

The Guardians

Thursday, 31 December 1981

“Well, why *can't* Yvonne watch him?”

“*She* would like to go to a party tonight as well, dear. Oh, I knew we shouldn't have left this for the last minute....”

Petunia Dursley chewed her lip as she smoothed down her already-smooth emerald-green evening dress. Surveying the source of their problem, her mind raced for a solution. That source was her nephew, Harry Potter, sitting on the living room carpet hemmed in by a hinged wooden fence that Vernon had built that could be moved from room to room, confining him to a squarish space roughly three feet to a side. He played listlessly with an old sock of Vernon's and eyed his cousin Dudley (who had the run of the room), one corner of his mouth twisting downward as he regarded Dudley's vast collection of toys.

Dudley had at least a dozen toy lorries and a large train set that he was entirely too young to appreciate, in addition to a yellow school bus that he could straddle while pushing along with his feet (in theory—his body did not actually permit this activity), several footballs, a basketball, and a toy tennis racket with which he enjoyed striking everything within his reach (Harry, the furniture, his parents, Harry, his other toys, Harry, etc.). His favorite toy, however, was a set of plastic food, the parts of which were arrayed around him, as though he was trying to decide what to eat first. Other toys that didn't resemble food or weapons (soft stuffed toys, mostly) were piled into an overflowing box bearing the legend “DUDLEY” in large red letters.

Petunia Dursley had actually given Harry one or two of Dudley's cast-off toys when he'd first arrived two months earlier, to stop his yowling. However, the moment that Dudley had seen Harry given a ratty old bear or a car with a missing wheel, he had howled even louder than his cousin until the toy was taken from Harry again. She only tried this a few times before giving up. Each time, she removed the toy very promptly, as she never wanted to upset her son in any way. If she had to choose between upsetting Harry or Dudley, the choice was clear. Thus she'd had to endure nearly a month of Harry's demanding screaming before he finally seemed to get the message that *things were different here*. No matter how much he cried, he didn't get more food. He didn't get toys. Even when he tripped and fell (a frequent occurrence), he was not comforted.

Two months later, Harry seemed to have far fewer expectations than when he'd arrived; he seemed to understand that there was no point in drawing his aunt's attention. She never did anything beyond checking his nappy or feeding him in the course of feeding the rest of the family. Even his baths were quite cursory, consisting of being scrubbed raw with a very rough flannel while Dudley, with whom he had to share the tub, splashed soapy water in his eyes. When he cried, his aunt just scrubbed harder. To make it more difficult to hear him in the night, she had put his cot in the cupboard under the stairs. Unlike Dudley, Harry had no nightlight. He saw nothing but pitch blackness all night long. She had relented, however, on Dudley's old bear, which was the one bit of comfort he had in the cot (and Dudley couldn't see that Harry had the bear). As the cupboard was quite warm and had no window, he didn't have a blanket.

Vernon paced the floor, his face red above the starched white collar of his evening clothes. “I *need* to go to this party, Petunia! Bringing Dudley is one thing. People will eat him up! Nothing like breaking the ice with a baby, especially such a fine specimen as Dudders.” He beamed at his son, wearing a smaller version of his father's formal clothes, except that his shirt front was damp with drool while Dudley chewed happily on a piece of plastic pizza. “How can anyone say no to you when you've got a baby with you? I'm counting on making business contacts there, and *that* one could kill every deal I want to make,” he growled, pointing an accusing finger at the scrawny Harry.

“Yes, dear, I know....” she wavered, frowning deeply at Harry's messy black hair and his thin,

wan face with the too-large green eyes, just like her sister's. In the meantime, Dudley had reached under the couch and found a pig puppet of which he was fond; he used the puppet to pick up the toy food and then snatched the plastic hamburgers and fried eggs and put them in his own mouth, laughing uproariously about this, as though he'd got the better of the pig. Petunia gave him a loving smile; he was such a *happy* child! Harry, on the other hand—she had never seen a more surly, malcontented baby in her life.

Vernon turned and glowered at Harry. "I *knew* we shouldn't have kept him. I just knew he'd be more trouble than he was worth!" He continued to glare malevolently at Harry, his complexion deepening from red to purple. "We should have chucked him out on the day we got him! Let him be the government's problem!"

Petunia looked around nervously, as though afraid that someone could hear them. "You know we can't do that, Vernon!" she hissed at him. "You remember the letter—"

"Letter!" Vernon said, raising his voice and making his wife wince, as though the invisible entity would hear. "You call that a letter! *Parchment*, and *green ink*. And it was *hand-written*! Who writes letters by hand these days, I ask you? A *proper* letter is on white stationery, and it is *typed*. In *black ink*. And no bleeding wax seals!"

"Yes, dear," she said quickly and softly, staring nervously up at the chandelier, as though it might attack them for having this forbidden conversation. "Perhaps you should take Dudley and I'll stay home—"

"Stay home! And have prospective clients think I'm a pathetic single father? How am I supposed to take care of Dudders without you there? He's to break the ice, but I can't bloody well have him with me the entire time I'm trying to broker a deal—"

"Well, I'm sure there will be other women there who could take him off your hands temporarily—" she began, but found herself feeling very uncomfortable with this idea. Other women putting their hands on her precious boy? The thought was starting to make her feel ill. Someone was apt to make off with him, if they spent any time with him at all! Who wouldn't want such a beautiful, healthy baby boy? She'd heard that boys just like Dudley fetched quite a price on the black market, a memory which made her shudder. No, she just could not countenance letting Vernon pawn Dudley off on other doting women at the party, you never knew who was really in the black market baby business....

Just when Petunia had opened her mouth to protest Vernon's plan, the doorbell rang. She closed her mouth with a snap and stared at Vernon, who strode angrily to the door as though the doorbell-ringer was obviously determined to ruin their evening. After a moment's hesitation, she followed him. Petunia was standing a little behind her husband when he swung open the door, prepared to begin an angry tirade. The smallish old woman facing them, however, had other ideas.

"You have a brat who needs babysitting?" said a terse, shrill voice. Petunia and Vernon looked at each other, wide-eyed. *The answer to their prayers was on their doorstep!*

"Erm, yes, Miss—"

"It's Missus, if you don't mind. Mrs. Arabella Figg. And don't get any ideas about calling me by my first name. You're young enough to be my grandson, and in my day, we showed some respect for our elders. I go by Mrs. Figg. Where is he?"

Petunia looked uncertainly at Vernon, her eyebrows raised. The old woman was covered in cat fur down one side of her shabby old brown coat, her grey, wiry hair was askew beneath a green knitted tam, and she seemed to have come out wearing carpet slippers. Her face was ancient and lined, giving the impression that there might have been actual features there once, before they had sagged and drooped into the present configuration.

She pushed past them, immediately spying Dudley on the living room floor. He was attempting to eat a large realistic-looking plastic roast chicken, gnawing enthusiastically at a drumstick, his blond hair gleaming like a helmet on his large, neckless head.

"Huh!" she said, sounding impressed. "What a good-looking, healthy boy! Can't imagine he'd be much trouble...."

"Oh, no!" Petunia cried immediately, before an incorrect impression could take root. "He isn't the reason we need a babysitter; he's going with us. It's *him*," she said, her lip curling as she pointed an accusatory finger at Harry. She wondered for a moment whether this woman had pushed her way into the house to steal Dudley. *She's probably part of another black-market baby ring!* she thought, realizing that Dudley might even be in danger in his *own home*.

Mrs. Figg turned a gimlet eye on the thin, pale child, her mouth twisting. "Oh," she said in a flat voice. "I see the problem." She folded her hands on her large, battered brown faux-crocodile handbag and sighed. "All right, I'll do it. On condition that I watch him at my house and that I can take that little fence along, to keep him away from my *things*. I charge a pound an hour. I'm not

running a charity, you know. Half up-front.”

Petunia and Vernon looked at each other, trying to hide their elation; the woman was dirt cheap! And she didn't *appear* to be trying to steal Dudley (not anymore). They didn't want to seem too eager, however, should she raise her ridiculously low price. “Well, all right. I suppose as we're in a bit of a spot,” Petunia said. “I'll get some nappies—”

Mrs. Figg held up her hand. “No need. Been a nanny for years, have everything I need. Retired now, but I make a few extra quid on New Year's Eve. Just need a pram to get him there; never did like *holding* them too close.” She leaned toward Petunia, who wrinkled up her nose; the woman smelled strongly of cabbage. She pulled a card out of her pocket and handed it to Petunia. “My card; everything you need to know is there.”

Petunia glanced carelessly at it; the woman only lived a couple of streets away and her telephone number was printed in very small type, plus the legend, *Expert and Experienced Nanny. Ask the Prince of Wales*. Her hand fluttered to her chest. “You—you worked for the Prince and Princess of Wales?” she quavered.

“You mean the ones we have now? No, not as such. When *he* was a lad.”

That was all she said. Petunia hesitated, unsure whether this old woman might not be *too good* for Harry. *The Prince of Wales' nanny!*

“Well? Where's that pram? Don't you have a party to go to?”

Petunia handed the card to Vernon, who put it into his pocket without looking at it while Petunia trundled the pram down the hall from the kitchen. When she returned, Mrs. Figg was surveying Harry through narrowed eyes. Petunia's heart skipped a beat; now she was wondering whether this was a good idea for another reason. What if Harry *did* something when he was at Mrs. Figg's, and she discovered their great and horrid secret?

Just the day before, Dudley had got into Vernon's golf bag; he'd tried to eat a ball, which had lodged in his throat. Petunia heard him gagging and hurried into the living room from the kitchen, where she'd been cleaning. Just as she was entering the room, Harry had put out his hand and stared hard at Dudley; the golf ball went flying out of Dudley's mouth, through the bars of the enclosure, and into Harry's waiting hand. He immediately dropped it, wiping his hand on the carpet, making Petunia scream at him in annoyance.

After she had returned to the kitchen with Dudley on her hip so that she could give him a snack (he was obviously hungry) she wondered what she had just seen. Had Harry *made* the ball come to him? Or had Dudley simply managed to expel it at that moment, causing it to be projected across the room and into Harry's hand?

She looked at Harry now; he'd put his hand into the sock and was moving his fingers and thumb inside it like it was a puppet. He gabbled nonsense at it, ignoring the rest of them. Mrs. Figg made a harrumphing noise. “Look at that! Do you allow that? I certainly don't. *Using imagination*. Dangerous! I won't stand for it, I hope you understand.”

Vernon strode angrily across the room and took the sock from Harry's hand. “We most certainly do *not* approve of imagination,” he growled. Harry looked listlessly at him when the sock was removed. Petunia held her breath for a moment, but the conditioning of the previous two months held and Harry did not burst into tears. Petunia thought that Vernon also hesitated for a moment, in case this woman should find out about Harry. She could see the internal struggle on his face—go to the party, show off Dudley and make good business contacts, or guarantee that no one outside number four, Privet Drive would find out their deepest, darkest secret. Finally, she could see that the party had won out; he looked down at his white shirt-front and his fine, handsome son. They were going.

“We should be back by one-thirty or two,” Petunia said, placing Harry into the pram and shoving his arms into a jacket that Dudley had outgrown almost a full year earlier; it was far too large for Harry. “He's had his tea and it's nearly his bedtime. He can just sleep in the pram; then we can wheel him home again without waking him and having him fuss—”

“I know how to manage children,” she snapped, taking the folded-up fence from Vernon with one hand and wheeling the pram toward the front door with the other. She glared at Vernon until he sprang into action, opening the door for her. On the threshold, she paused, put down the fence, and held out her hand to him, palm up. “I said half up-front. If you're not getting back until two, that's four quid right now. Although we might as well say five, as it's a nice round number.”

The palm waited. Vernon pulled a five-pound note from his pocket and stuffed it into her hand. She immediately plunged it into her pocket and picked up the fence again. In a trice, she had bumped the pram down the one front step and was rapidly walking away from them, the squeaky wheels very loud in the still, frosty evening. Petunia looked uncertainly at Vernon once more, wondering whether *he* (not Vernon, the 'he' who had written the letter they'd found with Harry)

would be angry that they'd done this. She didn't want one of *them* to have any reason to come calling, after all.

Vernon was convinced that, over time, they could 'squash' what they assumed would be Harry's 'natural tendencies' out of him. Petunia wasn't so sure; she hadn't told Vernon about the golf ball incident. Perhaps it was too soon; perhaps over time....

She shook herself and went to get her wrap, so they could drive to the party. Her spirits lifted as she realized that she wouldn't have to think about Harry for hours and hours. *How freeing! How lovely!* Grunting a little, she heaved Dudley up onto her bony hip and planted a kiss on the top of his round, blond head.

He probably just spit the golf ball out on his own, she found herself thinking as Vernon backed the car out of the driveway. *I just need to make certain that he has more to eat. Surely if he did have enough to eat, he wouldn't be putting so many things into his mouth. Harry probably did nothing at all except catch the golf ball. Perhaps he might eventually prove to be useful, playing cricket,* she reflected. He already had that lanky, athletic look. A *normal* child would be interested in a *normal* sport, like cricket. Not that idiotic thing his father had done, flying about on a broomstick....

At the thought of flying on broomsticks, she gasped and tried to blank her mind. She did *not* want to think about that sort of thing. Vernon looked to his left for a moment, then back at the road. "Everything all right, Petunia?"

"Oh, yes, of course, Vernon. I was just thinking—we need to make certain our little Dudley has enough to eat so he won't put other things into his mouth."

Vernon nodded sagely as he drove. "You can never feed'em too much, in my opinion." He turned the car onto the motorway and glared at the other cars before him.

"Yes, dear," Petunia said softly, hoping everything was all right at Mrs. Figg's house. Hoping that Harry was behaving as *normally* as possible. Hoping that Mrs. Figg would never suspect that she was baby-sitting for the son of a witch and a wizard who had been murdered by an evil dark wizard who had tried and failed to kill Harry himself.

* * * * *

"You can go now," Arabella Figg said tersely to her brother after carelessly throwing Vernon Dursley's homemade Harry-fence into the cupboard under the stairs. Alastor had been staying with her other charge during the time it took her to walk to Privet Drive and return with Harry. A thin, pale, blond boy of about the same age as Harry was hitting Alastor Moody's carved wooden leg with a stick that Arabella immediately recognized as her brother's wand. "Alastor! What do you think you're doing, letting him get his hands on your wand like that? Whatever happened to your bloody 'constant vigilance?'"

