

# The Dancing Bear

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Joyce & Stanley Schmidt

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**P**acing the rocky shore, Nanuk (as some of the local humans called him and his kind) swept the water between its edge and the horizon with hungry eyes. He'd had nothing to eat in months. He could feel his reserves getting low, and the wait seemed longer every year. He could see ice out there, but it was still just isolated floes well offshore, not the solid deck he needed for hunting seals. A few of the clumps even bumped up against the shore, but he couldn't count on a way to get from one to another. A few days ago it had looked more promising, with a solid layer attaching itself to the rocks and extending well out into the big water. Then it had turned warm again, creeping above freezing often enough to undo the progress he'd been eagerly watching. Now he could no longer walk more than a few strides away from the rocks, and the seals didn't even need breathing holes.

Nanuk paced a lengthy stretch of shore, first one way, then the other, and decided he was wasting time and energy. Better to hole up and conserve what little he had left until conditions improved. He turned inland, walking deliberately and watching for a snowdrift deep enough to dig a good den.

After a few long strides he stopped, listening intently and scanning the sky. A faint whirring sound had caught his attention, a little like one of the horrid sky monsters the humans somehow put up there sometimes, but much quieter. A moment later he saw it, too. It even looked a little like the monsters, but much smaller.

Or was it? Could it be one of the things he dreaded, but so far away it looked and sounded smaller than it was?

No. He could tell by the way his eyes tracked it that it really was close and small. Did "small" mean it wasn't a threat? Maybe not, though he couldn't see how something so small could be a danger to him. Still, if the humans had something to do with it . . .

His hackles rose as it got closer and louder. He rose up on his hind legs, an act that usually intimidated anything he wanted to intimidate. This time the flying thing with the whirly blur on top just kept getting closer to his head, till he could barely focus on it. He tried a couple of times to bat it out of the air, something that should have been trivial for his big forepaws, but it seemed to anticipate his moves and dodged swiftly before he could connect.

That made him angry. He snarled and tried a couple more times, with no success. That made him a little afraid. He snarled louder and swung harder, but the motion almost threw him off balance, and he dropped back to all fours. Balancing on three legs, he batted unsuccessfully at the thing with his right forepaw.

Then it landed on top of his head. No longer able to see it, but feeling unfamiliar pinches and stings above and behind his eyes, he roared, but nothing changed. He batted at the top of his head, trying to knock the thing off.

But to no avail. It kept doing whatever it was doing up there, and after a moment it occurred to him that he was no longer afraid so much as curious. What *was* it doing? Had the humans invented some new way to torment him for no reason?

Then, abruptly, something changed. He didn't knock it off, but suddenly it let go and was flying away. But it had left something behind. He couldn't knock that off, either, but as he watched most of the thing fly away, its whirl fading with it, he realized that he didn't feel any worse. Both the fear and the curiosity gently faded to calm acceptance. Even if the humans were behind the incident, they didn't seem to have hurt him.

Maybe they weren't so bad after all.

He felt his whole body relax, and soon he forgot all about the flyer and went back to his business. He'd seen a good den site just a little ahead and to the left, and a short while later he was digging into a big drift, eagerly anticipating a cozy nap.

Polar bear patrol would not have been most people's first choice for a job, but it suited Jake Flintrock just fine. His angakkuq—or shaman—days were behind him, mostly, but being out here, typically on his own, helped him keep alive his old feeling of oneness with the land and the other creatures who shared it. He even relished the solitude. People were okay, in moderation, but alone was good, too, and Cape Merry at dawn was a great place to be alone. From his post atop the knoll, he could see a long way in all directions: the scattered lights of Churchill to the southeast; the broad expanse of the river and Hudson Bay to the north and west; and the lonely ruin of the Prince of Wales Fort beyond the river. The

lone cannon of the Cape Merry Battery, on this side, still aimed protectively out over the water even though it hadn't been fired, and there'd been no need for its protection, in centuries. All around him the ground sloped gently away, looking like rough seas frozen and turned to stone, then lightly frosted with ice and snow.

A tourist had told him once that he made an imposing figure, standing there on the rounded summit, silhouetted against the sky of steely gray, lightly brushed with subtle pinks, warm in his parka with its fur ruff not quite hiding his face, cradling his shotgun in its seal-skin bag to keep it warm in case he ever needed to use it. He rather liked the image, and found the comment oddly pleasing, but he'd never let it go to his head. He was just out here to do a job. An important job, and he was proud that he did it well—usually. He'd saved a few lives over the years, both human and bear, but he was still occasionally haunted by the fewer times he hadn't succeeded—times he'd been too late, or too slow, or not sufficiently in tune with the bear.

On occasions when he tired of solitude, it was usually easy enough to take a break from it. Not far from him stood two bright red Adirondack chairs for him and/or his partner to rest when they wanted or needed. Usually he had a partner; today it was supposed to be Jeff, but Jeff was under the weather and Jake actually was alone.

Or was he?

He frowned. A moving speck caught his eye, moving this way from town. He found it in his binoculars and groaned.

It was Molly MacIlvane—again. She'd been a good friend of his once; now she was the town drunk, a sad shadow of her former self. She blamed him for that, and felt compelled to tell him so at frequent intervals. Watching the way she walked, he could tell she was coming to do it again, and she'd been drinking.

He sighed and started toward her. He'd have to confront her whenever they met, and better that should happen before she got too far from town. "Molly!" he yelled when he was close enough that she might hear him. His breath made little clouds when his voice went out. He waved his arms. "Stop! Go back!"

She just kept coming, staggering a little but with enough control to stay basically on

course. He could see her shouting too, but couldn't hear her. The distance between them continued to shrink, and finally he heard her voice. "What's the matter, old man? Afraid to face me?"

He groaned. Hardly afraid, he thought, but hardly eager. Now that he could hear her, she should be able to hear him, too. "Go back, Molly," he yelled. "It's dangerous out here."

She was close now—too close. She stopped right in front of him, puffing booze fumes and cloudlets into his face as she said, "Dangerous, eh? Just like it was when that bear got Johnny."

He winced, for multiple reasons. "That was years ago, Molly," he said calmly. "I've told you a million times how sorry I am that I couldn't stop it. Sometimes you can, sometimes you can't. I'm sorry about what happened to your boy, but he shouldn't have been where he was."

"Like me now, eh? Like me now." She glared as if daring him to answer.

"Well, yes," he said, very quietly and evenly. "I'd hate to see something happen to you, too. But being out here by yourself is asking for trouble, and there's nothing I can do to bring Johnny back. The coast looks clear now. Go back to town. Get inside. Stay safe."

She stared at him for quite a while, her expression unreadable. Then she grinned, in a way that she might have meant to look flirtatious, but just came across as creepy. "Walk me back? Make sure I stay safe?"

He closed his eyes and shook his head almost imperceptibly. Whenever she did this, he felt pain and sympathy, thinking of the person she had once been and how much of that had slipped away. Sometimes he even felt a bit of guilt: maybe there had been something more he could have done, back then.

But he'd been over this hundreds of times, and he still thought he'd done the best he could. Sometimes a person's best isn't good enough.

And there was nothing he could do to change it now. "I'm sorry, Molly," he said softly. "I can't do that. The patrol is understaffed today and there may be other people out here. I have to stay where I can see as much as possible."

She stared at him a little longer, then muttered, "And so you let me down. Again."

With no further words, she turned and start-

ed back toward town with slow, faltering steps. He watched her slowly shrink into the distance, occasionally wondering if he should have followed her at least partway.

