

For What He Could Become

CHAPTER ONE

Bill Williams noticed that there was no sound in the woods--no bird calls, no squirrel chirring. He was lying on his stomach in a rivulet of snowmelt coming out of the hills, the cold water seeping into his shirt. Water penetrated his pants, wet his thighs, and made him shiver, but he didn't move.

Upwind and 40 yards away on the side of a hill a smallish black bear was feeding in a blueberry patch, and with a bite down and a swing of its head it stripped everything into its mouth. The sound of tearing leaves and brush was close enough for Bill to hear it. He'd smelled the bear for some time, tracking it into the breeze drifting down from the hills, the smell like rotting salmon on the stream banks.

It was not a big bear. He had seen others that were much bigger in the valley across the river from Arctic Village.

Lying partway into the trail with the rifle at his shoulder, he had a clear view of the bear's hindquarters. It had taken him some time to get to that position but it had not been hard work--just slow, tedious, and wet. When he had seen bears running, they went so fast that it hadn't occurred to him how deliberately they moved when they were feeding. He could wait as he had been taught to wait. If his father were alive he would be proud to see him wait to take the animal with one well-placed shot, no big damage to meat or hide.

As his Dad had told him so many times, the trick was to sneak up on the bear from down wind. If luck was with the hunter, all he would see was the bear's

hindquarters until the final moment. Done right, it would be a clean kill. Bill would be able to tan the hide and put it beneath his bedclothes to hold out the cold, or give it to Ilene.

No doubt the bear had been searching the stream banks for salmon and the sunny slopes for ripening berry patches. This diet, he guessed, was what made the bear's coat shine as if it had been oiled.

But there was something else going on. It was so quiet he thought for a moment he had gone deaf. He opened his mouth and popped his ears, straining to pick up a sound. He could feel his heart pumping, the rhythmic beat like a drum. Something was wrong.

The bear stopped chewing and lifted its head. It turned to the right, jabbed its nose in the air and sniffed. Then it lifted a front leg and swung to the left. Muscles bunched, ears twitching, it sensed something and froze. In the next instant the bear whirled around and rose up on its hind legs, jaws open, claws raking the air. The roar sprang from deep in its throat, passing over Bill with a vibration and volume that hurt his ears.

He gasped. His mind registered the picture the bear offered, but a louder roar from behind him purged any thoughts of taking a shot.

With the roar he felt the ground vibrate beneath him and turned his head in time to see a huge grizzly fill his field of vision. The bear had to be ten feet and at least 800 pounds, and it didn't see him or smell him. What it saw and smelled was the black bear, on which it focused with its pig-like eyes.

In seconds the grizzly moved from behind Bill, stepped on his leg, sprinted down the trail, and with a powerful swing of his foreleg knocked the small bear over. The

bawling and roaring of the two animals deafened Bill, who jammed his hands over his ears as panic raised a sour taste in the back of his mouth. He swallowed but it wouldn't go away. He saw chunks of peat moss flung into the air and a cloud of dust rising. Through it all was the smell--a sour, dead, fish-stinky odor that stuck in his nostrils. Pieces of plants, small rocks, and earth were dropping like rain.

The black bear, forced on its back, was raking the grizzly with its claws and teeth while being pushed and pounded into the small stream. The grizzly had it by the throat and was shaking it like a dog shakes a rabbit. In seconds the battle was over, the grizzly looking down at the still form between its front legs, its nose sniffing for any remaining life. Suddenly everything was still. Bill took his hands from his ears as the peat dust settled on the ground and water bubbled around the lifeless form partially blocking its flow.

The pain in Bill's leg had not yet started--the leg was numb. Whether it was cut or broken he didn't know. But he was able to stand on it, and clutching the rifle in his right hand he half ran, half hobbled down the trail he had come up from the river.

Funny feeling--like running on a wooden leg.

He burst through an alder patch, where low-lying limbs reached for his feet, Devil's-club thorns pierced his pants and stuck in his thighs. He made no attempt to dodge them but wished he'd cut them down on his way up the trail.

The back of his neck began to itch. He imagined the bear coming on behind him faster than he could run and his heart thudded in his chest. He wanted to look back but knew he could not.

