

ICE

Would you risk everything for a fairy tale?

SARAH BETH DURST



Ice

When Cassie was little her grandmother would tell her fairytales about the Arctic—stories about snow and ice, and about her mother who made a deal with the Polar Bear King and was swept away to the ends of the earth to become a prisoner of the trolls. Now that Cassie is older, and determined to become a leading scientist and Arctic researcher, she has no time for fairytales or lies about her dead mother and talking animals. But when Cassie comes face to face with a mysterious polar bear, one that defies all scientific fact or knowledge, she realizes that the fairytales could actually be true---her mother might be alive, and Cassie might be the only one who has the power to save her. She makes a deal with the Polar Bear King, but this deal comes with consequences she never bargained for.

Before long, Cassie finds herself on a journey against time, traveling across the brutal Arctic, through the Canadian boreal forest, and on the back of the North Wind to the land east of the sun and west of the moon. Before the end of her journey, Cassie will learn the true meaning of love and family, and what it means to become an adult.

Sarah Beth Durst is the author of the middle grade novels *Into the Wild* and *Out of the Wild*. *Into the Wild* was recently selected as a finalist for a Cybil (Children’s and YA Bloggers’ Literary) Award in the middle grade fantasy/SF category, and it will also appear on the preliminary ballot for SFWA’s Andre Norton Award for Young Adult Science Fiction and Fantasy. She lives in Stony Brook, NY with her husband and daughter.

PROLOGUE:

The North Wind's Daughter

“Once upon a time, the North Wind said to the Polar Bear King, ‘Steal me a daughter, and when she grows, she will be your bride.’”

Four-year-old Cassie clutched her quilt and stared at her grandmother. Tall and straight, Gram looked like a general. She perched stiffly on the edge of Cassie’s bed. She had a mahogany cane in her left hand. Tonight, Dad was away from the station, which meant Cassie would hear the story. Gram never told it when Dad was home. It was the only story she ever told.

“And so, the Polar Bear King kidnapped a human child and brought her to the North Wind, and she was raised with the North Wind as her father and the West, South, and East Winds as her uncles. She grew into a beautiful, but lonely, young woman. One day, while the Winds were gone (as they often were), she met a human man. She befriended him, and it wasn’t long before they fell in love.

“When the Polar Bear King came to claim his bride, she refused him. Her heart, she said, belonged to another. ‘I would not have an unwilling wife,’ he told her. ‘But your father has made a promise to me.’

“Knowing the power of a magic promise, the North Wind’s daughter sought to counter it with her own bargain. ‘Then I will make a promise to you,’ the North Wind’s daughter replied. ‘Bring me to my love and hide us from my father, and when I have a daughter, she will be your bride.’ And so, the Bear carried the North Wind’s daughter to her human husband and hid them in the ice and snow.

“Angry, the North Wind tore across the land, sea, and sky. But he could not find them. For a long while, the North Wind’s daughter and her husband were happy.

“In time, the woman had a child. Passing by, the West Wind heard the birth and hurried to tell the North Wind where his daughter could be found. With the strength of a thousand blizzards, the North Wind swooped down onto the house that held his daughter, her husband, and their newborn baby. He would have torn the house to shreds, but the woman ran outside. ‘Take me,’ she cried, ‘but leave my loved ones alone!’

“The North Wind blew her as far as he could—as far as the castle beyond the ends of the world. There, she fell to the ground and was captured by trolls.” Cassie heard the bed creak as Gram stood. Her rich voice was softer now. “It is said that when the wind howls from the north, it is for his lost daughter.”

Cassie blinked her eyes open. “And Mommy is still there?”

Gram was a shadow in the doorway. “Yes.”

PART ONE:

The Land of the Midnight Sun

One

Once upon a time, in a land far to the north, there lived a lovely maiden . . .

Latitude 72° 13' 30" N

Longitude 152° 06' 52" W

Altitude 3 ft.

Cassie killed the snowmobile engine.

Total silence, her favorite sound. Ice crystals spun in the Arctic air. Sparkling in the predawn light, they looked like diamond dust. Beneath her ice-encrusted face mask, she smiled. She loved this: just her, the ice, and the bear.

