

Chapters One - Four

POLAR BEAR DAWN



Lyle Nicholson

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CHAPTER ONE

*T*HE POLAR BEAR HAD WALKED miles from the shores of the Beaufort Sea to the Arctic Oil Camp. The sea ice had thinned, the seals were scarce. The bear was hungry. After marching across the windswept January snow, he arrived at the camp on the second day.

The lights of the camp shone like a beacon in the winter's darkness. Large flood lamps made pools of light around the massive camp that was stacked on pylons ten feet above the frozen earth.

The bear moved easily underneath the living quarters of the camp. The structures were stacked three high and radiated out from the main buildings. Humans were active inside. The bear's keen sense of smell picked up food, lots of food.

He could pick up the smell of a seal three miles away, even under the ice. The camp was a sensory overload. Bacon, grits, potatoes, beef, and the smell of frying eggs assaulted his senses. His stomach ached. He had not eaten in many days.

Large machines hummed from the generating plants, and trucks moved constantly to and from the camp. The smell of food was mixed with that of diesel and gas that powered the large camp. A twenty-four-hour commercial laundry shot off clouds of steam.

His last meal had been a tub of lard. He had scared a cook away as he was about to drop the lard in a rubbish bin. The lard had been licked down to its last bit of goodness before it froze. His large tongue had made short work of the meal.

Now he moved cautiously below the living quarters of the camp. Metal stairways led away from emergency exits every twenty feet. He moved between them, using them as cover, always aware of the humans and the threat they posed. They were a source of food and a source of danger. His massive paws walked the fine line.

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He had been shot twice with rubber bullets from a shotgun and frightened with an air horn by the humans. The bear had not liked the experience. He tried to keep away from them but close enough to their food. If he waited by the stairs, they would drop things when he rushed at them.

He was waiting patiently now, under a set of stairs. The fierce wind ruffled his fur. He put his nose down between his paws. He did not sleep. His stomach growled as his hunger increased.

A noise from above startled the bear—a crash of metal and a loud thud that pierced the Arctic night. A large, dark object bounced twice down the metal stairs and landed in a heap at the base.

Startled at first, the bear backed away from the noise and the object, but curiosity and survival eventually moved him forward. The object was a human. It lay in the swirling snow. There was no movement.

The bear approached slowly—his first instinct was always to protect himself from injury, the second was to survive. He nudged the body. There was blood on the forehead, the eyes stared. The bear looked only briefly around before accepting this offering of warm meat.

What should have been a feast for the hungry bear was rudely interrupted. Oil workers getting ready for their 7:00 a.m. shift had looked out the windows of their rooms. It didn't matter that the grey Arctic dawn would not appear for another four hours—the habit of looking outside in the morning is ingrained in humans.

What workers saw at first looked like a National Geographic moment: a large polar bear outlined by halogen lights from the building feasting on something. Then, as one, the workers realized the something was a human. They jammed the camp switchboard with calls.

Security guards rushed to the door, grabbing their Arctic survival gear and shotguns loaded with rubber bullets. In minutes they stood outside the door, the large bear below them. One crouched on the second uppermost rung, the other stood.

The first rubber bullet hit the bear in the hindquarters. He spun around, still on all fours, his mass covering the body, his coveted prize of food. Another shot rang out. It echoed amongst the two buildings. This one hit the bear in his shoulder.

He stood. He could now see his attackers on the stairs. Ten feet of white polar bear rose up, his massive paws raised in defense of his meal. The third shot was directed in his chest. The oil workers who watched from their rooms above could hear the woof of air that escaped the bear.

The bear had had enough. The humans with their rubber bullets had knocked the wind out of him. He dropped down to all fours, and with one longing sideways glance at the body, he ambled away. A short distance away, he stopped under the buildings, in the shadows, and watched to see if the humans would give him back his dinner.

The security guards cautiously made their way down to the body and began radioing for backup. There were no signs of life left in the body, and the Arctic cold was already turning it to ice.

