

Emma Haughton

The Dark

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I

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White. Endless, featureless, mind-numbing white. A white so bright it hurts your eyes, at once beautiful and dreadful. I've arrived, finally, at the end of the earth – or rather its southernmost tip.

And there's absolutely nothing here.

'You okay?'

Jim's voice is barely audible over the drone of the Basler's engines. I nod, though it's far from true. I'm exhausted. Bone-achingly, brain-crushingly tired. Three days into my journey, and everything is beginning to feel surreal.

It *is* surreal, I decide, as we fly deeper into the heart of the continent, peaks and glaciers giving way to bizarre ice formations that eventually subside into the vast plain of Dome C, an endless expanse of snow, ridged like a frozen sea, the same in every direction. No wonder it's nicknamed White Mars – this is the coldest place in the world, and the most deserted.

My new home for the next twelve months.

For the first time since leaving Heathrow for Auckland, I feel a niggle of doubt. A dent in my excitement.

This had seemed a good idea, back in the warmth and safety of my Bristol flat, reading the job application. A year as the doctor in an Antarctic ice station had the ring of adventure about it, and I could tick all the boxes: broad experience in emergency medicine; basic surgical training; no disqualifying

health conditions. Plus, the clincher – available immediately.

Even so, I hadn't expected to end up in this little plane, flying over mile upon mile of ice. The position in the new research base was open to anyone in the world. What were the chances they'd pick me?

Yet here I am, against all the odds.

Excited. And terrified.

'A couple more hours and we'll be there.'

Jim reaches behind my seat and retrieves the sandwiches, handing a packet to me. I unwrap it without enthusiasm. Though fresh when we left New Zealand two days ago, the lettuce and tomato have turned limp, the bread unappealingly soggy.

Suck it up, Kate, I tell myself, forcing it down. They're some of the last fresh vegetables I'll eat in many months, once those stacked in the crates behind us are gone. This is the penultimate flight to the United Nations Antarctica station – more affectionately known as UNA; when the final plane carries away the last of the summer team next week, no one can reach us again for over half a year.

My stomach tightens at the thought. Will I be able to cope? For that matter, will the other twelve members of the winter team? While it all seemed manageable – academic, almost – during the four-week crash course in Geneva, here, now, faced with this vast Antarctic wilderness, the chilling reality of what I've let myself in for is hitting home.

After all, I've heard the stories. Rumours of people going off the rails, destabilised by the isolation and constant darkness, the strain of being trapped in such a small social group. A cook at McMurdo, the large US base, who attacked a colleague with a claw hammer. An Australian staffer who became so violent he had to be locked in a storeroom for months. A

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drunken Russian welder who stabbed an electrical engineer in a fit of rage.

No wonder some stations don't let new staff meet the outgoing winterers.

Shit!

The plane gives a mechanical cough and suddenly dips. Despite the dampening effect of the pills I took before boarding, my breath stops in my throat, and for a second or two of pure horror I'm certain we're about to plunge into the unforgiving ice.

Moments later we're flying steadily again.

'Hey, relax.' Jim reaches across to squeeze my arm. 'She does that once in a while. Touch of cold in the engines.'

I smile at the Aussie understatement – it's minus forty out there. 'Sorry. I'm not exactly the world's best flyer.'

'No worries.' He grins. 'You're in good company. Had one guy last year – an engineer, so you'd think he'd understand aeronautics – sobbing for most of the return flight. You're doing fine.'

I flash him a grateful look, but my heart is still pounding. If anything goes wrong, if we crash or we're forced to make an emergency landing, the chances of rescue are vanishingly small. We could freeze to death within minutes.

I shove my hands under my thighs, trying to hide the trembling, but my body rebels with a rising tide of nausea. Oh God, please don't let me be sick. I squeeze my eyes shut against the relentless dazzle of sun on ice, breathing slowly and deeply.

Fox eyes glint at me in the glare of headlights, and my world begins to spiral.

Stop it, Kate, I hiss under my breath, pushing the image away.

Just stop.

* * *

‘Want to take a look at your new home?’

I wake at the sound of Jim’s voice, surprised I’d fallen into a doze. Pressing my face to the window, I squint in the direction he’s pointing. At first, see nothing except that ubiquitous white, the deep blue dome of sky above. But gradually, as my eyes adjust to the light, I make out a little huddle of buildings in the vast, flat plain below. Beyond them, some distance away, a tall silver tower.