“Don’t move,” she whispered at the polar bear.

Cassie felt behind her and unhooked the rifle. Placid as a marble statue, the polar bear did not move. She loaded the tranquilizer dart by feel, her eyes never leaving the bear. White on white in an alcove of ice, he looked like a king on a throne. For an instant, Cassie imagined she could hear Gram’s voice, telling the story of the Polar Bear King. . . . Gram hadn’t told that story since the day she’d left the research station, but Cassie still remembered every word of it. She used to believe it was true.

When she was little, Cassie used to stage practice rescue missions outside

of Dad's Arctic research station. She'd pile old snowmobile parts and broken generators to make the troll's castle, and then she'd scale the castle walls and tie up the "trolls" (old clothes stuffed with pillows) with climbing ropes. Once, Dad had caught her on the station roof with skis strapped to her feet, ready to ski beyond the ends of the earth to save her mom. He'd taken away Cassie's skis and had forbidden Gram to tell the story. Not that that had slowed Cassie at all. She'd simply begged Gram from telling the story when Dad was away, and she'd invented a new game involving a canvas sail and an unused sled. Even after she'd understood the truth—that Gram's story was merely a pretty way to say her mother had died—she'd continued to play the games.

Now I don't need games, she thought with a grin. She snapped the syringe into place and lifted the gun up to her shoulder. And this bear, she thought, didn't need any kid's bedtime story to make him magnificent. He was as perfect as a textbook illustration: cream-colored with healthy musculature and no battle scars. If her estimates were correct, he'd be the largest polar bear on record. And she was the one who had found him.

Cassie cocked the tranquilizer gun, and the polar bear turned his head to look directly at her. She held her breath and didn't move. Wind whistled, and loose snow swirled between her and the bear. Her heart thudded in her ears so loudly that she was certain he could hear it. This was it—the end of the chase. When she'd begun this chase, the aurora borealis had been dancing in the sky. She'd tracked him in its light for three miles north of the station. Loose sea ice had jostled at the shore, but she'd driven over it and then onto the pack ice. She'd followed him all the way here, to a jumble of

ice blocks that looked like a miniature mountain range. She had no idea how he'd stayed so far ahead of her during the chase. Top speed for an adult male bear clocked at thirty miles per hour, and she'd run her snowmobile at sixty. Maybe the tracks hadn't been as fresh as they'd looked, or maybe she'd discovered some kind of superfast bear. She grinned at the ridiculousness of that idea. Regardless of the explanation, the tracks had led her here to this beautiful, majestic, perfect bear. She'd won.

A moment later, the bear looked away across the frozen sea.

"You're mine," she whispered as she sighted down the barrel.

And the polar bear stepped *into the ice*. In one fluid motion, he rose and moved backward. It looked as if he were stepping into a cloud. His hind legs vanished into whiteness, and then his torso.

Impossible.

She lowered the gun and stared. She couldn't be seeing this. The ice wall appeared to be absorbing him. Now only his shoulders and head were visible.

Cassie shook herself. He was escaping! Never mind how. Lifting the gun, she squeezed the trigger. The recoil bashed the butt of the gun into her shoulder. Reflexively, she blinked.

And the bear was gone.

"No," she said out loud. She'd had him! What had happened? Bears didn't—couldn't—walk through ice. She had to have imagined it. Some trick of the Arctic air. She whipped off her goggles. Cold squeezed her eyeballs, and the white was blinding. She scanned the frozen waves. Snow blew across the ice like fast-moving clouds. The landscape was as dead as a

desert. When the cold hurt too much for her to stand it a second longer, she replaced her goggles.

Her radio crackled. She pulled it out of her parka pocket. “Cassie here,” she said, trying to sound casual. She’d chased the bear onto the pack ice without backup. If she’d caught him, all would have been forgiven. But now . . . How was she going to explain this? She couldn’t even explain it to herself.

“Cassandra Elizabeth Dasent, get home NOW.”

Dad’s voice. And he was not happy.

