gas chamber with nothing at all on and watching all the people I loved die as well.

My death would be much better than that. My death was going to be quick and easy and it was going to be death in the singular. You can deal with death in the singular.

Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One. . . .

The words seemed to have acquired a life of their own. It didn't matter the indignity of it. I was a human being and that thing coming toward me through the shale was a dumb beast. I was a human being. I couldn't be made ridiculous, if I could still laugh at myself, and the thought of me lying there all curled up and waiting for some dumb bear to eat me for lunch was almost funny.

Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One. . . .

I could hear its every step, but I remained perfectly still. I had the control almost not to breathe. One way or another, it would be over in moments. I closed my eyes -- I preferred them open, but I knew I would blink. I made my breath as shallow as possible. I was afraid of the thought of a lingering death, but, please God, any good slap was likely to be quickly fatal.

Bears don't toy with their victims.

I could feel the bear coming toward me. I could feel it hesitate for a moment. I could feel its hot breath, smell it.

I stopped breathing.

It was staring down at me. Considering my body. Wondering if I was worth a slap or two -- or a nibble.

For those few seconds the world was totally silent.

Hear O Israel the Lord our God, the Lord in one. . . .

In the silence I heard the sound of two twigs snapping.

And the bear fell on me.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Sing onto the Lord a new song.

It was still dark. But it was a different dark. A dank mildewed dark.
If this was heaven, it was way over-rated.

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