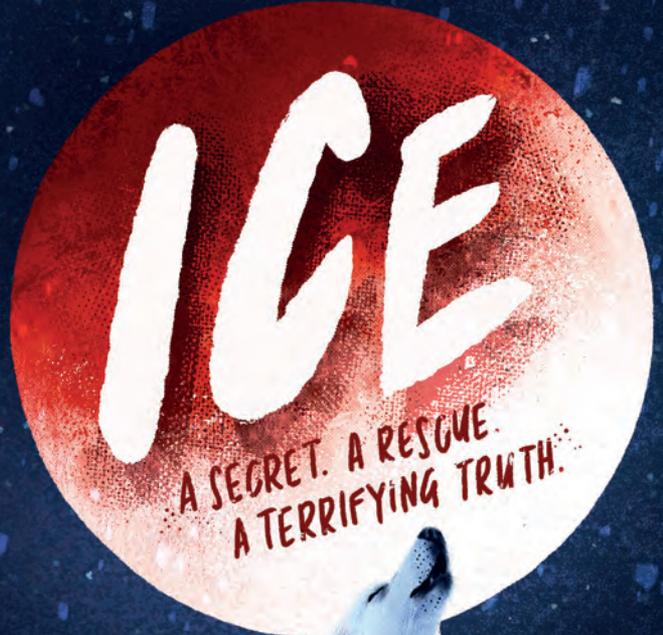


SUSAN BROCKER

ICE
SUSAN BROCKER

"NIGHT WAS FALLING, DARK AND DANK.
THE DOG STOOD BESIDE THE WRECKAGE,
GAZING UP AT THE SKY. SLOWLY A LARGE
RED MOON ROSE OVER THE MOUNTAIN,
FLOODING THE SNOW IN BLOODY LIGHT.
ICE LIFTED HER MUZZLE TO THE MOON
AND HOWLED, LONG AND SAD."

When Zac chooses the rescue dog with the startling ice-blue eyes, little does he know the danger and adventure that will unravel as the mystery around the tracking dog becomes a fight for survival against a terrifying enemy.



A SECRET. A RESCUE.
A TERRIFYING TRUTH.

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Zac tried to focus on freeing one of the divine beasts with his magical sword, but the sound of Ice's howls shattered his gaming. He switched off the console and stared into the night. His stepmum was right; a dusting of snow was now falling beneath the moonlight.

He peered out the window and saw the dog standing beside the woodshed, the moonlight reflecting off her pure white coat. She looked like a ghost wolf. As he watched, she lifted her muzzle to the moon and howled, long and sad. Zac wondered why she was so unhappy.

**This book is dedicated to the World Wildlife Fund and
their work in protecting endangered species – S.B.**



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SUSAN BROCKER

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FROM THE AUTHOR

I've always loved animals, so I guess it's not surprising they often feature in my books. I also have a deep interest in conservation and caring for the world's wildlife. While visiting southern Africa, I learnt about the challenges facing the wildlife there and this served as the inspiration for *Ice*. But I don't want to write too much about this as I hope you will read my story and discover some of this for yourself.

I would also like to say thanks to my own special dog who provided me with the ideas for the backbone of this book. Like *Ice*, he is a beautiful white shepherd, though he doesn't have her piercing blue eyes. He does, however, have her gift for tracking and searching, and he has taken me on many journeys. I write about this in my story, too, and I hope you enjoy it.



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CHAPTER ONE

THE CRASH

The dog could smell fear seeping from her master's pores like blood oozing from a weeping wound. The beating helicopter blades and howling wind drowned out her whines as she nudged his hand.

"It's okay, girl," her master said, trying to reassure her as they huddled together on the back seat of the heaving helicopter. "This storm will soon blow over."

But the dog sensed it wouldn't.

The muscly man hunched next to the pilot hollered above the screeching wind. "We're getting torn apart up here! Can't we put this chopper down?"

"We'll slam into the mountains if we get any lower!" the pilot yelled back, his face crimson with concentration and concern as he battled the control stick.

"The Boss won't like this," the muscly man hollered again. "We're meant to be down there searching. We need to get closer to the road."



The dog's master crouched forward, yelling to the men, "I've already told you – my dog can't search in these conditions. It's suicide!"

"We're dead meat anyway if we don't find that van," the muscled man yelled back, grimacing at the storm-sodden sky.

The dog had ridden in helicopters before as part of her training, but never in crazy conditions like this. She knew they were in danger. From the moment these men had snatched her and her master from the airport, she sensed they meant them harm.

