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Emerie

“Emerie!” Professor Martinez stepped out from behind her chaotic desk, her arms spread wide. A broad smile spread across her face, forming deep wrinkles at the corners of her eyes. As usual, she was wearing a colourful patterned blouse and her thick, jet-black hair, which was peppered with grey, was pulled into a classic bun. She looked as if she was about to give me a big hug. “I’ve got some wonderful news for you!”

Two years ago, when Professor Martinez had agreed to supervise my dissertation, my heart would have skipped a beat. But I now knew that even a new reference book in the university library made her jump for joy.

Don’t get me wrong: I was so lucky to have her as my supervisor. There weren’t many lecturers at Cornell who approached their research with as much enthusiasm as her. Lots of other PhD students were constantly in limbo waiting for feedback, or frustrated that their research methods had been shot down in flames. That wasn’t Professor Martinez’s style. She managed to wrap critique in warmth and sprinkle it with motivation. She was the most optimistic person I knew. But sometimes I wished she was a bit less . . . excitable.

“What sort of news?” I asked, stepping towards her, even though every part of me was screaming not to let somebody into my personal space, which, at the speed she was going, would happen in about two seconds. Every muscle in my body tensed ready for the hug. Physical contact was hard for me, even when it was my kindly supervisor.

Thankfully, Professor Martinez didn’t pull me in for a hug. Instead, she grabbed my forearm as I clutched a stack of papers. Her brown eyes sparkled. “You’re going to Ross Island!”

I dropped my papers in shock. “Really?”

She nodded frenetically, whereby some of her hair fell out of her bun and across her round face.

“Yes!”

“But . . . How . . . ?” I stammered, still not able to take it in.

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Once a year a four-person team from Cornell went to Cape Evans on Ross Island, where the *White Star* research station was based. Nearby, on the West coast was a smallish breeding colony of Adélie penguins, which were the focus of my veterinary-science dissertation.

Unfortunately, my applications had been unsuccessful both this year and last, because according to the research committee who made the decision somebody else was more important than a little behavioural scientist like me.

Beckett Callahan.

I hated the man with a burning passion.

“Well.” Professor Martinez reined in her enthusiasm. “I just found out that a techie broke his ankle and so can’t go.”

The techies were an interdisciplinary team of bioinformatics specialists, physicists, veterinarians and engineers, led by no other than Beckett Callahan.

My lips twitched involuntarily as I imagined Beckett spending the next few weeks hopping around campus with his leg in plaster. Not that I generally revelled in other people’s misfortune, or wished it on them. But for *him*, I could make an exception.

“It’s obviously a shame that the techies are down a colleague at such short notice,” Professor Martinez continued, smiling warmly at me. “But you’ve more than earned your place, Emerie.”

My pulse started to race as I stared at her, still completely nonplussed. “Then, it’s really happening?”

“Of course!” She laughed happily. “I just got the green light from the research committee. The place is yours if you’d like it. You leave in two days, though.” She frowned suddenly. “I hope that’s not a problem?”

I quickly shook my head. “No, of course not.”

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“If I’ve remembered correctly, the team is travelling back on December 21st. So, you would be back in time for Christmas. Is that okay with you?”

A breathless laugh escaped my lips. “Definitely!”

“Perfect.” My supervisor beamed. “Then it’s sorted.”

Holy shit!

I was really going to the Antarctic! For the first time in my life I would be able to see with my own eyes what I had up to now only watched on screens. I would feel the biting cold on my skin and experience the boundless snowy vistas.

Admittedly I could do without seeing the penguins in real life and not just on screen, because even though they were the focus of my research I wasn’t exactly their number one fan. But the expedition would still be invaluable in corroborating my theses.

My eyes welled with tears as my throat tightened with emotion. “Thank you.”

“My pleasure, Emerie.” Professor Martinez patted my arm before letting go and retreating behind her desk. “You’ve already done some incredible work in behavioural research and made some astounding discoveries. This expedition will help you make countless breakthroughs.”

That was exactly why I wanted to go. I could hardly wait – and the timing couldn’t be more perfect.

In the Antarctic winter, Adélie penguins spend a lot of time out at sea foraging and sustaining their energy reserves. But as soon as the Antarctic spring begins in October, they return to their breeding colonies to mate and rear their young.

The first penguins had already arrived on Ross Island and were busy building their nests. The mating season would soon begin and last until the end of December. And I was going to be there *in real life*.

It was madness!

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Professor Martinez sat down at her desk and started typing. “I’ll let Beckett know that you’ll be joining the team. He’ll email you the details shortly.”

My face fell.

