

Prey

Jacques van de Baan

“Human weakness is to desire to know what
one does not want to know.”
(Molière)

Summary Prey

As a commando, Andrew Smith has carried out multiple missions in very turbulent areas all over the world. Under mysterious circumstances, he was dismissed from active service and has been stationed as a police officer in Waterton, Canada – a quiet, small town in a nature reserve close to the American border.

Around midnight, Waterton is confronted with an exceptional natural phenomenon. Besides, the population is frightened by a fearful scream that makes them expect the worst. Something has entered Waterton. It soon appears that an increasing number of victims are involved. Under inexplicable circumstances, people go missing and traces indicate extreme violence. In this growing chaos, Andrew takes charge in Waterton.

Susan Vanderbilt performs ground-breaking scientific bacteriologic research. She is impressed with Andrew Smith and offers him her services as he tries to get grip on the mysterious events that take place. Their collaboration leads to more than discovering shocking facts.

This book deals with a current-day theme and tries to explore the ethical boundaries of science.

Number of pages: 319

This novel was a top title in the Netherlands during the month of the adventure book, June 2012

Chapter 1

Andrew Smith woke up and knew something was wrong. During the time he served as a commando behind hostile frontlines, he had developed one of his senses and honed it into one of his most important weapons against acute danger. Numerous times this buddy, as he called this sense, had saved his life. He had learned not to ignore the messages that his tingling hair roots sent him at times.

Opposed to what his reflexes urged him to do, Andrew remained lying in bed. With his eyes, he searched the ceiling until he found the time projected there. It was 11:46 pm so he had only slept for less than an hour. This was the second signal that something was wrong.

His senses worked full speed. He carefully listened if he heard something suspicious. After five minutes he slowly lifted his head and looked over his blankets into the room, searching for the reason of his increased pulse. Veiled moonlight entered the room through a gap between the curtains, enabling him to vaguely distinguish the contour lines of his furniture.

There was no one.

After a few minutes he carefully sat up, moved his legs over the edge of his bed and stood up. Then he felt it: the floor vibrated, very lightly.

Andrew raised his eyebrows and attempted to figure out the source of this vibration, but it was too short for a proper analysis. Adrenalin began to rush through his body and he took his pistol, a

Heckler & Koch .45 ACP with infrared laser, from his night stand. If something or someone in the house was causing this vibration, Andrew thought grimly, it would receive an unpleasant surprise. Resolutely, he walked to his bedroom door. He squatted down and looked around the corner.

There was no one to be seen.

Andrew rose to his feet and walked into the hallway. Without making any sound he closed the bedroom door and walked to another bedroom on his right. His bare feet did not cause any sound on the thick carpet.

Again the floor vibrated and with bated breath he searched for the cause of it. He still had no idea what it could be, but his hair roots were stinging like nettles. He took a deep breath and opened the door of the room. Stooped down and with his pistol ready, he entered the room.

Nothing to be seen.

He walked back and carefully closed the door behind him. The hallway separated the back of his house with bedroom from the front, where the kitchen and living room were located. Across his bedroom was the bathroom. Quickly, Andrew peeked around the corner. The bathroom was empty as well.

Cautiously, he walked to the living-room door and for a moment Andrew listened with his back against the wall. He concentrated, took a deep breath, threw the door open and jumped into the room. The infrared dot of the Heckler danced through the room like a firefly and rested on the closed door that led to the kitchen.

Nothing happened. There was no one in the room and not a single sound came from the kitchen. He began to believe that there was no one in the house. After inspecting the kitchen, he concluded he was right on that. With his hand Andrew rubbed the stubbles on his chin and wondered what had caused his unrest. Stooping down, he moved to the large window. Carefully, he pushed the leaves of the two ferns in the window sill aside and

peeked outside between the flower pots. He had a view on the long, straight shopping street of Waterton, a picturesque village on the shores of Waterton Lake by the border between Canada and the States.

It was quiet on the road. Too quiet.

Around midnight most people would be sleeping, but what concerned him was that he did not see any animal. Waterton was known for the large numbers of wildlife that lived in and around the village. Especially during the night, deer, mountain goats, elks, and squirrels could be found in any garden.

