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**ALI HAZELWOOD**

*Love*  
*on the*  
**Brain**



SPHERE



## THE HABENULA: DISAPPOINTMENT

HERE'S MY FAVORITE piece of trivia in the whole world: Dr. Marie Skłodowska-Curie showed up to her wedding ceremony wearing her lab gown.

It's actually a pretty cool story: a scientist friend hooked her up with Pierre Curie. They awkwardly admitted to having read each other's papers and flirted over beakers full of liquid uranium, and he proposed within the year. But Marie was only meant to be in France to get her degree, and reluctantly rejected him to return to Poland.

Womp womp.

Enter the University of Krakow, villain and unintentional cupid of this story, which denied Marie a faculty position because she was a woman (very classy, U of K). Dick move, I know, but it had the fortunate side effect of pushing Marie right back into Pierre's loving, not-yet-radioactive arms. Those two beautiful nerds married in 1895,

and Marie, who wasn't exactly making bank at the time, bought herself a wedding dress that was comfortable enough to use in the lab every day. My girl was nothing if not pragmatic.

Of course, this story becomes significantly less cool if you fast forward ten years or so, to when Pierre got himself run over by a carriage and left Marie and their two daughters alone in the world. Zoom into 1906, and that's where you'll find the real moral of this tale: trusting people to stick around is a bad idea. One way or another they'll end up gone. Maybe they'll slip on the Rue Dauphine on a rainy morning and get their skull crushed by a horse-drawn cart. Maybe they'll be kidnapped by aliens and vanish into the vastness of space. Or maybe they'll have sex with your best friend six months before you're due to get married, forcing you to call off the wedding and lose tons of cash in security deposits.

The sky's the limit, really.

One might say, then, that U of K is only a minor villain. Don't get me wrong: I love picturing Dr. Curie waltzing back to Krakow *Pretty Woman*-style, wearing her wedding-slash-lab gown, brandishing her two Nobel Prize medals, and yelling, "Big Mistake. Big. *Huge*." But the real villain, the one that had Marie crying and staring at the ceiling in the late hours of the night, is loss. Grief. The intrinsic transience of human relationships. The real villain is love: an unstable isotope, constantly undergoing spontaneous nuclear decay.

And it will forever go unpunished.

Do you know what's reliable instead? What never, *ever* abandoned Dr. Curie in all her years? Her curiosity. Her discoveries. Her accomplishments.

Science. *Science* is where it's at.

Which is why when NASA notifies me—*Me! Bee Königswasser!*—that I've been chosen as lead investigator of BLINK, one of their

most prestigious neuroengineering research projects, I screech. I screech loudly and joyously in my minuscule, windowless office on the Bethesda campus of the National Institutes of Health. I screech about the amazing performance-enhancing technology I'm going to get to build for none other than NASA astronauts, and then I remember that the walls are toilet-paper thin and that my left neighbor once filed a formal complaint against me for listening to nineties female alt-rock without headphones. So I press the back of my hand to my mouth, bite into it, and jump up and down as silently as possible while elation explodes inside me.

I feel just like I imagine Dr. Curie must have felt when she was finally allowed to enroll at the University of Paris in late 1891: as though a world of (preferably nonradioactive) scientific discoveries is finally within grasping distance. It is, by far, the most momentous day of my life, and kicks off a *phenomenal* weekend of celebrations. Highlights are:

- I tell the news to my three favorite colleagues, and we go out to our usual bar, guzzle several rounds of lemon drops, and take turns doing hilarious impressions of that time Trevor, our ugly middle-aged boss, asked us not to fall in love with him. (Academic men tend to harbor many delusions—except for Pierre Curie, of course. Pierre would never.)
- I change my hair from pink to purple. (I have to do it at home, because junior academics can't afford salons; my shower ends up looking like a mix between a cotton candy machine and a unicorn slaughterhouse, but after the raccoon incident—which, believe me, you don't want to know about—I wasn't going to get my security deposit back anyway.)

- I take myself to Victoria's Secret and buy a set of pretty green lingerie, not allowing myself to feel guilty at the expense (even though it's been many years since someone has seen me without clothes, and if I have my way no one will for many, many more).
- I download the Couch-to-Marathon plan I've been meaning to start and do my first run. (Then I limp back home cursing my overambition and promptly downgrade to a Couch-to-5K program. I can't believe that some people work out *every day*.)
- I bake treats for Finneas, my elderly neighbor's equally elderly cat, who often visits my apartment for second dinner. (He shreds my favorite pair of Converse in gratitude. Dr. Curie, in her infinite wisdom, was probably a dog person.)