Professor Martinez chose that very moment to look up from the screen and let out a long-suffering sigh. “Emerie.”

“Don’t worry.” I stepped up to her desk with a markedly calm expression on my face and sat down on the lefthand chair. “We’ll get along just fine.”

We’d never actually had an argument. But by now everybody on campus knew that I didn’t have much time for him. In fact, I avoided him at all costs. Which would be hard at the research station, I was beginning to realise.

Professor Martinez peered at me beneath her furrowed brow. “I really don’t understand what you’ve got against him.”

Of course she didn’t. The whole university was crazy about him. He was extremely good-looking, as well as being a complete genius. Under his guidance, his team had developed groundbreaking tracking and monitoring techniques, which had attracted several national and international innovation awards. And the research monies he reeled in for the veterinary science department were dizzyingly high.

Unfortunately, his ego was at least as big.

I let out a snort. “Maybe I’d warm to him if he didn’t constantly rub in how successful he is.”

“Well, he has a point,” Professor Martinez said with a wry smile, reminding me of the sadly irrefutable fact that I had him to thank for the majority of my breakthroughs. “Without his *TrakTags* there’s no way you would have been able to monitor the animals so closely.”

“I know,” I reluctantly admitted. The transmitter Beckett’s team developed had enabled me to position multiple high-resolution cameras in the breeding grounds and along the shoreline. That’s how, during the last breeding season, I’d been able to gain such incredible insights into the sixty pairs of

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penguins, whose breeding behaviour I was studying. And after the breeding season, I could use the satellite tracking to ascertain how long the pairs stayed together and where they went. Yet, to my own shame, the words that came out of my mouth made me sound like a petulant child. “That doesn’t give him the right to meddle in my work.”

Professor Martinez laughed. “Are you still annoyed at him for giving the penguins names?”

Too right, I was!

I had divided the breeding colony into six clusters, each containing ten pairs of penguins, which I had given unique and above all *neutral* identification numbers. But Beckett had renamed every single one of them. Every time they popped up on the screen it made me want to scream in frustration: Adonis & Abigail, Bertram & Bertie, Carlos & Cordelia and so on. It was as if I’d ended up in a pensioners’ club, not one of the most innovative research centres in the world.

The man hadn’t spared the clusters, and had changed my labelling by Greek letters to the names of the *Avengers*, which is why they were now the Stark family (Iron Man), the Rogers family (Captain America), the Odinson family (Thor), the Romanoff family (Black Widow), the Banner family (Hulk) and the Barton family (Hawkeye). It was ridiculous.

I ground my teeth. “I didn’t ask him to.”

“Well, giving each and every one of the one hundred and twenty animals a name shows a great deal of commitment,” my supervisor responded, trying to placate me.

But I was already seething with indignation. The self-righteous idiot had probably spent days laughing himself silly about the stupid prank. Men like him didn’t understand the power that names possessed.

Professor Martinez shot me an unusually stern look. “Cornell’s reputation is at stake, Emerie. So, put your feelings to one side and show how well you can work in a team. Otherwise, you’ll jeopardise the success of the whole expedition.”

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I realised she was right. Even though I couldn't stand Beckett Callahan, I still had to be professional. So, I nodded obediently before changing the topic and fishing a tabulated summary out of my pile of papers. "As of today, thirty-one marked penguins have returned to the breeding colony, and of those, four pairs from the previous year have partnered up again. That represents an infidelity rate of 74.2 per cent. If this trend continues, the data will be representative enough to challenge the assumption that the penguins mate for life."

And I would see it firsthand.

I had butterflies as Professor Martinez leaned back in her chair and looked at me thoughtfully. "You're still convinced that the current assumption is wrong?"

I nodded with conviction. "Absolutely."

Fidelity was a myth.

Amongst Adélie penguins too, who were famous the world over for apparently always returning to the same breeding ground and the same mate. I assumed somebody wanted to squeeze profit out of outdated publications by presenting an unrealistic image of cute, loved-up penguins. But I knew better – and soon I would prove it.

A self-assured smile spread across my face. "I've already determined some reasons for the males to abandon their mate and find another . . ."

I flipped through to my notepad and was about to put forward my hypotheses, but Professor Martinez hummed.

That was never a good sign.

I looked up, feeling tense.

"What about the females?" she asked enquiringly.

I blinked. "Sorry?"

She put her head on one side. “If your theory is correct and the previously observed pair bonds have led to false conclusions, you would also have to look into why the females find another mate . . .”

“Err, yeah, of course,” I stammered, because she was so obviously right. I had to be objective, even if experience had taught me that it was mostly the males who abandoned their mates.