But not now.

Andrew could not discover a single animal. The road was deserted. It began to occur to him that the reason for his disquiet was to be found outside. With a worrisome frown, Andrew walked to the veranda door. Slowly, he opened the door a bit and listened motionless for a moment. Then he stepped outside onto the covered veranda and waited – his back against the wall beside the door.

Furtively looking around, he absorbed his surroundings. The unusual silence was heavy and fell upon him like a blanket; again an indication that his buddy had alarmed him.

Andrew walked up to the railing of the veranda and glanced at the garden and the adjacent Waterton Lake. The moon reflected in the water and he could see his surrounding quite well.

When Andrew stepped off the veranda and walked on the lawn, the ground began to vibrate again.

Now the vibration was much more obvious than on the wooden floor in the house. He squatted and put his hand flat on the ground to feel it better. The vibration did not stop now as it did before and Andrew's uneasiness grew. Unlike people, animals are very well able to notice danger on time and he never experienced that a signal this strong was given by the fact that the animals were not there.

Andrew heard something. He stood up and looked over Waterton Lake toward the States. High in the sky was a rustle, coming from the south toward him. There was no wind, for the leaves on the branches did not move and Waterton Lake was like a polished mirror in the moonlight. Worried, Andrew fiddled with his right ear. With his mouth half open, he looked up. The moonlight appeared filtered by spurts by *something*. In the distance he heard another sound now. His head bent forward, he carefully listened. It took a moment before he understood what he actually heard. He recognized the call of a crane and he realized that huge swarms of birds were flying over. He now heard geese as well and even the hoarse screeching of ravens. Baffled, he shook his head. This simply could not be true. It was early August and the bird migration would only start in a month. This was absolutely no bird migration and the fact that several kinds of birds formed one swarm together, was an indication that these they were trying to escape *something*.

Something that began to scare him.

Something that his buddy had warned him for.

Something that most likely had a connection with the vibration that went on continuously now.

Andrew let his bated breath fleet between his pursed lips and walked back into the kitchen. He quickly put on his clothes and shoes. Doubting for a moment, he looked at his holster and gun but decided to leave it home. He suspected that the danger could not be dealt with a gun.

Through the kitchen he left the house again, walked around the corner to the road. The vibrations ceased when he walked onto the pavement. Andrew looked at his watch and noticed that this last vibration had last more than twenty minutes. By now, he was not the only one who was awake and down the road he noticed two men in the middle of the road. It was obvious that they had a heated discussion. They were Brian and Peter Bullock, two single

brothers who had a freebooter's life and lived off a substantial inheritance of an aunt. They quit talking when they noticed him.

"Hi Andrew. You are still awake as well?" Brian asked.

"To be honest, guys, I wasn't. I was sound asleep, but woke up because of this *something* that you are probably talking about."

"We indeed had a discussion about the tremors and the huge swarms of birds," Brian answered. "Peter thinks it to be earthquake, but I don't believe that at all."

For a moment, Andrew thought the possibility of an earthquake. "What do you think it is," he asked Brian.

"I really have no idea," Brian answered. "I don't believe it is an earthquake, though, since the tremor lasts much too long for that. I never heard about a one-tremor earthquake that lasted longer than twenty minutes."

"Once it has to be the first time," Brian answered. "They have been speculating about the Big Bang that is to be expected at the San Andreas Fault along the west coast. According to experts, this will be a monstrous one. Why could it not be happening now? It is quite far from here, but we probably would feel the tremors here."

Thinking about this possibility, it was silent for a moment. "What is your opinion, Andrew?" Peter asked.

"I tend to agree with Brian," he answered. He clearly hesitated. "I also think that a tremor of an earthquake would not last twenty minutes. On the other hand, your idea about the tremendous earthquake by San Francisco is not altogether senseless. I just don't know," he continued with a somber face. "I am thinking about the possibility of a massive forest fire. In these situations you also see panicking animals and large swarms of birds."

"That doesn't explain the tremors, though," Brian answered. "A forest fire doesn't come with tremors, unless there are explosions in the line of fire, but an explosion doesn't last twenty minutes either."