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CHAPTER TWO

SENIOR SECURITY OFFICER TROY MERCURY was in the Arctic Oil Camp gym running wind sprints and intervals on the treadmill; he was working out hard and enjoying it. His shift had finished at 0600 hours, and he had wanted to have a workout before breakfast.

The TV, turned to CNN, was blasting the latest reports of Politicians behaving badly in the lower forty-eight states. Both his pager and cell phone were vibrating in the recesses of the treadmill. He couldn't hear them over the noise of the television.

A few minutes later, Troy slowed the machine down, seeing Junior Security Officer Chuck Lindgren come into the room. He turned the TV down with the remote on the treadmill. His cell phone and pager were still vibrating.

"We have a dead body outside of the D wing, and Security Chief Braddock has requested your presence ASAP, Sir," Chuck said as he approached Troy, looking stressed out. Chuck was an ex-marine straight from Iraq and Afghanistan, but dead bodies anywhere still unnerved him.

Troy grabbed the towel off the machine and began to dry himself off. "What's the situation Chuck? How'd they find him? Does anyone know how he died?"

"Well, they claim he was attacked by a polar bear. Caucasian male, about twenty-seven year's old, contractor." Chuck rattled off the stats as if he were standing to attention in front of his former army commander. Everyone liked Chuck—he was a little too formal and military sometimes, but he meant well. Chuck was still very military in appearance, his crew cut, and pressed coveralls and shiny boots stood out.

Troy stepped down off the treadmill. They were the same height, tall, but Troy was lean, dark skinned, and dark haired. Troy was born in Alaska to a Dene Native mother, and a Caucasian father.

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On the reservation he'd been called a "baked potato and fake native," by the reservation kids, in Anchorage the white street kids had called him worse names. He'd used his fists to explain to them the errors of their ways. His attitude now tempered, still showed.

"No shit, a polar bear. Well that figures, a white guy getting eaten by a polar bear. The Indians are too smart to get eaten by bears." Troy broke into a smile and gave Chuck a pat on the shoulder. "Tell Braddock I'll be right there."

"Thanks for the information, Sir. I'll try to have you with me when I meet a bear. And I'll let Braddock know." Chuck smiled, threw an unnecessary salute, whirled around, and hurried out of the gym.

Troy headed for his room, which was close to the gym. He pushed through the heavy fire door that separated the main quad from the sleeping quarters. A large sign said "DAY SLEEPERS. PLEASE BE QUIET." Troy was supposed to be one of them.

He'd been flippant about the bear attack with Chuck, partly because it was his nature and to relax Chuck, but a bear attack at the Arctic Oil Camp was not a funny thing. The security team tracked polar bears from one camp to another and sent out alerts when they were near. Now, one had gotten through the entire network of camps and had somehow killed a man. This was not how his security team was supposed to roll.

In his room, he stripped off his workout gear and hit the shower, glad that the guy in the next room was not using the shared shower. After toweling off, he put on his security coveralls, attached his Glock .40 sidearm, and grabbed his gear: survival parka, bib overalls, felt pack boots, and leather mitts with woolen inner liners. The weather forecast for that day was minus forty degrees Fahrenheit. *A shitty day to be outside, living or dead*, he thought.

He jogged down to the security office at the front entrance of the camp, picked up his two-way radio, and ran down to the D wing. He put on his survival gear when he reached the exit door, where a security officer was putting yellow tape over a red stain. Troy was going ten feet down the stairs. Ten feet in minus forty—a cold that causes frostbite in less than a minute to exposed skin. Today, the weather would leave teeth marks.

As Troy came out the door, he could see a group of men, all encased in Arctic gear, and standing around the body. Two men were kneeling with shotguns pointed to something—something under the camp pylons. The thought only briefly entered Troy's head, "looks like Custer's last freaking stand."

The group gave off clouds of steam as breath escaped out of hoods. The lights from the camp buildings gave the group an eerie glow. No clouds of air escaped from the body on the ground.