We launched into an intense discussion about my research questions, which my supervisor felt were a bit too imprecise, and I feverishly took notes until, after a good hour, her phone rang. She glanced at the display and her eyes lit up. “It’s my husband.”

Because I didn’t know how to react to this piece of information, I just smiled and waited as she took the call. She spoke in very quick Spanish before erupting into a croaky laugh, her cheeks flushed. Then she looked at me. “This could take a while.”

“No problem,” I shrugged. After all, I didn’t understand a word. And apart from that, my head was spinning and I had cramp in my hand because I’d been writing so quickly. So, I was ready for a little breather.

“You don’t need to wait, Emerie. I’ve already told you the good news. Take this morning off to get yourself ready. Email me the outline with your updated research questions, and let me know when you’ve settled in at the White Star.” She winked at me. “It’s going to be an amazing adventure!”

My stomach did another somersault. I was really going to the Antarctic. I still couldn’t believe it. The adrenaline made me immediately leap out of the chair. “Thank you so much!”

“It’s my absolute pleasure, Emerie.” She waved at me, but her dreamy smile showed that her attention had already turned to her husband.

I rushed out of her office. I considered calling Amber to tell her the news. But there was someone else I was even keener to share the news with. I practically sprinted through the university corridors.

To the left was the row of lecture theatres, which were still pretty full as lectures weren’t due to finish for another half an hour. The right-hand side of the corridor was made up entirely of glass and

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offered a perfect view outside, where an autumnal storm was raging, rain and brown leaves lashing the windows. The sky was a dismal grey.

I wrinkled my nose. Autumn was the season I hated the most. For me there was no beauty in the sad months in which all life seemed to fade. That was another reason I could barely wait to immerse myself in a snow-covered landscape. The Antarctic wasn't exactly colourful either, but there was something magical about the way the pure white snow glittered like diamonds in the sunlight. The very thought of it made me forget the gloom outside and my smile returned.

The high-tech lab I'd spent about eighty per cent of my life in since I started my dissertation was on the floor below. I went down the wide staircase, nodding politely at a few people, and pulled open the heavy door.

I was instantly transported to a completely different world.

The lab was actually an open-plan office with twenty workspaces, and was sub-divided into several distinct areas. On the right was the techies' workshop with space to solder and tinker, or whatever else it was they did. Through the glass wall, which acted as a soundproof barrier, I could see Sienna Wilson deep in conversation with two of her colleagues. She abruptly turned to one of the shelves, which contained wires, cables and circuit boards. Behind her back one of the techies rolled his eyes in irritation, the other ogled her behind.

Idiots!

I considered having a word with Sienna about it later. We didn't know each other particularly well, but us women had to stick together, didn't we? Maybe not. She'd probably manage without my help.

A deep laugh emanated from the break area opposite, and the hairs on my neck stood on end. I automatically sped up; Beckett Callahan was the last person I wanted to see.

I scurried through the narrow, artificially lit corridor, past individual cubicles, which were separated from one another by thin walls.

My workspace was right at the end on the left. It was so tiny I could barely turn around in it. There was just enough space for a desk with two monitors, a swivel chair and a filing cabinet. Luckily, I didn't suffer from claustrophobia.

I put my papers and notes down on my desk, before sitting down and logging on to the college network. Then I glanced up at the digital clock above my desk that showed different time zones. Here it was now just after four in the afternoon, which meant that on Ross Island it was nine o'clock in the morning.

Cooper was probably already awake.

I had never had very many friends. But Coop was definitely one of them. He had done a Masters in IT at Imperial College London and then applied to a government funding programme. He had worked on the White Star for a good few months and took care of a lot of the administrative IT jobs. I liked him a lot. Not just because he was always there when I was having technical issues (which happened far less often than before he arrived), but also because he was always in a good mood.

We normally communicated via instant messages because he was deaf. But because I could also sign and wanted to see his reaction, I plumped for a video call.

My fingers were shaking with excitement as I opened the platform, found my contact list and clicked on his name. Then I waited impatiently for him to accept my call.

"Come on, Coop," I murmured, grabbing a pencil to put the unruly strands of hair falling in my face into a bun. Then I straightened my glasses.

After a while a video connection was established. A few seconds later, Coop appeared on screen, coffee cup in hand. He was wearing a hoody with *Let me through. I'm IT support!* written on it in big letters. He quickly took a slurp of coffee before putting the cup down and tucking his dark, chin-length hair behind his ears. As usual, his brown eyes sparkled, perfectly setting off his lopsided grin.

I waved at him, beaming.