When she'd faded almost completely into the background, casting a long shadow as the pink brightened ever so slowly, he was about to look away and try to forget about her. Then, out of the corner of his eye, another movement caught his attention. He lifted his binoculars and focused on it.

A bear—a big male he recognized right away as one that had caused trouble before. Two terms in "bear jail," one relocation, and now he was back. Walking toward town, just like Molly, but a couple of hundred meters behind her.

And that distance was shrinking. He pulled out his radio, kept warm inside his parka so the batteries would work, and called the dispatcher. "Molly's been out here again," he said. "Sober enough to stay upright, but not much more. I told her to go back to town and she's on her way, but she's alone. . . . Yes, so am I; Jeff's sick. Anyway, 724 is back. I thought we'd got rid of him, but he's found his way back. He's headed toward town, too. I think he's following Molly."

"Can you intervene?" dispatcher Sharon asked through the radio crackles.

"Negative. They're both too far from me. They're closer to Ralph. See if he can."

"Will do. Stand by." There was a pause while Sharon tried to raise Ralph and talk to him. Then she was back on Jake's frequency. "Ralph sees them. He'll see what he can do."

"Thanks." Jake put his radio away but left it on in case of new developments. He raised his binoculars just in time to see Molly disappear over a knoll, but the bear was still in sight, still headed the same way.

As soon as the bear passed over the crest and out of view, Jake saw a series of bright flashes from the other side and heard, after a brief delay, a series of loud bangs, each followed by a long whistle and a slightly different bang. Jake relaxed just a little; evidently Sharon had gotten right through to Ralph. The flashes, bangs, and whistles meant he was firing cracker shells to scare the bear away from where he was, toward somewhere else.

But would it be enough?

Jake hoped it would, but he had his

doubts—especially when, a half hour later, he heard and then saw a helicopter circling an area near the town, sweeping the ground with glaring searchlights, its horn bleating loudly.

And then sirens and new flashing lights on the ground in that same area.

That afternoon found Jake in Phil Bailey's office, feeling like a snowshoe hare being scrutinized by an Arctic fox. "She . . . died?" he echoed. Oh, no, he thought. Not again. Aloud, he said, "I thought Ralph had it."

"So did Ralph, for a while. It didn't turn out that way." Phil paused, looking fixedly into Jake's eyes, his expression betraying little. Usually Jake thought he was a pretty good patrol supervisor, even though he had little experience out on the tundra; but Jake often wished he were easier to read. His squarish face and iron-gray hair could look kindly, sympathetic, or stern; more often it was just enigmatic. "What happened, Jake? Phil said you talked to her first. Why did it wind up Ralph's problem?"

"She was headed his way and was closer to him than to me before I saw the bear. When she started back to town, I kept an eye on her as long as I could, but I have to watch my whole zone, too. Other folks go out there, too, and I have to watch out for all of them." Jake tried to change the subject. "Where did it happen?"

"Near the cemetery. Any idea what she was doing out there?"

"The usual," Jake said. "Visiting her son." Before Phil could comment, Jake added, "When he died, she unraveled and never got over it. She goes to his grave a lot, and she comes to give me a hard time. She can't move beyond it."

Phil made a dismissive gesture that Jake found annoying. "Well, there's no undoing it now. It's not as if anybody's going to particularly miss her, but—"

"*I'll miss her!*" Jake interrupted, as explosively as his even temperament allowed. "Yes, she's been a pest lately, and she had nobody left who was close to her. But I remember the fine woman she used to be, and don't you forget that either."

"Sorry," Phil said tightly. "I'll try not to. But I didn't know her as well as you did." Now *he*

changed the subject. "The thing is, the fact that something like this happened to *anybody* makes us—the patrol—look bad. It's bad for our reputation; it makes it look like we can't prevent this sort of thing. And that's bad for the future of the tourist business."

"People only hear about the incidents that go bad," said Jake. "They don't hear about the many more that we defuse."

"Exactly," said Phil. "They only hear about the ones that go bad—and there've been too many of those lately. So what are we going to do about it? What are *you* going to do about it?"

Jake forced himself to answer calmly. "I'm just one patrolman. What I can do is just what I've been doing: protect my zone to the best of my ability. Everybody else out there needs to do the same—and they already are. There aren't enough of us, Phil. And I don't know what we can do about that. There aren't many people living here, and I don't see how we can spare any more for patrol duty."

"Or maybe," Phil muttered, "there are too many—" He stopped abruptly, as if suddenly realizing that what he had started to say was politically incorrect. But before he could figure out how to change course, the two-way radio on his desk squawked for attention. Phil cut off abruptly to listen.

It was Ralph. "Sorry, Boss. More trouble. Not in my zone, but Paul has his hands full and asked me to relay his report. There's a group of young guys out in Graffiti Alley daring each other to tease a bear and pose for selfies with—"

Phil groaned audibly. "Let me guess. High school types."

"No, a bit older than that—and not local. Tourists. Young American businessmen, not long out of college and way too full of themselves. But listen, Phil. Those details don't matter. Right now Paul's got these guys out here making trouble, and if it goes too far it'll be bad for all of us. We need some help."

Phil frowned for several seconds, then said, "I'll come myself, and bring my radio in case there are more calls." He glanced at Jake and added, "I'll bring Jake, too. See you in a few minutes." He disconnected and stood up. "I think we both need to see this firsthand."

Jake almost objected that he was off duty now and if they were really so shorthanded he ought to get back to his own post, but quickly thought better of it. Wordlessly, he followed Phil out to the little tundra buggy parked outside.

Graffiti Alley wasn't an alley, of course; just a stretch of tundra road not far east of town, with big rock faces at the roadside that certain folks thought cried out for their inimitable decorations. Jake thought it was pathetic that defacing a place of beauty with spray paint was the only way some people would ever make their mark on the world, but he was used to it by now.

Riding shotgun as Phil drove—briskly—Jake saw even before they got there that the situation was even worse than he'd thought. The first thing he noticed was not the rowdies, or a bear, but three tundra rovers gathered in a tight circle like Conestoga wagons in an old western movie. They were impressive vehicles: like boxy white buses on steroids, crossed with an armored car, with tires five feet high and three feet wide. When several gathered like that, it always meant the guides on board had spotted something interesting, almost certainly involving at least one bear.

And in this case, Jake realized with a sinking feeling, almost certainly involving the rowdies Ralph had reported. Which meant at least a couple of dozen ecotourists would be witnessing whatever was happening.

It didn't take long to see what that was. As Phil pulled his buggy up next to Paul's, just past the big rovers, he saw Paul standing outside his buggy, shotgun under his right arm and bullhorn in his raised left hand. It boomed out his powerfully amplified voice: "Move SLOWLY away from the bear and toward me. Right now."

One of the three young men he was addressing yelled back a rude expletive, unamplified but unmistakable. "When I'm good and ready! Just one more picture!"

The speaker had to turn his head to the left to shout his defiance. Most of the time he was facing a big polar bear only twenty feet or so away. Two other humans stood beyond both the bear and the daredevil, both intent on their cellphones. The one wanting "just one more picture" at least had enough sense to

move *slowly* as he inched closer to the bear, but that was unlikely to be enough.

The bear, so far, looked perplexed but wary. But his gaze was intent on the human trio.

"No, *not* one more picture," Paul's bullhorn boomed. "Move away NOW. All three of you."