Sheets of sleet and snow slammed against the cockpit window, shrouding them in a deadly web of white.

The pilot cursed. "I can't see a thing."

Suddenly a massive gust of wind jerked the chopper sideways. A crack as loud as thunder ripped apart the leaden sky.

"The rotor's snapped. We're going down!" the pilot yelled.

The helicopter plummeted to the ground, twirling through the air. Held fast in their harness and seatbelt, the dog and her master flipped over and over, smashing against the fuselage.

When the cabin door burst open, her master stretched across and unclipped her harness. He shoved her through the open door, crying out as she fell, "It's your only chance. Go, my girl! Fly!"

The dog somersaulted through the sky. She felt the ice-cold wind slicing through her flesh and her head spinning in space. She had no time to be scared before she hit the ground.

A deep drift of snow cushioned her fall. She tumbled like a rag doll to a dead stop, sinking to the bottom of the drift, then paddling madly to the surface again to take in gulps of air.

The dog looked about and whimpered. She was sitting on a low ridge overlooking a vast snow-covered valley. The driving snow blocked much of her vision, but she could smell the stench of burning fuel and scorching metal. She turned towards the stench and ran.

The wind roared in her ears and the ice stung her face as she raced along the ridge. She bounded over the deep snow, her padded paws cushioning her path.

After leaping a ditch, she came face to face with the burning wreckage lying in the valley. Flames shot high into the sky, hissing and spitting as they hit the falling snow. The dog dashed forward, digging at the twisted metal and red-hot rubble. The fierce flames kept driving her back, but she rushed in, again and again, to dig.

Her foot pads were ripped and torn by the time the snow had doused the fire. All that remained of the helicopter was a charred metal skeleton half-buried beneath the snow and ice.

Night was falling, dark and dank. The dog crouched



beside the wreckage, gazing up at the sky. Slowly a large red moon rose over the mountain, flooding the snow in bloody light. She lifted her muzzle to the moon and howled, long and sad.





CHAPTER TWO

THE SHELTER

“What about this wee pup?” asked Anna, as they edged along the cracked concrete path in front of the kennels. “He looks like a friendly chap.”

Yeah, he did look friendly ... like a fawning lap dog who'd love anyone that came along. Zac didn't want a dog like that. This was all his stepmother Anna's idea anyway. She thought a teenage boy like Zac would love a dog of his own. It would help 'pull him out of himself', whatever that meant.

Zac walked along the path, feeling even more depressed as he gazed at the hopeful faces of the poor little dogs, all eager for some love and attention.

Then he spotted the dog in Kennel 7.

It was large and pure white, with pricked ears and a long thick ruff around its neck. It looked like Ghost, the dire wolf from the TV fantasy series his mum in Auckland would never let him watch. What attracted



Zac to it was its eyes. They stared right at him and they were ice blue, like the surface of a frozen pond on a chilly day. They looked haunted and lost.

“What about this one?” Zac asked the shelter attendant.

“I wouldn’t go near her,” the attendant replied. “She’s only here until the vet can euthanise her.”

“You mean *kill* her?” Stevie piped up. “I thought you were meant to save animals, not kill them. What is this place – death row?”

Zac had to smile. He’d only really known his eleven-year-old stepsister for a few months and mostly she drove him up the wall, but he liked how she always said exactly what she thought.

“They found her in the mountains, lost in the snow. She nearly took the hand off one of the skiers who tried to help her,” the attendant explained. “We can’t rehome a dog like this – she’s too dangerous.”

“Have you tried finding out where she came from? She can’t have just appeared out of thin air,” Stevie demanded, glaring at the attendant from fiery amber eyes.

“She’s not microchipped, and nobody has reported a dog like her missing,” the attendant said, lifting his cap to scratch his balding head. “She won’t let anyone near her. She’s a menace.”

“What a pity,” Anna said. “She’s such a lovely looking dog. What is she?”



“A German shepherd, I’d say.”

“I didn’t know shepherds could be white.”

“Yeah, some, but I’ve never seen one with spooky eyes like that. It’s like she’s looking right through you.”

“Can I pat her?” Zac asked.

“Sorry, son. She could take off your hand. This one’s for doggy heaven.”

Zac looked into the ice-blue eyes turned up to his. They looked sad and lost.

Before the attendant could stop him, Zac stuck his hand through the bars of the cage and patted the big dog’s head. She pushed her nose against his hand and whined. He stroked her ears and she licked him gently in return.