Well, she wasn’t happy either. She’d promised herself that she’d tag a bear as a birthday present to herself—she was turning eighteen in just a few hours. It seemed the ideal way for the only daughter of the head scientist at the Eastern Beaufort Sea Research Station to celebrate becoming a legal adult. When this bear had sauntered past the station while she’d been out fixing the radio antennae, it had felt like a gift. She’d never expected the chase to lead her so far out onto the ice, and she’d never expected the bear to . . . He couldn’t have gone far. He had to be somewhere just beyond the ice ridges. She checked the gas gauge. She had another three hours of fuel to spare.

“Cassie? Cassie, are you there?”

“I’m going after him,” she said into the radio. She revved the engine, drowning her father’s response, and headed across the ice.

Cassie abandoned the snowmobile in the shed. Slinging her pack over her shoulder, she trudged to the station. She ached from head to toe, inside

and out. Even her fingernails ached. The sun hovered on the horizon, as it would for less and less time every day before it sank permanently for the winter. The low-angled light made her shadow look like a snow giant out of an Inupiaq legend.

She'd lost him.

She didn't know how, but she'd lost him. She kept replaying the search in her mind as if that would make her envision the tracks she must have missed. If she'd just searched more carefully in the first few moments instead of speeding across the sea ice . . .

Owen, the station lab technician, met her at the door. She blinked at him—a potbellied man with a pepper beard. Clearly, he'd been waiting for her.

“Cassie, the case!” Owen cried in an anguished voice.

She glanced at her pack. The syringe case dangled out of the bag. It was encrusted in ice. Cassie winced. “He got away,” she said.

Owen rescued the bag and gun from her. “Do you know how much these cost?”

Cassie followed him inside through the double door entryway. As she shut the inner door behind her, the thick, sour warmth of the station rolled over her like a smothering wave. It was the smell of home, stale and stifling and comfortingly familiar. She wished she had been coming home victorious.

Clucking over the tranquilizer gun, Owen said, “You have to be careful with this equipment. Treat it like a baby.”

Her stomach sank as she watched him examine her equipment. She

didn't need another strike against her. She'd taken the snowmobile out onto the pack ice alone *and* she'd been careless with equipment. Dad was not going to be pleased. Peeling off her outer layers, she asked, "Where is he? Radar room?" She'd better get it over with. There was no point in delaying.

Owen didn't respond. He was absorbed in cleaning the tranq gun. She could tell he'd already dismissed her from his mind. She almost smiled. He loved his equipment like she loved the pack ice. Both of them were a bit . . . single-minded. She could admit that about herself. "Jeremy?" she said. The new research intern looked up from his desk.

"He's not a happy camper," Jeremy confirmed. "He wants to talk to you." He nodded toward the research lab door. "You're welcome to hide here," he added helpfully, pointing under his desk.

She managed a grin. Jeremy had been blasted by Dad his first week at the station for going out on the ice without the proper gear, and now he had a healthy respect for Cassie's father's temper. Of course, in that case, he had deserved it. She didn't care if he was from UCLA. What breed of idiot went out on the ice without a face mask? You'd never catch her making that kind of newbie mistake. *No*, she thought, *I specialize in the more spectacular mistakes, such as misplacing a full-grown polar bear.*

Cassie pushed through the door to the research lab. She scooted between the boxes and equipment. She could hear Dad's voice, deep and clipped, inside the radar room. Ugh, this was not going to go well. Here in the faintly sour warmth of home, it was going to sound like she was quoting Gram's old fairy tale about the Polar Bear King. What seemed almost believable out on the sea ice seemed patently unreal here, back in the prosaic old station.

Here, it seemed far more plausible that she'd imagined the bear walking through ice. She wished she'd imagined losing him.

In the radar room, Dad was in his typical position, half-perched on a stool, flanked by two other researchers. Cassie halted just inside the doorway, watching them. Her father was like the sun. People tended to orbit around him without even realizing they were. Scott and Liam were his most common satellites. She wondered if that was how she looked next to him—overshadowed and small. Not liking that thought, Cassie stepped farther into the room.

The door swung shut behind her, and Dad looked up at the sound. He lowered his clipboard. His face was impassive, but she knew he was furious. She steeled herself. She'd deliver her report as professionally as possible. How he reacted would be his choice.

