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EINSTEIN the PENGUIN

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Chapter One

London Zoo

It was a very long time ago now, as long ago as last Christmas, that the Stewarts first met Einstein.

It was a cold sort of Christmas. The sort where days end early and forget to start on time, and the fairy lights out in the street don't quite make up for the darkness.

'What can we do with the children?' said Mrs Stewart to her husband one Saturday towards the beginning of December. The early afternoon was bitterly chilly, and no one had found the heart to

venture out into it yet. 'We don't want them to get too bored. Imogen might paint the cat again.'

Mr Stewart sighed into his tea and turned a page of his newspaper. 'She's grown out of that sort of thing, hasn't she?'

'I don't know,' said Mrs Stewart. 'Maybe.'

The children, at that precise moment in time, were keeping themselves busy in the sitting room. Arthur, who was six, was drawing pictures in a notebook while Imogen, his big sister, was sitting cross-legged in the corner, fiddling with the dials on a radio. Occasionally it would make a crackling sound and then stop again, and she would triumphantly declare to her brother that she had 'fixed it'.

'Maybe we should take them to the zoo!' said Mrs Stewart suddenly.

'The zoo?' Mr Stewart repeated.

'Yes!' said Mrs Stewart, who had spotted an advertisement on the back of her husband's newspaper.

'Arthur might like to draw the animals!'

Mr Stewart frowned into the article he was reading. He rather liked the idea of going to the zoo. It was exciting: maybe he'd see a lion! 'Well, all right,' he said eventually, in a careful sort of voice. 'If you think the children will enjoy it.'

'Imogen! Arthur!' Mrs Stewart called, and Imogen came skidding into the kitchen on the slippery tiles. Her brother followed calmly a few moments later. 'Get your shoes and coats on. We're going to the zoo.'



'The zoo?' said Arthur.

'Yes. As a treat. It's very cold outside, so wrap up warm. Imogen, where's your jumper? You haven't lost it again, have you?'

Several minutes of rushing about the house passed. Imogen's jumper was retrieved from the cat, and three separate arguments were had about scarves. By the time they stepped outside and made their way



towards the bus stop, the sky had gone through a whole new shade of grey, and the sun – no doubt a little bored of waiting – had hidden itself behind the tall trees on the edge of Hampstead Heath.

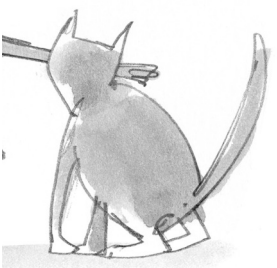
'It's cold,' said Imogen, reluctantly taking her father's hand as they crossed the road.

'I *did* tell you to put a scarf on, darling,' said Mrs Stewart, who was just a bit ahead of them.

'My scarf is *pink*!' said Imogen. 'I don't *like* pink any more!'

'She's nine, you know, Rachel,' said Mr Stewart through a smile. 'Very grown-up.'

The bus was a Saturday afternoon sort of busy, bustling with shopping bags and umbrellas. There weren't enough seats for everyone, so Arthur sat on his mother's lap while Imogen stood up in the aisle, swinging happily on the handrail each time the bus jolted to a stop.



When they got off, the sky was greyer still, and there were leaves blowing in the cold wind as they walked alongside the canal.

There is something about chilly afternoons that makes people all the more determined to enjoy themselves, and the Stewarts weren't the only family in London who had thought the zoo might be a sensible place to spend their teatime: it was very busy.

The children were immediately anxious to examine all the sweets in the gift-shop window, while Mr Stewart – having had a brief panic about whether he'd lost his wallet – found it and went to buy tickets.

'Right, where to first?' he said, returning a moment later with a map.

Imogen declared that she wanted to see a polar bear, and make friends with it.

'I don't think they have polar bears,' said Mrs Stewart, taking the map from her husband. 'Why

don't we wander past the monkeys and finish up at the penguins?'

Imogen pursed her lips and frowned, but the idea of monkeys was a good one, and she quickly cheered up. After a few moments, *both* of her parents were having to shout at her to slow down.