We’re here, I realise, with a tremor of anticipation.

The ice station.

A tiny oasis in all this emptiness.

As we draw closer, two taller pale-grey buildings loom into view. Several small, squat structures are dotted around, trails criss-crossing the snow between them.

Beside me, Jim has an air of focused attention, adjusting dials and switches on the dashboard as we begin our descent towards the runway. If you can call it that. As we line up for the approach, I see it’s nothing more than a long strip of compacted snow. Fear erupts again, squeezing into my throat. I grip my seat tightly as the ground rushes up to meet us.

‘Don’t worry.’ Jim glances at me and grins. ‘I’ve done this a thousand times.’

The little plane bucks and shakes as the wheels hit the ice. I exhale, relief flooding my body as we rapidly decelerate, coming to a halt several hundred metres away from the main buildings. The two largest, I can see now, are three storeys high, raised on massive steel legs to keep them clear of the drifting snow. A couple of figures are descending the steps and making their way towards us.

‘There you go.’ Jim sits back and rubs his neck. ‘Home sweet home.’

My smile is weak, my heart still racing from the adrenaline of the landing.

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‘You ready?’ He zips up his thick parka.

‘For what?’

A moment later I have my answer. As Jim opens the plane door, impossibly cold air rushes in and my lungs contract with shock. Despite my goose-down jacket and salopettes it’s like an assault, a collision with something solid. I try to breathe steadily, but inhaling is painful. As I ease myself out of my seat, longing for firm ground beneath my feet, I feel the moisture around my nose, my eyes, my lips instantly freeze. Even with goggles, the sunlight bouncing off the snow is blinding.

The next thing that hits me is the silence. Thick, almost cloying.

The sound of pure emptiness.

I take a few steps then stumble, dizzy, disoriented. A hand grabs my arm. ‘Steady there. Takes a minute or two to adjust.’

I look up at the face gazing down at me. Or rather, I catch a glimpse of stubble on a small section of his exposed skin. The rest of him is covered head to foot in cold weather gear, huge reflective goggles obscuring his eyes. Even so, I can tell he’s good-looking; something in his tone, the confident way he holds himself.

‘Andrew.’ He extends a gloved hand towards mine. ‘But everyone calls me Drew.’

I shake it weakly. ‘Kate.’

‘Welcome to the bottom of the world,’ he says in a soft American accent, then turns to introduce his companion. ‘This is Alex.’

Alex gives me a brief nod, then goes to help Jim unload the crates from the back of the plane. I push away a little pang of something I identify as disappointment.

But what did I expect? A welcome parade?

‘Let’s get you inside,’ Drew says, before turning to the pilot. ‘You staying for a while?’

Jim nods. 'I'll be there in a minute. Put the kettle on.'

Drew picks up my heavy bags as if they're weightless, and heads towards the nearest building. I trail after him. Walking feels strange, the snow nothing like the soft, slushy stuff that occasionally appears back home. This is an altogether different beast: hard, crystalline, squeaking and groaning beneath my boots. Though it rarely snows up here – Dome C has so little rainfall it's technically a desert – when it does snow, it stays, amassing over thousands of years into ice several kilometres deep.

As we approach the station, the silence cedes to an array of hums and beeps, testament to the activity inside. The sound of life. Generators, instruments, everything we need to sustain ourselves in such a hostile environment – without these machines, we'd quickly die.

'Good journey?' Drew stops, waiting for me to catch up. I'm gasping with the effort of this short walk. The altitude, I remind myself; we're 3,800 metres above sea level, and the air is thin as well as fiercely cold.

'You've come all the way from London, right?'

I nod.

'Your first time in Antarctica?'

I nod again, too breathless to speak.

'You get used to it.'

As we reach the closest building, Drew pauses to show me the Union Jack in an array of flags strung above the door. 'You're sharing it with Alice, but I'm sure you won't mind that.'

'So that one's for you?' I point to the stars and stripes at the end.

'Yup. Midwest born and bred.'

On impulse, I dig my phone out of my pocket, pulling off my gloves to swipe the camera icon, wanting to record the moment of my arrival. But before I can take a picture, the

screen freezes – literally – the surface covering with a light dusting of frost.

‘Hell.’ I peer at it in disbelief before stuffing it back into my jacket, fingers already aching with cold.

‘Yeah, cell phones don’t work well in these temperatures,’ Drew says. ‘Don’t worry, it’ll be fine.’