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Because it was unusual for me to start a video call this early, he also had an enquiring look on his face. He raised his hands and signed: “Everything okay with you?”

I nodded emphatically and signed back, albeit not as fluently as Cooper: “Great. You’re not going to believe what’s happened.”

He curiously tilted his head to one side. “What’s that?”

I took a deep breath. “I’m coming to the White Star!”

A deep furrow appeared between his eyebrows as if he wasn’t quite sure if he’d understood me right. He leaned forward intently. “Can you repeat that?”

I signed it again, giggling, and added: “My supervisor only just told me. Unbelievable, huh?”

Cooper always supplemented his signs with facial expressions to make himself clearer. But now his eyes were like saucers. “You’re coming *here*?”

“Yes!” I shouted, gesticulating and nodding.

He grabbed his head and tore his hands away again, his fingers spread wide before signing more joyful expressions. He also made raucous sounds to emphasise his excitement.

His reaction made me laugh. “I’m so excited.”

He reined in his excitement and smiled at me. “I can believe that.”

“What should I bring you?” I asked next.

His eyes lit up. “Can I send you a list?”

“Sure.”

I started to sign to him that I would get him anything he wanted, when somebody laughed behind me. “You know he’s going to shamelessly milk that for all it’s worth, don’t you?”

I spun around in shock.

Beckett was nonchalantly standing in the entrance to my cubicle. As if his combination of good looks and his razor-sharp mind weren’t bad enough, he was also wearing low-slung jeans and a sky-blue

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shirt that brought out the colour of his eyes. The fabric stretched taut across his broad shoulders, and his sleeves were rolled up to his elbows, giving me the added pleasure of catching a glimpse of his muscular forearms. His dark-brown hair was a bit longer on top than on the sides and partially flopped across his forehead. And his awful lips, which I deeply despised, grinned lopsidedly.

“I didn’t know you could sign,” he said.

Which meant that he could obviously sign too, otherwise he wouldn’t have understood Cooper.

“What’s the matter, Hastings?” he asked in the absence of a reaction from me. “No snarky comeback today? The sight of me seems to have left you speechless.”

My face was burning. I was annoyed at myself because I’d looked at him like a rabbit caught in headlights, I turned back to the screen. “Of course not.”

Cooper was obviously already writing his list; his fingers flew effortlessly across the keyboard. When he noticed I’d turned back towards him, he paused.

“Everything okay?” he signed, signalling with a look of concern that I was obviously scowling.

I waved off his concern. “I’ve got a few things to sort out. Let’s talk later, okay?”

Cooper saluted and ended the call while I inwardly steeled myself. Then I turned to Beckett, with the most neutral expression I could muster. I didn’t want him to know how much his presence had affected me.

2

Beckett

My day had started badly when I received the news this morning about Miller's accident. A drunken accident, I'd like to add. I was obviously pleased that he hadn't been seriously injured. But what sort of idiot got so drunk two days before an expedition that they wrapped their bike around a lamp post? I just couldn't understand it.

And it was completely beyond me why Martinez had totally ignored my suggestions for a suitable replacement and chosen Emerie Hastings instead. What on earth was that all about?

Everybody on campus knew that Emerie and I weren't particularly friendly. And that was putting it mildly.

In my defence: I didn't start it.

When I first met Emerie two years ago, she walked straight into me. I caught her and tried to make a joke of it – but she pulled away as if I was the devil incarnate. Ever since, she either hissed at me, or avoided me as if I had the lurgy, depending on how the mood took her.

Which, to be completely honest, pissed me off a bit.

I wasn't used to someone giving me the cold shoulder for seemingly no reason and not letting me know exactly what the damn problem was. To begin with, I thought she was just having a bad day. But in all the time we'd worked together in the same lab, she hadn't said a single kind word to me. So, now I'd started annoying her with stupid banter whenever the opportunity arose, for one because it gave me a strange sense of satisfaction to lure her out of her shell, and for another because it at least gave her a reason to look daggers at me with those emerald green eyes of hers.

It only now dawned on me how counterproductive my behaviour had been. After all, she was now a member of the team. I should at least try to break the ice between us, instead of creating another blizzard.

“I was only joking,” I said. She didn’t really think that I was serious and that I thought I was so hot that she was rendered speechless, did she?

A smirk crossed her face. “Sure.”

Okay, so she did think I was serious.

Great.

It beat me what Martinez was thinking by putting Emerie into my team, because apart from the interpersonal issues, I needed a technically savvy veterinarian rather than a girl who ascribed god-knows-what motives to a penguin for simply scratching its ass.