Everything he knew about bears screamed at him to climb a tree, but his feet and legs moved unattached to his mind and even as he told himself to climb, he couldn't make himself do it. He would have to stop to climb a tree, and if the bear was close, it would get him before he got high enough to be out of its reach.

His balance was threatened by his feet wind-milling out of control while a picture formed in his mind of him falling on his face, heart pounding, chest heaving, the bear standing over him. Miraculously his feet missed every root, every hole.

As he cleared the brush line, the bank of the river was in front of him. He dropped the rifle, planted one foot in the sand, and launched himself into the river, legs churning, arms thrashing, head back, gulping air as he crashed through the surface, kicking hard under water.

Underneath, water bubbled past his ears. He held his breath and swam against the current. The water tugged at his clothes, pulled him downstream, slowed him down. He broke out of the water with his eyes shut tight, the air exploding from his lungs like a breaching whale.

He had no idea how far he was from the bank. He gulped air and was ready to dive again when he heard laughter. He tried to stand, tripped and fell, then tumbled further downstream until his feet found a shallow place and he stood up and shook the hair from his eyes. He cast a quick glance at the bank he had just left, then turned in the direction of the laughter.

Herb Chulpach and his uncle Charlie stood on the bank, laughing. They pointed at the bear pacing back and forth upstream from the trail, sniffing the rifle. It turned and

disappeared into the brush. Bill took a huge breath, then waded to the opposite bank and sat down, his head in his hands.

Herb and Charlie came over to him. They didn't speak but glanced at each other. The skin around Herb's mouth puckered up and then relaxed, and it looked to Bill like he was laughing inside. Bill didn't look at Charlie.

"Fast bear," Charlie said.

Herb snickered. The old man looked straight ahead as if he were plotting where the bear would come out next.

"Were you teaching the bear to dance?" Charlie asked.

Bill sighed. "I was hunting the bear." He wrung out his shirt.

"Hunting." Charlie nodded. "Pack on the ground. Gun on the ground. Feet in the air."

Herb pursed his lips. Both hands clasped around one knee, he rocked back and forth, a smile on his face.

"Just as I was getting ready to shoot the black bear, this grizzly made a fight with it. On its way, it stepped on my leg."

Charlie nodded, the smile fixed on his face. "Were they both male bears?"

"I didn't examine their privates." He held the shirt up and shook it.

"Maybe you got in the middle of their house and that old bear figured you were trespassing." Charlie snorted little bursts of air out of his hairy nostrils while Herb continued to rock back and forth. What a pair.

"Did it occur to you that I could have been killed?"

He took off his boot and rolled up the pants to look at the place where the bear had stepped on him. The claw imprints were red in the center, blue-black in between, with blood trickling out of each imprint. Charlie put his hand on the pants and pressed them down so he could see better. He looked at the muscle that was beginning to swell, touched the claw marks with his fingers, then looked at Bill.

“You’re lucky,” he said. “To be between two bears and get some bad meat on your leg and a cut or two. You’re dumb--but lucky.”

Herb rolled up on his feet in that squat he always used on wet ground and appraised Bill’s leg. Head tilted back, eyes squinting, making small sounds with his mouth. At last done with the examination, he looked Bill in the eye, nodded his head several times, and sat back down on the bank.

The wet socks clung to Bill’s feet and he had to work to get the boots back on, his leg pulsing and pounding now that the numbness was wearing off. He lifted the leg a few times. It didn’t seem broken. Past injuries had taught him that the real pain would come tonight or tomorrow, maybe not for two days.

His rifle and pack were on the other bank. He thought about what Herb would tell Ilene and Verda at dinner tonight, about his father and Carl and the way they had killed bear. And then he said “To hell with it,” got up and sloshed back into the river, picking the shallow spots to walk over, swimming the deeper channel to the far bank. He opened the rifle bolt, removed the cartridge, and blew down the barrel, dislodging the dirt jammed in it. He allowed himself a quick glance at the bear’s tracks on the bank, then limped upriver where he could wade across and get home. He was hungry and his leg hurt. The three-day bear hunt had lasted three hours