



October 5th 1933. It's wonderful to reach this little cabin at Gnalloden, under the cliff filled with cacophonous seabirds. It's nice to be alone and away from the menfolk for a while. My sons Alf and Bjørvik have come to Spitsbergen with me this year and Anders is training them up to be good trappers, much like he did me when I first wintered here two years ago.

Anders Sæterdal is a good man and he treats me as an equal partner. After burying two husbands I was resigned to bringing up my sons alone. I enjoyed my job in Tromsø; I could tell that the men I picked up at the port in my taxi were always surprised to find a woman driver – someone has to be the first in every profession, and it seems that I am to be first in two! As I ferried the trappers to the bar they would regale me with stories of jumping from ice floe to ice floe, outwitting fierce polar bears, surviving the winter darkness in small huts and the breathtaking scenery of the Svalbard Archipelago.

Meeting Anders changed my life and it didn't take much persuading for me to join him on his next voyage north. He had described the hut he had built at Hyttevika in such glowing terms: the roomy construction, the little auk colony in the rocks behind that attract Arctic foxes, the amazing view over the low islets at the entrance of the Hornsund Fjord. He knew I was a good shot; my trophies for marksmanship had pride of place on my mantelpiece.

Those first two winters the boys stayed with their grandma and oh, it was exciting to be alone with Anders as he trained me to look for the best spots to lay traps for the foxes, how to catch them without damaging their valuable pelts, how to search out the ptarmigan in the hillside, the best spot to find geese and eider duck, how to kill seals and even beluga whales without losing them to the sea. And he taught me about polar bears. How dangerous they can be and how valuable a clean perfect skin is. The first time I shot a bear he was by my side as we travelled by foot to one of the small cabins deeper into the fjord. I saw a distant yellow white shape and then the glint of black nose and eyes. Raising my rifle, I waited as the curious young bear approached towards us and I aimed at its shoulder and got a clean shot to its heart. The bear dropped and as I walked on towards

it, Anders angrily shouted out a warning to shoot it again in the head to make sure it was dead. I never forgot again.

It was me that devised our Signal though, a simple but highly effective contraption: a long string – at one end a blubber bait, tied up to a post about 100 yards from the house, the other end coming in over the door and tied to some empty cans. When a bear comes to take the bait the clattering raises the alarm inside and through a hole in the cabin wall it is easy to get a clean shot. So no more need for trekking and searching for days on end – the bears come to us! It does mean that our faithful huskies have to stay inside, so as not to scare the bears away, but we enjoy their added warmth and we're used to their doggy smells now.

I've brought my favourite two dogs with me to Gnalloden. They have pulled a small sled with some fuel and supplies for the week that I shall be here alone. Tomorrow I will go up the hill to the edge of the bird cliff and go from fox trap to fox trap and see what they have caught. It is hard work lifting up the wooden platform of rocks and re-setting the simple deadfall traps. A small upright stick is all that keeps it up, and a fox attracted to a little piece of blubber will knock it down so that weight of stones crushes the little animal dead.

I have just now noticed that the sky has cleared and there is a marvellous *aurora borealis* this evening. The days are drawing in – just a few hours of daylight now - but even in the months with no sun above the horizon, the starlight and moonlight and the aurora provide astonishing lightshows and inside we have our oil lanterns. I prefer the winters, the sharp cold, the invigoration of pitting my wits against the bears and foxes; travelling with the dogs over the sea ice, exploring fjords and finding new hunting areas. Even sitting by the stove skinning what I have caught, knowing the good price I will get at the summer market in Tromso.

It is a hard life, but so exciting and though I am small I have proved to the men that I am as



tough as they are, and just as capable of being a trapper and hunter. I plan to spend several more winters here, and then perhaps Anders and I will have saved enough for a small farm back in Norway. We can settle and remember this astonishing wilderness, this land of snow and ice, tundra, bird cliffs and magnificent white bears.

Wanny Wolstad, the first female hunter and trapper in Svalbard. Born 15 January 1893, Sommarøy, Norway; died 26 October 1959, Sørkjosen, Norway.

Hannah Lawson