Jake frowned. This was not going to end well. Had he come on the scene earlier, he might have been able to placate both the bear and its tormentors enough to separate them safely. But he feared it was too late now. The bear—he wasn't sure if it was the same one that had attacked Molly—was increasingly on edge. It emitted a low rumble and slapped at the snow with its forepaws. The advancing young man hesitated briefly, then resumed his slow trek forward.

The bear clicked his teeth repeatedly. Paul put down his bullhorn and lifted his shotgun. The bear looked startled when the gun fired, and again when the cracker shell exploded near his head, harmlessly but loudly.

The bear rumbled again, louder, and stood up on his hind legs, towering ten feet over the tourist. It looked back and forth between him and Paul. The few observers on the open rear platforms of the rovers looked tense; most of them had retreated inside as if afraid of how what was happening might affect them.

Jake heard one of the cell photographers yell, "Wow, that's great! Just—"

The bear had had enough. He dropped back to all fours and walked calmly but briskly over to the guy trying to pose with him. With one casual swipe of a forepaw—not viciously, not savagely, but more like a picnicker swatting at a mosquito that had grown too annoying—he backhanded the man.

But an animal that weighs half a ton and has paws full of daggers doesn't have to be malicious to do damage. Mr. Smartphone went down with a loud grunt and a look of startled incredulity—and a red stain starting to seep through his torn parka.

His companions looked just as incredulous, and even more uncertain what to do. For a moment they did nothing. . . .

And then, as one, they started running toward their fallen friend—and the bear—emitting bloodcurdling yells and waving their arms wildly, evidently trying to make themselves look large.

It might have worked on a hundred-pound

black bear—but not on a thousand-pound polar. This one roared and charged toward them.

Jake lifted his gun and fired a cracker shell. It went off close to both bear and tormentors, and had the desired effect on all. Humans turned tail and ran back; the bear looked briefly at the fallen man, apparently decided he wasn't worthy of any further attention, and ambled off in the other direction.

A little too calmly for Jake's comfort. It seemed to him that this bear had become too acclimated to cracker shells.

But at least the immediate threat seemed to have passed. He pulled out his radio and called for an ambulance as he walked toward the fallen man to see what he could do while they waited. Paul was doing the same, and they met to examine and confer.

The so-called victim's name was Julius Farnsworth III, and he was more shaken than seriously injured. But he was sufficiently traumatized and had lost enough blood that the ambulance took him to the ER of Churchill's small hospital, and the staff made everybody else wait outside while they checked him over, did whatever they were going to do, and settled him in for the night. Jake, Paul, and Phil went back to check on him the next morning, and were told that he could have visitors, but only for a few minutes.

"Good morning, Mr. Farnsworth," Phil said. "I'm the polar bear patrol supervisor and these are two of our officers who helped you last night. How are you feeling this morning?"

"How do you think I'm feeling? I feel like I've been mauled by a polar bear." He wore several obvious bandages and no pretense of a smile. He seemed a bit groggy, likely sedated.

"Understandable," said Phil. "You were. Besides physical discomfort, do you feel anything else?"

"Like what?" *Like sheepishness*, Jake thought. *Like embarrassment*. But he didn't say it, and Farnsworth certainly didn't.

"Just wondered," Phil said neutrally. "If you think of anything you'd like to talk about, just let us know."

"Oh, I'm sure I will," said Farnsworth. "Later. I don't feel up to it now."

"Fair enough. We'll let you rest now. Hope you feel better soon." Phil nodded toward the door, and Jake and Paul followed him out.

Two young men were waiting in the hall and stepped toward them as soon as they emerged. The taller one, with close-cropped blond hair and a build that suggested football in his recent past, said, "You're the guys who called the ambulance last night?" His accent hailed from the southern U.S.

Phil nodded.

"Too little, too late," the football type said. "We're going to need your names."

"And we're going to need yours. I'm Phil Bailey, shift supervisor of the polar bear patrol. These are Jake Flintrock and Paul Schneller, two of my best patrolmen. And you are?"

"Rocky Campanelli," the tall blond said. He gestured at his companion, a shorter brunette who looked more like a wrestler. "This is Ed Ponder. You've already met our buddy in there. Recognize our names?"

"Nope."

"Julius and I are partners in a major law firm in Houston. If you followed the news, you'd know we've played key roles in some very high-profile cases. Ed is a blogger with millions of followers." He paused to let that sink in. Then, with a gesture toward the door of Farnsworth's room, "I thought the bear patrol was supposed to prevent things like this from happening. So why did it?"

"Excellent question," said Phil. "But I don't think this is the place to talk about it. Let's go to my office."

He started briskly toward the parking lot, without waiting for Campanelli and Ponder to agree or asking how they would get there. But he watched them to make sure they followed. They got into a Jeep parked a few stalls away from Phil, and followed as Phil drove the few blocks to the patrol offices. Phil's lair wasn't spacious, but there was enough room to squeeze in a few extra chairs. He took his own chair behind his desk, which should help their guests think of him as in charge, and directed Campanelli and Ponder to two of the extras, facing him across the sizable desk. Jake and Paul took two others at the sides of the desk, also facing Campanelli and Ponder.

"Okay," Phil said. "Everybody settled? Then let's get down to it. We're all very sorry about what happened to your friend, but I gather you think that was somehow our fault. I find that hard to believe."

“Well,” Campanelli began, “your organization exists to prevent such incidents—”

“Indeed it does,” Phil agreed. “But anybody visiting this place has to do their part, too. Do you have any idea how many things you did wrong out there?”

Ed Ponder looked offended. “So now you’re going to blame the victim? Hey, we’re guests here. You can’t expect us to know all your little rules.”

“You’re right,” said Phil, “you’re guests. As such you had a responsibility to learn at least the basics, and we offered you plenty of help. As soon as you came into the airport terminal, you couldn’t have missed the big sign telling you you’re in polar bear country and listing several things that you needed to always do, and several more that you must never do. Are you going to tell me you didn’t see that?”

“Well, yes, but—”

“You didn’t understand it? We tried to make sure all those dos and don’ts were in clear, simple English that anybody could understand. Was there some part that you didn’t?”

Ponder and Campanelli stared as if they couldn’t believe he was talking this way to them, but seemed too flustered to answer.

“Or maybe,” Phil went on, “you thought it somehow didn’t apply to you. Do you think a bear knows or cares how many cases you’ve won or how many followers you have? And when you got out to the shore, there were red signs all over saying ‘DANGER: DO NOT WALK’ with a picture of a polar bear and one of a walking person with a strikethrough, which most people understand means ‘don’t do this.’ One of the things you were warned never to do was approach a bear for any reason. Yet your buddy was doing exactly that, apparently to immortalize his stupidity on Instagram, and you were egging him on.” Phil looked piercingly at each of them in turn. “So, how, exactly, is any of this our fault?”

The junior executives were momentarily speechless. Then Campanelli said, “Well, maybe we had a little lapse of judgment. If so, we’re sorry. But it’s still your job to provide a safe environment for tourists, because this sorry little town depends on us for its economic survival. Since you didn’t do that, and our friend is suffering for it—”

Phil ran out of patience. “If you want to try to convince a judge of that,” he interrupted,

“that can be arranged. But if you don’t want to change all your travel plans and hang around until a judge has time for you, I’ll make you a deal. You can stop wasting my time and leave, and I won’t arrest you for any of the several infractions that I could.”

The two glared. Then Campanelli said, “Okay, we’ll go. But you haven’t seen the last of us—or our influence.”

“So be it,” said Phil. “But if you come back, please consider going on a guided tour. There are several companies offering excellent ones. They know the ‘little rules’ you can’t be bothered to learn. They’ll show you things you’d never find on your own, and they’ll keep you out of trouble.”