The men's faces were covered by the hoods, and Troy could only identify them from name badges. He came up beside Security Chief Braddock. Braddock had to turn his hood towards Troy and move within inches of him so they could hear each other in the wind.

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“Chief, what have we got here? Some guy out for a smoke and the bear gets him?” Troy asked.

Braddock yelled above the wind. “Troy, we got blood spatter on that door up there. I think this guy got a helping hand out the door. I’ve called in police and forensics. They’ll be here by noon.”

“Shit,” Troy said. He looked at the scene. The name Marc Lafontaine was on the parka of the body, and the company contractor name read CLEARWATER TECHNOLOGIES. He could see where the bear had been clawing—getting down to business. He had seen men killed by animals before. Never pretty.

Troy thought about how they had never had a murder in their camp before. Fights, sure, lots of those as men and women in too-close quarters and in the too-long darkness could develop short fuses. The security team would break it up and send the offending parties home, back to the lower forty-eight or Anchorage. They’d cool off, get some sun, and come back happy. But murder, no, not until this.

Troy’s thoughts were interrupted as his radio came to life at his shoulder. “*Security assistance needed. We have a 10-52 reported in E wing, room 330. Over.*” It was the camp dispatch operator. A 10-52 was an accident or personnel injury.

Troy yelled to Braddock that he’d take it and ran back up the stairs. Once inside, he stripped off his survival gear and saw Chuck, and told him to follow him. They had to run back down the corridor to the central building to connect to the E wing and then up three flights of stairs to get to the room.

When they got there, they saw a crowd of workers outside the room. Troy and Chuck motioned them aside and walked in. A young female oil worker was weeping beside the bed. On the bed lay a young woman. Her eyes bulged, her face was blue.

Troy calmly moved the weeping oil worker away, and Chuck guided her from the room. The woman on the bed was dead. She had headphones in her ears—as if she had been quietly listening to music just before her death.

Troy heard the worker who found her tell Chuck that the bathroom door on her side had been locked. “It had been locked for over an hour and I needed to get ready for my shift,” she explained. “I heard nothing in the bathroom, so I decided to go in her room to find out what was up.” She’d found her dead.

Troy walked to the door and looked at the doorframe. The names of all room occupants were listed on the doors. The label read, CONSTANCE LAFONTAINE—CLEARWATER TECHNOLOGIES.

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CHAPTER THREE

MATTHEW CORDELE WALKED INTO THE Captains' Club Lounge on the top floor of the Captain Cook Hotel to have breakfast and read his *Wall Street Journal*. Cordele was in his mid-thirties, had well-groomed blond hair, blue eyes, a clear complexion, and movie-star looks. People always seemed to smile at him as he went by, wondering if they knew him, or why he looked familiar. He would smile back, a wide, perfectly aligned flash of quick brilliance that meant nothing to him and everything to those he smiled at, as they wondered again who he might be.

Cordele had been born with natural good looks, a love for fine things, and a knack for getting what he wanted for nothing. He was a great con man—he had done a stint in the US Army in Logistics and had been forced out over unproven accusations of supplies being diverted to his own uses. Cordele could have fought his release, but he knew there were too many other things that could have come up in his trail.

Matthew Cordele was in Anchorage, Alaska, using his cover as a logistics consultant to oversee a mission in the Arctic—a mission that was to make him a lot of money. His main concern was that the people hired to do the mission, hired for their expertise, were not getting along. He'd been sent to Anchorage to sort things out before anything got out of hand. They were supposed to meet him tomorrow on their flight back from the high Arctic.