Scott flashed a smile at her. "Ah, the little workaholic."

"Could you gentlemen excuse us?" Dad said to Scott and Liam. "Family discussion." Oh, that was not a good sign. She swallowed hard.

Cassie wondered, not for the first time, if her mother hadn't died, would that have softened Dad? Would she have been able to talk to him without feeling like she was approaching a mountain? So much could have been different if her mother had lived.

The two scientists looked from father to daughter, as if suddenly noticing the tension that was thick enough to inhale. Both of them bolted.

For a long moment, Dad didn't speak. His expression was unreadable. His eyes were buried underneath thick, white eyebrows. His mouth was hidden in a mountain-man beard. Six-foot-five, he looked impervious. Cassie raised her chin and met his eyes.

Finally, he said, “You know better than to go out on the pack ice without backup. I raised you to be smarter than this.”

Yes, he had. One thing he’d always made sure of was that she knew the rules of the ice. Everything else in her childhood he may have left to others. With her mother dead soon after Cassie was born and Gram gone from the station when Cassie was five, she’d done a lot of her own raising—with only a sort of tag-team parenting from Dad, Max, Owen, and whoever else was passing through the research station. But he had made sure that she knew what to do when she stepped outside the station, and she was grateful for that. “I know,” she said.

“You could have fallen into a crevasse,” he said. “A pressure ridge could have collapsed. A lead could have split the ice, and you could have driven directly into ocean water.”

“I know,” she repeated. What else could she say? She wasn’t going to make excuses. Maybe she would have a few years ago, but she wasn’t a kid anymore. If she expected to be treated as a professional, she knew she had to act like one.

He continued to scowl at her.

Cassie felt her face redden, but she forced herself not to look away. She refused to be intimidated by him.

Dad sighed. “Report,” he said.

“There’s something unusual about this bear.” Taking a deep breath, Cassie plunged into a description of how she had tracked him and how he had walked into the ice. She told Dad about searching the pressure ridge and failing to find tracks leading out of it. She told him how she had

searched the surrounding area, crossing miles of pack ice, with no further sign of the bear. Finishing, she braced herself, waiting for Dad to tear apart her report.

Instead, she saw the anger drain out of her father's face. He dropped his clipboard to the table, and he hugged her. "I could have lost you," he said.

This was new. "Dad," she said, squirming. Anger she had expected, but hugs? They were not a hugging family. "Dad, please, I'm fine. I know what I'm doing. You don't have to worry."

Dad released her. He was shaking his head. "I should have known this day would come," he said. "Your grandmother was right."

Awkwardly, she patted his shoulder. "I'll bring backup next time," she promised. "I'll catch the bear. You'll see."

He didn't appear to be listening. "It's too late for application deadlines for this year, but some of my friends at the University of Alaska owe me favors. You can work in one of their labs and apply for undergrad next year."

Whoa—*what?* They'd agreed she would take courses remotely. She wasn't leaving the station. "Dad . . ."

"You can live with your grandmother in Fairbanks. She'll be thrilled to say 'I told you so.' She's been pushing for this since you were five, but I selfishly wanted you here," he said. "I'll contact Max to fly you there."

She stared at him. "But I don't want to leave," she said. She loved it at the station! Her life was here. She wanted—no, *needed*—to be near the ice.

He focused on her, as if seeing her afresh. "You're leaving," he said, steel back in his voice. "I'm sorry, Cassie, but this is for your own good."

“You can’t simply decide that—”

“If your mother were here, she would want this.”

Cassie felt as if she’d been punched in her gut. He knew full well how Cassie felt about her mother, how much she wished she were here, how much she wished she’d known her. To use that as a weapon to win an argument . . . It was a low blow. Cassie shook her head as if she could shake out his words. “I’m not leaving,” she said. “This is my *home*.”

Her father—who shied away from feelings so much that he had delegated her childhood to her grandmother and had left her puberty to a stack of bio textbooks—her father had tears in his eyes. “Not anymore,” he said softly. “It can’t be anymore.”

Two

Latitude 70° 49' 23" N

Longitude 152° 29' 25" W

Altitude 10 ft.

