

THE
SNOWY
PENGUIN

For Elizabeth

HW

For Mum

DD

LITTLE TIGER

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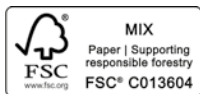
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Illustrated by David Dean

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“Bella! Bella! It’s happening!”

Bella looked over at her mum, who was standing by the kettle, making herself another cup of tea and staring at her phone. For a tiny moment she wasn’t sure what Mum meant – and then she understood, and was flooded with a wild mix of panic and excitement and pride and worry.

“Antarctica?” she whispered.

“Yes...” Mum was frantically skimming through an email on her phone. “Yes! The project’s been approved. The funding. They said

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yes. It's – it's all finally happening..."

Bella swallowed hard and tried to smile. She knew how much Mum wanted this, and how torn she was inside. Bella's mum had been researching penguins and their Antarctic habitat for a long time. She'd even travelled to Antarctica once, years ago, before Bella was born. It was how she and Bella's dad had met. Mum had always wanted to go back – especially as Dad had died when Bella was little. Her mum had so many wonderful memories of their time there together.

But she couldn't take Bella with her. The Antarctic wilderness was no place for a young child.

"I don't mind," she'd always told Bella. "You're my most special thing. Penguins come second."

Then the most amazing opportunity had

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come up, the most perfect research job, for just one Antarctic summer. October to March on the other side of the world.

Six months.

Bella knew how much her mum wanted to go on this trip – how special it would be for her to return to that incredible, beautiful place. And how important her research was to her.

But six months without her mum? Bella wasn't sure she could bear it.



When Mum first heard about the job – from someone at the university where she worked – Bella had found her crying in the garden. Bella was supposed to be in bed, but she'd been thirsty and her water bottle was empty. She'd gone down to the kitchen to fill it and had seen

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Mum through the window, hunched forward on the little bench that was just big enough for the two of them, wiping her sleeve across her eyes. Bella had run outside in a panic. Something awful must have happened. Why else would Mum be crying?



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Mum had explained then, about the trip. There was a rare opportunity to go out to Antarctica for work – there was a research base right in the middle of an Adélie penguin habitat, and an Emperor penguin colony close by too. Mum told Bella about the call of the snow and the ice and the wind and the sea. And the penguins. How much she wanted to go back, but she couldn't.

“It's hard, sometimes, to give things up, Bella,” she'd said slowly. “But we have to. Maybe the person who takes the job will agree to do some research for me. I'll get in touch with them.” She'd reached out and squeezed Bella's hand. “Don't worry! I'm just having a silly moment. Like you when you didn't get that part you wanted in the Year Four play, remember? You were so upset for a couple of days, but then you and Emily went to Miss Franklin and she let

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you write a song and sing it in the play, and it was perfect. Far better than the other part. It'll be just like that. Something better will come out of it, you'll see." Then she'd sniffed and shook her hair and glared at Bella, her face scrunched up and pretend-cross. "But anyway, why aren't you in bed, young lady? It's late and you have school tomorrow!"

Bella had hugged her, and slowly climbed the stairs back to bed. She remembered the play, and how miserable she'd been. Mum was right, it had been brilliant doing the song – but she still regretted not getting the lead role. And really, one class play wasn't all that important, was it? Not like someone who'd spent their whole life studying penguins, and how they were being affected by climate change and the seas warming up. That sort of thing mattered

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a lot. And not just to her mum.

Mum shouldn't have to give that up, Bella thought, as she got to the top of the stairs. I just have to get her not to worry about me.



“She won’t do it.” Grandad shook his head at Bella the next day. He’d just picked her up from school, like he always did on Thursdays.

“She might! If we persuade her!”

“She won’t, Bella. She’s stubborn. Like you! Your gran and I offered to look after you before, so she could apply for a job like this.”

Bella stared at him. “You did?”

“Yes. A couple of years ago.” Grandad sighed. “She looked excited for about one second, and then she said she couldn’t possibly, it would be far too long to leave you.” He looked at Bella

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curiously. “You’d miss her, if she went, though, wouldn’t you?”

“Of course! But she was so sad, Grandad. You didn’t see her crying. And the way she talks about the time she spent in the Antarctic before I was born; it sounds unbelievable. Like, really hard and strange, but wild and wonderful at the same time. Like it’s perfect, no one’s spoiled it. That’s what she’s trying to do; make sure no one spoils it. Ever.” Bella swallowed. “I want to do that too, one day.”

She kicked at a plastic bottle someone had left on the pavement, and it gave a satisfying crunch. Then she picked it up so she could take it home and put it in the recycling – Mum had shown her so many videos of seals and penguins and gulls, all tangled up in plastic waste. She couldn’t leave it behind.

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“You know,” she told Grandad bitterly, “I bet if it was my *dad* who’d got the perfect job offered to him like this, he’d go. It’s just because Mum’s my mum; she thinks she can’t. Because good mothers don’t leave their children behind. Even if I don’t mind being left!”