We climb the dozen aluminium stairs to the main door, the effort making me dizzy. Seconds later I find myself in a sizeable room packed with an assortment of outdoor gear: coats and parkas draped across pegs, various sizes of snow boots lined up beneath. Goggles and safety hats stacked on shelves.

In the corner, a snowboard and several pairs of skis. I frown at them, puzzled. Surely it’s way too flat out here?

Drew follows my gaze. ‘A couple of the guys like to get towed around behind the skidoos. You should try it some time.’ He hands me a pair of navy Crocs. ‘These look about your size.’

I sit on an empty bench and remove my coat and boots, teeth chattering as I slip the Crocs onto my feet. ‘Thanks. I’ll give them back when I’ve unpacked.’

‘Keep them. One of the summer crew left them behind. We’ve got a whole room full of stuff nobody wants any more. Anything you need, just ask Rajiv – as well as cooking our meals he’s in charge of supplies, which makes him pretty much the station equivalent of God.’

This makes me smile, and I try not to stare at Drew. Now he’s removed his outdoor gear, I can see my intuition was correct; he is disconcertingly handsome. Tall, with short muddy-blond hair. Deep brown eyes and the sort of honed features that wouldn’t look out of place in a glossy magazine.

I feel instantly self-conscious and instinctively turn my cheek from his gaze. Then stop myself. Why hide it? It’s not as if he won’t notice.

‘C’mon, let’s get you a nice cup of tea,’ Drew says, in a terrible imitation of a Cockney accent.

‘That would be wonderful.’ I’m shivering so hard my voice quivers like someone in shock.

‘You can warm up and meet everyone. Caro baked a cake in your honour.’

I follow him out of the boot room, through a network of corridors painted in bland institutional colours that remind me of the hospital. I’m feeling unaccountably nervous at meeting the people I’ll be cooped up with for the next year.

What if they don’t like me?

Don’t be ridiculous, Kate. This isn’t school. Why on earth wouldn’t they like you?

Drew leads me to a large room which, I’m guessing is the communal lounge. Big picture windows face out over an empty expanse of ice – the relative warmth and comfort inside, the scattering of sofas and armchairs, the lamps and bookshelves piled with paperbacks and well-thumbed magazines, all providing a stark contrast to the lethal cold just beyond the glass.

A dozen or so people look up as we arrive, and my features freeze into a rictus smile as Drew reels off introductions. I try to fix each name and job title to a face as one-by-one they get to their feet to hug or shake my hand. Rajiv Sharma, the chef, easy to remember with his close-clipped beard and neat blue turban. Sonya Obeng, a Canadian meteorologist with a warm welcome that immediately takes the edge off my nerves. Luuk de Wees, the Dutch station electrician, so tall that if he stretched up an arm he could touch the ceiling. The Kiwi plumber, Caro Hinds, and Alice Munro, an atmospheric scientist from Edinburgh. Tom Weber, the shy-seeming data manager from Munich, whose gaze barely meets mine – the only person, I notice, wearing glasses. Rob Huang, our Australian comms

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manager, who looks like a fashion designer with his tight-fitting black clothes and bleached blond hair. Plus Arkady Vasiliev, a big bearish Russian in his forties who maintains the generators. Not to mention the motley remains of the summer crew, due to leave next week.

No sign of Sandrine Martin, the station leader, I realise. Nor Alex, the guy I met outside.

There's an awkward silence once the introductions are over. Everyone is being careful not to stare at my left cheek.

'How about that tea?' offers Drew, as I sink into an unoccupied chair. 'How'd you take it?'

'Milk. No sugar. Thanks.'

'I'm afraid it's powdered milk,' says Alice, her eyes darting towards my scar then away again. 'But you'll get used to it.' With her dark-blond hair and pale blue eyes, she and Drew could be brother and sister. She's astonishingly pretty: slim, with delicate features and a soft Scottish accent.

'I bet you're knackered,' she adds, and I grimace. I can only imagine how gruesome I look. I've barely slept since leaving Heathrow, and lacked the energy to apply any make-up before the final flight with Jim. Anyway, what was the point? There's no disguising the damage to my face.

Now, however, I wish I'd made more effort. I feel dirty and sweaty, my hair greasy after three days without a wash. More than anything, I want to escape into the oblivion of a long, hot bath.