Cassie blinked at her clock: three a.m.

What were they *doing*? It sounded as if the whole station staff were stomping around outside her door. She could have sworn she'd even heard a plane engine. She tossed off her covers and raked her fingers through her hair. She knew she looked like a redheaded Medusa, and she was sure she had bags under her eyes the size of golf balls. She was wearing long johns, mismatched socks, and an oversize T-shirt that read: ALASKA—WHERE MEN ARE MEN AND WOMEN WIN THE IDITAROD. Cassie yanked on pants and a sweater over her long johns and T-shirt before she stuck her head out her door. She spotted Owen scurrying down the hallway. "Hey," she called to him. "It's three a.m." She nearly added, *And it's my birthday.*

"Max's plane is here," Owen said. "Just landed. We'd have had more warning if you had fixed the antennae instead of going off to chase trouble."

She winced. She deserved that. After all, she'd wrecked his equipment. His crankiness was justified. But what did he mean that Max's plane was here? Max wasn't scheduled for a visit. . . . Oh.

He'd come for Cassie.

Her heart sank. How had Dad convinced him to come so fast? Before the budget cuts, Max had been on the station's staff. He'd flown his Twin Otter for them when Cassie was little; he'd been her earliest babysitter, practically an uncle to her—but now he worked for a commercial runway in Fairbanks. He couldn't take off on zero notice. She hadn't imagined Dad would call for him immediately.

Cassie brushed past Owen and headed for the research lab. She had to put a stop to this right now. She had to talk sense into Dad and convince Max to return to Fairbanks without her.

Before Cassie reached the lab door, she heard boxes scrape across linoleum, and the door flew open. "Cassie-lassie!" Max bellowed. He strode down the hall and scooped her up into a bear hug. He swung her in a half circle, then thumped her shoulder blades as if he were burping her as he set her down. "Did you find the Abominable Snowman?" he asked, their old routine.

"Stuffed and mounted," she said, on cue. He grinned at her, his white teeth startlingly bright against his dark skin. She automatically grinned back. She'd forgotten how much she'd missed seeing him.

Maybe this is a normal visit, Cassie thought as Max beamed at her. Maybe it's unrelated to my argument with Dad. Maybe it's just a coincidence.

And maybe there really is an Abominable Snowman. She shook her head at herself. Max wasn't here by coincidence, not within mere hours of Dad's pronouncement. She shouldn't bother trying to fool herself.

"Got a surprise for you," Max said.

"Yeah?" He hadn't said it like it was a bad surprise, but her stomach knotted as if it knew this couldn't be good.

Cassie heard a familiar tap from the doorway—a cane. Gram. Max had brought Gram. Cassie wished she could be happy. She hadn't seen her grandmother in months, and now she was here. Ordinarily, this would have been a wonderful surprise: Max and Gram, her two favorite people in the world, were here. But now she was going to have to tell her grandmother face-to-face that she didn't want to live with her in Fairbanks.

She shouldn't have told Dad about the bear walking into the ice. If she had simply left that detail out of her report . . .

Gram hit her mahogany cane sharply on the floor. "I haven't shriveled to nothing. Come hug me." She held out her arms.

Forcing herself to smile, Cassie bounded the remaining steps to the lab door. She wrapped her grandmother in her arms. It was like holding a bird. Gram was almost as tall as Cassie, but her bones were tiny. She felt breakable. Cassie released her quickly.

"You've grown," Gram said.

"You've shrunk," Cassie responded automatically.

Gram frowned and shook her head. Like Cassie, she had a fierce frown. Both of them had strong faces, but Gram's skin hung loose over hers, and her hair, once as thick and red as Cassie's, rustled like an old curtain. "Nonsense. I'm as beautiful as the day your grandfather met me. First time in the back of his pickup, do you know what he said? 'Ingrid,' he said. 'Ingrid, God Himself could not have more perfect breasts than you.'"

Cassie couldn't help laughing. "I've missed you."

"Oh, my Cassandra." She hooked her arm around Cassie's waist. "Let me look at you. So grown-up. Such a fine young woman now."

