

Chapter 5

*A dark fuzziness grows in my amygdala
Pulling the hairs on my scalp from within.
A stark fuzziness takes my mind from without
Where white is black and she is he and life is,
Life is only marginally better than not-life.*

Over the following day they spend most of their time chased into the pingo by the ever-present freezing gale.

The next morning brings a better day. While on reconnaissance to map out the locations of toxic dump sites, Simion sees young Mike sitting on his snowmobile. Unnoticed in the gale, Simion walks up behind him. He sees that Mike is using a sharp knife to slice off a chunk of meat from a fresh-killed and skinned seal's hind quarter.

At a scraping sound, Mike jumps and cuts himself. He throws a dirty cloth over the seal parts, then sticks his bleeding thumb in his mouth. Spinning around, he holds the knife in his right hand, looking like he is ready to use it on Simion.

Simion takes a step back, raising his arms. "Hey Mike, I'm really sorry! I didn't mean to startle you like that! Can I help? Let me help you bandage..."

Mike pulls his thumb out of his mouth to say, "Bugger off! What the hell you doing sneaking around here like that? Owwww!"

"I can..."

"NO! Bugger off!" He puts his thumb back in his mouth and waves the knife with his free hand.

With a shrug, Simion backsteps and heads off toward his next possible site. Looking back occasionally, he sees Mike awkwardly wrap things up then get his snowmobile going. Simion hears it for a minute, then it stops. With another shrug, "Well, I offered. What the hell's he doing there, anyway?"

After finishing, Simion tromps back to the cave and quickly slams the newly reinforced rough-hewn door behind him into total darkness. The inside of the door is cold and slimy. He wipes his hand on the leg of his coveralls. As his eyes adjust, faded green symbols come into view on a small electronic device beyond his reach. Shining sharply from the door, two

thin lines of light mark the floor in front of him with a distorted right-angle. He steps forward, blocking off most of the horizontal line with his shoulders.

Something stirs nearby.

Simion stops. "That you Andrei?"

The Russian accent answers, "Yes, of course, my friend. Think maybe I am bear?"

Simion snorts as he shuffles ahead toward the shadow of a chair. "Ha! You? You're a pussycat, Andrei. Not anything like a friggen bear." His eyes adjusting, he catches a glimpse of gleaming teeth near the green light.

Simion steps carefully in the dark. Speaking as much to keep Andrei located, he says, "This is going to be one hell of a vacation, old man. That weird kid was out on his snowmobile, over by sector 2D. He cut his finger when I came up behind him."

"Hunting?"

"Not around here, unless he can do something with a lemming. No, he had a seal carcass he must've caught from the shore."

"Hunting for lemming soup?"

Simion laughs, "You'd need ten for one bowl!" He tries to coax some heat out of the little ceramic stove into his hands. "He was cutting the seal up. Maybe trying to trap foxes. No idea what he was doing."

He sees Andrei sorting markers by colour, holding each one into a ray of light to confirm its colour.

"Do you think those special markers are going to do the job on the barrels? Even frozen?"

"Should. Tested by expert. Graffiti artist friend say they mark all thing."

"So why didn't our government guy, Mike-the-other, provide us with something? And maybe a real house, too."

Simion plops down awkwardly into the aluminum tube chair. His bulky clothing catches on the wooden arms, clamping his body into the chair.

He wiggles his bum for some room then heaves a sigh. "Did you get through to the Institute?" Simion's frigid breath hangs in front of him in a dark shadowy cloud. Unseen, Andrei rolls his eyes at the question.

The howling wind outside continues its battering at the door. As Simion's eyes adjust better he sees that he did not latch the door well enough. Mini whirlwinds whip up the frigid snowdust, framed by light from a weak and lowering sun, coming in around the door. Puffs of steam from his mouth hang for a brief instant in front of his face. Simion gets up, again catching the armrest with his coat, which hauls the chair up like it was stuck to his bum. The aluminum chair rattles against the hard sand floor as he shakes it from his rear end, then he stomps to the door. Pushing against the door with a shoulder, Simion gets the latch all the

way down. It's now darker and a bit quieter. He wipes the slime off both hands onto his legs.

The smell of cold musty dirt gets up Andrei's nose. He sneezes.

"Simion, did tent live? Could see through blizzard?"

Opening up the coat's zippers before sitting back down, Simion shakes his head. "Nope. Couldn't even see the tatters."

He looks around. "If this pingo bubble wasn't here we'd be polar popsicles for sure! So much for Mike's assurance that we'd be as comfortable as possible."

Andrei snorts. "What mean, possible?" He reaches for the electronic device. "Try Oceanographic Institute in Vladivostok, and try Mountain Police channel. Are different time zone, yes?"

An exasperated nod from Simion shakes the fur hood that is half off his head. "The RCMP detachment isn't staffed all the time but they should be there now."

"So some person should be awake now, yes?"

Simion nods. "Whoever was left in charge by Mike is not doing his job! He *would* go to a place like Africa and leave us in this deep freeze!" Rubbing his hands briskly, Simion reaches for a pot of tea to pour some into a metal cup.

Mumbling, "Ice tea," he sighs in exasperation at the low heat setting that Andrei insists they use, to conserve supplies.

Louder, "Need to warm this up again, eh?" He takes a long slurp. The lukewarm liquid is welcome, anyway. He settles back as comfortably as he can into the aluminum-frame chair. Its original wooden back-slats have long ago been replaced by rough-cut aluminum strips from the wings of a crashed airplane. But aluminum is colder than wood.