Campanelli and Ponder left without another word. When they were gone, Phil told Jake and Paul, “I’m afraid they’re right. If they really have the connections they brag about, they could cause us a lot of trouble. And since they’re from south of the border, it could turn into an international incident. We’d better have a chat with the mayor right away—but I see a bigger, messier meeting in our near future.”

As soon as Leyla Wroczoza heard about the town meeting, she knew she had to be there; and she was glad she was in town when it was happening. She didn’t get here all that often, but she liked to go on a couple of her company’s trips every year, and one of them was always here. She hated to think their future might be in doubt, but she’d seen hints in the past, and now somebody seemed to think things had gotten ominous enough to require action.

The gymnasium in the Town Center Complex was packed. Even with rows of folding chairs brought in, people stood along both side walls and the back, sometimes having to be warned not to block the exits. Leyla, surveying the room from the seat she’d snagged near one of the rear doors, saw several faces she knew, including Jake Flintrock and Phil Bailey—and, of course, Suzy Fournier, the mayor who looked like a sweet little old lady but had a hard-earned reputation for combining ferocity and fairness.

Five minutes after the published starting time, Suzy called the meeting to order. “As you all know,” she said, “we’ve had an unusual

number of incidents lately involving polar bears and people. A couple of them have been pretty bad, in different ways. Questions have been raised about what, if anything, we need to change about how we do things going forward."

A cacophony of voices erupted from several parts of the room, and Suzy wasted no time in silencing them with two loud raps of her oversized gavel. "The *first* thing we have to do," she said, "is talk one at a time, and listen to what everybody else says. Maybe to get things rolling, we should review a few things we can all agree on. Anybody who lives here knows bears come with the territory. They gather here in the fall because they haven't eaten since spring and they want to be ready as soon as the bay freezes over enough so they can get out on it and catch seals. When you have a lot of bears and humans living close together, of course there will be incidents. We've always had encounters from time to time, and we have laws and customs to deal with them.

"Lately, we've had more of them than usual, and that understandably worries people. Why is it happening? Part of it's just random. Anything that happens randomly will happen oftener in some periods than others. But there's another reason, too. I'm told people in some places still think climate change isn't real, but anybody who's lived here for any length of time is all too aware that it is. Every year the sea ice thaws earlier in the spring and refreezes later in the fall, so the bears have a longer fast and less time to fatten up. Bears aren't out to get people, but they stay around town longer and they're likely to be 'hangry.' You would be, too, if you hadn't had anything to eat since April or May and you were used to eating through June."

A few smatterings of laughter bubbled up from the audience. Then Suzy went on, "So why are these latest incidents particularly concerning? One of them involved a fatality, one of us—and that naturally makes the rest of us nervous. The other involved foreign tourists in a position to stir up bad publicity. Is there anything we can do to make these things less likely to happen, or to cause other trouble?"

At least a dozen hands shot up, but before she could pick one to speak first, a gruff

voice blurted out, "Stop coddling the damn bears!"

There were gasps, shouts of both agreement and vehement objection, and three more raps of Suzy's well-worn gavel. "Remember, folks: we're going to take turns speaking, one at a time, and we're going to listen to each other. To keep it orderly, we're going to ask for recognition. I thank the gentleman who thinks we need to stop coddling the damn bears for giving me the opportunity to remind you all of that, and I'll let him finish. But don't any of the rest of you count on getting away with it." She smiled sweetly at the gruff man who had spoken without recognition. "Now, sir, you were saying?"

He at least had the good grace to look a bit sheepish. "Sorry," he said, just audibly. Then, louder, "But it's true. We live in this town, and we work hard for the privilege. But we live our lives in fear of the bears. Most of the time we can't even walk around outside our homes, except for a few blocks in the middle of town—and only for a few hours during the day."

"We all knew that when we moved here," Suzy pointed out quietly.

"How about the ones who *didn't* move here?" the challenger demanded. "How about the ones who were born here?"

"Like everybody else born into this world," Suzy said, "they adapt to the conditions they're born into. And when they're old enough, if they don't like it, they can move."

"If they can afford to. If they're even still around." He paused to let that sink in. "I repeat, we should stop coddling the bears. If they cause trouble for humans, get rid of them."

"We have the bear jail—" somebody said.

"—and we put problem bears in there for a few weeks, turn them loose, and pretty soon they're back. I say we should quit fooling around and risking lives. If a bear causes trouble, play your silly jail game if you must—once. But if it comes back, I say shoot it."

Several in the audience gasped audibly. Suzy was about to lower her gavel again when she noticed a hand in the air—somebody actually asking to be recognized. "You there. You have something to say?"

"Indeed I do. Does my esteemed neighbor realize that if we shot all the bears, that would destroy polar bear tourism—which is our biggest source of income?"

“Sure,” said the esteemed neighbor, without asking to be recognized. Suzy let it pass, perhaps because the question was addressed directly to him. “But word getting around that the bears make it too dangerous to come here wouldn’t help tourism either.”

Another hand shot up, this time one that Leyla knew and respected: Jake Flintrock. “Are tourist dollars the only thing that matters?” he asked quietly. “The bears were here first. We’re making what we make at their expense, at a time that’s already the hardest they’ve ever faced. We have a pretty good arrangement for them and us coexisting. If we can find ways to improve that, I’m all for it. But wiping them out is not a solution.”

The fragile conversation again threatened to dissolve into chaos, with different factions trying to shout each other down. Leyla stood quietly and raised her own hand, looking straight at Suzy. The mayor got the message. “Ms. Wroczoza?”

“Thank you, Madame Mayor. Some of you know me, even though I’m not here a lot of the time. For those who don’t, my name is Leyla Wroczoza. I used to be a guide here, and now I’m the president of Worldwind Expeditions. We conduct ecotours in many parts of the planet, but this one is special to me. So special that I’ve long made it a point to go on one of our bear tours here every year. Over the years I’ve come to feel that I know these bears, and you people who live among them. The Inuit, the Cree, and the Métis. Good people, like Jake Flintrock, who just spoke to you. His people have lived here a lot longer than many of you, and he knows what he’s talking about. Please listen to him. Many of you have never lived anywhere else, or traveled much, so you may not realize just how special what you have here is. I have, and I do.

“You may say that I have a vested interest in seeing the bears protected because they make people want to go on my company’s tours. That’s true, and I can’t blame you for being a little suspicious of my motives. But I didn’t start a tour company just to make money. There are much easier ways to do that. I did it because early in my life I fell in love with the wonderful diversity of this planet, and with a lot of its individual parts—like your bears, your town, and you yourselves. I hope you’ll

see, when you think about it, that destroying the bears wouldn’t help any of those. Thank you.”

As she sat down, another voice said, “And it isn’t necessary.”

The speaker, a lanky, bearded man in his thirties, stood up as Leyla sat, as smoothly as if they had planned in advance to coordinate their motions. When Leyla saw who it was, she felt a momentary fear that Suzy would cut him off with her gavel, and then relief that she didn’t. “What she said,” the new speaker said, to scattered, uneasy laughter. Then, “You’re less likely to know me, but I, too, have a deep interest in Churchill and its bears. My name is Charlie Simmons, and I do research on polar bears at a couple of major zoos in the states. Some of our findings may help you find a better way—no killing, fewer mutually dangerous human-bear incidents, no need to give up your bear tourism.”