Her very elderly brother, his face even more war-worn than his sister's, had been distractedly staring at her television, something she'd never yet experimented with herself, having lived in the house for less than a day. At present, a woman in a shockingly short dress was dancing about her kitchen with her cats, and all of them (the cats included, who walked miraculously on their hind legs) were singing at the tops of their lungs about how wonderful the tins of cat food were that they all carried in their hands (and paws). He gawped at the screen. His sister screamed his name again and he finally noticed that the child had somehow transfigured his beautiful carved leg (it had come from his mother's old grand piano and always reminded him of her) into a spiny cactus.

"No, Draco, no! Mustn't touch wands! No no *no!*" she cried, snatching it from his determined grasp. Harry was in the pram still, where she had parked it in the hall just inside the front door. He enjoyed this performance a great deal, laughing and clapping. Having an appreciative audience made Draco laugh, too, and he pointed gleefully at his handiwork. However, in doing so, he pricked his finger on a cactus spine; after a shocked three seconds, his face turned deep red and his mouth opened in a blood-curdling howl. Arabella Figg sighed; she took out her wand and picked Draco up under the arms, touching her wand to his finger for a moment to take the pain away, then waving her wand carelessly at her brother, restoring the wooden leg. Draco was starting to calm down, taking great gulping breaths, tears still streaming down his face as she gently bounced him.

"There now, little dragon, you're all right," she said in a more tender voice than anyone else in the world ever heard from her. She carried him into the hall and stood beside the pram so that Draco could see Harry and Harry see Draco. After their initial 'bonding' over the hilarious transfiguration of Alastor's leg, they regarded each other silently, suspiciously. Wary green eyes met clear grey, and then Harry patted Draco's arm, smiling amiably.

Draco slowly smiled back and Arabella, satisfied, turned to carry Draco into the dining room, which was not yet furnished. She returned to fetch Harry, and after setting him on the carpet next to the blond boy, waved her wand, endowing the room with a plethora of toys appropriate to two

toddlers. Harry's eyes went wide, but like all children his age, magical or Muggle, he didn't question it or fear it (many things seemed to magically appear and disappear, as far as he could tell). Soon the two of them were crowing over this toy or that, and in no time, they'd developed a game of building tottering structures with brightly-painted wooden blocks and then demolishing their creations by ramming toy cars and lorries into them. This was hilarious, evidently. The pair of them erupted into high-pitched squeals of laughter as they scrambled to rebuild and destroy again.

Arabella returned to the living room, shaking her head but smiling over the antics of the two small boys. Her brother was watching some sort of drama now; the actors didn't sound British. After a moment, Arabella reckoned that they were American. The men were all wearing very large outlandishly-shaped hats and everyone was saying "y'all" a great deal. Two men were standing facing each other in the middle of a dusty road, surrounded by rickety-looking wooden buildings with large square fronts.

"What are they doing?" he asked her.

"I'm not sure. They look like they might be about to duel."

"But they're Muggles, aren't they?"

"Muggles duel. They don't use wands, but they duel. I *said* you could go, Alastor. I need you back at around midnight, in case those Dursleys are early. Got your potion?" Her brother took out his flask and raised it, nodding. "Good. I'll put one of my hairs in it just before you take it. Then you can return Draco before anyone at the Malfoys' is aware of our being gone, and the Dursleys won't see him here when they come for Harry."

"And if I happen to see anything to send Lucius Malfoy to Azkaban while I'm there...."

"Oh, no you don't. I can't have you seeing something that only *I* would see and having him think that I betrayed him. Albus didn't put me there to spy on Lucius Malfoy; he put me there to watch over Draco. Better to let Malfoy believe he's getting the better of the Ministry. If he were ever to do anything truly dangerous, I would alert you and Albus. But with You-Know-Who gone, Albus doesn't believe Lucius is likely to engage in any Death Eater-like behavior. He's already been questioned and released; it's officially on record that he was under Imperius, even though *we* know that's codswallop. I've got my eye on him when I believe it's necessary. Keep your nose out of it."

She'd been caring for Draco since he was born, thanks to Albus having talked her into applying for the job. The fact that she'd been working for him as an operative was not widely known. She'd been in Slytherin House when she'd been in school (the same year as Lord Voldemort himself), so Lucius Malfoy had welcomed Arabella Figg and her no-nonsense approach to child-rearing. He'd said that his wife tended to be too 'soft' on Draco and he wanted to toughen him up. *Just as bad as that Dursley pillock*, she thought. *Both boys will turn out to be utterly insufferable at that rate*. She didn't think that Narcissa Malfoy's tendency to spoil Draco was any better.

Her brother looked grumpy, even for him, watching the men begin to duel with their strange metal wands. "Well, I can just wait here and watch the telly thingy--"

"Oh, no you don't. Out! Come back later. Albus didn't set up this house for me to have my brother sit about watching Muggles dancing with cats and dueling. I'm here to watch Harry. You shoo before I turn that leg of yours into something far worse than a cactus."

He grunted in protest, but finally left. She turned to watch the boys through the archway to the dining room. Draco was having some difficulty building another structure to be knocked down, and looked up at her hopefully.

"Nanny Bella! Help, Nanny Bella!" he piped at her.

Harry looked at her now. "Nanny Bella--" he echoed, making her gasp.

"Oh, no you don't. I told your aunt and uncle that *they* couldn't call me by my first name. I'm not having you doing it. They'll think I'm soft. You call me *Mrs. Figg*." She sighed, realizing that this was probably pointless. She was going to put a memory charm on him before he returned home anyway, so it didn't really matter what he called her before then. She didn't like putting memory charms on someone so young, but she was very good at doing just enough to erase a small part of a person's recent memory. She would have to do the same to Draco, so he wouldn't remember Harry, either. She went to Draco and helped him with the blocks before returning to the living room and sitting in one of the armchairs Albus had provided. The television was off now; she might try it again eventually, but for now she had something far more interesting to watch.

Harry and Draco played together for over an hour, stopping for a snack, before they both fell asleep in cots she conjured with a wave of her wand. As she tucked them in, she drew in her breath at the enormity of the responsibility that had been given to her. Albus had told her that the boys were both in a Prophecy about the final fall of Voldemort. *Final fall?* She'd thought You-Know-Who had *already* fallen. But Albus had shaken his head and said no; the wizarding world was experiencing a temporary reprieve only. Someday *he* would be back, and until then, Harry and

Draco needed to be safe. It was going to be her job to watch over them both. At the same time, when necessary.

As the new year approached, Arabella Figg sat back and stared at the cots in her dining room, listening to the sleeping boys' deep breaths. She hoped she would be dead by the time You-Know-Who regained his power. She had no desire to know what price these two tiny boys might pay to finally defeat the great Dark Lord whom she had once known as a boy named Tom Riddle.

* * * * *

Thursday, 9 April 1982

"Very good, Percy!" Molly Weasley said, beaming at the five-year old. He had been reciting his Latin declensions and had got everything perfect. She hadn't remembered having this much fun when actually teaching a classroom of unruly children, but then, none of them had been her own son, and Percy was in particular a very studious child, his mind thirsty for as much information as she could pour into it. Sometimes she worried that he was leaping ahead of her ability to teach him; she was a bit rusty, after almost twenty years away from the classroom. And she had ample distractions in the form of Fred and George, who were nearly four years old, as well as Ron, who would have his second birthday in just over a month, and Ginny, who had just passed her first birthday.

She sometimes wondered whether she should tell Arthur that she'd changed her mind, it was all right for Percy to go off to the village school, as Bill and Charlie had done, and as Peggy and Annie had done before they disappeared. But the thought of sending any of her children away ever again made her heart ache so, even when it was only for a day and they'd be back again after school. She couldn't bear it. Yes, it was difficult with the younger children to manage as well, but Percy was an easy mark for her teaching. She could set him a lesson, send him off to do it, and when he returned half an hour later, she knew it would be perfect. He even did perfect work when they were doing sums, despite this not being his favorite lesson. He set his mind to it and did what was necessary.

Molly sighed and patted his head fondly; she really worried about being able to cope with teaching Percy *and* the twins in September, besides keeping track of Ron and Ginny. Ginny had developed a predilection for finding the most obscure places to hide in the house. Molly had been searching high and low for her more than once, her heart in her mouth, before finding the little imp under the ottoman or behind the curtains or under the kitchen sink. Each time, Molly held her little girl tightly, vowing never to let her out of her sight again. If anything ever happened to Ginny, she just knew she couldn't bear it, not after Annie and Peggy. Not that she wanted anything to happen to her boys; she loved all of her children dearly, and that was why none of the younger ones would be attending the village school, as their four oldest siblings had done. She was not letting any of them out of her sight until it was time for Hogwarts. She knew they'd be safe there. Dumbledore would never let anything happen at Hogwarts.

"All right, Percy-love. You've been a very good boy today. Now I have to feed Ron and Ginny, so you find a book to read, there's a good boy," she said again.

Percy nodded and walked solemnly to the bookcases flanking the fire in the crowded living room. His mother took Ron and Ginny from the hearth rug, where they'd been playing. The twins were upstairs, having a nap (supposedly—every so often, Percy heard tell-tale thumps overhead). After perusing the shelves, Percy quickly came to the conclusion that he'd read everything worth reading in the house. He went to the kitchen.

"Mummy?"

"Yes, Percy, dear?" she said, placing bowls of porridge in front of Ron and Ginny.

"Where do Muggles go for books?"

"Where do Muggles go for books? Why, to bookshops, I reckon. We'll go to Flourish and Blotts, in Diagon Alley, when you get ready to go off to Hogwarts. If you need new books, that is. With any luck, you'll be able to use Bill and Charlie's old ones."

"That's it?" he said, disappointed. "Bookshops?" Shops meant you needed money. Even at five, he knew that. And Muggle bookshops meant you needed Muggle money.

"Well, they also have libraries. There's one in the village, near the shops. You've seen it. No, Ron! We don't eat porridge with *fingers!*" she said with exasperation, waving her wand at the messy toddler, who was busily smearing porridge on his face. Ginny had been spooning her own porridge into her mouth, but now she started giggling uncontrollably at seeing what Ron had done, and decided to put her spoon on her chin instead of into her mouth. This produced more giggling from Ron, and Molly was soon involved in cleaning and scolding the pair of them, while they continued to laugh gleefully. She never heard her five-year-old son ask whether she would take him to the village to visit the library, nor the front door closing after he left the house, having failed to get a response.

Peter noticed, though. Sitting in Percy's pocket, he could tell right away that they were outdoors. It was a brisk spring day, and although Percy had put on a jacket, Peter was riding in his trouser pocket, so he didn't benefit from the jacket's warmth. He put his nose out of the pocket, very cautiously, then decided that Percy was just going to play in the garden. He curled up in the bottom of the pocket and resumed his nap.

He'd had a good life, surprisingly, since Molly had discovered him in Percy's care a few months earlier. Percy had begged and pleaded with his mother to be allowed to keep "Scabbers." He'd shown her how clean he was, told her that he'd been letting the rat sleep in his bed with him, and he hadn't brought any fleas or other rats into the house. Peter had sat up on Percy's hand and looked pleadingly at Molly Weasley, hoping she wouldn't consider hexing him while Percy was holding him. His heart had been beating very fast and if he'd been in his human form, his knees would have been knocking together. He had climbed up Percy's arm and perched on his shoulder, lightly gripping the fabric with his toes to keep from falling. Percy had stroked his fur, speaking softly to him.

Molly had sighed and thrown up her hands. "All right. You have a tame rat. He's *your* responsibility, Percy, and no one else's. Understand? I don't want to be finding him underfoot. And under *no* circumstances do I want to see him in my kitchen."

"Yes, Mummy," he'd replied happily.

After a time, Peter realized sleepily that Percy had been walking for far longer than it took to merely go out into the garden, so unless Percy had taken it into his head to walk round and round the garden, they had left the grounds of the Burrow. He put his nose out of Percy's pocket again and discovered that they were, in fact, entering a village. Percy was waiting patiently for a car to go through a roundabout, walking sedately along the pavement as though he went to Ottery St. Catchpole by himself every day.

Peter pulled himself back into the pocket, his small heart thumping even more rapidly than usual. *Molly Weasley is going to have a fit!* After the girls disappearing, for Percy to go off on his own would send her over the edge! Peter felt very angry and was tempted to bite him, to see whether it would bring him to his senses. It was bad enough that he, Peter, had caused their family so much grief and pain, but if anything happened to Percy....

Peter poked his head out of the pocket; Percy was opening a glass door, entering a stone-clad building, as though he knew just what he was doing. Usually, Percy spoke to "Scabbers" at great length about his plans. That Percy had kept *this* in his head was a bit alarming to Peter; he thought he always knew what to expect from Percy. Of all of the children, he was the only one Peter would have called almost boring in his predictability.

Today, Percy Weasley was specializing in being unpredictable.

Peter hazarded another look at his surroundings; there were shelves and shelves of books, and some squashy-looking brown armchairs and sofas made of cracked old leather. They seemed worn and comfortable, and when he entered the hallowed space, he felt Percy take in a deep, bracing breath, as though he'd achieved his heart's desire.

Percy looked around the reading room, smiling happily. He pushed his glasses up on his nose (he'd only been fitted for them a month earlier and was very pleased with how much better the world looked) and approached the librarian. She was an elderly woman, white hair pulled into a bun, her shirtwaist pockets bulging with pens and cards. Percy watched her open the back cover of the top book in the stack before her and pull a small card from her pocket, inserting it in another pocket glued to the back of the book. Closing it, she dropped it into a metal bin and reached for another. She looked dreadfully efficient, but somehow also friendly. Moreover, Percy was of the opinion that anyone who worked in a library must love books as much as he did, so she would of course be friendly to him.

Luckily, this assumption proved to be correct. Percy planted himself before her and said politely, "Excuse me, madam." She looked up (and then down) in surprise, an indulgent smile spreading across her face as she beheld the small would-be reader before her.

"Yes? What can I do for you, lad?"

"I was wondering where the children's books are," Percy said clearly, only a slight lisp marring his speech. She put down the book she'd chosen and stood, reaching over the desk for his hand, which he gave her. "Come with me. I'll show you."

He had slipped his small hand confidently into hers without a second thought; as much as his parents had attempted to inculcate in their children a suspicion of strangers, Percy couldn't bring himself to assume anything but the best of this nice old lady. For the first time, as he walked beside her, he felt a small pang at having come to the village on his own. But he'd *told* his mother what he was going to do. If she hadn't wanted him to, surely she would have said something? In his

eagerness to go to the library, he had failed to notice that she was too preoccupied with his youngest siblings to be aware of what he'd said. It simply did not occur to him that his mother had no idea where he was.