Cassie swallowed a sudden lump in her throat. “Gram . . .,” she began. She stopped. How did she say this without hurting Gram’s feelings? The last thing in the world she wanted to do was hurt her grandmother. “How . . . How was your flight?”

“Idiotic FCC almost didn’t let us lift up,” Max said. “No Fed can tell *me* how to fly safe. Thirty years flying in the bush, and I can smell ice. It’s not like flying in the lower forty-eight . . .”

Only half-listening to Max’s rant, Cassie watched her grandmother’s face and tried to read what she was thinking. “Gram, what did Dad tell you?”

Max fell silent.

Gram plucked lint from Cassie’s wool sweater. For as long as Cassie could remember, Gram was always tidying. Gram herself was as neat as a soldier. Her white shirt was pressed with a crease down the sleeves. She looked her neatest when she was most upset. She was looking very neat now. “Ah, my Cassandra.” Gram adjusted Cassie’s sweater, and then she took Cassie’s face in both her hands. Gram kissed her left cheek, and then her right cheek, an oddly formal gesture. Cassie pulled back. “Gram, what is it?”

“You found him,” Gram said. “You found the Polar Bear King.”

Cassie flinched as if she’d been slapped. Of all the things she’d been expecting Gram to say, that wasn’t one of them. “That’s not funny.”

“I wasn’t joking,” Gram said.

“Did Dad tell you I also saw Elvis?” Cassie said. “Oh, yes, the King’s taken up dog mushing. Saw him last week racing the Easter Bunny and the Tooth Fairy.”

Gram gripped Cassie's shoulders. "Cassandra . . ."

Dad had told them . . . what? She'd been hallucinating? She was crazy? *That* was how he had convinced Max and Gram to drop everything and fly here?

Max inched backward down the hallway. "I'll just . . . let you two talk. . . . Yeah. Takeoff will be at six a.m. Um, happy birthday, by the way." He fled through the lab door.

Some birthday. Why was everyone she loved and trusted acting crazy? First Dad, and now Gram. . . . Gram steered Cassie away from the lab door. "Come, let's go to your room," Gram said. "This isn't a public conversation."

Yes, that was a good idea. She'd talk to Gram alone—find out what was really behind all this. There had to be an explanation for Dad's uncharacteristic overreaction. Cassie managed a smile and tried for normalcy: "My room isn't exactly Gram-ready."

"I'll be the judge of that," Gram said.

Cassie banged her hip on her bedroom door, and it popped open. Socks spilled into the hall. She kicked them out of the way and switched on the bedroom light. Longjohns were draped over the dresser. Her bivy sack was wound around the bed frame. On her pillow, Mr. Fluffy, her old stuffed fox with the chewed ear, sported a roll of duct tape around his neck. Gram surveyed the wreckage. "Mmm," Gram said. "You didn't make your bed."

"You can see the bed?"

Using her cane, Gram picked her way over a nest of climbing ropes. She scooted a heap of maps off the bed and onto the floor and spread the comforter. "Fix your side, dear."

Cassie really didn't want to talk about the state of her room. She was sorry she'd mentioned it. "Gram . . .," Cassie began.

"Dear?" Gram repeated, more steel in her voice.

Cassie knew her: Gram wasn't going to talk until the bed was made. Dad had learned his implacable resolve from her. Sighing, Cassie tugged the comforter straight. "Tuck in the corner," Gram said. Cassie obeyed. "Very nice," Gram said. "Now, fetch your bag, dear. We need to get you packed."

"Gram . . . It's not that I don't want to live with you. I just don't want to live in Fairbanks. I want to stay here."

"You'll need sweaters and underwear." Gram plucked a backpack out of the mess. She laid it open on the bed.

Stay calm, Cassie told herself. *This is Gram*. Cassie continued in a reasonable tone, "It's prime season—bears are migrating back onto the sea ice. I'm needed here."

Gram poked her cane into Cassie's closet. "Clean or dirty?" She extracted a wool sweater and sniffed it. "You need to take better care of your clothes."

"Gram, talk to me," she pleaded.

Gram handed Cassie three sweaters. "Fold."