“Well, I’ll be damned. She likes you,” the attendant said, scratching his head again.

“We can’t take her, Zac,” Anna said, caution rippling through her voice. “We don’t know anything about her. And think of the food and exercise a large dog like that would need.”

“I thought that was the point,” Stevie chipped in. “You want Zac outside, away from his video games. What better way than having a big dog to run around with.”

“And she likes me,” Zac said, still stroking the dog. “Please can we try?”

Anna and the attendant exchanged glances.

“Well, she does seem happy with the boy,” the

attendant said. “Perhaps you could take her home for a few days and see how it goes. But if there’s any problem, – any problem *at all* – you must return her at once. Is that clear?”

Zac felt his stepmother watching him from serious grey eyes. The dog lifted her large white paw and gave it to him to shake through the bars of the cage. He grinned.

“Okay, then,” Anna said. “Though I don’t know what your father will say. I doubt he’ll approve of a dog like this.”

That was nothing new to Zac. He doubted his father ever approved of anything he ever did.



Anna turned the 4WD van into the long, sweeping driveway, pulling up outside their two-storeyed wooden bungalow. Zac sat in the back with his arm draped over the dog’s shoulder as she looked keenly out the window. He followed her gaze and took in the shimmering lake and, in the distance, the vast snow-covered mountains. The view always surprised him; he only knew busy city streets and tall buildings, not this chilly wilderness.

His seventeen-year-old stepbrother, Mason, had parked his battered quad bike in the drive. The carcass of a wild boar lay across the tray, its bloodied head lolling over the back. Mason and his father had been out pig



hunting and had returned earlier than Zac would have liked. Mason and Zac's dad were always doing stuff together, like hunting and tramping. Mason was much more like his father than Zac. He even looked similar, being tall for his age with dark, tousled hair and deep brown eyes.

Zac hopped out of the car to lead the dog to her new home. She leapt from the back, tugging at the tattered lead the pound had given them.

Before Zac had a chance to warn her, his stepbrother's two pig dogs charged around the house and slammed straight into her, growling and gnashing their teeth.

"Mason, call off your dogs!" Stevie yelled for her brother, rushing up to try to separate them.

The big white dog stood her ground against the pig dogs, but made no effort to fight back. Stevie tried to haul off the dogs while Zac stood helplessly. It seemed to take forever before Mason and his father appeared.

His strong father easily yanked the pig dogs away. "What sort of dog do you call that?" he hollered as he tied up the pig dogs. "It's twice the size of Mason's mutts but too much of a wuss to stick up for itself."

"She's not scared," Stevie butted in. "She just didn't want to fight."

"Same diff," his father said. "What will you do with this mutt, Zac? Go dog sledding?" he laughed. "Mush, mush!"



His father was right. The dog did look a bit like a husky, only bigger. Zac stared at his feet, wondering what clever thing to reply.

Anna got in first. She stood up to his father, barely coming up to his chin. “Jim, the dog will be a great mate for Zac. We found her at the shelter and she and Zac hit it off straight away.”

Zac was pleased she didn’t say anything about the attendant’s warning.

“Well, m’boy, you’ll have to get a part-time job to pay for its food. I’m not coughing up for that pony.”

“Hey, she’ll be strong-as out hunting,” Mason said eagerly, shoving the sleeves of his bloody bush shirt up his brown arms.

“No way! She’s not hunting,” Zac said.

“Why doesn’t that surprise me?” Jim said, glaring down at Zac. “Anyway, she’d be about as much use as a glass cricket bat.”

Zac could almost hear him adding ... *like you, boy.*

“Come on, Zac,” his stepmother interrupted. “Let’s get this girl settled into her new home.”

Zac led the dog behind Anna and Stevie out into the back garden, trying to ignore Mason’s wildly barking pig dogs as they passed.



CHAPTER THREE

THE GAME

“Let’s clear out this old woodshed for a kennel and she can run free in the backyard,” Anna said to Zac. She had already started to haul junk from the shed even though she was still dressed in her work suit. She hadn’t bothered to change before deciding to take Zac to the pound to find a friend.

“I bet no other dog ever had a view like this from its kennel,” Stevie said as she helped her mum.

Zac looked across the garden at the turquoise lake glittering on their doorstep, framed from afar by white-topped mountains. Stevie was right; it was quite some view. But it only made Zac feel lonely. He watched the dog staring intently at the mountains and wondered what she was thinking.

“What are you going to call her?” Stevie asked as they worked.