The librarian's name was Mrs. Williams. She smiled warmly at him as she directed him to a shelf with large picture books. He looked up at her. "Do any of these have poetry? I like 'The Pied Piper of Hamelin.' Do you know any books with poems like that one?"

Goodness, Mrs. Williams thought. *Prodigious*. She steered him away from the picture books, having heard this. "Why don't you try here, instead?" She reached up and took down a copy of *Peter Pan*. "Have you read this one?"

Percy stared at the wonderful picture on the cover of a pirate ship in full sail, shaking his head; he thought it looked *wonderful*. Gazing up rapturously at Mrs. Williams, he said, "I don't have to pay for it, right?"

She laughed. "This is a library. Of course you don't have to pay for it."

"Good. May I read it now?"

She scrutinized him with interest; he was a funny little thing. "Of course you may. Make yourself comfortable." She waved her hand at a nearby squashy armchair, and Percy happily scrambled up onto it, turned around and opened the book on his lap, preparing to start. Mrs. Williams gave him one last smile before she returned to her desk.

Peter, for his part, waited for a few minutes before poking his head out of the pocket again. Percy had removed his jacket, which was on the seat next to him (it was a very large chair and he was a very small boy). Peter crept out of the pocket very slowly and unobtrusively. Percy was oblivious, already immersed in the lives of the Darling family. Peter ducked under the jacket when he heard nearby footsteps, then took a chance and leapt onto the floor. He ran under the chair, but that afforded him little shelter (there was no skirt). His heart thudding very quickly, he paused under the chair, glancing around for security risks. Seeing none, he made a dash for a pair of long bookcases protruding from the wall behind the chair. Running all the way to the wall, where the bookcases stopped, he paused once more before he returned to his human form.

Peter could not be seen by anyone else in the library from his current location, including Percy, who wouldn't have recognized the human Peter, in any case. If, however, Molly or Arthur Weasley saw him, they might recognize him. He'd seen his own photograph in the newspaper when Sirius had been sentenced to Azkaban, and again when he had, posthumously, received the Order of Merlin. He'd also seen the photograph of his grieving mother, tears streaming down her face. No, at all costs, he must make certain that neither Molly nor Arthur saw him. He took out his wand and waved it, before an unsuspecting Muggle could suddenly stumble into the aisle. Less than a minute later, he re-materialized with a *pop!* in the old orchard at the edge of the Weasley property. The orchard was generally empty when the oldest boys were at school.

Changing back to his rat form (he didn't dare get closer to the house in his human form), he ran like lightning across the orchard and garden, finally reaching the kitchen door. He slipped under the door and saw that Molly was busy at the large table, waving her wand over a bowl. Ron and Ginny were still in their high chairs, messily eating biscuits and making more than a bit of noise. Peter chattered as loudly as he could, but Molly couldn't hear him above Ron and Ginny. Finally, knowing how very risky it was, he went over to Molly and quickly ran across her foot, getting out of the way before she kicked him.

She let out a blood-curdling screech and stepped back from the table. Peter ran for the hall, hoping she would follow him. She glared at the rat, pulling out her wand. Peter swallowed, scampering into the living room so that she could see that Percy wasn't there.

"Percy!" she cried, stomping angrily toward the rat. "I told you I didn't want to see that rat in *my kitchen!*" She looked around the empty room. "Percy?" she said, a little uncertainly this time. Peter ran to the front door and looked at her expectantly. She narrowed her eyes, looking down at the rodent. "Where is he, then?" she said to him, as though she suspected he could answer. She glanced at the family clock; for Percy, it was pointing to "traveling." Peter scratched at the door and she opened it; he ran down the path a few yards, then turned and looked at her, waiting for her to follow. She started to, but a loud clatter was heard from the kitchen and she dashed back into the house. Peter heaved a small rat-sigh and also returned to the house; he found Molly crouching before the fire, Arthur Weasley's head sitting in the green flames there.

"I'm sorry to ask, Arthur, but I can't find Percy, and I can't leave the other little ones...." Her voice was full of worry and self-reproach. Arthur Weasley looked very grim.

"I'll be right there, Molly."

His head disappeared from the fire and barely a moment later he had *popped!* into the messy Weasley kitchen. "All right, Molly, where was the last place you saw him?" he started to say to his

wife, but Peter didn't have time for this. He tugged at the hem of Mr. Weasley's robe with his teeth, trying to get his attention. Molly cleared her throat.

"Now, Arthur, you're going to think I'm daft, but I think the rat has been trying to *tell* me where Percy is. My problem is that I can't just run off and leave the—"

"Yes, Molly, I understand," Arthur said, stooping to stroke Peter's fur firmly. Peter scampered for the door, then paused to wait for Arthur Weasley. When he followed, Peter proceeded down the path to the dirt road leading to Ottery St. Catchpole. Arthur diligently followed the small creature, but Peter was getting rather tired out; his legs were far smaller than Percy's, and he hadn't had to get to and from the village on his own in rat form before. Arthur Weasley seemed to understand that he was tired; he picked him up and stroked between his ears. "All right, then, Scabbers. You know where your lad is, do you? We'll go to the village, and if I'm wrong, you just tell me somehow. Got it?"

Peter resisted the urge to nod; instead he turned his face toward the village and sat patiently in Arthur Weasley's grasp. When they were near the village shops and Arthur was passing the library, Peter started squirming, and finally, Arthur put him down on the ground and watched him. Peter ran to the library door and Arthur nodded, picking him up and putting him into a deep robe pocket.

Arthur Weasley had never entered the Muggle library in Ottery St. Catchpole. He hadn't even known it was there. He didn't generally like to go to places where there were a lot of Muggles because Molly told him that he tended to gawp, and the Muggles, in turn, gawped at him. That was what had occurred when he'd taken his children to work and had to travel with them on the Underground. He experienced a feeling of intense conspicuousness now that tingled along his scalp as he walked to the desk, his footsteps echoing on the stone floor. He was grateful that he wasn't wearing a wizard's hat today.

He smiled ingratiatingly at the white-haired woman at the desk, thinking of Molly back at the Burrow, going frantic. After the girls....

"May I help you?" the old woman asked Arthur with a friendly smile. *Muggles are always so friendly and ready to help*, Arthur thought with satisfaction. *Don't know what so many wizards have against them....*

"Erm, yes. I'm looking for my son. Small lad, about so high," he said, holding his hand at what he thought was the right height, before thinking better of it and moving his hand up and down uncertainly for a minute. He gave the woman a lopsided smile and put his hand into his pocket, encountering the rat, about whom he had forgotten. "Well, you know how they grow," he said feebly. "At any rate—small lad. Five years old. Bright red hair. Rather like, well, mine," he said, pointing needlessly at his own head. "And glasses. He's just got them. And, well, freckles. And—clothes—damn! Oh, excuse me. It's just that—I forgot to ask my wife what he was wearing. She's quite frantic. The twins were upstairs for their nap, she was feeding the babies, and she thought Percy was in the living room—"

"Twins and two other babies? Gracious! She has her hands full, I reckon. Percy? Is that his name?" She brightened up. "I think I can help you, sir."

He heaved a great sigh of relief at these words. "Oh, thank you so much, ma'am. I just—I couldn't possibly go back and tell her—"

"You shan't need to," she said, patting his arm. "Come with me." As she led him along, she said, "Are you the new choirmaster at St. Catchpole-in-the-Meadow? How are you getting on with Canon Dickerson?"

"Erm, fine, thank you. Just fine," he said, confused about this line of questioning.

"Really? After the way he treated the last choirmaster, the vestry wasn't certain they could get someone new, but no one else is ever willing to do all of the work Canon Dickerson makes time for...."

Arthur understood now that she was talking about the local parish church; he and Molly had taken the children there once for a Christmas Mass, to hear the choir. It had been quite nice, he remembered, but oddly enough, the words to the carols weren't quite the ones he remembered. He had decided that Muggles used different ones. But it had been a little jarring for him, and the Muggles had stared at his and Molly's robes, so they hadn't gone back. He remembered with a pang that it had been the four eldest children only: Bill, Charlie, Annie and Peggy. Percy wouldn't be born for another eight months.

When they entered the children's department, Arthur immediately saw Percy sitting in the large armchair, a book across his lap as he followed the words with his finger, his lips moving ever so slightly. He didn't take notice of anything else going on around him.

"Percy!" his father said loudly, before the librarian abruptly hushed him.

Percy looked up, his eyes widening when he saw his father. "Daddy! What time is it? Am I late?"

I told Mummy where I was going and that I'd be back for tea."

Arthur shook his head. "Mummy didn't know, Perce. We were both very worried." His heart was going very fast, but he was also enormously relieved; nothing had happened to Percy. No one had snatched him away from them. He was all right. He would not have to tell Molly that another one of their children had disappeared from the village.

"She didn't know? But I told her. Anyway, if she didn't know, how did you find me?"

Arthur looked uncertainly at the librarian, then leaned close to whisper to Percy. "*Scabbers led me to you.*"

Percy looked astonished. "He *did*?" He patted his pocket, realizing for the first time that it was empty. "Where is he?"

"*In my pocket,*" Arthur said very softly. "Now, give the book back and we can go," he said in a normal voice.

Percy's face fell. "Oh. Right." He sighed and closed the book, running his hands wistfully over the cover. "I don't reckon I'll be allowed to come again..."

"Whyever not?" Mrs. Williams demanded, her eyes flashing at Arthur Weasley, as though he was the enemy of intellect and learning for preventing his son from coming to the library. "You *could* get a library card, dearie. Would you like that? Then you could take some books home to read and bring them back and get some others."

Percy's face lit up, and Arthur had to stop himself from laughing. "Oh! Can I, Dad?"

"Of course, son, of course. *If* you wait until I can bring you, or Mum. You're not to come on your own again." He smiled and kissed his son on the top of his carrot-colored head. Percy hugged the book to his chest happily, then followed Mrs. Williams to her desk to make it all official. Arthur took off his glasses and ran his hand down his face, feeling very old and very tired. He felt some wiggling in his pocket and took out Scabbers the rat, using his hand to shield him from view. "Thanks to you, we've got our boy back, Scabbers," Arthur whispered to him, stroking his fur. "I reckon it's a good thing you and Percy became friends, yeah?" Scabbers cocked his head to the side. *Almost as though he can understand me*, Arthur thought for a moment before shaking himself and reminding himself that a rat didn't have a very large brain, after all. He'd become very attached to Percy, that was all. It really wasn't *that* extraordinary.

He put the rat back into his robe pocket; it finally dawned on him that it was because of the robe that the librarian assumed he worked as the parish choirmaster. He'd have to remember that, it was a far better story than any he'd thought up previously, when he'd gone out among Muggles in his wizarding robes. Usually he was mistaken for a priest, but she undoubtedly knew the rector, so her mind had gone to the next likely candidate.

Percy bade Mrs. Williams farewell at the door, clutching three books to his chest. Besides *Peter Pan*, he also carried *The Wizard of Oz* and *Mary Poppins*. "Did you know, Daddy, that Muggles know about magic? It's in these books," he said to his father after they had left the village and were back on the dirt road to the Burrow.

Arthur smiled. "Well, you might think so to read those, but because they're children's books, grown-up Muggles don't take them seriously. And you'll find that the way magic works in the books isn't the way it *really* works. Muggles wrote them, after all."

Percy frowned. "So, do the Muggles who wrote the books believe in magic?"

He nodded. "Probably. Many do. But most Muggles don't, and that's why, even when Muggles *have* seen real magic, they often don't say anything, in case other Muggles should think them mad. Or they're really worried about being mad themselves and convince themselves they saw something else. Or they write about it—usually getting a lot of things wrong—but say that it's a story that they made up. It all rather works out for us, in the end. You can still enjoy the stories, of course."

Percy nodded, clutching his books with a proprietary air. "I think Scabbers is a magic rat," he said suddenly. Peter, riding in Arthur's pocket, heard this and stiffened in fear.

"Why do you say that, Perce?"

"He must have known that Mummy didn't know where I was and he went back home to tell her. He led you to the library in the village. Do most rats do that sort of thing?"

His father laughed. "Probably not. Maybe you're right," he said, humoring Percy and getting into the spirit of the fantastic books the boy had selected. "Maybe there's a race of magical creatures that hasn't been discovered, because they *look* just like rats, like Kneazles looking like cats or Crups with trimmed tails looking like normal dogs."

Percy nodded sagely. "Must be. I mean, it took me ever so long to get to the village from home, but you got there really fast. Do you think Scabbers can Apparate?"

Peter thought he might faint; the child had hit it on the head, almost. He *was* magical (although

not a magical creature), and he *had* Apparated back to the Burrow.

"Don't be silly, Percy. Only witches and wizards can Apparate, although house-elves can get about in a way that's a bit like Apparition. And then there are phoenixes...."

"Well, we're just lucky I have the smartest rat there is, aren't we?" Percy said, smiling up at his father. Arthur ruffled his bright hair and grinned back at him.

"That we are. That we are...."

After a homecoming that was part celebration and part scolding from Molly, it was time for tea. To his astonishment, Molly created a place of honor for "Scabbers" beside the hearth, with his own freshly-baked biscuit and his water in a slightly chipped china saucer. He not only was not being ejected from her kitchen, he was being given his own special place in it. Later, when she was tucking Percy into bed and kissing the top of his head, she reached out her finger and stroked Peter's fur, whispering, "*Thank you for helping us to find him,*" before kissing the sleeping Percy once more and gently closing the door.

In the dead of night, Peter scrambled to the edge of the bed and, after making certain that Percy was deeply asleep, changed into his human form and looked down at the peaceful child with a sigh. Everything had turned out all right. Peter walked carefully to the door, opening it only half-way, as it tended to squeak past that point. He went to each bedroom in turn, even Molly and Arthur's, checking on them all to make certain they were safe. He stopped beside Ginny's cot, stroking the red curls for a moment, his chest hitching as he thought of her older sisters. At least they were alive, because of him, he thought. At least they were still together, and in a good home. He remembered the nice family of which Lily had spoken, the poor couple who had lost their little girl to cancer.