His cell phone vibrated, and Cordele looked down at the message. He realized he was too late: his main contact reported that he had been required to “eliminate” the two technicians, as they were about to blow the mission. He dropped his *Wall Street Journal*, patted his lips with a napkin, and went back to his room, where he dialed the number of his boss in Seattle. He had never seen his boss—had been hired by him over the phone and was given missions by him over the phone—and his voice

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always unnerved him. This voice ordered Cordele to places like Singapore, Hong Kong, or Dubai to ensure clients secured favorable contracts for their companies, and if things stood in their way, then Cordele hired the necessary forces to remove obstacles. “Remove” could mean blackmail or death. And Cordele’s bank account grew.

The call was answered on the second ring. “Go ahead,” said the voice on the other end of the line. Cordele was never sure of the age of the voice; it was male, deep, self-assured, never a sign of excitement.

“We’ve hit a snag at the Arctic Oil Camp,” Cordele said. He hurried to explain. “Our contact sent me a text stating the two technicians were about to blow the mission and reveal the intent to Arctic Oil. It seems they wanted to expose our operation for a million dollars. He took them both out.” Cordele noticed he was sweating. His upper lip was moist; he wiped it with his cotton handkerchief as he awaited a reply.

“Did they put the devices in place?” the voice asked with no inflection.

“Yes, everything is in place, and my operative has the controls.” Cordele sat down on the couch in his room. He could sense where the conversation would go.

“Good, what about our other target, the one on the Beach?” the voice asked.

“I have a report it’s ready as well.”

“The other two technicians will have to be removed as well. Do this immediately, before the news reaches them—and before the news reaches McAllen.” The voice in Seattle hung up.

It’s that simple, Cordele thought. Two more people would have to die for him and his boss to make the massive amount of money they were about to make on this mission. The Beach was the code name for Fort McMurray, Alberta, home of the largest deposit of oil, sitting in something called tar sands, in North America. Their devices were meant to sabotage the flow of oil from the tar sands and from Alaska.

Two people had died that morning, and two more were about to die somewhere in Canada as well. To Cordele, death and money were commerce. Sometimes one just had to be traded for the other, especially when it benefited him.

His next phone call was to his counterpart in Fort McMurray, John Parsons, a man similar in age to himself but a large, strapping Newfoundlander with red hair, freckles, and smile that spoke of bad dentistry and too much rum and coke.

“What’s up?” Parsons asked.

Cordele quickly filled Parsons in on the situation in Alaska and the command from their boss. They shared the same sense of unease about the boss. Failure was never an option.

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Parsons spoke quickly. “Look, they let me know they installed the last device, and our man has the controls. They’re out near the tar ponds now. He could do them there . . . hide the bodies . . . know what I mean?”

“You Canadians, always the efficient ones... let me know when it’s done,” Cordele said. He put away his phone and headed back to the Captains’ Lounge to have breakfast. The morning’s work had made him hungry.

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CHAPTER FOUR

THE NEXT CALL PARSONS MADE was to Emmanuel Fuentes. Fuentes's main credential: he got things done. He was the handler and driver for the two technicians from Clearwater—Kevin Buckner and Alicia Sylvester, two doe-eyed environmental activists that Fuentes hated the moment he met them.

They had clashed immediately and hardly spoke to one another except to accomplish their mission. Kevin and Alicia had signed on to destabilize the oil sands. They had been given the technology to do it, and that was what they cared about. Fuentes had signed on for the money, only for the money. He hated the cold he was subjected to in northern Canada.

When Fuentes's cell phone rang, he had to take it out of his inner parka jacket. He had found out over the past two months that any cell phone left in an outer pocket would freeze. He hated Canada. He swore at it all the time. "Fucking frio, fucking cold Canada," was his favorite expression.

"Yes," he answered, irritated that his hands were out of his gloves to take the call. "What is it?" His breath rose in clouds of steam in the extreme cold.

Parsons was to the point. "Fuentes, there's been a major cluster fuckup in Alaska. You have to eliminate and dispose of our two technicians."

Fuentes's dark features broke into a smile for the first time in two months. "This would be my, greatest pleasure." He smiled into the phone. "We are at the perfect place to get this done. I will call you back when my job is finished. Thank you, muchas gracias."