“Ice,” Zac replied at once, thinking of her eyes the first moment he saw her.

“That’s chill,” Stevie teased.

“Cold eyes, warm heart,” Anna said, now sweeping the shed.

“I’ll get a board and paint her name on it for you to put above her kennel,” Stevie offered.

As they chatted, Zac wondered what he was going to do with a dog. He’d never had a pet in his life, let alone one this big. Although he’d always loved animals, his mother had said they were too busy to keep pets, and anyway, a city was no place for them. What had he been thinking when he’d picked Ice? Or had *she* picked *him* with those eyes?

Anna fetched an old duvet from the house and laid it on the newly swept shed floor. “The nights are freezing and there’s snow in the air,” she told Zac. “Even a dog with a built-in fur coat needs extra warmth.”

“Her fur’s as thick as a polar bear’s. She could hibernate,” Stevie joked.

“What about feeding her?” Zac asked, thinking of his father’s comment about him needing to get a job.

“Mason’s got plenty of wild pork in the freezer he feeds to his dogs,” Stevie said. Zac screwed up his nose, and Stevie laughed. “She’s a dog, not a vegetarian,” she said, play-punching his arm. “Go get some. She’ll be hungry.”

“Nah, it’s okay,” Zac said, trying to think of an excuse

to get away. He didn't know what to do with a dog, let alone what to feed it. The dog might have liked him at the pound, but he doubted she'd like him much once she got to know him. "Could you please feed her? I've got that online course to do," he begged Stevie.

He saw his stepmum and stepsister look at each other and realised they knew he was fibbing again. But Anna replied, kindly, "Sure, Zac. Maybe you could come out later and spend some time with her."

Zac agreed and hightailed it to his room, dodging past his dad and Mason, who were dragging the bloody pig carcass off the quad bike.



As soon as Zac shut his bedroom door, he plonked down in front of his computer screen and fired up the games console as usual. He'd been playing the same fantasy adventure game for longer than he could remember. He loved playing the part of the teenage action hero, who looked exactly like him: slightly built, just like Zac, and with the same long fair hair falling into wide blue eyes. Yet he wasn't scared to take on the wild world in which he lived. He climbed mountains, navigated deadly dungeons, and defeated monsters in a never-ending quest to destroy evil in his world.

Zac was soaring across the skies on a paraglider



when he heard his father's voice booming, "Zac, this is your last call. Dinner's on the table!"

He looked up, surprised to see it was already dark outside and the moon was high. He leapt up to head for the dining room, overhearing his father say, "I thought that dog was meant to get him outside and away from gaming. The boy's obsessed."

"Give him time, Jim. It wouldn't hurt if you asked him out on your hikes or hunts ... involve him a little," Anna replied.

"I've asked him until I'm blue in the face. I reckon the boy's allergic to fresh air and snow."

Mason sniggered until he noticed Zac standing at the door. Stevie quickly said, "Mum's cooked your favourite macaroni cheese – and I fed Ice."

"Thanks," Zac muttered, pulling out a chair to flop down. The table fell silent.

He hung his head, his hair falling into his eyes. He tried scooping up a forkful of macaroni when a loud howl suddenly erupted from the backyard. He nearly dropped his fork. Another howl broke out, then another, each one longer and louder than the one before.

"What's that racket?" his father demanded.

"It's Ice," Anna said, surprised. "She seemed settled when we left her."

"She's lonely," Stevie said.

"Like I told you, that mutt's a wuss," his father scoffed.

“Couldn’t she sleep in Zac’s room? She really likes him,” Stevie asked hopefully. “Skiers found her lost in the snow,” she added, as if that might help.

“I don’t care if they found her in Timbuktu. No dog is setting foot inside this house. They’re working animals. They belong outside, like Mason’s dogs,” Jim said, taking his plate to the bench, plonking it down, and disappearing into the lounge. He turned up the telly to drown out the howling, then popped his head out a second later to add, “And for Pete’s sake, shut that mutt up!”

The dog kept howling. Zac didn’t look at the others. He put his unfinished dinner on the bench next to his father’s and disappeared into his bedroom. He tugged his earphones over his ears to drown out the howling, and returned to where he’d left off in his game.





CHAPTER FOUR

THE CHAT

Zac tried to focus on freeing one of the divine beasts with his magical sword, but the sound of Ice's howls shattered his gaming. He switched off the console and stared into the night. His stepmum was right; a dusting of snow was now falling beneath the moonlight.