It's better this way, he thought, gazing down at Ginny, who sighed and rolled over in her sleep, her thumb in her mouth. *And someday, you shall help to bring down the Dark Lord, little Ginny.* First, he knew, his Master would need to rise again. He might have to help him do that. He shuddered, remembering the wisp of life blowing over the trees....

Until then, Peter Pettigrew thought, gazing down at the peacefully slumbering baby, *I'll make certain that nothing happens to you or your family.*

* * * * *

Saturday, 1 May 1982

Maggie Dougherty sat straight up in bed, trying to get her breath. She'd had the dream again. The dark-haired man pulling her out of the water, his fingers pulsing with a red light at the edges....but she wasn't a little girl in the dream, she was a woman. She was all grown up. And then she was sailing, the salty wind in her face, and she was laughing, and he was beside her, also laughing and smiling, a pink glow suffusing both of them....

Maggie shook her head, watching herself in the slightly cloudy old mirror hanging over her dresser. She wasn't sure whether the mirror or the morning light gave the impression of there being a delicate silver-grey glow around her. (Or something else.) She was very clearly still a little girl, with her orange hair in a messy tangle over her head, her thin face pale and drawn. It was all very strange. Why should she keep having this dream?

She'd been to a wedding with her parents the previous weekend, a cousin of her mother's. Someone had told her that if she slept with a piece of wedding cake under her pillow, she'd dream of her future husband. She hadn't put the cake under her pillow (it had seemed a messy, unsanitary thing to do), but was she doing that anyway?

Maggie frowned, remembering the man's face very vividly from her dream. He certainly wasn't what you would call handsome, with that beaky nose and those dark, brooding eyes. *You'd think I'd pick someone a little better-looking,* she thought. When he smiled, he wasn't too bad, though, she remembered. She also recalled that he had a nice laugh. He was terribly pale and thin, and more than a bit bossy. She *definitely* remembered him being bossy, when he'd been trying to get her out of the water.

Her thoughts were suddenly interrupted by her mother appearing at the door of her bedroom. "Good morning, Mags! I told Mrs. Matthews we would help her set up for the jumble sale, remember? Are you still interested in running your little booth? Or would you rather dance around the Maypole with your friends?"

They other children weren't really her friends, so she had no interest in the Maypole, but Maggie smiled at her mother, whose aura pulsed a clear turquoise. This meant that she was cheerful and organized, Maggie had worked out even before looking in a book at the library about this. She much preferred her mother this way, rather than with a muddy blue or sulfur-colored aura. She was glad that her mother wasn't melancholy or ill at ease. In fact, she couldn't remember the last time her mother hadn't been rather cheerful.

"Yes, Mummy," she said smiling nervously.

"All right, then. Breakfast in ten minutes. Don't you love the village fete?" she trilled as she left. Maggie smiled after her mother and scrambled out of bed, immediately straightening and smoothing the sheets and blankets and then laying out her costume. She was going to pretend to be a Gypsy fortune-teller. Checking a chart on her wall with a diagram of the palm, she reminded herself of what the different line configurations meant. That, the information she'd memorized about aura colors, and the *feelings* she sometimes had when she was around people should allow her to put on a good show. It was all for charity, she reminded herself. It would be fun. For once she wouldn't have to bite her tongue when something leapt into her mind. For once she'd have a reason for acting like 'a freak,' as some children at school called her. She had a small circle of near-friends, but even they sometimes thought she was rather queer. Only Valerie didn't.

Valerie appeared now, coming through the door of the wardrobe. "Good morning, Valerie," she said briskly to the ghost as she donned a swirling flowered skirt that was her mother's; cinched with a belt, it fitted Maggie with only a little bunching around the waist. The hem swept the toes of her trainers in a satisfyingly gypsy-like fashion.

"*Good morning,*" Valerie answered mistily, drifting over to perch on the footboard of the bed. Maggie turned, hearing a note she didn't like in Valerie's ghostly voice. Not for the first time, she wished that she could 'see' ghosts the way she could 'see' live human beings. But ghosts had no aura, no real future, so she could perceive nothing about her mood or what would become of her in the same way that she could for the living.

"Everything all right?" Maggie asked the girl-ghost while she wound a bright green scarf around her head. She pinned her mother's large hoop earrings to the scarf, next to her ears. She'd pleaded with her mother to pierce her ears, but was told that she had to wait until she was sixteen. (This was a lifetime away, as she wasn't yet ten.)

"Yes. That's just it. Everything's so all right..." Valerie trailed off. Maggie frowned; Valerie faded for a moment, then reappeared, faded, then came back.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean—I think it's time for me to go," Valerie whispered, sounding like someone speaking from a distant room.

Maggie whirled, eyes wide. "Go? Oh, no!"

Valerie nodded. "I've put it off, but I can't any longer."

"Why?" Maggie wished she could touch Valerie somehow, clutch at her and keep her.

Valerie gave a shrug of her transparent shoulders. "I stayed because I was worried about my parents. I wanted to look after them. But now...you are their daughter. You look after them. And they look after you. You're a family."

Maggie couldn't stop the tears streaming down her face. "But you're part of our family."

Valerie shook her head. "Not anymore," she said, her voice sounding even farther away. She shimmered in the morning light. "I've got a place where I can go. There are a lot of ghosts there. It's a school. I would have gone there when I was eleven. If I'd lived to be eleven..."

"Where is it? I thought you would have gone to school here in Appleby Magna."

"No. It's a different sort of school. I died too soon to find out about it. Our parents...they seem destined to have special daughters, even though they're not special themselves. Maybe it's the house. Another girl lived here; she went to the school. You'll like it. You'll go there someday. Because you're special, too."

Maggie frowned. "Special how?" And how could she say her parents weren't special?

"I think you know. I cannot say more now. It is time for me to go..."

"No!" Maggie cried, clutching at the empty air where Valerie had been.

"*It's all right,*" said a disembodied voice that sounded less and less like Valerie's. "I know you shall do a good job of watching over them..."

Maggie choked on her tears, turning round and round, looking at her empty room. Valerie had been there for her from the start. She'd had her to talk to for so long. It almost didn't matter anymore that she couldn't remember anything from her early life.

"Maggie!" her mother called, entering the room. Seeing Maggie's tears, she pulled the girl to her, no longer having to stoop to embrace her, as Maggie was quite tall now; the top of her head was just under Mrs. Dougherty's chin. "What is it, dear?" she said softly.

Maggie shook her head; she couldn't tell her mother that she was crying because Valerie had left, when she'd already gone through her own mourning for her. "I'll be okay," she said, hiccupping noisily, drying her eyes with the end of her green headscarf. "I just need to go up to the attic and get that old shawl to finish my costume."

Her mother cupped her chin with her hand and surveyed her. "You look like a rather pale, blue-eyed Gypsy," she joked, grinning. Maggie laughed for a moment, in spite of the hollow feeling she had, where Valerie had been. Someday she might find something or someone to fill that space. She tried not to think about what dreadful color her aura was.

Maggie crept up to the attic, carefully lifting her mother's flowered skirt as she climbed the stairs. She made her way over to an old trunk draped with a paisley shawl; removing the shawl, she saw that the trunk had chipped gold initials on it. *L.G.E.* She'd never looked in this trunk before. The shawl had always draped the trunk like a genteel tablecloth, and she'd never thought about what might lie underneath. A large padlock sealed the trunk, and Maggie's heart dropped; she had been about to open it. It wasn't every day that you came across a mystery in your own house! But there was no telling where the key to the lock was. Maggie took the padlock in her hand; it felt heavy and substantial and she grasped it tightly, wishing fiercely that she could open it....

She leapt back with alarm when the lock seemed to melt like butter in her hand. She stared at it for a second, then dropped it on the floor with a thud; it still *seemed* to be heavy, solid metal. There was nothing keeping her out of the trunk now. Maggie approached it cautiously, stepping over the discarded lock. Lifting the lid, she found a lot of dusty old books. *One Thousand Magical Herbs and Fungi*. Ugh, she thought. Gardening. The others looked like schoolbooks. One said, *A History of* and then nothing else, for the cover had been partially burnt. The pages also emitted an acrid, burnt smell. Perhaps these things had been saved from a fire. The gardening book was a bit charred at the edges, too, although not so badly as the history book.

Amidst the half-burnt detritus in the trunk were some old letters and postcards. One such collection of letters, which seemed to have been written on old-fashioned heavy parchment and written in a lovely flowing script with ink that had browned over the years, was bound by a faded green ribbon. Maggie was able to make out the address by squinting:

Miss Lily G. Evans
10 Highgrove St.
Appleby Magna, Leicestershire

Lily G. Evans lived here, Maggie thought. Her things had never been removed. Maggie looked at the shawl in her hand again and realized that it wasn't nearly as dusty as the other things in the attic. Then she remembered that, the previous November, the owner of their house had come with some things she wanted to store in the attic. Mrs. Dougherty had been surprised, but the terse, unpleasant woman merely said that there had been a death in the family and that they had no place to put her sister's old school things in their house. So Mrs. Dougherty had admitted her (she was the landlady, after all) and Mrs. Dursley had ascended the stairs to the attic, coming back down rather quickly. She left again right after that, declining Maggie's mother's offer of tea.

Maggie felt like an intruder now, thinking about poor Lily Evans. She moved to replace the bundle of letters in the trunk, but a photograph fell out of the bundle. Maggie gasped, frozen. It was the man in her dream! She picked it up and turned it over. In neat, flowing script, were the words *Severus, June 1977*.

Was that supposed to be a name? she wondered. *Severus*?

Perhaps it was a place. They might have gone to a town called "Severus" and she'd written this on the photo. If they'd gone to Monaco, it might have said, *Monaco, 1977*. But as she stared at those dark, fathomless eyes, she couldn't help think that the name Severus had more to do with *him* than wherever he'd been in 1977.

Then the man in the photograph turned his black eyes directly at her and one corner of his mouth turned up slightly. Maggie gasped and dropped it, backing away. She clutched the paisley shawl to her, wondering whether she was just still reeling from losing Valerie. After a minute, she walked back to the photograph and stooped to pick it up; surely she had just imagined that the man in the photo had moved. But the photograph was no longer of a young man with long, lank dark hair, a beaky nose and dark brooding eyes. It was instead a photograph of a bookshop. The young man was nowhere to be seen.

She shook her head, wondering what had happened. Had thinking about the man in her dream made her imagine that he was in the photo? Had she fallen asleep? She tried to see him in the picture, and realized that the background *had* been the bookshop. Now the shop appeared to be the subject of the photo. Shuddering, she dropped it back into the trunk. She closed the trunk but couldn't lock it again, unfortunately. She pushed the broken padlock under a low dresser, so it wouldn't be seen.

Hurrying down the stairs to her bedroom again, she felt like her heart would burst out of her chest. *He was in the photo, he was*, she thought. *And then he wasn't. But first, he moved.* It was insane. She was daft, barmy. She was going mad....

"Maggie! I told you to get down here!" her mother's voice came up the stairs.

"Coming, Mum!"

Maggie was not sorry to be getting out of the house for the day. She was starting to wonder whether she really wanted to know the secret behind the strange photograph of the dark-haired man. She ate her breakfast and sat silently in the car while her mother drove to the fete. She smiled and nodded at people all day and received a number of visitors to her Gypsy fortune-telling booth. Once, when she had a very strong feeling that Mrs. Slocum's husband was going to leave her for another woman, she refrained from mentioning it. Another time, she did not tell Mr. Eggles that he had a white aura; how do you tell someone they may die in a matter of hours? She had pulled her hand away at first, then forced herself to grasp it tightly again, to look up into his old, lined brown eyes. "Is there anything you feel you've forgotten to do?" she'd asked him cautiously.

"Oh, no. Everything is quite in order," he'd said, smiling. She'd nodded at him.

"Good, that's good, because soon-soon you'll be busy. Too busy for—a lot of things...."

She'd barely been able to get the words out; she exclaimed over his long life-line and correctly told him that he'd been married twice but the one time he'd *almost* married someone, that was the one he really regretted. He'd been very impressed, but suddenly, the responsibility of what she was doing seemed overwhelming.

She didn't want to know more about the people in her community. She managed to get through the rest of the day, somehow, but it was starting to make her ill, staring at palm after palm, the sometimes-horrid fates of her neighbors laid out before her. It had never bothered her before, seeing people's auras, and they thought it was just a game she was playing. It was cheering to see the pretty bright blue auras of the children dancing around the Maypole, but now she was finding it difficult not to pass judgment on someone with an orange aura, wondering whether he'd walked all over a co-worker to get a promotion. She wondered whether a woman with a deep black aura was ever going to unburden herself and tell someone her deep, dark secret....It was too much for a nine-year-old girl.

At length, her mother noticed that she was pale and trembling while she was looking at Mrs. Lowgrin's hand. Except that she wasn't looking; she could bear it no longer. She squeezed her eyes shut and whimpered, "*No more, no more, it's all too terrible...*"

And her mother had hushed her and packed her off in the car, tucking her into bed at home with a hot water bottle and a mug of hot chocolate, then reading to her. Maggie looked at her mother; her aura was a turquoise glow again, suffusing everything her mother touched. She missed Valerie, but she knew that the ghostly girl was right; the Doughertys had finally managed to get over their daughter's death. They had someone new to care for. And in turn, by letting them, Maggie was taking care of them.

"Thank you for bringing me home, Mum," she whispered when her mother tucked her into bed. But she didn't just mean that she was grateful for returning from the fete.

"You looked like you needed to come home," her mother answered gently.

Yes, I did, Maggie thought. I needed to come home here to be with you very much. And you needed for me to do it, too.

"Good night, Mum," she whispered, closing her eyes in contentment. She knew that she wouldn't always be able to hide from her abilities, but for now she was content to let them lie dormant. Valerie had said she was special, and would go to a special school one day. One day was fine with her, as long as it wasn't this day. She was content to wait.

* * * * *

Friday, 14 May, 1982

Juliet Hathaway packed her potions supplies, watching Bill Weasley as she did so. He was on the other side of the room with his potions partner, Roxanne Maine-Thorpe, laughing at something Roxanne had said. Next to her, Alex Wood jostled Juliet's arm; she nearly spilled a highly-corrosive acid onto her bag, catching the heavy vial just in time.

"Oh, bloody hell. I'm sorry," Alex said earnestly. "I'm so clumsy."