"That's true," Andrew mumbled. "That's why I don't know what is happening."

“What do you think about an avalanche?” Peter asked.

Andres shook his head. “Birds don’t leave when there is an avalanche. One thing is certain: wildlife doesn’t respond like this if there is no reason. I am going for a walk through the village. Are you guys joining?”

“Sure, we can do that,” Brian answered. Peter nodded in agreement.

They walked through the deserted shopping street to the campsite that was fully occupied with recreation vehicles. It was high season and that meant that there were more tourists than Waterton’s own population. Usually, only about one hundred people lived in Waterton year round, but in the summer this number increased to more than three hundred. Many people owned a second house. Silently they walked through the village and looked around carefully.

“It is remarkably quiet.” Brian spoke softly. “I haven’t seen one animal yet. I often wander in the village late in the evening and then it is teemed with rodents and deer.”

Andrew nodded. “I noticed it as well. It seems as though they fled or hid themselves.”

They walked passed a row with RVs. A man with two little dogs walked up to them.

“Good evening, gentlemen,” he greeted.

“Good morning, by now. Still around?” Andrew responded.

“Yes, I had gone to bed already, but my dogs got terribly nervous and squeaked like weasels. I am not sure what their problem is. All they do is nervously pulling the leash.”

“Did you notice anything different the past few hours?” Andrew asked.

“No, did I miss something?”

“I don’t know. That’s why I am asking.”

Somewhat deterred by Andrew’s short response, the man looked at him suspiciously for a moment. “All I notice is that my dogs behave foolishly, but I assume that is because of the

surrounding. I am from Vancouver and my dogs aren't used to being in nature. I guess they are scared."

Andrew nodded. "Have a good night. They will get used to it."

"I am sure do so. Good night."

Shaking their heads, they continued. "Real city dwellers," Peter grumbled. "They would not even notice when a grizzly bear would empty their fridge."

"Andrew laughed softly. "Their dogs are smarter than their boss. They felt the tremors and became nervous."

They continued walking, passed the waterfall and arrived at Brian and Peter's house thirty minutes later.

"Oh well. All we learned was that everyone is sleeping as if nothing happened and all animals have taken off," Peter said.

"Now what?" Brian asked Andrew.

"We cannot do anything," he answered. "We simply don't know what is going on, so we just have to wait. I am going to try to sleep for a while.

"That's impossible!" Peter was frustrated. "I cannot sleep now!"

"I can only give you one advice," Andrew responded with a smile: "Expect the unexpected." He waved goodbye with his hand to the somber looking brothers and walked back home.

Standing on his veranda he looked for a moment at Waterton Lake. Going inside, he switched on a few lights and started his computer. Just like one of the Bullock brothers, he did feel like sleeping, but they did not need to know that. In the kitchen he made himself a double espresso with his Jura coffee maker. Back in his room, he logged on to the internet. It took a moment before his computer was connected. There was no ADSL in Waterton and internet was only available via his landline. This time, however, it took even longer than usual. He navigated to the CNN site. Hopefully they would know what was going on.

No connection.

Surprised, Andrew stared at the popup on his screen. It was unthinkable that CNN's website was not online. He was connected with the internet, so it was not his computer that caused the problem. He logged on the site of Waterton Park. No problem here. Again he tried CNN.

No connection.

He tried a few other news websites. No connection. A few general sites from the States did not work either. It seemed as if all internet traffic in the States was blocked.

Impossible!

Andrew leaned backward in his chair and folded his hands behind his head. With his eyes almost closed he looked at this screen. This didn't feel right. Apparently, something was going on in the States. The swarms of birds also came from that direction. Again he tried to analyse what could have taken place. If the entire internet was down, it could possibly be a terrorist attack.

He logged on to BBC. He assumed that the Britons would be online and he was right. On his screen, he saw a reporter in the studio. Behind his back an enormous cloud of smoke was visible. With his eyebrows raised, Andrew looked at the images and tried to figure out what happened and where, but it did not work. It was clear that it was about a huge fire, but he didn't see the actual fire. Andrew leaned forward to get a better look at his screen and to listen to the reporter. His screen blacked out. The connection was gone. Quickly, Andrew tried to log on again, but it did not work anymore. Now the entire internet connection was down. But that meant... Swiftly, he walked to his phone and pick up the receiver.