In short, I have an absolute blast. I'm not even sad when Monday comes. It's same old, same old—experiments, lab meetings, eating Lean Cuisine and shotgunning store-brand LaCroix at my desk while crunching data—but with the prospect of BLINK, even the old feels new and exciting.

I'll be honest: I've been worried sick. After having four grant applications rejected in less than six months, I was sure that my career was stalling—maybe even over. Whenever Trevor called me into his office, I'd get palpitations and sweaty palms, sure that he'd tell me that my yearly contract wasn't going to be renewed. The last couple of years since graduating with my Ph.D. haven't been a whole lot of fun.

But that's over with. Contracting for NASA is a career-making

opportunity. After all, I've been chosen after a ruthless selection process over golden boys like Josh Martin, Hank Malik, even Jan Vanderberg, that horrid guy who trash-talks my research like it's an Olympic sport. I've had my setbacks, plenty of them, but after nearly two decades of being obsessed with the brain, here I am: lead neuroscientist of BLINK. I'll design gears for *astronauts*, gears they'll use in *space*. This is how I get out of Trevor's clammy, sexist clutches. This is what buys me a long-term contract and my own lab with my own line of research. This is the turning point in my professional life—which, truthfully, is the only kind of life I care to have.

For several days I'm ecstatic. I'm exhilarated. I'm ecstatically exhilarated.

Then, on Monday at 4:33 p.m., my email pings with a message from NASA. I read the name of the person who will be co-leading BLINK with me, and all of a sudden I'm none of those things anymore.

“DO YOU REMEMBER Levi Ward?”

“*Brennt da etwas*—uh?” Over the phone, Mareike's voice is thick and sleep-laden, muffled by poor reception and long distance. “Bee? Is that you? What time is it?”

“Eight fifteen in Maryland and . . .” I rapidly calculate the time difference. A few weeks ago Reike was in Tajikistan, but now she's in . . . Portugal, maybe? “Two a.m. your time.”

Reike grunts, groans, moans, and makes a whole host of other sounds I'm all too familiar with from sharing a room with her for the first two decades of our lives. I sit back on my couch and wait it out until she asks, “Who died?”

“No one died. Well, I'm sure *someone* died, but no one we know.

Were you really sleeping? Are you sick? Should I fly out?" I'm genuinely concerned that my sister isn't out clubbing, or skinny-dipping in the Mediterranean Sea, or frolicking with a coven of warlocks based in the forests of the Iberian Peninsula. Sleeping at night is very out of character.

"Nah. I ran out of money again." She yawns. "Been giving private lessons to rich, spoiled Portuguese boys during the day until I make enough to fly to Norway."

I know better than to ask "Why Norway?" since Reike's answer would just be "Why not?" Instead I go with, "Do you need me to send you some money?" I'm not exactly flush with cash, especially after my days of (premature, as it turns out) celebrations, but I could spare a few dollars if I'm careful. And don't eat. For a couple of days.

"Nah, the brats' parents pay well. Ugh, Bee, a twelve-year-old tried to touch my boob yesterday."

"Gross. What did you do?"

"I told him I'd cut off his fingers, of course. Anyway—to what do I owe the pleasure of being brutally awakened?"

"I'm sorry."

"Nah, you're not."

I smile. "Nah, I'm not." What's the point of sharing 100 percent of your DNA with a person if you can't wake them up for an emergency chat? "Remember that research project I mentioned? BLINK?"

"The one you're leading? NASA? Where you use your fancy brain science to build those fancy helmets to make fancy astronauts better in space?"

"Yes. Sort of. As it turns out, I'm not leading as much as *co*-leading. The funds come from NIH and NASA. They got into a pissing contest over which agency should be in charge, and ultimately decided to have two leaders." In the corner of my eye I notice a flash

of orange—Finneas, lounging on the sill of my kitchen window. I let him in with a few scratches on the head. He meows lovingly and licks my hand. "Do you remember Levi Ward?"