Juliet smiled at him. "It's all right. My fault. I wasn't paying attention." She finished packing up and looked closely at Alex, who was dawdling, eyeing the apprentice Potions teacher suspiciously, as though he wanted to hex him. Juliet shook her head. "I don't know why Professor Dumbledore hired him, either. He makes me so *nervous!*" she whispered. "Always pulling faces every time I measure anything, or add something to the cauldron. He's got me second-guessing myself every time. Twice I almost reached my hand into the potion to try to snatch something back."

Alex didn't take his eyes from Severus Snape. "Good thing you didn't, or you might not *have* a hand now. He's a bloody Death Eater," he said quietly, barely moving his lips. "That's what I don't get." As they left the Potions dungeon, he continued, "He should be in Azkaban, not here at Hogwarts trying to ruin people's lives. If he's supervising my N.E.W.T.s, I definitely won't get Potions, that's all I can say."

Juliet stopped just outside the door, noticing out of the corner of her eye that Bill was waiting at the end of the corridor while talking to Roxanne. "What makes you say that he's a Death Eater?" she hissed anxiously. Over Alex's shoulder, she saw that Snape was striding through the classroom, making notes on a piece of parchment, presumably concerning which students didn't do an adequate job of cleaning. Snape always seemed to be intent on taking house points, especially from non-Slytherins.

"You don't know? He was very, *very* good friends with Barty Crouch's son. When Lowell and I were together—" He choked on these words, the lump in his throat almost preventing him from continuing. He pulled her down the corridor, away from the door. "We saw them together *a lot*," he whispered, looking back at the doorway in case Snape should come through it. It was so *obvious* that they—well, that they were like *us*. I know he was Lily Evans' boyfriend, but *she* was killed by You-Know-Who. Coincidence? Not bloody likely. Who do you think probably led him to her and James? I bet Snape was told when he was still in school that his job was to deliver her to be killed. Why would she be with *him*, anyway? Remember that whole disaster when he broke up with her? Did you really believe that? He probably put her under Imperius and then ended it when he was told. I mean—can you imagine Evans being with him of her own free will? I don't fancy girls, but even I could see that she was too pretty for him."

Juliet shook her head as they walked slowly toward Bill. "I still can't believe Crouch went to Azkaban. I mean, I never liked him when he was in school, always giving detention to anyone he didn't like, but to *torture* someone into insanity...."

Alex snorted. "I'm not surprised. When I used to go to the Ravenclaw common room he was a complete prat. Worse than prat, actually. He looked at the pair of us like he knew just what we were up to. I was always waiting for him to 'slip' and expose us to the entire school. Still not sure why he didn't, actually. It was the sort of thing he *would* do."

"But you said he and Snape were together," she said, looking nervously over her shoulder.

Alex shrugged. "That wouldn't have stopped him. You can be a bastard and fancy girls or boys. Doesn't matter who he sleeps with. One of the only bits of news I've had in the last year that made any *sense* was finding out that that son of a bitch was a Death Eater. I just wish Lowell and I had said something when we first found him hanging about with that filthy Slytherin. Much as I hate Snape, though, it's probably a draw whether he corrupted Crouch or Crouch corrupted him. Could have gone either way."

Juliet swallowed. "Corrupted? You mean—"

Alex made a face. "No! I meant which one got the other into the Death Eaters. Get your mind out of the gutter, Miss Hathaway," he added, grinning.

Juliet flushed deep red. "Sorry. I get it now." She looked up at Alex. "I'm sorry about Lowell, too," she said softly. "Has he shown any improvement at all?"

Alex sighed, remembering his last trip to St. Mungo's. "Not really. All he knows is that he couldn't *possibly* have been my boyfriend because he *doesn't fancy boys*, as he keeps saying." He frowned deeply. "Of course, he doesn't even remember any of his magical training, so I reckon mentally he's about ten years old or younger. Still—"

She nodded. "That doesn't make it any easier, I'm sure."

"No," he said firmly. "It doesn't. I reckon that little kid is lucky he didn't get the full force of Lockhart's memory charm. Of course, he's not so lucky to have his parents in St. Mungo's even worse off than Lowell. But at least he still has a chance at a normal life."

Juliet knew that his opinion was that Lowell didn't have this same chance, and she put her hand on his arm sympathetically. Just when they'd all thought that life was going to be better, that You-Know-Who was gone, the Longbottoms had been attacked. And then there were the other trials, Death Eaters coming out of the woodwork, some of them even working at the Ministry (although no one believed that Ludo Bagman was doing anything but showing poor judgment, and he'd got off). The trials were still going on, and the claims of being under Imperius. It seemed that it would never end.

They had reached Bill. He turned away from Roxanne; she gave Juliet an appraising look and a smirk before turning, leaving without a word to her or Alex. Bill grinned at Juliet and put his arm around her shoulders. "How'd you do, Jules? Didn't let old Snape get to you, did you?" he said cheerfully as they climbed the stairs to the entrance hall.

"Only a little," she said quietly, not looking at him.

The more strained their relationship became, the more Bill tried to hide his unease under a forced joviality; everyone seemed to be aware of this but Bill himself. He and Juliet went through the motions of being a happy couple. They entered the Great Hall together now for lunch, choosing adjacent seats at the Gryffindor table. Alex sat to the left of Bill and started talking about Quidditch. Juliet assumed that he wanted to go back to his usual not-thinking about Lowell Faulkner. After arriving with some other fifth years, Charlie sat next to Juliet, giving her a shy grin, which she returned. She knew that Charlie still had a bit of a crush on her, and she didn't mind, really. When she was feeling uneasy about her relationship with Bill, it actually gave her a nice warm feeling to know that Charlie cared, though she didn't feel the same way about him. He was very sweet, she thought; talking to him usually made her feel much better if she was down. She didn't burden Alex with her problems, knowing that he had plenty of his own, and Mary Ann and Jack were usually off on their own. Jack had proposed to Mary Ann during the Easter holiday.

Juliet looked at her plate; somehow, she didn't remember piling it so high with food. She felt ravenous, but suddenly, the sight of it was making her stomach churn within her. She put her hand to her mouth, bolting from the Great Hall, making it as far as half-way up the marble stairs before it happened. Afterward, she looked down in horror; the sick was all over the marble and had splattered her shoes and the hem of her robes. She held onto the banister, taking great gulps of air, trying to get her bearings, her head spinning. Just as she thought her legs would collapse from under her, she felt herself being supported and embraced. She looked up into Bill's face, gazing down at her with love and concern. She realized vaguely that there had been three sets of footsteps following her; Alex and Charlie were standing on the steps as well. Alex cleaned up her sick with a wave of his wand.

"Are you all right?" Bill demanded. Juliet nodded.

"I just-must have caught something. I tried to get to the hospital wing before this happened. I'm sure she'll have me right as rain in no time," she said brightly, hoping Bill would go. *I can't tell him*, she thought. *I can't tell him how stupid I am.*

"I'm taking you to the hospital wing," he said. He scooped her up in his arms and walked up the stairs, followed closely by Alex and Charlie, who opened the infirmary door when they reached it. Juliet put her arms around Bill's neck when he picked her up, burying her head on his chest so he couldn't see her face, which was red with shame.

Madam Pomfrey nodded when Bill placed Juliet on a bed, then pulled the curtain around it and shoed them away. The three boys left the infirmary, to Juliet's enormous relief.

"What happened, dear?" Madam Pomfrey asked her, all business.

Juliet bit her lip. "I was sick on the stairs," she said truthfully.

The matron nodded. "Ate your lunch too quickly, I reckon?"

Juliet shook her head. "I didn't eat anything at all." And then, she finally did it; she said the reason why she was sick.

Madam Pomfrey eyebrows flew so high they nearly disappeared into her hair. "I see," was all she said, her lips pursed. This happened rarely, but at least the girl was near the end of her seventh year. *I remember giving her the potion*, she thought.

Juliet didn't want to talk very much about it with Madam Pomfrey, though. "There's no reason why I can't finish the term. It's almost June, after all. I'll be fine," she said firmly.

Madam Pomfrey nodded. "I've got just the thing for you-perk you right up, and it's very safe. But it wouldn't hurt for you to stay here for the rest of the day. It *is* Friday."

"All right," she agreed. "I only have History of Magic, and then nothing."

"Well, there you go. You'd only be napping at your desk in Binns' class anyway," Madam Pomfrey said, wondering whether one of the boys who had come into the infirmary with her was to blame. "You might as well do that here, in a nice bed."

Juliet sank back against the pillows gratefully. "Thank you."

After Madam Pomfrey had gone to her office, Juliet was vaguely aware of the infirmary door opening and closing. A hand separated the curtains around her bed and she looked up in surprise.

It was Charlie. "What are you doing here? Shouldn't you be in a lesson?" she asked him.

Charlie sat on the edge of the bed, reddening. "I wanted to be certain you were okay."

Juliet examined his face, wondering whether she should tell him. She so *longed* to tell someone. Madam Pomfrey knew, but then, she knew everyone's secrets. That hardly counted. She couldn't really *talk* to her about it.

"I'm all right," whispered, feeling very tired, "but thank you for checking on me." She put her hand over his. *Bill didn't come to check on me*, she thought.

"No, you're not okay," Charlie said softly. "Not really. What's going on, Juliet?" he said urgently, his dark eyes large and worried. "Something's wrong, I can tell."

She clamped her mouth shut, swallowing. "You have to promise that you won't tell *anyone*," she finally said. Charlie clasped her hand with his strong, calloused fingers.

"I promise," he said hoarsely.

"Most of all, you can't tell Bill. That's my job. Eventually. *You* are not to."

Charlie's eyes opened wide. "Oh my god! You're going to have a baby!"

"Sssshh!" Juliet said quickly. "Do you want the whole school to hear?"

Charlie looked torn. He gripped her hand. "Sorry. I just-when?" he sputtered, at a loss.

"Middle of December."

"Back then?" he said, shocked. "But-but you don't-"

"No," she scowled. "I'm only about two months. The baby's going to be *born* in the middle of December."

"Oh," he said, feeling stupid. *Of course she's not more than six months pregnant!* Her belly was still flat as a board. He realized that he'd been looking at her body and averted his eyes, trying not to think of *how* she'd conceived.

"What-what happened? Weren't you and Bill-"

"Taking precautions. Yes, for a bit. We were so on-again, off-again, that when we got back together last November, I forgot that I was overdue for more potion. It lapsed when Bill and I weren't together. Then we were just lucky for months, so I still didn't remember. Then-well, in March, our luck ran out-"

Charlie nodded, trying not to think of Bill touching her. "So why haven't you told him?"

She sighed and stared at the curtain around the bed. "Two reasons. First, I'm not terrifically anxious to tell him how absolutely stupid I've been. He thought I was keeping track of this, and I completely forgot. At least-at least I *think* I did."

Charlie frowned. "I thought you said-I thought you knew for sure."

"Yes, I'm definitely going to be a mummy in about seven months. I mean-I *think* that not taking the potion was forgetting, and not something else."

He looked even more confused now. "What else could it have been?"

She removed her hand from his, looking guilty. "Well, I've been thinking about it and wondering whether I had a subconscious desire for this to happen. To keep Bill here."

Charlie wasn't certain he understood. "He would stay, if you told him."

"Yes, he would," she said gloomily. "Out of obligation. But not to be with me. I don't *want* to go to bloody Egypt and he knows it, but he's so excited about the Gringotts job, he doesn't care. I-I don't want to give him a better excuse. At least-I think so-"

"So, you think you might have done this on purpose, to get him to stay, but you're not sure that you did? I still don't understand," Charlie said quietly, his head swimming. She took his hand again and smiled at him.

"Neither do I. But that's why you can't tell him, Charlie. Bill knows how I feel about his going off to Egypt. If he decides to stay, I'll tell him. If he doesn't-"

"What will you do? Will your mum and dad turn you out?" he asked, worried.

She shook her head. "I doubt it. But I may leave Britain. I'm not sure I want to go through this here if I'm not with Bill. I have an uncle in British Columbia, near a dragon reservation. I've asked him whether I might come to live with him. He knows I'm a witch, but not about the reservation. I could apply for a job on the reservation, pushing papers. Anything that doesn't actually involve working with dragons," she laughed.

"I wouldn't mind working with dragons," Charlie said eagerly.

"I know you wouldn't." She smiled tenderly at him. "Maybe you could come to visit me, if your parents aren't too worried about you traveling on your own."

"Maybe," he said, his voice catching in his throat. "That would be nice."

"Yes," she agreed sleepily, still holding his hand as her eyes closed. "Would be nice..."

He stayed by her side after she was sleeping peacefully, still holding her hand, and trying not to be too stupidly optimistic about the last thing she'd said before falling asleep.

* * * * *

When Juliet opened her eyes, the infirmary was dark. Madam Pomfrey evidently hadn't checked on her, for Charlie was still by her side, fast asleep. He sat in his chair, his head on the edge of the mattress, still holding her hand. She gently withdrew her hand and brushed the hair from his brow,

looking at his peaceful face. He appeared to be very young when he was in repose like this, with his snub nose and freckles, his messy orange hair the texture of straw. He hadn't started shaving, like Bill, and she knew this was a sore point with him. He was making a valiant effort to grow facial hair, but the soft down on his upper lip was a very pale blond, virtually invisible, and the hairs on his chin and along his jaw were just as fair. He wasn't as tall as Bill, and two more years to catch up probably wouldn't make any difference. Unlike Bill, however, he had developed broad, strong shoulders and thick sinewy arms from hours of Quidditch practice. She didn't know how many times she'd seen him hanging straight-armed from his broom, then swinging himself back up onto it without any apparent effort.

Why couldn't she have fallen for the other brother? she thought. Charlie was sweet and uncomplicated. His life was Quidditch and magical creatures, having a full stomach and working himself to exhaustion before dropping into bed. She knew that he also blamed himself for his sisters going missing, like Bill, but unlike Bill, he hadn't torn himself apart over it. He hadn't alienated everyone he knew afterward. He'd gone on with his life.

It failed to register on her when Charlie opened his eyes; she was still stroking his hair absent-mindedly. When he sat up, she was surprised, and pulled her hand away abruptly.

"Don't," he whispered, reaching for her hand again. "It's nice."

But Juliet kept her hand pressed against her stomach, not giving in. She didn't want to be unfair to Charlie. "Walk with me back to the common room?" she said softly.