I preferred facts and figures – Emerie, on the other hand, spent hours of her life staring at monitors trying to make sense of animal behaviour. I only had a vague idea of what her dissertation was about. But I found it unlikely that a behavioural researcher would have the technical know-how to get to grips with the new generation of TrakTags that we’d developed in the last couple of months.

Obviously, that wasn’t her fault. But, fuck me, I really wish Martinez had listened to me.

In our research department there were four other vets who had the necessary skills – and although two of them were marine biologists, I would have preferred one of them by a mile.

Emerie defiantly stuck out her chin, as if she’d read my mind. “I assume you’ve already seen Professor Martinez’s email letting you know I’m going to be part of the expedition.”

“That’s why I’m here,” I replied, as she peered at me.

It was beyond me how somebody who seemed so completely oblivious to the impact of their own behaviour could understand anything about the behaviour of others – even if they were just penguins.

Emerie was actually pretty cute. Objectively speaking. But she didn’t make the best of herself. Most of the time she wore butt-ugly, baggy jumpers over denim or cord skirts and opaque tights. She only wore a tiny bit of make-up. Her dark-blond hair was shoulder length, but she usually had it tied up on her

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head with a pencil. And above her freckled nose sat a pair of big, round glasses with narrow black frames that covered half of her face.

“You could have just emailed me everything,” she responded, crossing her arms, as if she were fighting the urge to kick me out of her inner sanctum.

I felt myself getting annoyed. “Yeah, well, it’s not quite that simple. I’ve got a few documents and questionnaires that I need you to look at by this evening.”

“What for?”

A throbbing started up in my temple. “Because as the team leader, I have to be certain that you’re in peak physical condition. The expedition is a huge physical challenge. You will be pushed beyond barriers you didn’t even know existed.”

“I’m aware that the expedition isn’t some kind of ski trip,” she said coolly. “I can assure you that my last health check was fairly recent and didn’t show up any problems.”

“And what about your mental health?” I asked, although I didn’t have any concerns in that regard. I might not be a fan of her research interests, but I knew she was hard-working, sharp and disciplined. She would cope with the trip.

She snorted. “No problems with *my* mental health.”

Her snippy tone destroyed my good intentions.

“On the White Star, we’re cut off from the outside world for weeks at a time,” I explained, smiling thinly at her. “We live and work at very close quarters with four other European researchers. You’ll be constantly freezing, barely have a minute to yourself and it’ll be one stress after another. Are you sure you’re ready for that? I don’t want you running off and doing something crazy like dancing in the snow naked or something.”

She gasped for breath, outraged. “I will definitely *not* be dancing in the snow naked.”

“That’s a relief.” My voice was even. But it took me an unsettlingly long time to get the image out of my head. “I’ll send you the Antarctic Treaty with the environmental protocol and research framework, as well as the usual risk assessments, a packing list of your personal gear and a handout about the White Star. And it would be good if you updated your resumé, wrote a summary of your dissertation for the website update and came up with a proposal for your expedition report.”

She looked at me, unimpressed. “Is that everything?”

I had to suppress a smile. “If you want, you can take a look at the TrakTag drawings and operating instructions.”

A deep furrow appeared on her forehead. “What am I supposed to do with those?”

Hopefully she was joking. “We’re going to fit a hundred more animals with the second gen for a new long-term study. Miller has spent the last few weeks preparing to get close to the animals and fit the transmitters. Now it’s your job.”

“What?” Her eyes widened. “Professor Martinez didn’t mention that.”

“Had she really thought she was going to be spending the next few weeks sitting in the snow watching penguins through a pair of binoculars?”

I raised an eyebrow. “I assume that as you’re a qualified vet, she didn’t think that would be a problem.”

“But I need to concentrate on my *own* research. Can’t you do that yourself?”

“I could.” I shrugged. “But that would mean that you would have to establish the connection between the transmitters and the satellite system, and edit some of the application source code if necessary. Probably a breeze for you.”

She grimaced. “What about somebody else on the team?”

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I was getting impatient. “I need Sienna and Luan with the antennae. And apart from that, neither of them will be issued a permit to get close to the animals, but you will. But if you don’t think you’re up to it, I can find a replacement . . .”

“No!” she quickly interrupted. Her fingers were shaking as she pushed her oversized glasses up her nose. “I’ll do it.”

“You sure?” I asked; she looked pretty pale. “You look like you’re about to throw up.”

She bit down so hard I thought I could hear her teeth grinding. “I’ll manage.”

To be honest, I had my doubts. But since our flight was leaving in less than forty-eight hours, I just had to hope for the best. As far as the expedition was concerned, and the newest member of the team.