'Where does *that* monkey come from?' said Arthur, clutching his father's arm at the sight of a particularly large gorilla. Imogen was a few metres ahead, frowning at it with her face pressed to the wall of the enclosure.

'Africa,' said Mr Stewart. 'But most of them were born at the zoo. Look here – can you read the sign?'

'This one's my favourite,' said Imogen, wrinkling her nose and blowing air into her cheeks in an effort to look like the gorilla. 'Can we take him home?'

'You'll have to ask the zookeeper very nicely,' Mrs Stewart said. 'But shall we have a look at the flamingos first?'

Imogen started to shake her head, and explain that

she would much rather see the wolverines because their name sounded made up, when Mr Stewart barked that everyone should follow *him*, and marched off in the general direction of the lions.

'Why are we going this way?' asked Mrs Stewart. 'Imogen wants to see the flamingos.'

'The *wolverines*!' Imogen corrected. She was staring down at the map, which she had stolen from her mother's handbag, and without looking where she was going trod on the back of Arthur's shoe.

'Well, Arthur wants to see the lions,' said Mr Stewart firmly.

'I'd rather have an ice cream,' said Arthur, glaring at his sister and pulling his shoe back on to his foot. It was the sight of an ice-cream stand that had caused him to stop so suddenly.

'Why do you want an ice cream?' said Imogen. 'It's freezing.'

'Well, perhaps the flamingos would make a good

compromise,' Mrs Stewart suggested.

'That's not a compromise – that's just doing what you want to do,' said Mr Stewart.

'You're only saying that because you want to see the lions!'

Eventually they decided that, provided they were quick, they would have time for everything, but Mr Stewart spent so long looking at the lions, and Imogen spent so long looking at the wolverines, that they ended up with no time left for the flamingos at all.

'Well, that's it!' said Mrs Stewart, in her cross-but-pretending-to-be-polite voice. 'We'll have to go home – the zoo's about to close!'

'But we haven't seen the penguins!' cried Arthur. 'You said we'd see them last!'

'We can have a quick look on our way out,' said Mrs Stewart reluctantly. 'We have to go past them anyway.'

The penguins were outside, with their own beach and a great big pool of water that they were happily diving in and out of. Imogen watched them excitedly and cheered whenever one made a particularly big splash, while Arthur sat a short distance away from her, drawing a picture in his notebook.



'Imogen, look,' said Arthur suddenly. One of the smallest penguins had walked right up to the glass, and was peering at him.

'Oh, he wants to be our friend!' said Imogen, rushing to join her brother.

'*My* friend,' Arthur corrected.

'Don't be mean,' said Imogen. 'He can be my friend too.'

The penguin tapped its beak against the glass, and looked from Imogen to Arthur and back again.

'Look!' cried Imogen. 'He likes us!'

When they walked along the edge of the enclosure,



the little penguin waddled beside them, as if it knew exactly what they were thinking, and when they stopped, it stopped too, and squawked and shook its wings.

'I think he's the best penguin here,' said Arthur.

The penguin squawked again, and looked pleased with itself.

'Imogen! Arthur! There you are!' Mrs Stewart appeared suddenly through the crowd. 'What *have* you been doing? It's time to go home.'

‘We’ve made friends with a penguin!’ said Imogen. ‘Can we keep him? Please?’

Both children were crouching close to the glass, staring at the penguin longingly.

‘Please?’ said Arthur.

‘Come on,’ said Mrs Stewart, reaching out a hand for Arthur to hold. ‘We can’t stay any longer or we’ll be late for supper.’

Arthur looked reluctant, so Mrs Stewart gently rolled her eyes and crouched down to face the penguin. ‘And *you*, Mr Penguin, must come and stay with us whenever you like. Penguins are always very welcome at our house.’

The penguin looked up at her blankly, and ruffled its feathers.

‘There, will that do?’ said Mrs Stewart to Imogen and Arthur. ‘Can we head home now?’

‘All right,’ grumbled Arthur, and they followed their mother out towards the gift shop.