He helped her to stand and they walked out of the infirmary, hand in hand. She felt very tired as she climbed the many stairs, and finally she had to rest in the Charms corridor. She and Bill had sometimes come here to be together, in the Charms classroom. His talent with Charms made it one of his favorite places, and he conjured up beautiful accommodations, while also assuring that no one would be able to get into the room while they were using it. (He also guaranteed that they wouldn't even want to; one of his cleverer spells was similar to a Muggle-repelling charm; anyone who thought they had wanted to enter went off thinking they had a number of other things to do instead.)

"Can we just go in here, to rest a moment?" she asked Charlie, pointing at the classroom. However, just as they were about to enter, Juliet froze, hearing a familiar voice.

"I *told* you, Roxanne, Juliet and I are together again....Stop that! Stop—" A moan met their ears, then the sound of furniture moving; it seemed that someone had been pushed against a desk, making it scrape the floor. "I said *stop!*" the voice repeated.

"Are you sure? You were starting to sound like you liked that. I remember everything that you like," a seductive voice purred, followed by the sound of fabric rustling.

"Put that back on! Now! I don't want to hex you, but I will if I have to!"

"Ooh, what kind of hex?" the woman's voice wanted to know. "I know some really good ones....some very *interesting* ones...."

Juliet couldn't stand it any longer; she pushed the door open and beheld a nearly-topless Roxanne Maine-Thorpe (she still wore her bra) sliding her arms around Bill's neck. Bill's eyes widened in horror as he saw Juliet enter with Charlie, and he thrust Roxanne away from him. Charlie felt it would be a strain to close his mouth, which was open in shock.

"Bill!" he said, disgusted. "Are you mad? A Slytherin? You've got Juliet, and she's—"

"*Charlie!*" Juliet said sharply, turning to face him with blazing eyes.

He clamped his mouth shut before he could say any more, not trusting himself. *You don't bloody well deserve to know what's going on, brother of mine*, he thought. He didn't hate his brother, precisely, but he never knew that he could feel such a strong dislike for him as at this moment. "A *Slytherin?*" he repeated, as that was safe.

Juliet glared at the other girl. Roxanne didn't bother to put her blouse on. "Could you please leave? I don't think he wants to shag you now, and we need to talk," she snapped.

"We weren't doing anything! We haven't, since you and I got back together!" Bill said hurriedly. "I never cheated on you," he added, sweat flying from his brow.

Juliet put her hands on her hips. "No, but after we broke up I *waited* for you to decide to come to me again. You could have at any time! I didn't pressure you. Instead you were with *her*, is that it?" Roxanne was smiling sunnily at this; Bill sheepishly nodded. Juliet rolled her eyes and snapped at Roxanne, "Would you just sod off, you stupid *tart!*"

Roxanne picked up her blouse from a nearby desk and put her arms in the sleeves, buttoning it slowly. "I wouldn't want to be indecent. Might get a detention from the Head Boy," she said suggestively, giving Bill a very clear look before swaggering away.

Juliet sat, feeling tired. She felt tired all of the time, due to the baby. Bill stood before her

awkwardly, unable to meet her eyes. "You know, if you really want to be with her, it's very simple," Juliet said in a quiet, even voice. "I've asked you before not to go to Egypt. If you stay here or come to Canada with me, we can still be together. If you insist on Egypt—well, you have the freedom to do what you like with little Miss Slytherin, as we won't be together." She tried to focus on Bill's Head Boy badge and will herself not cry.

"Canada!" Bill said. "Why Canada?"

"I have an uncle there. If you don't want to marry right away, I understand. That far from my mum and dad—and yours—it wouldn't matter. Uncle Emory doesn't care about that sort of thing; he's been living with a married woman for twenty years. Her husband wouldn't give her a divorce. The thing is—if we stayed here, we'd probably have to get married. Our parents would probably insist on it." She saw Charlie nod vehemently.

"Married! Who said anything about getting married?" He looked panicked. "And if we're going to live together without being married, why *not* Egypt?"

Juliet pursed her lips. "I don't want to live in Egypt. I want to be near *someone* in my family when—" She swallowed and looked at Charlie, who raised his eyebrows. She sighed and bowed her head. Yes, he would do as she wished if he knew. But that wasn't how she wanted it to be. He'd resent her for years afterward, feeling that she'd trapped him. She looked up at his face. "I love you, Bill. Do you love me enough to do this?"

Bill ran his hands through his hair, making it stand on end. "Of course I love you, but if *you* loved *me*, couldn't you stand to come to Egypt? What's this about needing to be near family? And do we have to do this in front of my little brother?" Charlie bristled.

Juliet felt as though her heart had stopped. "Does that mean that you've made up your mind? You're going to Egypt?" *It had to be a dream, a nightmare....*

Bill swallowed. "I've already accepted a position. I leave on the first of July. I signed a five-year contract. *Why* can't you just—"

"I hope you and Roxanne will be happy together," she said stiffly, standing with difficulty. Charlie sprang to help her, glaring at his brother. She leaned heavily on his arm.

Bill stood in shock, unable to process what had happened. "Why are you doing this?"

Juliet turned at the door. "When did you sign the contract?" she asked softly.

"Last month," he mumbled, looking at his feet.

Juliet stared. "You only told me a week ago that you'd got the offer." Her words echoed in the large empty classroom. Bill didn't answer or meet her eyes. She turned and leaned on Charlie's arm again, not saying another word. Bill was also silent.

They didn't hear Bill's footsteps behind them, but reached the corridor outside the Gryffindor common room without running into anyone else. Juliet opened her mouth to give the password, but found that she couldn't; instead, her voice cracked and a helpless sob escaped her. She threw her arms around Charlie, crying into his shirt. He pulled her to him uncertainly, his chest hitching. His robe was open and she was warm against him, her tears wetting his clothes. He could only make out a few words through her sobs.

"I can't believe this is happening—I love him so much, Charlie—"

He patted her back and the top of her head, feeling her trembling in his very bones. "I know," he whispered to her, not knowing what else to say. *"I know."*

* * * * *

Tuesday, 31 August, 1982

Nils Anderssen watched his wife and the girl who was now his daughter while they ate their breakfasts. The summer sunlight shining in the breakfast room windows glinted off the two golden heads as they chatted happily and drank their tea. The girl's hair was the product of a potion, and she'd agreed to it with no argument, as they both had blond hair; she'd said that the old nun who ran the orphanage used to have gold hair.

He could see already how fond his wife was of her. It was going to be a wrench to send her child off to school the next day. She'd been with them for less than a week, and already Nils couldn't remember what the house had been like without her running from room to room, exploring, her voice chattering non-stop with questions and comments.

Unfortunately, school couldn't be put off. His wife would have had the girl wait for at least a month or two if it could be managed, but she needed to make up for lost time. They could visit the school as frequently as they liked, the headmaster had said, even take her home for weekends. It meant more traveling, but he felt that it was a good idea for them to see her more often than just the holidays, as they'd just become her parents.

Luckily, the Swedish Ministry of Magic did not have the same laws about underage magic that the British Ministry did. Immediately after bringing her 'home,' he'd taken her to buy her first wand in Stockholm, and she'd been practicing spells almost constantly ever since. Although shockingly ignorant of some things, he'd also found her to be quite prodigious in other ways, and was starting to think that it wasn't a ludicrous idea for her to enter Durmstrang as a second year, considering her innate talent. She'd had a good grounding in Latin and Herbology, as well as magical history. She'd been living with Muggles, so she might have done well in Muggle Studies, but Durmstrang did not teach this.

Perhaps, he thought, the headmaster could arrange for extra tuition for her in the areas in which she was lacking, until she caught up. From what he'd seen, it shouldn't take long for her to surpass the rest of the second years. He could do it on the weekends himself, if it came to that. He'd seen that she was a fast learner. The idea appealed to him; it was very satisfying to them both when she'd mastered something new. He was rather enjoying the unfamiliar paternal pride that swelled his breast when he watched her glowing face, showing off to her mother something that he had taught her. She was a remarkable girl.

Not surprising, given her parentage, he thought. She was pure-blood, after all, even if her family left something to be desired. Not for the first time, he thought about life's unfairness. That a Muggle-loving family like the *Weasleys* should have children so effortlessly was galling when he and his wife couldn't do it at all, and *Muggles* were to blame. He hadn't known from the start that she was a Weasley; that had taken detective work. And once he'd found out, then there was the lengthy decision-making process....

It hadn't been lengthy for his wife. She didn't care about her parentage. He'd had his doubts. There were many things to consider. He'd worked at gathering information unobtrusively. At a small wizarding pub in Yorkshire, he'd tried to feel out the barman.

"Did they ever work out what happened to that girl who disappeared? I forget when it was now," he'd started off, hoping that his vagueness would be rewarded by greater accuracy in the response. But the barman evidently never heard any conversation that wasn't about the Quidditch League or people paying him for drinks—or he just wasn't in the habit of paying attention to conversations about other topics. He'd squinted at Nils.

"Eh?"

Nils had shaken his head, not really having expected to find the information he sought so quickly and easily. He was on his sixth pub, in a small village in Suffolk, when he finally received a response to his question. It wasn't exactly an answer, but in its way, it was more informative. He'd evidently been asking the wrong question.

"A girl?" the garrulous old barmaid had said while wiping what seemed to be a perpetually cloudy glass. "Just one? There was that case a few years ago, of course, down near Exeter. Two girls, sisters. Just disappeared into thin air..." She shook her head. "Was there another one then? That's awful..."

Nils had swallowed, trying to hide his excitement. *Exeter*. It *had* to be the same incident. So, their prospective daughter had had a sister who'd disappeared with her. He'd pushed his glass carelessly toward the barmaid, asking for another pint.

"Do you remember the family name? I seem to have forgotten it," he said as he counted out Sickles after silver Sickles, aware of her small, greedy eyes upon his busy fingers.

"*Weasley*."

He'd wracked his brain, trying to remember where he'd heard that name. Why was it so familiar? He didn't think it was because he'd heard about the girls; he'd been in Sweden. No, there was some connection to his sister, he felt sure....but what could it be?

"Right," he'd said to the barmaid. "Weasley. Father's—what is he again?"

"With the Ministry. Went on a lot of raids. He's been responsible for putting more than one Death Eater into Azkaban, let me tell you." She leaned forward and whispered to him, "Some say that's why his poor girls disappeared. A message to *him*, y'see?"

Nils nodded, swallowing his beer. It didn't fit. At least one of the girls was alive. Nils thought about his brother-in-law, Lucius, who bragged quite freely—in private—about being a Death Eater, part of the Dark Lord's inner circle. It seemed to Nils that it was out-of-character for a Death Eater to kidnap two girls and send them to live in a Muggle orphanage if the father was as annoying as this Weasley. He knew that the usual way was for bodies to be found afterward, the Dark Mark hovering over the house.

He wanted to ask his brother-in-law about it, but didn't dare. Lucius' position was rather precarious in the months after Nils and his wife first met the girl in Exeter. After the Dark Lord had fallen, Lucius had had a lot of questions to answer at the Ministry. He'd claimed that he was

under Imperius, although Nils knew that quite a lot of gold had changed hands in order for this to be written into the official record. Those who were on the receiving end of the gold had no real interest in Lucius Malfoy's guilt or innocence; it only mattered that he could pay for silence, and pay handsomely. The problem was with those who hadn't been paid; one had to make sure all mouths stayed sealed. Sometimes permanently.

Nils brought it up very casually, when they were visiting during the Christmas holiday. "By the way, Lucius, I heard the name Weasley in a pub the other day, and couldn't remember why it seemed so familiar. There was something about it—"

Lucius dropped the large carving knife just as he was about to slice the joint for their dinner. He glared at Nils, then at Narcissa. "Did you put him up to this?" he demanded of his wife. Her hand fluttered to her throat.

"N—no, Lucius, of course not. Why would—"

"Why *would* you try to get your brother to upset me by mentioning the name of my father's murderer?" he growled, resuming the carving; the joint was in danger of looking like it had been clawed apart by badgers, he was hacking at it so angrily now.

"Sorry, old boy," Nils had interjected quickly, before blame could be attached to his sister. "How stupid of me. That is obviously *why* it seemed familiar....How very stupid...."

"Yes," Lucius agreed, throwing the meat onto a serving plate. "How very, very stupid," he spat, glaring at his brother-in-law. Later, in Lucius' study, Nils broached the topic in a different manner. He considered Lucius Malfoy very carefully, wondering whether he *might* in fact have a soft spot for two little girls who hadn't exactly chosen their father.

"Did it ever cross your mind to get revenge on Weasley?" he'd asked casually, over cognac. His wife and sister were up in the nursery with Draco and his nurse, Nanny Bella, a sour-looking old witch. Nils wouldn't have let her near a child of his, but apparently, the most important thing to Lucius was that she'd been in Slytherin and didn't believe in mollicoddling. Lucius stood at the mantle and laughed, swirling the amber liquid in his snifter. After dinner he was expansive and no longer showed signs of erupting.

"Of course it did, of course. And in a way—well, I didn't do it myself, but—"

Nils sat up anxiously, then thought better of it and slouched comfortably against the back of the leather armchair, before Lucius could turn and see how eager he'd been. "But what? You put a hangnail hex on him?" Nils had said with a forced disdain.

Lucius' pale eyes glowed with an eerie light. "No. There was this prophecy, you see, about the fall of the Dark Lord. According to another Death Eater who'd had a conversation with a Centaur, one of the people in the prophecy was a daughter of Weasley's. Didn't matter which one. So I recommended to the Dark Lord that Weasley's daughters be—disposed of. I never did work out how he did it so cleanly....there wasn't a single trace of them, and all owl post came back as well. He either killed them or spirited them away to another planet, but killing is easier. Weasley knew how *I'd* felt then!" he declared, his eyes wild, while Nils struggled to maintain his facial expression.

That was all he needed to know. He'd gone to the offices of the *Daily Prophet* after the New Year, looking for old editions that had come out during the investigation of the girls' disappearance. He'd finally found what he was looking for, an *Evening Prophet* from April of 1979 with photographs of the girls and a detailed description: *Annabel Weasley, called Annie. Born the first of September, nineteen-seventy. Four feet three inches tall, weighing about four stone, blue eyes, bright orange hair*

....

He had stared and stared at the photograph. *It was her.* The girl at the orphanage. He tried to work out *why* she was living there, but didn't want to risk returning to the orphanage to find out. On the day she had saved their dog, he, his wife and the dog had escaped quickly by using the *Tempus Fugit* spell, as they couldn't Apparate with the dog. He didn't like using this spell, but his wife was more cavalier about these things than he was. However, while they were using this spell, it had occurred to him to take a mirror from his wife's pocket and draw the memory of the incident from the nun's brain, so that she would not remember any of it. He'd kept the memory preserved in the mirror, just in case he should ever need to restore it, but if he returned to the orphanage and eventually did return that memory to the nun, it would seem odd to her to have two memories of meeting him for the *first* time.