Lots of people started to talk at once, some grasping at hope that the stranger might actually have something to offer, others scoffing at the possibility. This time Suzy did use her gavel. Leyla didn’t know whether Suzy knew Charlie, but evidently she at least sensed that he might be worth listening to. “One at a time,” Suzy reminded the room. “Let’s hear what the man has to say. Now, Mr. Simmons?”

“Thank you,” said Charlie. “Let me tell you a little about what we’ve been doing, and how it might help you.

“Some of you may have heard of transcranial magnetic stimulation, or TMS. It’s a class of methods using magnetic fields to study or influence electrical activity in the brain. Basically, an electromagnet, called a stimulator, is placed near a subject’s head and a varying electrical current through it induces corresponding currents in the brain itself—or vice versa. It’s a relatively young technology, so we’re still learning a lot about it, but it’s been around in some form since the mid-1980s. It’s been found helpful in diagnosing and treating a wide range of neurological and psychiatric conditions. Depression and anxiety, for example, and obsessive-compulsive disorder. Even Parkinson’s disease, Alzheimer’s, and—”

“But not polar bear attacks, I’ll bet,” someone called out.

“Not directly,” Charlie said calmly. “But I’m coming to that. Most of the published research has been on humans, but my colleagues and I have been looking at its effects on captive polar bears. Attacks often occur because humans have done something to provoke them, or because the bears have learned to associate humans with unpleasant things like cracker shells and noisy helicopters. The increasing stresses of trying to eke out a living with climate change makes them more irascible. It occurred to us that TMS might be able to reduce aggressive impulses toward humans, and generally calm the bears down.”

Leyla knew all this; she’d heard of Charlie’s work some time ago, and seen exciting potential in it—enough to decide supporting it could be an excellent long-term investment for Worldwind Expeditions. The board agreed, and they’d been quietly sending money that way for a while now. She hadn’t realized Charlie was planning to say anything publicly about it yet, or even that he’d planned to be at this meeting. But she listened attentively for how people would react.

“It’s a lovely dream,” somebody was saying, “but it sounds like pure science fiction. And how are you going to put a stimulator on a wild polar bear?”

“Not so long ago,” Charlie said, “your smartphone sounded like pure science fiction, too. So did AI and gene therapy, and a long list of other things that you now take for granted. That’s not a real objection. As for how you put a stimulator on a bear, the obvious answer is to capture the bear and strap it on, but that’s dangerous for the person who does it and traumatic for the bear. Doesn’t mean it can’t be done; researchers have been putting tracking collars on bears for a long time, though it only works on females because the males’ necks are too thin and the collars fall off. But we think there’s a better way.

“The less direct contact with bears humans have, the better for everybody. So we thought, why not have a small, precisely controlled drone deliver the stimulator and attach it to the bear, exactly where it’s needed? We’ve developed special, fast-acting adhesives that can attach it directly to the bear’s fur, with no need to capture, sedate, or otherwise traumatize the bear for more than a few seconds, and no need for anybody to wrestle with a collar.

It even works on males; it doesn’t matter how thick or thin the neck is.”

The room was mostly quiet, except for a few murmurs as if people were mulling the idea and comparing their thoughts on it. Then the guy who had said it sounded like science fiction said, “Well, it still sounds too science-fictiony to me.”

Then somebody Leyla knew stood up and Suzy recognized him. “Jake?”

Jake Flintrock, as always, spoke quietly and carefully. “I don’t think it’s too ‘science-fictiony,’ but I do have another reservation about it. As Mr. Simmons said, a lot of things we use every day were science-fictiony just a few years ago. What bothers me is that it’s unnatural and disrespectful to the bear’s innate spirit. You’re talking about getting into the bear’s head and making it do what *we’d* like it to do instead of what *it* wants—”

“Pah!” someone burst out, and Suzy’s gavel landed hard.

“That’s not how we get recognized,” she said. She looked at Jake. “Jake, evidently somebody wants to take issue with you. Do you want to let him, or do you want to finish what you were saying first? You have the floor.”

“Oh, let him have his say,” Jake said affably. “I’m in no hurry—but I do want to come back to this.”

“Thank you,” said the “Pah!” man. “With all due respect to Mr. Flintrock, I think he needs to come into the twenty-first century. Mr. Simmons has a good scientific idea that might help us a lot, and old-fashioned ‘New Age’ claptrap about the bear’s innate spirit doesn’t help at all. No offense, but I think Mr. Flintrock’s just an old guy who still thinks he’s a shaman and actually believes that stuff about the dancing bear—”

Suzy’s gavel cut him off, not loudly, but sharply. “Personal attacks don’t help, either. Anything you’d like to say, Jake?”

“Yes, there is.” Jake looked directly at his critic and spoke with quiet self-assurance. “No, I don’t think I’m still a shaman, but I proudly admit I used to be. Don’t let that fool you into thinking I’m ignorant of modern science and technology. These days I’m also a certified computer programmer and repairman, and I’ve done a good deal of consulting with the bear researchers at PBI. I know plenty about bear anatomy, physiology, and behavior.

ior.” He paused. “But I haven’t thrown the baby out with the bath water. There’s still a good deal of wisdom in Inuit shamanism, and we’d do well to recognize and preserve it.

“My friend here mentioned the ‘dancing bear.’ I suspect many of you are too young to remember what he’s talking about. To you, it probably just means a kind of soapstone figurine that we sell to tourists; to our ancestors it was much more. I’m not going to take your valuable time to explain it all in detail, but the essence is that everything in the Universe—from a man or woman, to a bear, to a tree or rock—has at least one spirit. Living beings or objects, deceased beings, and spirits, live in different but interpenetrating and interacting worlds. A shaman’s role is to serve as an intermediary among those worlds. He or she can move between the worlds. The dancing bear represents the moment when the spirits of shaman and bear merge. Some say the shaman *becomes* the bear, but it’s better to say he becomes one with the bear—”

“Can you do that?” someone called out.

“Professional secret,” said Jake, with as much hint of a smile as Leyla had ever seen on him. “The point, too often forgotten by folks from European backgrounds, is that all these worlds are important and interconnected. You can’t just latch onto one of them—humans, for instance—and say that’s the only one that matters.”

Several comments burst out at once, ranging from, “But if it helps us . . .” to “No, Jake’s right!” One asked, “How do we know Simmons can even do what he claims? How do we know he’s not just a snake oil salesman?” Another added, “Or a pied piper?”

During the flurry, Leyla saw Suzy frowning, almost imperceptibly, at something on her phone.

Then the mayor quelled the incipient tumult with an abrupt barrage of her gavel. “Please, people, let’s keep this civilized. I think we can all agree that there’s a lot we don’t all agree on, and we don’t have enough information to sort it out now. I’d like to suggest that we form a committee to study Mr. Simmons’ proposal and report back to us. Then we can make a sound decision with cool heads. Of course, as the chair, I can’t make the formal motion. Would anybody like to do it for me?”

For a few seconds nobody said anything. Then Jake said, “So moved.”

It only took a few more minutes to get it seconded and passed, and several more, during which Suzy stole several more glances at her phone, to assemble a committee. Then Suzy said, “Okay, that’s a start, and we’ll all look forward to hearing that report soon. Meanwhile, there’s a snowstorm headed this way. I suggest we all make it our top priority to get home safely.”

As the crowd streamed out of the hall toward the slowly gathering dusk, Leyla, Jake, and Charlie converged near the door. “Good speech,” Leyla told Jake.