Fuentes looked over at Alicia and Kevin. They had wondered off to a tar pond. The last device had been installed, and they wanted to take one last look at the devastation of the landscape caused by the oil sands operations.

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Fuentes trudged through the deep snow and came up behind them. They were looking at some wolf tracks by the pond and commenting on how man was destroying the wildlife.

Kevin was very tall and slim. At six foot seven, he towered over the five foot eight Fuentes, but size never mattered to Fuentes's knife. He pulled out his large-blade hunting knife, and in one swift motion, he grabbed the back of Kevin's parka hood, pulled him back towards him, and plunged the knife into Kevin's throat.

Kevin's blood shot out in a hot stream in the frigid air. Steam rose from the snow where it dropped. Alicia screamed his name and knelt by his body.

Fuentes stood over Alicia. He waited for her, to see her next actions. She rose up. She was very small, a petite young lady who was now in the shadow of her killer.

Her eyes flashed defiance, and "asshole" was all she said before he cut her throat.

He carefully pulled out his cell phone and called Parsons. "It is finished."

"Where are they?" asked Parsons.

"A tailings pond, with lovely wolf tracks all around. I don't think too many workers come here."

"Excellent, get back here to Fort Mac and we can finish our operations."

"Mucho fantastico. I cannot wait to leave your wonderful country."

"You are a lying little Spanish prick."

"You wound me when you call me a little prick. Please use the term 'El Grande' when you call me a prick," Fuentes protested.

Parsons finished his call with Fuentes and then placed a call to Cordele in Alaska.

When Cordele answered, he simply said, "It's cleaned up."

"Fine, good job."

Just off of downtown Fort McMurray, and about a two-hour drive from many of the oil sands mining operations, Royal Canadian Mounted Police Detective Bernadette Callahan was sitting in her Jeep. The engine was running, her two-way radio was on, and she was scanning her cell phone for recent YouTube videos.

Bernadette was bored. She had been parked outside the house with yellow police tape since 9:00 a.m., and it was now past 11:00 a.m. She was waiting for the coroner and the crime scene investigator to show up, and both were late, as they had been detained by another crime scene on the other side of town.

She was at the scene of a double homicide—a shotgun blast with some knife stabbing thrown in. A party gone wrong with some drug dealers, and no one had heard a thing through the loud music. When dawn's first light came, the ravens started to circle the house.

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Ravens will always lead you to fresh meat, she thought. Bernadette had been raised on a Dene reservation in northern Alberta, the daughter of a Native mother and an Irish Catholic father who had wandered off. Bernadette had always walked a line between her native and Irish roots.

Bernadette had joined the RCMP at the age of twenty-two, when politicians were clamoring to bring about an equalization of minorities and gender in the force. Bernadette had made it on both counts and had to work harder than anyone else to get respect.

She had worked her way from one detachment to the next, always staying below the radar but proving skilled enough at solving crimes to become indispensable. It also helped that she took no crap from the male RCMP officers. Her last tangle with a senior officer had left him with bruised balls. She had proven hers were bigger, and she was shipped off to the detective squad—probably because they wanted to get rid of her, but she didn't care.

Bernadette was thirty-five, with medium-length reddish brown hair, light brown skin, and green eyes. She was of average height with a muscular frame that showed off her dedication to the gym. She needed to be able to defend herself, against bad guys, but mostly, she needed to keep her weight down. She loved doughnuts and junk food.

She balanced a double cream, double sugar large Tim Horton's coffee on her knee. A maple-glazed doughnut was standing by. She would hate herself for this later, but this was now.

As Bernadette scrolled down the YouTube site, she came across the video of the polar bear making a meal of a man. The description below stated: "Polar bear in Prudhoe Bay, Alaska, eating an oil worker." Thousands of hits cheered on the polar bear.

Bernadette shifted in her seat, took a swig of her coffee, and sighed. *What is the world coming to?* she thought. She had no idea how much this particular incident would involve her in the very near future.