He hadn't learnt how to use such Dark Magic at Hogwarts, but his wife had taught him a thing or two since they'd been married, as she'd had a thorough grounding in the Dark Arts at Durmstrang. He knew that the British Ministry wouldn't look well on using *Tempus Fugit* at all, let alone near Muggles, and that to assault a person's brain and withdraw memories against their will, especially from a Muggle, was worthy of a prison sentence (but not a life term). He might have been able to get away with merely memory-charming her, with the excuse that she'd seen magic, but the problem

was, it was *the girl* who had done the magic, when she'd healed the dog. Which would only draw attention to her. Somehow, even before he knew that her life had been in danger, he didn't want the Ministry to notice her. She was *their* secret, a witch living among Muggles. A possible daughter for them. And while it occurred to him, very briefly, to use the spell to just take her, he didn't want her to suffer from its effects, as he and his wife would. He also didn't think there was any point to taking her by force; she should *want* to come with them.

He eventually used a charm to alter his features to visit with the nun. He specifically asked whether there were two red-haired sisters, as his wife was interested, he said. She said no, only one. There had never been another one? he had persisted. She allowed that, yes, two had come in at once, but they weren't sisters and one had been quickly adopted.

He thought about this interview for months, finally coming to the conclusion that whoever had taken the girls had not been able to bear the thought of killing them. *Lucius wouldn't have hesitated*, he knew. But then, the Death Eater who did the kidnapping probably hadn't had his father killed by this Weasley. He'd looked into the background of the Weasleys over the following months, trying to learn everything he could. Finally, he was satisfied that if he and his wife adopted the girl, they could teach her to be a true Anderssen. All indicators pointed to the girl having been memory-charmed so that she couldn't remember her early family life. Knowledge that she had acquired in school remained intact, but the rest just seemed to be gone from her mind.

They'd made contact with her again, at school. Nils did not want to tell her that she was a Weasley, as he was afraid that she would want to return to her family (and her life might be at risk again if she did that). She'd been called to the headmistress' office because, she was told, a couple who were considering giving her a scholarship to St. Martin's Academy were there. They had heard that Anna Burroughs was an excellent student and wanted to meet her before deciding. When she was left alone in the headmistress' office with them, she stared, dumbfounded. "But-but you're the people with the dog!" she said immediately, when the headmistress had gone.

Nils looked at his wife; she was smiling. "Yes!" she said, coming forward to take the girl's hands. "And you-well, brace yourself. What we have to tell you may be a bit of a shock. You see-you are a witch, and I'm one also. My husband is a wizard. Do you understand what all of that means?" The girl hesitated for a moment, then shook her head. "It means that you can do magic! Isn't that wonderful?" She beamed at her.

"Who-who *are* you?" the girl asked cautiously. Nils thought it interesting that she didn't question being a witch, nor their being a witch and wizard.

"We're here to take you away to live like a proper witch, with a proper magical education," his wife had told her. "The idea of living like this, with *Muggles*-!"

"You-you're what?" The girl had frowned. Nils had stepped forward.

"We're adopting you. Only-only if you want to come away with us, of course. I mean, if you *want* to go on living in a Muggle orphanage--"

"It's not that I want to, so much as--" She stopped abruptly, and Nils noted that she hadn't asked the meaning of "Muggle." *How much does she remember?* he wondered.

"Who are you? Where are you from? Where do you live? Why do you want to do this?" The words spilled out in a rush. Her color had risen, and Nils wondered whether she was afraid. Perhaps she knew that she and her sister had been targeted, years ago? He and his wife explained that they lived in Sweden and couldn't have children, that when they learned that a witch was in a Muggle orphanage, they'd felt it their duty to give her a proper home and education. She nodded at their explanations.

"But do you know-do you know why I never received a Hogwarts letter last year?" she'd whispered. Nils had looked uncertainly at his wife; he hadn't thought about it. The Death Eater who kidnapped her must have owl-proofed the girl. This gibed with Lucius' saying that the owl post had come back, indicating that the girls were dead.

"What is your name again?" he asked her, genuinely wondering what she would say.

"Anna Burroughs."

He nodded. "How long have you had that name?"

"Since I came to live at the orphanage."

Tapping his fingers together thoughtfully, he said, "Well, then, no one at Hogwarts would have known to address a letter to you that way, would they?" He did not bring up the fact that she knew about Hogwarts. Some stray words, like "Muggle" and "Hogwarts" must have stayed in her mind, unaffected by the memory charm.

"I reckon," she'd said softly, biting her lip. "Would I live in Sweden if you adopted me?"

"Yes," his wife had said eagerly. "And you would go to my old school, Durmstrang. Much better than that *Hogwarts*....no *Muggle-borns* at Durmstrang, you know."

The girl shook her head. "I never heard of it. Where is it?"

"Ah, that would be telling. Don't worry, we'll take care of getting you to school. What do you think?" The girl looked up at his wife, and Nils could practically see the wheels turning in her head. "Would you—could you be our daughter and come away with us?"

"We have the same name," she said suddenly. "Anna and Anna. That would be confusing, wouldn't it?" She hadn't answered the question.

"Well, you're little Anna, so you could be Anita. Nita for short. There! That works well. Nita Anderssen. That would be your name. Do you like it?" His wife was shaking.

She bit her lip again, thinking. "It's all right," she said grudgingly. "But I don't speak anything other than English. What do they speak at Durmstrang?"

"Do I sound like I can't speak English to you? Oh, English has been the standard at Durmstrang for some time now. Everyone speaks at least one other language, of course, but they've had a British-raised headmaster for decades, and he's just hired his nephew, who went to Hogwarts with my husband's sister, to fill the open Charms position. You'll have to learn Swedish, of course, and you should probably also know German and a little Russian. But you're a bright girl. That shouldn't be a problem for you."

Nils had forgotten about Karkaroff hiring his nephew. Igor had been in the same year with his sister Narcissa, and had been arrested for Death Eater activities. He'd gone to Azkaban initially, but was released when his testimony before the Ministry netted them some more Death Eaters. Igor knew he wouldn't be safe in Britain after that, because of people like Lucius (even though he'd done everything in *his* power to avoid prison as well), so he'd fled to Belarus, to his uncle, Professor Sergei Karkaroff, headmaster of Durmstrang. Would Karkaroff recognize "Nita" as the missing Annie Weasley? he wondered. What if *Igor* was the one who had been charged with kidnapping her?

"Would we go right away?" she asked suddenly. Nils and his wife looked at each other.

"No—why?"

"It's just—if it was sudden, like, Mother Crispin would—she'd be sad. And you know that she doesn't remember you and your dog at all? She seems to think it never happened...."

Nils looked at his wife again, then the girl. "We know. I removed the memory from her mind and saved it. Not long before we come to get you, I can restore her memory, so she'll remember us when we come and say we want to adopt you. And that way you'll be able to just pack all of your things and come away with us."

"There's usually a day-visit first. If that goes well, other visits. It's not all at once."

Nils had nodded, and they'd talked for a while with "Nita," who was able to give them all of the information they needed about applying to adopt her. She didn't want to go until after her birthday, which the nun thought was in late August (Nils didn't let on that he knew the real date), as the old nun evidently had a special present for her.

Plans were made and the end of August drew nearer. Nils found that restoring to the nun the memory about the dog was easy; due to her confusion, she appeared to believe that the incident had occurred within the last week. When Nils and his wife appeared in her office to talk about adopting "Anna" she was hesitant at first, but wouldn't tell them why. Finally, they were driving away from the orphanage; the girl was waving to the old nun through the back window of the car, tears streaming down her face. They did not go to the address in Exeter that they'd given the nun, but drove directly to London. They gave "Nita" the potion to dye her hair before continuing on to France, which they reached by way of enchanted ferry. From there they took an illegal Portkey to Sweden. He didn't want their movements to be traced. As it was, they had created numerous false documents concerning "Nita's" birth and adoption.

"What are we going to do today?" Nita asked her mother, grinning. "It's my last day of freedom, after all, before starting school." She scratched Napoleon behind the ears; the dog had adored her from the start and now slept on her bed every night.

"Anything you like!" Anna Anderssen said to her daughter affectionately, making Nils smile. He'd never seen his wife so happy. It was a good thing they were going to be bringing Nita home every weekend. Their daughter laughed.

"Anything?"

His wife put her hand on the girl's, looking like she considered herself to be the happiest woman in the world. She had never thought she would be a mother, and now she was.

"Anything."

* * * * *

Friday, 31 October 1982

“Happy birthday!”

Charlie hugged Juliet, not too firmly, because of her belly, and kissed her on the cheek. She smiled at him, awkwardly holding his gift to her in one hand. “It’s really something for the baby,” he said sheepishly. She grinned and tore open the paper, then opened a small white box. Charlie wished he had a camera to capture the look on her face when she squealed and held up the tiny dragon-skin boots that were nestled in the box.

“Oh, they’re so *wee!*” she exclaimed, grinning at him now. He felt his stomach flop; he was pleased that she liked them. But he glanced at her left hand, at the wedding ring there, and knew that he had to accept this state of affairs. The flopping stomach couldn’t be helped, nor other physical manifestations of his feelings for her. But he hoped eventually he would stop feeling this way. It had been very difficult, when he’d first arrived at the reservation in British Columbia, to learn that she had been married *one week* before his arrival. That had been two months earlier, and although he liked her husband quite a lot (Brendan McDonald was one of the best handlers on the reservation), he couldn’t help the jealous resentment that welled up in him when he saw them together. He wished he *didn’t* like her husband.

She wore a delicate gold amulet hanging from a chain around her neck, and she clasped the amulet now, rubbing her fingers over the raised design thoughtfully. “What’s that?” he asked her. Somehow it had a familiar look, although he’d never seen it before.

She smiled, looking down. “Oh, that’s Brendan’s present. He says it’s supposed to be the Gryffindor lion. Doesn’t it look like the one on the keystone over the hearth in the common room? He liked the idea of giving me something connected to Hogwarts, even though we weren’t there at the same time.”

Brendan McDonald was neither Canadian nor American, but British, having grown up in the Midlands. He was about twenty years older than Juliet, born the same year as Charlie’s mother. Much as he liked Brendan, Charlie still had a nagging feeling about their marriage. It just seemed wrong. Brendan had liked Juliet from the start, when she came to work in the main office at the reservation as a clerk. She had done what no one had previously managed, to organize the reservation activities. There was no longer any question about who was managing which beast at what time. All species were given precisely the right food. Days off were carefully rotated. And she had seen a gap in the workforce, a gap which she proposed could be filled with an apprentice. She’d suggested Charlie, and written to him to tell him that he had an open invitation to spend a year at the reservation, if he wanted to wait to finish his schooling.

He had, of course, taken it the wrong way that she was inviting him to British Columbia for a year. She had wanted another familiar face around besides her uncle when the baby came. She didn’t feel about Charlie the way she had once felt about Bill. The way she pretended to feel about Brendan, now.

“Charlie,” she’d said as soon as she’d greeted him in the reservation office. “I have something to tell you. Please sit down...” She’d waved him into a stiff wooden chair and carefully lowered herself into another. She was five-and-a-half months pregnant now. With Bill’s child. Charlie forced himself to look at her face when he sat.

“Yes, Juliet?”

“Well,” she’d said, nervous, her left hand spread protectively over her belly. He’d seen it, he had, and yet it hadn’t registered on him. “You see, Charlie, the thing is—I’m married.”

The ring. Now he saw it, *really* saw it. The ring. Married. *Married!*

When he didn’t say anything, she went barreling on. “I know it seems sudden, but Brendan has been a dear since I got here, and he asked me when I was feeling very vulnerable...”

Charlie stared at her. “But—but I thought—Bill—” he sputtered. “I mean—he just did it because of the baby, didn’t he? How is that different from telling Bill about the baby?”

“Because it’s not Brendan’s baby. He’s not marrying me because he thinks he has to. He wants to be with me and—well, he rather thought the baby would make it less likely I’d say no. But still—he’s marrying me because he wants to be with *me*. Brendan will be a wonderful father. This is all for the best, it really is. I hope you can be happy for us.”

Numb. He’d felt numb. She’d barely known the man—the *old* man—for two months, and she’d married him! It was utterly unreal. He had no idea what to think. He’d quickly hugged her and congratulated her. The more he had become friendly with Brendan McDonald, the more difficult it had been to resent him, too, which made Charlie feel a bit grumpy at times. He didn’t *want* to like the bloke. He didn’t want to not hate him.

Charlie looked at the gold amulet now, holding it in his hand. It felt warm to the touch, and

when Charlie grasped it, he felt a calm reassurance flood him. He closed his eyes, then opened them again. "Wow! That's some amulet. It's—"

"—magical. I know. We have no idea where it came from, though. I reckon someday I'll give it to Natalie, perhaps when she goes off to Hogwarts. Even though she'll be born here, Brendan and I both want to return to Britain when it's time for her to go to school."

"Natalie?"

She smiled. "The midwife in Vancouver says it's a girl, and that's the name we've chosen. Do you like it? It means 'Christmas,' but she'll probably be born a couple of weeks before that. Anyway, I think it sounds nice. *Natalie McDonald.*"

Charlie gasped. "You mean—"

Juliet sighed. "Charlie—how on earth can I give her the Weasley name? Brendan will be her father in every way that counts, once she's born. And you'll still be her uncle."

"But I can't tell Bill."

She drew her lips into a line. "Please don't. If anyone tells him, I think it should be me."

Charlie nodded, holding out his hand to her, trying not to hate the way everything had turned out. Juliet seemed perfectly happy; why couldn't he be satisfied? *Because you had some romantic idea that you'd come here and she'd decide she loved you after all, that's why.* The voice in his head was rather annoying, and he closed his eyes, trying to ignore it. Opening his eyes again, he looked earnestly at Juliet, taking her hand.

"I'm glad you like the boots. I want to do whatever I can to be a good uncle."

She smiled, put her hand over his and placed it on her belly, making him gasp; he could feel movement. The *reality* of the unborn child, his niece, was jolting.

"You will be a good uncle, I think, Charlie. You will be."