Cassie dumped the sweaters onto her bed. Gram gave her a look, and then neatly folded the sweaters and placed them inside the backpack. Cassie fished them out again and tossed them back into the closet.

"Don't be difficult," Gram said. She fetched the sweaters. "Your father worries. He has always worried, the stubborn fool." Gram refolded the sweaters. "He wanted to shield you. He thought ignorance would protect you . . . but

that's an old argument, and the point is moot now. The important thing is to get you to Fairbanks. I'll explain everything once you're safely there."

Cassie felt a chill. She didn't need protection from a fairy tale. There was no Polar Bear King. What was Gram hiding behind this ridiculous lie? "Gram, what 'everything'?"

"You aren't going to make this easy, are you?" Gram said.

No, of course she wasn't. Gram was asking her to leave her life, her home, her career, and her future. "What aren't you telling me?" Cassie asked.

Gram sighed. "Oh, my Cassandra, he should have told you the truth a long time ago. He only wanted to protect you. We both only wanted to protect you. We merely disagreed on the best approach." She sounded tired. Old and tired. Cassie had never heard Gram sound like that.

"What truth?" Cassie asked.

Gram sat on the edge of Cassie's bed like she used to when she'd tuck Cassie in at night. Gram held one of Cassie's sweaters on her lap. "Your mother," Gram said gently, "was the daughter of the North Wind. She bargained with the Polar Bear King, and now, on your eighteenth birthday, he's coming for you."

Cassie heard a roaring in her ears as her pulse pounded. Her mother, the daughter of the *wind*? That was only a story.

"You know it's true," Gram said. "You've seen him."

She'd seen a bear, larger than any on record, who'd walked into solid ice. But that didn't mean . . . Cassie shook her head. Why was Gram doing this? It wasn't funny. Teasing her about the Polar Bear King, teasing her about her mother . . . It was cruel. "Don't do this," Cassie said.

“Cassandra, it is true,” Gram said. “You know I left the station because your father and I had a disagreement. This was what we fought about. I believed you should have been told the truth.”

Gram’s expression was grave. Her eyes were kind and serious. Her hands were nervously flattening the sweater on her lap. Cassie stared at her. For a brief, marvelous, crazy instant, Cassie thought, *What if*. . .

But no, it wasn’t true. Her mother had died in a blizzard shortly after Cassie was born. She wasn’t at some troll castle. If she were . . . If she were, if there were even a *possibility* that Gram’s story were true and her mother was a prisoner somewhere, then Dad would have rescued her. Cassie wouldn’t have had to grow up feeling like she was missing a slice of herself.

“You need time to think,” Gram said kindly. “I understand. It’s a lot all at once.” She patted Cassie’s shoulder. “You rest. We’ll leave in a few hours.”

Before Cassie could object again, Gram left her alone.

Cassie tossed her backpack into the closet and deposited the sweaters onto her dresser. Why had Dad and Gram invented this lie? They’d never lied to her before. But they were either lying to her now or . . .

Cassie blinked fast. Her eyes felt hot as she stared at her bed. Years ago, Gram used to sit there, a profile in the dark. Her voice, telling the story, was as familiar as a heartbeat. She’d told it every time Dad had been away from the station. Cassie had always thought that was because Dad had disapproved of fairy tales. His idea of a bedtime story was Shackleton’s journey to Antarctica. Now she was supposed to believe he’d objected to Gram telling her the truth?

She wished she'd caught that bear. If she had, they could've run tests on him, taken a blood sample, even tagged him with an ID and tracked his movements. She could have proved he was ordinary.

Maybe she still could. If she called their bluff, they'd have no excuse to force her to Fairbanks.

Without waiting for second thoughts, Cassie tiptoed out into the hall and then cut through the research lab. The fluorescents were off, but the computer screens glowed green. She heard hushed voices from the direction of the kitchen. If she were quick enough, no one would even notice she had left her room. She exited the lab, closing the door softly behind her, and then flicked on the light of the main room.

Someone stirred. "Whaa . . ."

Cassie froze. It was Jeremy. He'd fallen asleep at his desk again. "Go back to sleep," she whispered.

"Mmmuph," he said, closing his eyes.