“Thanks,” he said. “I hope that isn’t *all* it was. I’d like to see some reasonable action come out of this, but forming a committee is too often a cheap substitute for actually doing anything. A way to look like you’re working, without producing any results.”

“Too true,” Leyla agreed. “But Suzy’s a better-than-average administrator.”

“Actually,” said Charlie, “we may not have to wait for a committee.”

Leyla felt a frisson as she thought of what he might mean by that. “Maybe,” she said as they approached the outside door, “we should go somewhere to continue this privately. How about Bear Up or Snowed Inn?”

“Under the circumstances,” said Jake, “I think Bear Up seems appropriate. Maybe that cozy little booth in the back will be available.”

“What about the snowstorm?” Charlie asked.

“I checked the weather on my phone, too,” Jake said. “We have some time.”

The wind was picking up a little when they stepped outside, but the sky was still clear and no flakes were flying. Outsiders were often surprised at how little snow Churchill got; it was in a cold desert, and there simply wasn’t enough moisture in it to supply as much as southerners expected from its latitude. But it still got plenty; blizzards happened and had to be taken seriously when they did. November was early in the season, but that didn’t warrant complacency.

Leyla and her companions looked both ways—all ways—when they got to the street. Not for traffic—which was, as usual, very

sparse—but for bears, which could appear anywhere, anytime, and were admirably camouflaged for snow.

Jake's car, an old but impeccably maintained Jeep Wrangler, was parked fifty yards up the street. It was unlocked, of course; considerate locals usually left their cars that way in case some passerby suddenly needed shelter from a pop-up bear. Bear Up was only two blocks away, but everybody drove even such a short distance, for the same reason.

The wood-paneled tavern was unusually empty, perhaps because of concern about the coming storm, and they easily got Jake's favorite booth. They all ordered beers; Leyla and Charlie ordered poutine, and Jake a small plate of smoked goldeye.

"Now," said Leyla, "what's this about not needing to wait for the committee?"

"We've already fitted a couple of bears with stimulators," said Charlie. "And cameras and recorders, to watch any interactions they have with people." He grinned. "Ain't miniaturization wonderful?"

It took several seconds for Leyla and Jake to come up with any reaction beyond shocked silence. Then Leyla managed, "On your own initiative? Without clearing it with anybody?"

"Uh-huh. We weren't entirely happy about that, but we know how committees work. If we waited for them, who knows how long we'd be waiting for approval, and you have a problem *now*. This way, we may have some data before they even have a meeting."

"That's true," said Leyla, "but I'm concerned about the risks. What if you get good data and the powers that be won't even look at it because you didn't go through channels to get permission to collect it?" *And*, she thought, *how will it impact Worldwind Expeditions if word gets out that we were funding your research but didn't know you were going to do this?* "This whole area's a protected bear refuge, and the bears are an endangered species. Some people in high places aren't going to look kindly on your messing with their minds just because you could."

"We thought about that," Charlie said, "and decided it was worth the risk. If you kept having more and more incidents while we waited months or years to get approvals and funding, the bears—and Churchill—might go extinct

before anything got done. What good would your protocols do then?"

"Tricky question," Jake said. "Part of me wants you to be right. Another part still thinks the whole idea is wrong—an invasion of the bears' spiritual space. But what if it's the only way to keep them—and us—alive?"

That bothered Leyla, too. "I think," she said, "that this may actually be the best solution, and we may not have time to dillydally. But Charlie's jumping the gun on this is a clear violation of protocol, and could cause serious legal problems."

"But it's done," said Jake. "So there's no point in arguing about whether it *should* be done. Our question now is how to broach it to the local authorities so they'll look for the best way to use it instead of just pointing fingers and debating how to punish somebody."

"Couldn't agree more," said Charlie. "That was our thinking, too. The weak point in it is that we don't know the local authorities as well as you do. So we're hoping you can help us."

"Suzy's a good place to start," said Leyla. "But she's got her hands full, with this storm coming. Maybe this isn't the best time to break it to her."

"Maybe right *after* the storm," Jake suggested. "Assuming it doesn't create even bigger problems that she has to give priority."

"Good idea," Leyla said, looking at her watch. "Maybe now we should all get home and sleep on it. First I'd like to stop by the Inukshuk Inn. I have a sister and brother-in-law visiting from Florida, with an almost new niece I haven't met. I'd like to look in on them before the storm—meet her and give them all some support if they need it. Could you give me a lift, Jake?"

The Inukshuk Inn had to have an inukshuk, of course—though it wasn't a fully authentic model as built by indigenous peoples from native stones stacked to vaguely suggest a human form and used for purposes from navigational aids to welcoming beacons. It was built in reinforced concrete modules by a factory in Winnipeg and shipped up here for assembly. But it was quite adequate to evoke local atmosphere and history for visitors.

The hotel itself was one of Churchill's newest, out on the eastern fringe of the pa-

trolled “safe” zone. But it looked much like the older ones: small and low, with rooms numbering in single digits and all on one floor. The style was calculatedly rustic, with log facing on the exterior and exposed beams inside. There was a fireplace in the lobby, but a moment’s glance—and the absence of woodsmoke smell—made clear that it was a good electric imitation, not the real thing.

It wasn’t kept very warm inside, but it felt refreshingly toasty compared to the biting chill on the street, except when somebody going in or out left the door open—which happened surprisingly often. Visitors just didn’t have the conditioned reflexes of locals. When Jake dropped Leyla at the door, they wished each other a good night and Jake drove to his home, a few miles out in the country.

There was nobody in the lobby, so Leyla rang the old-fashioned bell on the registration desk. An offstage voice called out, “Coming!” and a couple of minutes later a rangy middle-aged woman in jeans and a plaid flannel shirt materialized behind the desk. “Welcome to the Inukshuk,” she said with a smile. “Checking in?”

“No, I’m here to see a couple of your guests—Joe and Kasia Saunders. Could you tell them Leyla’s here?”

The clerk picked up a phone and did so. A couple of minutes later Kasia and Joe emerged from a side corridor, smiling, with a curly-blond little girl running ahead of them, to the extent that a not-quite-two-year-old can run. With a big grin on her face, she hurried right up to Leyla and threw her arms around her knees. “Aunt Leyla!”

Leyla grinned back. “And you must be Nixie. I’ve heard a lot about you.” She raised her eyes to look at Kasia. “Has it really been so long that she’s this grown-up before I get to meet her?”

Kasia smiled. “Yes, it has. Come here, you.” The sisters hugged, then Joe got his turn. After a brief flurry of small talk, they all sat down on the couch near the ersatz fireplace—except Nixie, who was too wound up to sit down.

“So,” Leyla asked, “when did you get in? What have you been doing? How do you like it?”

“Last night,” said Kasia. “Good trip up. We took a rover tour today—”

“And we saw bears!” Nixie said excitedly. “*Big* bears! They looked cuddly.”

“I’ll bet they did,” said Leyla. “How many bears did you see?”

Nixie thought intently for several seconds, then held up four fingers.

“That must have been fun. Were you scared?”

“No. The bears were outside. We were inside.” She looked up at her parents. “Can we go to bed soon?”

“Yes, sweetie,” said Joe. “We’ll get you tucked in in just a few minutes.” To Leyla: “She’s had a long day. Time to recharge for the next one.”

“I understand. Her attitude toward bears is a lot more sensible than a lot of adults. And I’m surprised she came to me so easily. I was afraid I’d have to spend several days breaking through fear of strangers.”

“You had good advance press,” Joe said. “Your sister spoke very highly of you. Nixie’s been looking forward to meeting you for a long time.”