"This storm, I think, is being pushed by the jet-stream loop up through the Arctic. Could be disrupting reception."

"Sense makes." Andrei shrugs. "So what we do? Need more antenna? When comes resupply plane? Need heat! No tree outside mean we freeze when all can go empty!" He flicks a hand toward a plastic-wrapped package of fuel cans.

Simion shifts under his layers of clothing. "Our time zone..." He wrinkles his brows.

"Vladivostok is, what, plus 12 Zulu?" A nod from Andrei. "And we're at minus 8, no, minus 4 here. Vancouver is minus 8 Zulu, right?"

Andrei reaches for his non-existent cellphone. "Yebem..." he mutters. "Do not know. Sound good."

Something rolls down the ramp in front of their abode and slaps into the door and its dirt support. More snowdust gets kicked off the curved wall/ceiling, swirling slowly with the eddies, lighting up in the few rays of luminescence from the transmitter, along with the clouds of their breaths. Both their wide eyes shine, too, straining to see in the dark. Simion shakes head, refocusing on their predicament. Andrei sneezes loudly.

Simion says, "Bless you."

Andrei crosses himself. "Damn dirt! And mould! It stink! Is like, like baba's potato hole!"

Simion smiles. "Fruit cellar. You can always step outside, my friend. Our tent is well past the airport, by now, heading for Pelly Bay. Might have to go to their church after all, eh?"

"Not his church." Frustrated, Andrei wipes his nose broadly with the sleeve of his sweater that sticks out past the orange coveralls. He tries to read one of his cyrillic-printed books. An Orthodox cross on the cover is the only thing Simion recognizes.

Rousing himself to action, Simion raises his voice. "Andrei, we need to figure out when we can call at the right time. They probably think we're out tagging ptarmigans and friggen white foxes, playing in the sand!" He kicks at the mixture of frozen dirt and blond sand on the floor.

Opening up his zippers a bit more, Simion stares at the ceiling. "Ok. We've been in this dungeon for over 70 hours, so it's Thursday, ah... afternoon! Well into so-called May, up here. Andrei, have you tried all the channels on the phone?"

Nodding, Andrei gestures at the transmitter. "Do not hear from Elena for many week. Make me worry." He stretches toward Simion with the radio. "Elena will bring my money and I live in condo in Coal Harbour." His bright smile shows clearly.

"You mean the one in Nunavut?"

"NO not Coal Harbour in Nunavut..."

As Simion reaches for the transmitter the door bursts open blinding them both. He yells in fear. Bitterly cold air rushes at them.

With snowdust flying, a terrifyingly big polar bear settles down onto both front paws, grins at Simion, then moves quickly through the doorway, slashing at Simion's outstretched arm and is about to open her mouth over his neck when BANG!

Andrei shoots again BANG!

The bear roars and rises toward full height slamming her head against the ceiling BANG!

Reddened across her chest, she crumples onto the floor, snowdust and chunks of dirt rain down from the ceiling onto her white fur. Her splayed-out left paw pushes hard on Simion's left arm. He can't get it away. The bent chair still holds him awkwardly, along with the great paw. She drags her paw slowly, with Simion's arm, toward her head. Simion's glasses are clouded by the final breath escaping from the great bear, as he and his chair scrape in slow-motion closer to her huge teeth. Incongruously, he notices that the paw's skin is black under the white fur.

Snapping his body straight out of the chair and from under her paw, Simion frantically scrambles away, pressing well into the frozen dirt wall as far away as he can from the mother polar bear.

Staring through the smashed door, in the howling snow-gale, Simion's desperate eyes scan the ramp that leads up from the cave. A very young cub peeks around the top of the ramp, then gives a quiet yelp. It backs away out of sight into the gale.

Andrei is pressed against the dark wall on the other side of the cave. His rifle is held waist-high, ready for another shot at the reddening white mass on their floor. "B-bozhe moi!" Feeling the heat of the bear on his face, Andrei brushes at his cheek with his right hand, then quickly pulls the rifle stock back up.

Simion starts to shake, sending a light halo of snowdust off the wall behind him. "Andrei! K-keep your gun on him!"

A widening pool of blood soaks into the floor around the bear.

Gruffly, "Think is dead, Simion. Move paw – see if he lives."

Pushing back further into the wall, Simion's eyes glare. "HELL NO! I ain't touching that thing! Watch out for the other one outside!"

Andrei quickly swivels the rifle. "Where! Other bear?"

Simion points hesitantly up the ramp. "I saw." He restarts, trying to lower his very high-pitched voice, "I saw a smaller one up there around the corner. Make sure it doesn't come down." He clears his dry throat without moving his wide eyes off the doorway. Then, glancing down at his left arm, Simion notices that the sleeve is ripped and is slowly being discoloured. "Shit. Must have got me." He holds his left arm up against his belly.

The gale is now clearing to the point where some of the tundra beyond the ramp can be picked out in the arctic noon. Simion notices a clump of flesh on the ground just outside the door. He is about to point it out to Andrei when a plaintive yelp comes again from the cub, hiding around the corner of the ramp wall. Hearing it, Andrei points his rifle up the ramp and lets off a shot, startling Simion.

"JESUS FRIGGEN CHRIST! What're you doing!"

Andrei smiles, then breaks into giggles, looking at Simion then outside and back again.

"Simion! You want I should ask next time to shoot at bear?"

He starts laughing uncontrollably. Simion joins him, still holding his left arm. Their manic laughter echoes up the ramp.

Outside, the cub yelps again then backs away. He turns and runs. Stops, half turning back, then runs away over an embankment.