

Now is Perfect

by MMADfan

Discovering what you want may help you find it when the time is right.

Fluffy one-shot.

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Chapter 1 of 1

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Note: This story was written for Eloquent Phoenix for an FFPS gift exchange. It is a stand-alone one-shot set in 1959-1960 in an HP universe very much like the one in my fic, Resolving a Misunderstanding. If you are familiar with RaM, you may recognise a few elements from that story.



Filius Flitwick was too old to have crushes. That is what he told himself. Every morning, he would get up, look in the mirror and remind himself of that fact before he dressed very carefully, but not with any particular person in mind and went to breakfast. He was too old to have crushes.

He would remind himself again as he approached the staff dining table to take his seat. And he believed himself. He was very convincing, was Filius Flitwick. Champion duellist and champion debater, he was very convincing. He was too old to have crushes. Then he would catch sight of her.

Filius Flitwick had a crush, a terrible crush, but it was only a crush. That is what he would tell himself as he took his seat next to her. It was only a crush. Foolish at his age, but it meant nothing. It meant only that he was foolish. Once married and now a widower, a respectable widower teaching at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, but still a foolish wizard. And the crush meant nothing.

Day after day, week after week, Filius tried to tell himself that it was only a crush. It would go away. It meant nothing. Finally, one cold, snowy evening, that time of year when the sunset comes early and the wind blows icy across the lake, he came down the stairs to go to the Great Hall for dinner, and he saw her again. She came through the large oak doors, the chill entering with her, but her eyes were bright and warm and her cheeks were rosy. She gave a slight shake and the snow which had settled on her hat and shoulders vanished. It was as though she brought the spring with her. And when she looked up at Filius where he had stopped on the stairs, as if mesmerised, she smiled and he knew it was no crush.

It was infatuation, Filius told himself. Mere infatuation. Intense and excessive, more than a crush, but still, only infatuation. When she spoke to him and he could scarcely find the voice to reply because her own voice was so mellifluous and charming, so filled with warmth and light, that inability to speak was only more evidence that it was infatuation. Only an infatuation. When Albus asked him to assist her in recharming some microclimates that were failing in the gardens, and his heart beat faster and his palms became sweaty, that, too, was proof that it was only infatuation.

Infatuations pass, Filius reminded himself. Infatuations are short-lived by their very nature. Short and intense. And if, as she knelt beside him on the frozen earth as they fixed the failing microclimate charms together, he looked into her eyes and saw uncommon warmth in them, it was only because of the warmth their spells were creating.

Spring came. Filius had ceased telling himself that it was infatuation. It was far more dire than that. Far more desperate, and when he realised this, the pleasure that he had felt in her presence, though undiminished, was now ringed with wistfulness. The sight of her bright eyes, the bloom of her cheeks, her warm smile, her rosy lips, her wonderfully womanly figure, all of those things now presented him with a longing tinged with sorrow. It wasn't the sorrow of loss. It was the sorrow of knowing that he was in love. Completely and utterly head-over-heels in love. And completely and utterly unable to act on it.

Filius resigned himself. It was a cheerful resignation, if any resignation could be called cheerful. Now that Filius knew he was in love, he no longer had to persuade himself of its unreality, of its emptiness, or of its brevity. Though his heart still beat more rapidly in her presence, his palms no longer sweat, at least not as much, and his stuttering ceased. He did have to watch to make sure that he didn't make a fool of himself, but even that was not as difficult as it had been, and he found that as time passed, he was able to enjoy her company more than he had when it was just a crush or mere infatuation, even though each encounter left him feeling forlorn.

Pomona. Such a beauty she was, such a gentle, warm, feminine beauty, yet hearty and robust, like a rose that bloomed in winter and in summer alike. He would treat her with gallantry and collegial respect and love her from afar. Well, not from very afar. They sat next to each other every day for every meal, and they were both Heads of House. It might have been easier if there were more distance between them. It was hard when she spoke of some wizard who was interested in her, and harder still when she decided to go out with one, and hardest when she talked about the date the following day.

"So, do you have another date with that fellow, Preston?" Poppy asked Pomona, and Filius's ears pricked up as he ate his lunch.