“Me, too,” said Leyla. “Good night, Nixie.”

Kasia took Nixie off to bed, and Joe drove Leyla back to her hotel in their rental car. If they’d asked her advice, she would have said renting a car wasn’t worth it; there just weren’t that many places to drive in Churchill, and there were taxis. But maybe, for them, it was the right choice. Nixie would need naps and was likely subject to sudden mood changes, so flexibility would be their friend. In any case, Leyla appreciated the ride.

She didn’t sleep well. The storm warnings were becoming more insistent, and she kept listening for the wind picking up outside and occasionally checking the forecast for changes. She wasn’t particularly worried about her own day; she had several bits of business to take care of, including meetings with local officials and outfitters her company partnered with, but if necessary those could be Zoomed. She was more concerned about Kasia, Joe, and Nixie. They’d spent a lot of time and money to come here, and she wanted it to be worth their while.

When she gave up on sleep in the morning, it was still cold and fairly windy, and some flakes were falling and blowing around; but the change was hardly dramatic compared to

what she'd expected. The weather radio said the front was stalled, still active, but moving much slower than they'd expected. It might be like this all day.

She knew Kasia and Joe were planning to take Nixie on various short outings, interspersed with rest periods, beginning with a dogsled ride this morning. She hoped they would be all right for that, at least. The dogsledding site was not far out of town, and the trail ran through taiga, so it would be relatively sheltered from whatever the weather eventually chose to dish out.

Meanwhile, she had her meetings and other work to catch up on, so she dug into that, beginning with a chat with Suzy about how Churchill and Worldwind Tours could help each other deal with potential fallout from the recent spate of bear incidents and the publicity those American hotshots were threatening to unleash. Dashing from one concern to another kept her busy, but whenever she could steal a few minutes she checked on the weather.

Which never seemed to change. She and, she suspected, many Churchillians, began to suspect the meteorologists were exaggerating. Gradually, her concerns about a storm faded into the background.

Then, late in the afternoon, the front started moving again and the storm woke up.

She had planned to meet her sister's family for dinner, but work matters piled up and, so to speak, snowballed. She called Kasia and explained that she would be late. "I suggest you go ahead and eat at your hotel. I'll grab something and come over to see you as soon as I can. How was dogsledding?"

"It was great! Nixie loved it and can't wait to tell you about it. She loved the dogs, and none of us imagined they would go so *fast!*"

"Can't wait to hear about it. Bye."

By the time Leyla could get away, it was almost completely dark and snowing hard. The wind howled and whipped it around. On nights like this she could see why all the important signs along Kelsey Boulevard were mounted on sturdy cages filled with rocks.

She called for a taxi and had to wait more than half an hour to get one. There was enough fresh snow on the street for it to leave

obvious tire tracks, though it was much deeper in some places than others because of blowing and drifting. It wasn't slippery; it was too cold for that, and hills and curves were almost unknown in and around Churchill. So Leyla wasn't surprised to see the cab pull up in front of her hotel close to the time promised. But for the short dash out to get into it, she had to pull the ruff on her red parka tight around her face and struggle to stay upright.

"Glad you could make it," she panted as she settled into its warm interior.

The driver shrugged, though that was barely perceptible under his thick parka. "All in a night's work," the driver said. "We were due for one of these."

A very few minutes brought them to the Inukshuk Inn, and Leyla looked forward to getting inside and spending a warm evening with family. Maybe even the night, if the weather kept deteriorating and she couldn't get back to her own hotel.

But what she found when she got inside was not what she expected.

Kasia and Joe were there, and the desk clerk, but they all looked frantic. "Nixie's disappeared!" Kasia wailed.

Leyla, uncharacteristically, gasped and felt as if her heart skipped a beat. "Disappeared? How—?" The lobby, even the whole hotel, was small. How could the toddler have vanished?

"We were only gone a few minutes—" Kasia began, and seemed to struggle with how to continue.

Joe tried to calm things down. "We were all sitting here in the lobby. Nixie was tired but still excited. She was trying to tell Gretchen here"—he gestured toward the hotel clerk—"about the dogs and the carvings at the Itsanitaq Museum. It was all very cozy. Then everything happened at once. I got a frantic call from my boss at work, and I knew it was important because I'd told him not to disturb me unless it was *really* important, so I stepped away to take it privately. A couple of minutes later Kasia needed a bathroom break and asked Gretchen if she could watch Nixie for a couple of minutes—"

"And I said sure," said Gretchen. "But as soon as Kasia left the room, Nixie got nervous

and I asked if she'd like me to make her some hot chocolate. She liked that idea, but during the few seconds I turned away to get a packet of cocoa and start the water—"

Leyla began to feel a sinking certainty about where the girl must be. "Did somebody leave that door open again?"

"Must have been a guest," Gretchen said. "Even just a little, and on a night like this the wind could grab it and throw it wide open. You know how guests from outside don't understand things here. They don't have bears, and they're used to hotels having more security—"

"And," said Kasia, "Nixie had never seen snow falling before. When she looked out the open door and saw it blowing around under the streetlights, she must have been fascinated."

"So I'm guessing," said Joe, "she slipped out for a better look. And then the wind shifted and blew the door shut."

"And she was stranded outside," said Leyla, feeling herself switching abruptly into emergency mode, something she hadn't had to do much since her guiding days. "In the storm. Have you looked around outside?"

"Of course we have," said Gretchen. "But the snow's blowing around so much tracks don't last long. We didn't see any, but they must have been there."

"And I assume you've checked the whole hotel." That wouldn't take long. "Well, I guess we need some search parties, eh? I'll call Jake and see if he can help."

She did. Jake said, "I wish I could come right away, but my car's buried in a snowdrift. I'll dig 'er out and be there as soon as I can."

"Great," said Leyla. "Good luck, and be careful." She speed-dialed again, this time to Charlie. He was staying nearby and had no such problems. He said he'd be over right away, and he was.

"Charlie's a bear researcher here," Leyla told Kasia and Joe when he arrived. She could tell they didn't think he looked reliable enough to trust with their baby. "Very familiar with Churchill and its bears," she added. "He and I will go out and start searching. But first I'll call Suzy and see if she can get some more search parties together."

"We'll go too," Joe said, almost lunging toward the door.

"No, you won't," Leyla said gently but firmly. "You have no experience dealing with polar bears, you don't know the town, and you don't have the gear or experience for going out in this weather. Your job is to stay here and make sure Nixie has somebody to come home to. Can I count on you for that?"

"Of course," Kasia said meekly, obviously on the verge of tears and wanting to get more actively involved but not knowing how.

"Good." In her training as a guide, Leyla had been taught, and learned, to always stay outwardly calm in front of clients. But it was much harder when the "clients" were her sister—and Nixie.

Leyla stepped into a corner and called Suzy to explain the situation. Suzy promised she'd get right on it, and keep in touch with any developments as they happened.

Then she and Charlie snugged up their parkas and hoods, checked their deep pockets for gear they might need, and stepped out into the howling wind.

The snow was falling heavily by then, swirling in the wind, piling it high into drifts in some places and scouring the pavement bare in others. They both called out Nixie's name and listened for an answer, but none came. Not surprising, but still scary. "She can't have gone far," said Charlie. "It hasn't been that long, and this weather would slow anybody down." As if trying to convince himself, he repeated, "She can't have gone far."