She held her breath. He was the newbie—the *cheechako*, to use Max's native Inupiaq. Dad and Gram wouldn't have told him anything, she assured herself. If she acted normal, he wouldn't be alarmed, and he wouldn't fetch her father. She moved slowly to her desk and pulled on her Gore-Tex pants. The pants rustled, and Jeremy's eyes popped open again.

Jeremy peered at her blearily. "Where are you going?"

"Repair work," she lied. "Nothing to worry about." She shoved her feet into her mukluks and secured her gaiters over them.

"Don't know how you can stand it out there," Jeremy said. "It's a wasteland. An ice desert. At least you're getting out, eh?"

Her fingers faltered as she fixed her face mask. “Who told you that?” she asked, trying to keep her voice calm and casual. She pulled the hood up over two wool hats—almost ready. She felt as if her insides were shouting, *Hurry, hurry!*

“That plane guy, Max, said you were going to undergrad.”

“Max talks too much,” she said. “I’m not going anywhere.” She Velcroed the throat gusset of her hood shut and then fetched her emergency kit. The small pack held a flashlight, her ice axe, extra flannels, and a few food rations. With this, she could search the pack ice for several days, if that’s what it would take.

“Just because this is all you know, it doesn’t mean this is all there is,” he said. “Don’t you want a normal life? You’ve never lived outside this station. You’ve been homeschooled your entire life. Don’t you want to get out there, meet kids your age, do what normal people do?”

She loved the ice. She loved tracking bears. “This is home,” she said shortly.

“I thought this would be my home. Coming here was my dream, you know, for years. But now . . . Hey, whatever, dreams change. Nothing wrong with that. I’m applying for a nice, cozy postdoc back at UCLA.”

“Good for you,” she said. Her dreams weren’t changing. Nothing and no one—Dad, Gram, Max—could force her to leave her life here. “I’ll just be a minute,” she said as she opened the inner door and shut it behind her.

For a brief second, she debated staying inside and trying to talk sense into Dad and Gram, but words had failed to convince them before. *No*, she thought, *if I don’t act now, I’ll be on a plane to Fairbanks in three hours*. She

couldn't let that happen. She opened the outer door and stepped out into the Arctic.

Cold seared into her, slicing her, and her face mask instantly frosted. She took a deep breath of night air. It felt brittle and sharp in her throat, as if the air were filled with shards of glass. This was exactly what she needed to clear her mind. The piercingly cold air soothed her, as it always did.

Standing within the station floodlights, she faced out toward the blue darkness. Silence surrounded her. "Polar Bear King!" she shouted into the silence. "I'm coming to find you! Do you hear me?"

She waited for a moment, listening. Snow drifted over her feet. Rubbing frost from her goggles, she scanned the darkened ice fields. Wind blew surface snow over the moonlit snowbanks and ridges. Blue shadows oscillated over the ice.

Cassie shook herself. She hadn't honestly expected the so-called Polar Bear King to answer, had she? That was crazy. *Kinnaq*, she remembered—that was the Inupiaq word for lunatic.

Just because she had let her overtiredness make her (for an instant) want to believe in a magical polar bear, that did not mean she was snow-crazed. Just because she'd wanted Gram's story to be real and her mother to be alive, it didn't make her crazy. She'd find that bear and prove to Gram, Dad, and herself that he was ordinary. Cassie marched toward the shed with the snowmobiles—

—and a shadow rose over her.

Towering over her, the bear was immense. He blotted out the stars. In the station light his fur was luminescent, his silhouette glowing as if he were

some Inupiaq spirit-god, Mashkuapeu himself. Suddenly, the Arctic didn't feel big enough. It collapsed down to just her and the polar bear.

He opened his jaws, and she glimpsed white canines and a black tongue. A massive paw came down toward her, and she dodged. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw a glint drop from the polar bear's claws. As the glint hit the snow, the bear twisted, dropped to four paws, and retreated to the edge of the station floodlights.

Cassie looked down at her feet, at the snow where the bear had stood. Dusting snow blew into the concave curves of his tracks. In the curve of a paw-print lay a silver needle with an orange tail, the tranquilizer dart.