"Is he some guy I dated who's trying to reach me because he has gonorrhhea?"

"Huh? No. He's someone I met in grad school." I open the cupboard where I keep the Whiskas. "He was getting a Ph.D. in engineering in my lab, and was in his fifth year when I started—"

"The Wardass!"

"Yep, him!"

"I remember! Wasn't he like . . . hot? Tall? Built?"

I bite back a smile, pouring food in Finneas's bowl. "I'm not sure how I feel about the fact that the only thing you remember about my grad school nemesis is that he was six four." Dr. Marie Curie's sisters, renowned physician Bronisława Dłuska and educational activist Helena Szalayowa, would never. Unless they were thirsty wenches like Reike—in which case they absolutely would.

"*And* built. You should just be proud of my elephantine memory."

"And I am. Anyway, I was told who the NASA co-lead for my project will be, and—"

"No way." Reike must have sat up. Her voice is suddenly crystal clear. "*No way.*"

"Yes way." I listen to my sister's maniacal, gleeful cackling while I toss the empty pouch. "You know, you could at least pretend not to enjoy this so much."

"Oh, I could. But will I?"

"Clearly not."

"Did you cry when you found out?"

"No."

"Did you head-desk?"

"No."

"Don't lie to me. Do you have a bump on your forehead?"

". . . Maybe a small one."

"Oh, Bee. Bee, thank you for waking me up to share this outstanding piece of news. Isn't The Wardass the guy who said that you were fugly?"

He never did, at least not in those terms, but I laugh so loud, Finneas gives me a startled glance. "I can't believe you remember *that*."

"Hey, I resented it a lot. You're hot AF."

"You only say so because I look exactly like you."

"Why, I hadn't even noticed."

It's not completely true, anyway. Yes, Reike and I are both short and slight. We have the same symmetrical features and blue eyes, the same straight dark hair. Still, we've long outgrown our *Parent Trap* stage, and at twenty-eight no one would struggle to tell us apart. Not when my hair has been different shades of pastel colors for the past decade, or with my love for piercings and the occasional tattoo. Reike, with her wanderlust and artistic inclinations, is the true free spirit of the family, but she can never be bothered to make free-spirit fashion statements. That's where I, the supposedly boring scientist, come in to pick up the slack.

"So, was he? The one who insulted me by proxy?"

"Yep. Levi Ward. The one and only."

I pour water into a bowl for Finneas. It didn't go *quite* that way. Levi never explicitly insulted me. Implicitly, though . . .

I gave my first academic talk in my second semester of grad school, and I took it very seriously. I memorized the entire speech, redid the PowerPoint six times, even agonized over the perfect outfit. I ended up dressing nicer than usual, and Annie, my grad school best

friend, had the well-meaning but unfortunate idea to rope Levi in to complimenting me.

"Doesn't Bee look extra pretty today?"

It was probably the only topic of conversation she could think of. After all, Annie was always going on about how mysteriously handsome he was, with the dark hair and the broad shoulders and that interesting, unusual face of his; how she wished he'd stop being so reserved and ask her out. Except that Levi didn't seem interested in conversation. He studied me intensely, with those piercing green eyes of his. He stared at me from head to toe for several moments. And then he said . . .

Nothing. Absolutely nothing.

He just made what Tim, my ex-fiancé, later referred to as an "aghost expression," and walked out of the lab with a wooden nod and zero compliments—not even a stilted, fake one. After that, grad school—the ultimate cesspool of gossip—did its thing, and the story took on a life of its own. Students said that he'd puked all over my dress; that he'd begged me on his knees to put a paper bag over my head; that he'd been so horrified, he'd tried to cleanse his brain by drinking bleach and suffered irreparable neurological damage as a consequence. I try not to take myself too seriously, and being part of a meme of sorts was amusing, but the rumors were so wild, I started to wonder if I really was revolting.

Still, I never blamed Levi. I never resented him for refusing to be strong-armed into pretending that he found me attractive. Or . . . well, not-repulsive. He always seemed like such a man's man, after all. Different from the boys that surrounded me. Serious, disciplined, a little broody. Intense and gifted. Alpha, whatever that even means. A girl with a septum piercing and a blue ombré wouldn't conform to his ideals of what pretty ladies should look like, and that's fine.

What I *do* resent Levi for are his other behaviors during the year