*Unless, Leyla thought but didn't say, a bear picked her up and carried her...*

There were two main ways Nixie could have gone: out into the fairly wide openness of Kelsey Boulevard, or into the maze of little residential streets behind and next to the hotel. Those were narrow, poorly lit, and full of bushes, rocks, and spaces between the modest houses. "You search one side of the street," Leyla suggested, "and I'll search the other. Let's keep each other in sight and our radios on."

They started doing that. Leyla's eyes scanned constantly back and forth across the snowy scene close at hand, pausing briefly on every detail that looked like it might be something but always turned out not to be. Several times a minute she scanned behind her. She also kept stealing glances at Charlie, and he at

her. They both yelled, “Nixie!” so often Leyla’s throat soon began to feel sore, but even if the toddler answered, she might not be heard. Leyla could barely hear Charlie’s shouts from across the street. Amid all that were frequent radio calls to and from Suzy, first telling her the plan that she and Charlie were following, then trading updates. Suzy soon had two other teams searching other nearby areas, with a similar strategy, but they weren’t finding anything either.

Sometimes Leyla glimpsed a movement in the shadows cast by the streetlights and her breath caught as she investigated. A couple of times one of them looked white and furry and her first anxious thought was that it might be a bear, too close, but the first was just an Arctic fox and the second a hare. Tracks would have helped, but there were almost none to be seen; the snow and wind covered them too quickly.

Until something seemed different. Leyla stopped, heart pounding, at the sight of something that clearly *was* a track, faint but unmistakable—and the size of a dinner plate.

A *big* dinner plate.

It certainly wasn’t Nixie’s, but there might be a connection, and in any case she had to find out where it led as quickly as possible. “Charlie,” she said quietly through her radio, “I think we’d better stick together now. Over here.”

“Be right there,” he said. As she waited for him to cross the street, she kept scanning all around while concentrating on finding more tracks. The first she found was so faint it was hard to recognize the details that would tell her which way the bear was headed. But her second guess paid off and she found another. By the time Charlie reached her side, she was pretty sure she was headed the right way, and the tracks seemed to be getting marginally clearer, meaning they were fresher.

She was about to call Jake to ask how he was doing when he startled her by calling her first. “I’m dug out,” he said. “Got the car started. I’m on my way.”

As Jake clicked off, Charlie said, “Looks like we’re close to a bear. Guess we’d better check that out first. Wait—what’s this?”

He pointed at a small indentation near one of the bear tracks, and then some others, similar. Indistinct though they were, they put an

idea in Leyla’s head—and she wasn’t sure whether it was encouraging or terrifying. “What if,” she said, “the bear was carrying Nixie?”

Charlie didn’t need to say anything. That was clearly a plausible explanation; but if it was true, how could they get the girl away from the bear without anybody getting hurt—or worse?

The tracks were getting clearer now. They must be getting close. Leyla called out Nixie’s name yet again and listened intently, hoping to hear some sort of answer over the wind. But none came.

After several minutes the tracks, which had become quite clear, blurred together as if the bear had stopped moving forward and started milling around in a small area. Leyla knew what that probably meant. They were in an area where several small houses were crowded close together, and the snow had piled into high drifts among them.

The bear had probably dug a den into one of them for shelter. But which one?

She wished Jake were here. She was pretty familiar with this aspect of polar bear behavior, but Jake was much more so. She knew it would take him several minutes to drive here, even with the flat roads. . . .

She heard an engine, distant but getting closer, then more distant again. She realized suddenly that he wouldn’t know exactly where to go, so she got on the radio and told him the nearest intersection she could remember, and the number she could barely see on the nearest house.

And then he was there, his car getting louder, then stopping, its door opening and then closing as he got out—and Leyla spotted the small opening of the den, with the bear just inside.

And, barely visible between its huge forepaw and the deep, soft fur of its chest, the blonde curls of a little girl.

They moved, slightly, as if the toddler was asleep—but alive.

Jake padded over to join Leyla and Charlie, his sealskin gun bag slung over his shoulder and his face almost invisible deep in the fur-rimmed hood of his parka. “Sorry I’m late,” he said calmly. “What’s—? Oh.”

His keen, experienced eyes had spotted

the den and its occupants even before Leyla or Charlie could point it out. "Now what?" Leyla asked softly, despite the tension she felt. "How do we get her out of there?"

A light had come on in the nearest house and a middle-aged woman, probably the owner, had come out of it and walked over to the group gathered around the den. "What's going on?" she asked, and then she saw for herself. "Oh!"

"A little girl slipped out of her parents' hotel and wandered away," Leyla explained in a whisper. "Stay back and be quiet."

The homeowner noticed Jake's gun and asked, "Are you going to shoot it?"

"No," Jake said flatly. "This bear has done us a huge favor. There's no way I'm going to kill him."

"But surely," the homeowner almost wailed, "at least a tranquilizer. . ."

"Not unless I have to," said Jake. "Please, everybody. Stand back, be quiet, and let me handle this."

The bear was awake now, staring out at the small throng of humans gathered around him. He was still silent and still clutching Nixie tightly against his chest. He looked the humans over several times, then fixed his gaze on Jake. For at least a couple of minutes, man and bear gazed intently at each other. Nixie was awake now, watching but bewilderingly calm. Leyla wondered what was going on in her mind.

After a while, moving very slowly, Jake took his shotgun out of its case but made no move to raise it to a firing position. Instead, cradling it with both hands, he held it out at arm's length, showing it to the bear, then slowly laid it aside and held out his empty arms for the bear to see. He walked very slowly toward the bear, then knelt in front of it and waited, arms still outstretched.

The bear stirred, and the onlookers gasped—except Jake. The bear shifted position, gently maneuvering Nixie into position to face Jake. Leyla was just close enough to hear Jake softly say something to the bear in Inuktitut, ending with, "Nanuk."

Nixie stood on her own feet, and the bear nudged her toward Jake. She patted the bear on his nose and said, "Nanuk."

Then she stepped into Jake's arms, and he tucked her inside his parka, because she was not dressed for the cold. The bear snuggled back into his den and went back to sleep.

Oddly unafraid, Leyla stepped toward Jake. Nixie saw her and grinned. "Aunt Leyla!" She reached out excitedly and Jake wordlessly transferred Nixie from his parka to hers. Then he picked up his gun and started putting it back into his case.

"Don't you think you should keep that out and handy, just in case?" the homeowner asked nervously.

"Nope," said Jake.

The homeowner went uncertainly back into her house. "Jake," Leyla asked, "did you dance with that bear?"

"Professional secret," he said.

"Or was it my stimulator?" Charlie asked.

Leyla had almost forgotten he was there. "You think that bear was one you tagged?" she asked. "I didn't see anything attached to his head."

"Oh, he was definitely one of mine," said Charlie. "Even the best adhesives aren't forever. Evidently it let go and fell off. They'll find it somewhere around here. But I know that bear, and I saw where it was attached."

Leyla looked back and forth between Charlie and Jake, unsure what to think. Finally she said, "We're all going to have a lot to think about. Now let's get Nixie back to her folks." ■

*When Stanley Schmidt was editing Analog for 34 years, Joyce was his first reader and critic in the "outside world." With all that exposure, she eventually caught the writing bug herself. "The Dancing Bear" is their third collaboration for Analog, and probably makes it obvious that they both enjoy exploring many aspects of this fascinating and sometimes frightening world. Before "retirement," she was a clinical laboratory scientist in both hospital and research settings; he (before editing Analog) taught physics at Heidelberg University in Ohio and occasionally strayed into more-or-less related fields. They met when he was acting herpetologist for a field biology course and she wanted to do an extra-credit project on snakes.*