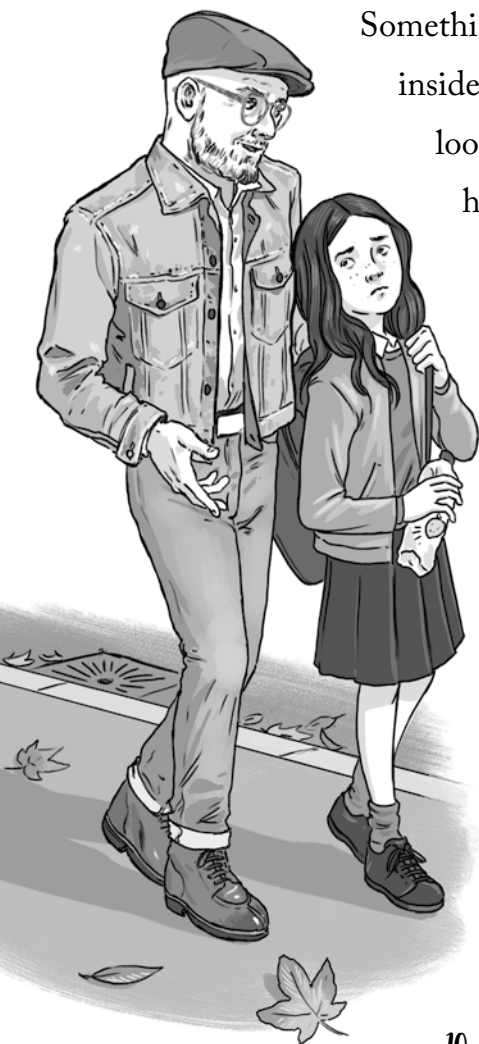
“Well – that’s what happened, love.”

Bella stopped walking. “Oh. Yes, I suppose it did.” Her dad *had* gone back to Antarctica on a research trip, when Bella was just two years old, and that was where he’d died. He’d been wintering – staying in Antarctica at the harshest time of year, which not many people did. He’d got caught in a whiteout – freezing clouds had settled around the research station and her dad been trapped, away from the rest of his team, with no shelter. No one could survive in cold that intense without proper

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equipment, Mum had explained to Bella when she asked about it later; she'd been too young to understand at the time.

Something panicky twisted inside Bella's chest, and she looked up at Grandad, her eyes wide with worry. Did she really want her mum to go away somewhere so dangerous? What if she got caught in a whiteout too, and never came back? Bella loved Grandad and Gran, and she thought she could



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manage living with them for six months, but she didn't want it to be forever. She didn't want to say any of that, but she was almost sure that Grandad knew what she was thinking.

"What happened to your dad wouldn't happen again," Grandad said, putting a hand on Bella's shoulder.

"I know," Bella told him firmly. "I've watched millions of videos about living in the Antarctic. I know what it's like. It's dangerous because you can't predict the weather, but you can be prepared. Mum would be prepared. I know she would. She's careful about *everything*." She glanced up at Grandad. "I would be too. I'm going there too one day, you know?"

"Are you now?"

Bella could tell Grandad thought she didn't really know what she was talking about – he

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was just playing along, because he thought she was sweet.

“Mm-hm. Maybe even with Mum. When I’m older. It sounds like the most wonderful, special place in the world. We can research penguins there together. I’ve already helped her; she gets me to read her research papers and check her spelling.”

Grandad sighed. “Two of you to worry about,” he muttered. But he sounded resigned, Bella thought. As though it was only a matter of time before Bella would be there in the snow watching penguins with her mum.

Bella had to let her go. She had to make Mum go, so that one day, they could be out there together.

“Will you talk to her again, Grandad, please? You and Gran? Tell her that I want her to go.

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She wouldn't listen if I said it. But it's so very important for her, I know it is."

Grandad hugged Bella, and the grubby plastic bottle made a sort of squeaky farting noise as it got caught between them. Bella was glad of that, because she thought Grandad might be about to cry, and it made him laugh instead.

"I'll do my best, love, but I'm not promising. I told you, your mum's even more stubborn than you are. And I shouldn't say this, but your gran would be lost without her too. You think she fusses over you, but you haven't seen anything. If your mum's off counting penguins..." He shook his head.

Bella made a face. "I know. But it would be worth it, wouldn't it? Just think how happy Mum would be."

Grandad nodded slowly. "Just think..."

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Emily rolled over in the grass and leaned up on her elbows, staring at Bella.

“Six months!”

“Mmm.” It was hard to talk about, Bella had discovered. Talking about it made it seem real. She and Emily were stretched out in a corner of the school field at lunch time, and she was trying to explain. “For the Antarctic summer. They don’t have summer there the same time we do, because it’s in the southern hemisphere. Like Australia, you know, when they have barbecues on the beach on Christmas Day.”

“They wouldn’t have barbecues in Antarctica, though, would they?” Emily said doubtfully.

“Is it even sunny?”

“Yeah. Where Mum’s going, by December, it

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doesn't get dark at all. It's called the midnight sun, because Antarctica's pointing right at the sun. But it's still cold; it never gets much above freezing."