No dialling tone.

With a thud he dropped himself in his sofa and rubbed his face with his hands. The situation became more and more unclear. Deep in thoughts he sipped from his now cold coffee.

With a shock Andrew woke up and drowsily looked around. He had fallen asleep on the couch but something had called him back

to reality. His watch told him it was 5:37 am. He rubbed his eyes, but stopped halfway when he heard something. Lifting up his head, he tried to listen more carefully. It came from his backyard. Quickly, he stood up and walked to his window. Cautiously, he opened the curtain a little bit and peeked outside.

Weird. It was still dark and at this time in August, the sun was supposed to shine abundantly already. He opened the curtains a little further to get a closer look and his jaw dropped when he noticed something that was absolutely impossible.

It was snowing.

The weather could change quickly in the mountains around Waterton, but at this moment there was no wind at all. He walked to the digital display of his outside thermometer. It was 17° Celcius so snow was completely unthinkable. Yet, it was true. Snow came down steadily and slowly a thin layer was formed on the lawn.

Again he heard the sounds that woke him up. It sounded like a soft moaning, a frightened panting.

Andrew bent forward to the window, but could not see anything. He looked up to the sky and again he noticed that it should have been much lighter at this time of the day. It was dusky outside and the sky looked similar to having heavy weather: dark grey with streaks of light in between.

The moaning resumed. Cautiously, he walked to the kitchen and looked out of the window. He had a view on his veranda and lawn. Surprised he bit his lip when he observed the cause of this moaning.

Six coyotes walked on his lawn.

Twisting their bodies and tail between the legs, they walked around in circles. They panted heavily with open mouths. Once in a while they stopped walking and looked intently at Waterton Lake. Then they turned around, moaning, and crawled over the veranda again.

They were terrified.

Andrew looked at the lake but could not see anything different.

After opening the kitchen door he stepped onto the veranda. The coyotes looked at him, but soon focussed their attention on Waterton Lake again and continued their bizarre dance. Their fear for something was beyond their fear for humans and that was a bad omen.

Slowly, Andrew walked to the railing and looked at the snow that came down. It had a grey color and made a sound when it dropped down.

This was no snow.

Carefully, he reached out his hand and held it in the flakes. He closed his hand and rubbed his fingers together.

It was powder.

Bringing his hand to his nose, he carefully sniffed. It smelled like sulfur. With his eyes almost closed he looked over Waterton Lake again in the direction of the States. The border was close by, right across Waterton Lake. The images from the BBC flashed through his mind. The reason of last night's unrest must have been a massive fire and apparently just across the border since ash was coming down here.

Yet, he had some indefinable feelings. Too many questions were unanswered yet.

How was it possible that the internet was completely down?

Why were the animals so scared? Between Waterton and the fire were high mountains that formed a safe barrier. There was no risk for a fire here. At least, he hoped so.

Andrew took a tissue to keep it in front of his mouth and walked to the barn to get a mask. From the barn he walked to the front of his house where he had another surprise. Under the covered area where he had parked his car were four deer hiding for the ash. Even more surprising was that there were two coyotes and a skunk as well, standing closely together. Deer and coyotes were no friends, on the contrary: they avoided each other like water and fire.

Abruptly, Andrew stood still and looked at the bizarre scene – frowning. Just like the coyotes on the veranda, these animals, without exception, were terrified too. He knew that animals were very scared of fire, but the agony he noticed had to be caused by something more than raining ash only. Something that was much more dangerous than just fire.

At that moment, Andrew heard a cry of distress from the village. It was not just a cry – it was a death cry. Andrew knew the difference between a cry of distress and a death cry. With the former, there is still hope to be rescued and one calls for this loudly. With a death cry, however, all hope is gone and the person knows he is going to die. In Bosnia, Iraq, Afghanistan, and Somalia, Andrew had often heard this cry. A death cry sounds the same in any language.

As if someone pulled the plug of a record player, the cry abruptly came to an end.

Something had entered Waterton.