As I stared down at the footprints outside of my lab, I felt the distinctive burn of an ulcer being formed. I hadn’t left the safety of my lab in weeks, yet here they were. Footprints. Here. In the Alaskan Tundra. Surrounded by glaciers, and penguins, and temperature reading equipment, and nothing else. I found numerous possible explanations. It could be that I wasn’t alone. That my old research partner Will had come back to torment me. It could be a penguin playing a prank, or a polar bear reaching the next stage of evolution. Whatever the answer, I was too tired and caffeine deprived to search for it now.

So I closed the door, and retreated to the warmth of my lab and prepared to brew my morning coffee. Or as I call it, create a roasted symphony of acidic balance. It was then that the mystery rose to new, teeth gnashing heights. My grinder, my Italian grinder with the notch I had made indicating the ideal setting for a French Press brew, was not on its designated shelf. In fact, I couldn’t find it anywhere. I tore apart the kitchen, throwing dishes, silverware anything that wasn’t an Italian grinder across the room. I found nothing but a few packets of instant coffee. I became physically ill. I tried to plumb the recesses of my brain to remember what had happened last night, but all I found was a mind-numbing caffeine headache. I couldn’t remember where I was, or what happened until I had my morning coffee. Which apparently was going to be a problem.

I re-opened the front door and looked closer at the footprints. I noticed then that the prints were ambiguous in shape, making it impossible to distinguish whether they were coming or going. Also, there seemed to be a good deal of blood scattered about. It appeared I was the victim of a crime to which there was no clear perpetrator. I retreated to my lab, threw on my coat, and poured myself a thermos of the instant “coffee.” Science may be my profession, but it is not my passion. Brewing, grading, experimenting and testing those little seeds
from the coffea plant, all in pursuit of that unattainable dream: the perfect cup of coffee. I pursue that dream with all the passion and professionalism that William used to treat this whole “global warming” theory.

After five frozen minutes in pursuit, the footprints were washed away by the Etch-a-Sketch that is the Tundra during a big blow. Not that I needed them any longer; the only place for miles was the radio tower, where Will used to sleep. Was there a chance Will was still on this iceberg? I hadn’t been to the tower since he left, despite the many alarms and warning systems blinking at me to do so. Will handled all of that technical garbage the last few months, while I dealt with the important questions of life. Will never got over his obsession, and towards the end things between us... soured.

The blizzard roared with the ferocity of a jungle cat as I trudged deeper and deeper into the snow. Soon, I feared, I would need to tunnel the rest of the way to the tower. Freezing, I had no choice but to guzzle down the hot, brown abomination contained within my travel thermos. I tried to take a delicate sip of the bland tasteless brew, but my hands were like paint shakers. The lid gave and steaming liquid crashed over me like the exact opposite of a marathon runner dousing himself with cool water. But the hot bath was like a syringe of adrenaline, and, reawakened, I sprinted onward towards the tower.

As I reached the lab door, the wind howling, snowflakes tearing my cheeks like small shards of glass, I prepared myself for an ambush. Will swore before he left that if I criticized him one more time, I would wake up naked on an iceberg with a temperature reading rod shoved inside me so that he could accurately measure the pH of my anus as I froze to death. If only he had shown that much passion for coffee, we wouldn’t be in this mess.

Inside, the lights were on, fluorescent bulbs blinking. The radio crackled with static from the central control. Will’s cot was empty in the corner, but the clothes strewn around indicated he had been sleeping here recently. He must’ve left and come back the next day during my “Will is gone” party. And he called me crazy. Which was nonsense; I think I would recognize if I were crazy. After all, my family has a long history of paranoid schizophrenia. After concluding the main room was empty, I let the door swing close.

I walked to the console, and turned the radio back to the proper channel. The static dropped and was replaced by a sound much more terrifying. Bloop, Bloop, Bloop. I stood frozen. My heart wasn’t beating,
my breath caught in my throat. It was the sound of automatic drip coffee, which is the single most inefficient and disrespectful brewing method for a single serving of coffee. He was here. He was taunting me. How long had he left the pot on the warmer? Coffee burns very quickly on a warming plate. Silently, I scanned for a weapon, finding only the round metal espresso tamper I gave to Will long before I knew he would use it as nothing more than a paper weight. The tamper had a nice weight to it. A one pound smooth metal disk with a non-slip handle grip. Perfect for compressing ground beans, and possibly skulls.

I approached the doorway to the kitchen, the only other room in the tower. Bloop, bloop, bloop. Each drop rang out like a small explosion. The smell of burnt, stale coffee wafted from beyond the doorway. Rage rose within my chest, warmed my extremities, my ulcer screamed for vengeance.

I tightened my grip on my weapon. It was him or me, and I was prepared to tamp him into powder. I whipped around the corner, screaming. I gasped, stumbled back, the tamper falling from my hand. “Impossible,” I whispered.

There lay Will. Well, it sort of looked like him. The last time I had seen him there were a lot less cuts and boils on his face. Neither was there a pool of blood and coffee beneath his torn up cheek. He also wasn’t dead. Bloop, bloop, bloop. That sound, that haunting sound was coming from the coffee dripping off of the table and landing in a puddle of rusty crimson. I stood, dumbfounded. After what seemed like hours I came to my senses and developed a hypothesis. There was only one explanation I could think of: suicide. He obviously tasted his horrible coffee, obviously became upset that my grinder didn’t produce any better results, and, obviously, he smashed the full coffee pot across his face, then used a shard of glass and finished the job. I walked over to the table where my grinder sat, magnificent and unharmed. I began grinding up some whole bean Columbian.

The radio crackled from the other room. A man’s voice came through the other end, muffled and familiar. “This is base-camp Alpha, Omega, Alpha 343. If anyone can hear this we have dispatched a helicopter with supplies and the replacement researcher you asked for. We’ll touch down on Friday 0600. Copy?”

I sighed and looked down at poor William. “I sure hope he makes better coffee than you do.”