* * * * *

Monday, 1 December, 1982

He ladled the glutinous potion into the flat flasks and put a stopper in each. Wrinkling his nose at the stale cabbage-smelling stuff, he put one flask in each robe pocket and turned to his wife, who watched him anxiously from the doorway. She was wan and pale, as she had been since their son's trial. Wasting away month after month with grief for her boy, her beautiful boy who had screamed for mercy, who had sworn he was innocent....

His wife was where their son got his looks, except for his eyes, which were his father's. Now her once-vivid yellow hair was dulled, far more grey than yellow in it, and her eyes roamed around the room aimlessly, as though she wasn't really seeing it. He was losing more of her daily, and he dreaded the day that she was lost to him completely, the day he had to bury her in the cold ground, the day she would be but a memory....

"You're sure about this?" he asked her for the hundredth time. She nodded slowly. She'd begged, pleaded with him. She knew she was dying without her boy, and that she'd also die *there*, in that hopeless place, with no happiness left in her, nothing good. But at least she'd know she had *saved* her boy, her innocent boy. He'd be able to live, and not in a prison for a crime he did not commit. And she could die on her own terms.

He swallowed, watching his wife. *A crime he did not commit.* He didn't know *what* he believed about his son's crime. One of the boys who'd testified against him told of seeing his son torture Frank Longbottom, while the other had denied all knowledge of it. It was impossible to say what had occurred. Dumbledore hinted strongly that he knew of a young man who could testify against his son, if necessary, concerning other Death Eater activities, but the conviction had been handed down without that.

The co-defendants, all from the Lestrangle family, had not only owned up to what they'd done, they'd *bragged* about it. Mrs. Lestrangle especially. But the boy did not pledge his life-long loyalty to You-Know-Who, did not brag about what they'd done. He cried out to him imploringly, *Father! Father!* And he'd ignored his own son, he'd *had* to, even when his wife fell down in a faint because she was unable to believe that he would sentence their son to live with the dementors in Azkaban for the rest of his days.

Barty Crouch crossed the room and enfolded his wife in his arms. "It's time to go, love."

"Go? To Banff? Is it finally time?" Her face glowed with anticipation, a rare flush on her pallid cheeks.

"Yes, it's time to go to Banff," he confirmed. It was a short trip by Floo to the district office in Banff; in the past, Bartemius Crouch, Sr. would have requested and received a Portkey to make

the trip. He hadn't felt quite so much like throwing his weight around since being shifted into the Department of International Magic Cooperation, however. His assistant, Weatherby, had obligingly come with him, but it was a cut in pay and prestige for them both, and Barty was still trying to get his bearings.

When they emerged from the fire in Banff, a young man in shabby brown robes and a scrubby light-brown beard was waiting to use the fire to leave; for someone so young, Crouch found it odd that he had a lock of white hair that bobbed over his brow. The young man turned again to the District Supervisor.

"You're sure? I can't just—"

"Told you. That prisoner is not to receive visitors except of the most official sort. And you—what made you think *you* would be permitted? A filthy—"

"I know what you think of me," the young man practically growled. "I'm going."

Before the young man could throw Floo powder into the fire and depart, he heard the supervisor say, "Ready to visit your son, Mr. Crouch? Very good. Right this way...."

Barty Crouch felt the young man's eyes glaring at him resentfully as he stepped into the fire; he had rather odd eyes, with a reddish light to them. After he whirled out of sight, the district supervisor introduced Barty to the Aurors who would accompany them. Normally a dementor or two (depending upon how difficult the prisoner was) would also ride in the boat, but since they were visitors, not prisoners, that was deemed unnecessary. Normally Azkaban prisoners didn't get any visitors at all, but Barty had been afforded this privilege as a favor from the Minister of Magic himself. He knew it was their only hope.

The trip across the North Sea was chilling to the bone; dementors would have been redundant, he thought, as they moved across the water to Azkaban fortress. It rose out of the black water, a mountain of despair, the place where his wife would soon die, very likely. He glanced at her out of the corner of his eye as they approached the prison; her face glowed with hope. *Enjoy that while you can*, he thought, knowing that the dementors would remove that hope from her in short order. *At least she would know, in death, that she had freed her son from this place.*

After the boat grounded on the sandy beach in the grotto beneath the fortress, they climbed the stairs to the cells, the two Aurors going ahead. They didn't seem to relish coming here and were sweating profusely in the cold air. Barty wasn't sure he had any happiness or hope left for the dementors to feed on, which was just as well. Nonetheless, when they'd reached the top and he felt the presence of so many of the creatures around them, he felt a cold penetrate his chest, as though he'd been sliced open by an icicle.

You have been brought here before the Council of Magical Law so that we may pass judgment on you, for a crime so heinous—

Father, Father...please...

—that we have rarely heard the like of it within this court. We have heard the evidence against you....

Father, I didn't! I didn't, I swear it, Father, don't send me back to the dementors—

You are further accused of using the Cruciatus curse on Frank Longbottom's wife, when he would not give you information....I now ask the jury—

Mother! Mother, stop him, Mother, I didn't do it, it wasn't me!

I now ask the jury to raise their hands if they believe, as I do, that these crimes deserve a life sentence in Azkaban....

No! Mother, no! I didn't do it, I didn't do it, I didn't know! Don't send me there, don't let him!

Suddenly, he felt like he'd received a blast of cold water in the face. He jerked his head up; the first thing he saw was a face staring through the bars on a cell door. It was a vaguely familiar face, with dark, deep-set eyes, long black hair framing a grimy visage.

He shook himself and looked away from the prisoner; one of the Aurors was standing over him, handing him some chocolate. "Here, eat this, Mr. Crouch. We've sent them away from this corridor. They won't bother you and your wife while you're visiting with your son. We'll be here at the end of the corridor, to make sure they don't come again. We've given them the parchment explaining that it's official Ministry business. But you never know. We've brought plenty of chocolate, as a precaution."

Chocolate. He should have thought of that. He should have brought a supply of chocolate that his wife could eat. "Do you have some more?" he asked. The Auror nodded and removed a large block from his pocket. Barty Crouch nodded at him and took his wife's arm, feeling the prisoner's

eyes on him again but willing himself to ignore it. He followed the other Auror to his son's cell and waited for the door to be opened.

When he entered, his wife a heavy weight on his arm, he didn't see his son at first. Then he spotted him, curled up in a corner, shivering, looking like a pile of rags. *This is my son?* he thought, appalled. And yet—he knew that he'd done what had to be done. He couldn't have shown any preference to his son in court. There was nothing but evidence against him, the one boy's testimony, and no evidence in his favor, no one to give him an alibi, or even to give him a favorable character reference. It wasn't as though he hadn't tried; he'd gone to a number of his son's former housemates, from Ravenclaw, and all of them had said that they'd never liked him and didn't really feel like they knew him. If anyone had asked them to name former students who would be likely to turn to He Who Must Not Be Named, they wouldn't necessarily include his son's name, but if asked whether he was a Death Eater, they also wouldn't automatically say, "No, of course not!"

It proved to be rather simple to administer the Polyjuice Potion to his wife and son and to switch their clothes. After they'd each drunk a small amount of potion from the caps of the flasks, Barty redistributed the potion by filling up the flask that would be staying behind, since his son only needed enough to get to the mainland again, while his wife might need every drop she had. Each of them pulled out some of their own hairs to give to the other, to add to the potion afterward. They embraced, mother and son, and it was strange to think that the person who looked like his wife was really his son, and vice versa.

No! Mother, no! I didn't do it, I didn't do it, I didn't know! Don't send me there, don't let him!

Well, she'd done as her boy asked, hadn't she? Had there ever been a more dedicated mother? Barty looked at her, wearing their son's face; he leaned forward and kissed the pale brow bordered by yellow hair, just like his mother's. She nodded to them and went to sit in the corner again, the chocolate he'd given her hidden under the dirty robes.

When the Aurors came to let them out, they didn't bat an eye. His son, playing the role of his own mother, leaned heavily on his father's arm, just as his mother had done. Barty looked forward stoically, wishing he had some more chocolate, feeling again the eyes of the dark-haired, dark-eyed prisoner standing at his cell door. He was glad when they reached the grotto again and were on their way back to Banff. On the way, he handed a flask to his 'wife' when she started to look a little peculiar at one point, saying, "Here, dear, I think you need a drop of this." His son had taken the flask and, after surreptitiously putting one of his mother's hairs in the cap, filled it with potion and drank.

Barty Crouch didn't breathe easy again until they were back in their own home, the door securely locked. He put his son to bed in his old room and sat watch over him while he slept, blinking when the potion wore off and he saw his son before him once more. Until that moment, he wasn't quite sure he had actually done it. He helped his son escape from Azkaban. His mother's last wish. He, Bartemius Crouch, Senior, formerly considered to be the next Minister of Magic, had committed high treason, had broken wizarding law....

Well, he thought, pulling out his wand, I'm about to do it again, aren't I? He pulled out his wand just as his son was waking. Barty held the Invisibility Cloak in his other hand and the house-elf stood in the doorway, ready to do her duty; she had already received detailed instructions concerning his son's care and keeping.

In some ways, he knew, the life his son would live wasn't going to be much better than Azkaban. He would have no job, no chance to marry and have children, or even friends. His days would be circumscribed by hiding and sneaking about his own house in an Invisibility Cloak. It wouldn't be a normal life. But on the other hand—there were no dementors here, and Barty wouldn't have to watch his wife die of grief.

It was all for the best, and no one need ever know. It was Unforgivable, yes, but he had himself given Aurors permission to use Unforgivable Curses on Death Eaters in dire circumstances, with no consequences. Even though the new head of Magical Law Enforcement had changed that rule, surely *this* could be called 'dire circumstances.'

Not that anyone was ever going to find out.

Barty Crouch took a breath, looking into his son's eyes, which were a mirror of his own.

"Imperio!"

* * * * *

Monday, 15 December, 1982

Bill crumpled the parchment in his hand, the desert winds whipping at his face. He'd grown his hair long since arriving in Egypt almost six months earlier, and now he usually pulled it back into a

ponytail. This didn't really help to keep the sand out of it, however. He changed his mind suddenly and tried to smooth the parchment out again, but it was proving difficult in the wind. Growing impatient, he pointed his wand at it and it was once more flat and pristine. He reread the letter from Charlie.

Dear Bill,

Just thought you might like to know that Juliet is going to have a baby. She and Brendan are over the moon about it. According to the midwife it's a girl. I'll be a sort of uncle to her, Juliet says. It's strange for her to be with him, but I reckon I'm getting used to it.

I hope you have a good holiday. Mum and Dad said you aren't planning to go home either. I've already told them that I'm definitely going back for my sixth year next September. After the O.W.L.s I really needed some time off. Some of my mates left school last June and have already started working. I reckon I wasn't too keen on not having you there and my mates as well. But after working here on the reservation for the last three months, I'm actually missing school. Even Binns. Never thought I'd say that!

This is hard work, harder than I ever imagined. I still think this is what I might want to do, though. And Brendan says he'll give me a glowing recommendation when I finish school and want to go to work at a reservation somewhere. In future, though, I might want to stick to Europe. Six thousand miles away from home might as well be sixty-thousand. We're in the middle of nowhere, too, as the dragons can't get too close to Muggle towns. They have no Floo network here for travel or talk, and even owls have huge distances to travel with the post. They use Peregrin falcons more often. Makes me think of old Booth. How is he? Heard from any of your old mates?

Don't let the goblins get to you. They sound right nasty. Think I'll stick to dragons. At least I can throw a hex at them when they get annoying. Write back soon.

Your brother,

Charlie

Bill folded the parchment neatly this time and put it into his robe pocket. The sun was setting over the desert and the night cold was starting to set in. *Juliet is going to have a baby. She and Brendan are over the moon about it.*

Initially, Bill thought he had been shocked that Charlie wanted to leave school after his fifth year to study dragons. Then Charlie had decided to go to the very same reservation where Juliet was working, and had written to Bill to tell him of Juliet's marriage.

Two months. She'd married him after knowing him for *two months.* Bill still couldn't believe it. It was unreal, like watching someone *else's* life fall apart. This couldn't be happening to him, could it? Juliet was married. She was gone from his life. She was going to have another man's baby.

He slowly began to walk down the steps of the temple where he'd been standing; a group of other charms breakers sat around a purple magical fire at the base of the temple. A chill wind blew some sand around his body and he instinctively clamped his mouth shut, so he wouldn't inhale any of it. *It's just as well,* he thought, squinting against the sandy wind. He wasn't ready to settle down, but evidently Juliet was. He'd thought they were interested in the same things, but it turned out he'd been very wrong.

He watched the moon rise over the desert amidst a crowd of stars and he pulled his robes around himself for warmth. One of the wizards sitting round the fire had started playing some eerie music on a primitive flute, and the sound seemed very loud on the night air.

Perhaps someday he'd find someone else like Juliet and he would settle down. Someday. But today, in the here and now, that time seemed very far away. And yet—it was very hard not to think about what might have been. The life he might have had with Juliet.

He gazed up at the sky, strolling casually away from the campfire. Somehow it seemed so much larger here, over the desert, than it had at home. The crescent moon sailed over distant pyramids, silvering their peaks. Bill swallowed, surprised to find himself so immobilized by the news that Juliet was going to have another man's child. *It wasn't supposed to be this way,* he thought. None of it. Alex's Lowell wasn't supposed to be in St. Mungo's, his sisters weren't supposed to disappear into thin air, Orville wasn't supposed to be blown up in a sweet shop, Lily and James weren't supposed to die and leave their infant son an orphan. Juliet was supposed to be at his side.

Bill continued to gaze at the sky for a long time while the flute wove an intricate melody that seemed almost to become part of the desert, a natural-sounding, meandering song of both regret and hope. He drew a great shuddering breath, glad that the others couldn't see his face, couldn't know his pain....

The stars hung low and bright in the sky, quivering with the music, and so full of promise that he had to weep.

— *THE END* —

Notes: The words that Barty Crouch, Sr. hears when the dementors draw too near to him are by JK Rowling, from chapter thirty of *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*, pp. 516-517, UK edition (scattered excerpts). If you are wondering who the prisoner is who watches Crouch enter and leave the prison, reread chapter twenty-seven of *Goblet of Fire*.

Thanks to Dan, Emily and Rena for the beta reading and to everyone who commented on Chapter 19. I hope you enjoyed reading the prequel to *Harry Potter and the Psychic Serpent* as much as I enjoyed writing it. For convenience, there is a link below to the first chapter of *Psychic Serpent*.