He peered out the window and saw the dog standing beside the woodshed, the moonlight reflecting off her pure white coat. She looked like a ghost wolf. As he watched, she lifted her muzzle to the moon and howled, long and sad. Zac wondered why she was so unhappy. Her howling sounded lonely, like Stevie had said. He heard his father yell out the kitchen window, "Shut up, ya stupid mutt!"

Zac doubted the dog would last long here. He returned to his game, trying to lose himself in his usual adventures. But he couldn't stop listening to the dog. He wished he could help her, but he didn't know what to do.



It was nearly midnight when the howling abruptly stopped. Then came a light tap on his bedroom door, followed by Stevie's whisper, "Zac, open up. It's us."

Zac yanked a dressing gown over his pj's and opened the door. Stevie stood in the dark hallway in her pink onesie, holding a torch, the large white dog standing quietly at her side.

"Quick, let us in," she mouthed. Before Zac could reply, she shoved past with the dog and shut the door behind them.

"What are you doing?" Zac hissed. "Dad will kill us!"

"Kill *you*, don't you mean? He'd have to get past my mum before he murdered me," Stevie said, grinning and patting Ice. "Anyway, he won't even know she's inside."

"But he'll hear her."

"Not if you keep her quiet. And you can sneak her out the secret trapdoor to the woodshed before your dad wakes up."

Great, thought Zac, looking at the big dog and imagining trying to sneak her quietly down the hall and through a trapdoor in the floor.

Stevie dug a blanket out of his wardrobe and laid it alongside his bed. "She can sleep next to you. If she howls, you can pat her and she'll settle."

"What if she doesn't?"

"You've got to try, otherwise your dad might send her back to the shelter," Stevie said. And the shelter would



put her down, Zac knew. He felt even more hopeless.

Stevie led Ice to the blanket and tried to encourage her to lie down. But she stood staring fixedly at the bright flickering lights on Zac's computer screen.

"Don't you ever turn that thing off?" Stevie asked, tossing Zac the lead. "Try to settle her while I shut it down."

Before Zac could call her away, Stevie marched to the console and switched it off. She glanced across his desk and spied his passport, grabbing it and flicking through the pages.

"*Zachariah Ajax Campbell*," she read. "Z-A-C! That's cool, your initials spell out your name. Ajax is weird though."

"It's pronounced 'eye-ax', actually. My mother was Dutch. She named me after some Dutch football team," he said, trying to urge Ice down on the blanket.

"She *is* Dutch, don't you mean?" Stevie corrected him. "Just because you're not living with her anymore doesn't mean she's suddenly become French or something ... sorry, I didn't mean ..." Stevie stammered uncharacteristically when she saw his face.

"It's okay, I don't care."

"But you never talk about her. It's like she never existed. Sorry, there I go again ... I should just shut my mouth."

"Sometimes it would be a good idea," Zac said,

stroking Ice's muzzle. The dog moaned and lay down on the blanket.

"And you don't even like football, or any sport," Stevie burbled on, forgetting all about keeping her mouth shut.

"I guess Mum didn't know that when I was born," Zac said, tracing Ice's silky ears through his fingers.

"Nah, otherwise she might have sent you back where you came from," Stevie tried to joke.

"Dad would've, that's for sure," Zac said.

Ice stood up again, thrusting her nose against his hand until he patted her some more.

Stevie must've heard something in Zac's voice because she added, "I think your mum just wanted you to get to know your dad – that's why she sent you here. He's kind of nice once you know him, honest."

"She wanted to get rid of me, that's all," Zac said, still stroking Ice. "When Mum and Dad split up, me and Mum went to live in Auckland. I guess I've spent a lot of time gaming and missing school. Now she wants me to have a more 'healthy' life down here in the wild while she lives it up in the city."

"Wanaka's not that wild," Stevie protested, her amber eyes flashing. "It's one of the most popular places in New Zealand."

"Yeah, if you're a tourist with bucketloads of money," Zac said.

"Now you sound like your dad," Stevie said. "Wait till

you start your new school, you'll make lots of friends and it won't be so bad."

The only friend I'll ever make is a dog, Zac thought, and I can't even get that right. He glanced down at Ice, and her blue eyes turned up to his, looking lost. Then he felt bad.

"It's okay, girl," he said, trying to reassure her when the last thing he felt was confident. "Lie down on your blanket."

Ice lay down, her eyes swimming.

"Good girl," he said.

"You can go back to your bedroom now," he told Stevie. "Me and Ice will be okay."