"But she'd come back, wouldn't she, if she went? For Christmas! She'd have to come back for Christmas."

Bella tried to shrug, as if she didn't mind. "I don't know. She might not be able to. Not many planes or ships go out there, you know. It's not like there's flights all the time. They use special planes that are made to cope with the weather and landing on snow. They carry food and supplies; they don't have room for people wanting to go back for a holiday."

"Oh..." Emily looked shocked. "And you want her to go? For all that time?"

Bella flopped down on to the grass. "I don't

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know!” she wailed. “I do and I don’t. It would be amazing for her – her job is to do with penguins, and she should be out there, seeing them again. But it will be strange for her too, because of my dad. She still misses him, and that’s all mixed up with being out there as well. I want her to be happy,” she told Emily, looking up at her fiercely. “I really do. Just ... I wish it wasn’t so far away. And for so long.”

Emily nodded, but she didn’t say anything. Just for a minute, Bella was jealous of her friend. She felt horrible about it, but it was hard not to be. Emily’s mum was a teacher at their school. Emily was always there early because her mum had to set up her classroom or have a staff meeting. She said her mum was always on at her about getting her homework done or filling in her reading diary.

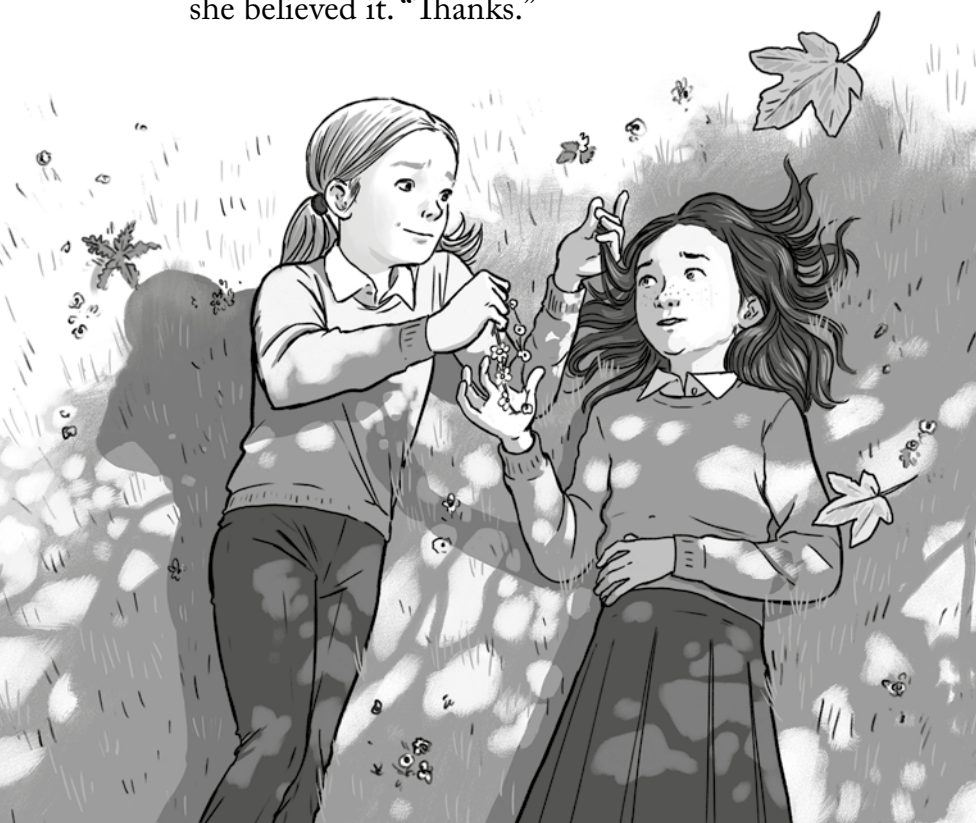
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Emily never had to think about saying goodbye to her mum for six whole months so she could travel to the other side of the world, though.

“It’ll be all right,” Emily murmured, handing Bella the daisy chain she’d been making.

“Whatever happens, it’ll be OK.”

“I know,” Bella muttered, trying to sound as if she believed it. “Thanks.”



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She'd fought for this.

You wanted her to go! Bella told herself, trying to slow down her leaping heartbeat. *You told Grandad to persuade her. You want to go there too, one day.*

But now that it was happening, Bella knew that she wasn't ready. She couldn't imagine what it would be like, not seeing Mum for six months. Not being with her for Christmas. She could feel the words piling up in her head. *No, I didn't mean it, please don't go!*

Then Mum put her phone down slowly on the worktop, and Bella could see that her hands were shaking. Her mum looked up and smiled, and she seemed so enormously

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happy that Bella swallowed the words back down, burying them deep inside.

“You’re really going?” she whispered, and Mum’s smile got bigger, and she shook her head. She crossed the kitchen floor in two massive steps and crouched down by Bella’s chair, catching her by the arms and holding her tight.

“No. I’m not going, Bella. We are.”