But that's impossible now. With water and power in limited supply, baths are out of the question – the base rations showers to just two minutes, every other day.

Yet another thing to get used to.

'You okay?' Caro hands me a slice of the chocolate cake she baked in my honour.

'I'm pretty shattered,' I admit.

‘I’m not surprised.’ She plonks herself down on the sofa opposite my chair. ‘I passed out for fifteen hours when I arrived, and I only came from Auckland.’

No chance of that, I think. I can’t remember the last time I got a solid eight hours. Partly from the rigours of working in A&E; partly because I haven’t slept well since the accident.

‘Are you from Auckland?’ I ask, examining her short punky hair and the piercings in her ears and nose; not as stunning as Alice, but pretty in her own, more casual way. In contrast to Alice’s floral top and black leggings, she’s wearing a pair of large baggy dungarees and a faded orange T-shirt.

Caro shakes her head. ‘Near Dunedin. Parents had a cattle ranch there. But I’ve been living in Queenstown for five years.’

Luuk flops next to her, spreading his long legs so wide Caro is forced to the edge of the sofa. ‘Where are you from?’ he asks between mouthfuls of cake, making no effort now to hide his scrutiny of my face.

‘Bristol, in the south-west of England. But I grew up in Surrey.’

He nods, though I’m guessing this means nothing to him. ‘Amsterdam,’ he says before I can ask. ‘But my mother’s English.’

I smile, unable to think of a response that isn’t utterly banal. My brain feels sluggish and I have the beginnings of a serious headache. I’m desperate to dose myself up, crawl into bed, and fall unconscious – or at least try. Instead I sip tea from the mug Drew hands me and nibble at Caro’s cake, though I’m too tired for hunger.

Make an effort, I urge myself. First impressions and all that.

Thankfully I’m saved from further small talk by the arrival of a dark-haired man, along with a smartly dressed woman in her fifties, an air of authority in her demeanour. This must be Sandrine, the station leader.

I stand to offer my hand. ‘Hi, I’m Kate.’

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'I know,' she says with a clipped French accent that somehow makes her more intimidating. 'Welcome to UNA.' She stares unabashed at the scar on my cheek for a few seconds, then introduces the man behind her. 'This is Raffaello de Marco – the doctor you're replacing.'

Raffaello gives me a wide smile. 'Nice to meet you,' he says in perfect English, 'however briefly. My apologies for rushing off like this.'

'What do you mean?' I'm confused. He isn't due to leave until the last plane next week.

The doctor looks visibly embarrassed. He glances at Sandrine, but she doesn't comment. 'Did no one tell you?' he asks. 'I'm departing today.'

I gaze at him blankly, unable to take this in. *He's leaving?* Raffaello was supposed to spend the next week handing over, helping me find my feet. 'No, no one told me.'

'Raff's son is ill.' Sandrine's tone is matter-of-fact. She studies my reaction dispassionately. Almost critically – or so it feels.

'Oh, I'm sorry,' I stammer, trying to cover my consternation.

'It's not serious.' Raffaello offers another apologetic smile. 'But he has to have an operation and my wife needs me at home.'

'Okay.' I know I sound insincere, but I'm too shocked to appear more sympathetic. How on earth will I manage without him to show me the ropes?

Suddenly Jim arrives, gulping down his tea. 'Sorry, mate.' He slaps the doctor on the back. 'We need to set off right away. Just had a report of bad weather coming in.'

Raffaello quickly says his goodbyes in a flurry of hugs and handshakes. Then picks up his rucksack and turns to me. 'I've left a file on your desk, along with instructions on where to find everything. You'll be fine – Jean-Luc made meticulous notes.'

Jean-Luc Bernas. The French doctor who died out on the ice two months ago. The reason I'm here.

'Thanks,' I say, automatically. 'I hope everything goes well with your son.'

Raffaello nods, then disappears. Sandrine turns and walks off without another word.

I stand there, mood spiralling. I'd been relying on having someone here to show me how to manage all the medical experiments and generally bring me up to speed. I feel stupidly let down. Abandoned. Though of course it's no one's fault.

For a crazy second or two I fight the impulse to run after the pair of them and tell them I've changed my mind, that I want to go back home. I stare into the distance, trying to pull myself together, then notice Drew watching me carefully.

My cheeks flush. I sense he knows exactly what I'm thinking.

'C'mon, Kate,' he says gently, collecting my bags from the corner of the room. 'Let's get you settled in.'

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