"Yes, tomorrow night after dinner here. I'm meeting him at Madam Puddifoot's for dessert," Pomona replied.

"This is the fifth time you've been out with him," Poppy observed. "You must like him."

"Oh, I don't know. He's nice enough, I suppose," Pomona said.

"Still something missing?" Poppy asked.

"There always is."

Poppy shook her head. "I don't know if I have ever known a witch with so many wizards interested in her and yet who is so very picky!"

"Maybe I can afford to be picky," Pomona replied. "It's not as though I have no choices, after all."

"Preston's good-looking, and his shop does quite well," Poppy said. "He also comes from a nice family. His younger brother Michael was in Hufflepuff, you know, just two years above me. You could do far worse."

Pomona shrugged. "I don't think I'm looking for any kind of long-term relationship, Poppy. I know that's important to you to a lot of witches but I like my independence, and I am not ready to leave Hogwarts. The worst thing for me would be to have a wizard become too serious, start talking about marriage. They do that, and good-bye, freedom, good-bye, independence!"

"Not necessarily. Look at Madam Persecta. She's been seeing the same wizard for the past fifteen years. He has his life and she has hers, but they still have fun together."

"Yes, and from what I understand, he has fun with other witches, too," Pomona said. "Not something I would put up with for fifteen years."

Poppy shrugged. "It doesn't seem to bother her. I think you want it both ways you want to have a wizard who is devoted to you but who will make no demands on you. You should just get a dog."

"Dogs are too dependent. Nice enough, but not for me. A cat, maybe. But I think you're wrong about me, Poppy. I just haven't been asked out by the right one. Besides, you shouldn't talk. The way you keep putting off Murdoch, who is certainly one eligible wizard if I ever saw one, it's a wonder the poor man hasn't given up on you."

Poppy stiffened. "That is different. You know it is. We just . . . we just haven't worked out certain areas of disagreement yet."

"The same areas of disagreement you had two years ago when he first asked you to marry him you don't want to leave Hogwarts, and he doesn't want to have a part-time wife nine months out of the year," Pomona said. "And anyway, that's not all it is for me. It all comes back to what you said before, there's something missing. Always something missing." She sighed.

Filius sighed, too. If those wizards didn't measure up, he surely wouldn't. He was older than any of the ones Pomona had dated, from what he could tell, and he was far from the tall, dark, and handsome type or even the short, fair, and handsome type. Calling himself "short" would be an understatement. His late wife, Eudora, had been petite, as witches go, at just five feet, and she was still several inches taller than he. But they had been contemporaries, they had both been Ravenclaws, he only two years older than she, and she had come to know him and love him when he was young and lively. His height rarely bothered him as he went through his day, but he knew that witches in general preferred tall wizards, and although they enjoyed his company and found him clever, it would never occur to any of them that he might be "an eligible wizard," as Pomona had referred to Murdoch. He was "cute." He'd heard that more than once, and he had overheard one witch visiting from somewhere in the southern United States speaking of him, and she said, "Isn't he the most dahr-lin' little wizard! Absolutely dahr-lin'!" He had turned and walked in the opposite direction.

"What do you think, Filius?" Poppy asked. "Is Pomona too fussy?"

"Um, what? I'm sorry, I was just enjoying my pudding," Filius said.

"Do you think that Pomona is too fussy about who she goes out with?"

"I really couldn't say. She should be selective. Not just go out with any wizard. Well, not a disreputable one, or someone who wasn't worthy or whom she didn't like. That's not too fussy." He blushed. "Excuse me, I have a detention to supervise in a few minutes. Have a good evening, ladies."

"You, too, Filius!" Pomona said. Filius heard her say as he began to leave, "You see, Poppy! He doesn't think I'm too fussy. . . ."

Filius hurried away.

Saturday morning at breakfast, Filius greeted Poppy as he took his seat. Pomona wasn't there yet.

"I guess Pomona is still recovering from her big date last night," Poppy said as she added extra cinnamon to her porridge.

"Big date?" Filius asked.

"Well, maybe not a big date, but still, five dates with the same wizard. That's quite something for Pomona."

Filius put cream in his coffee and tried to think of something to say. "She should enjoy herself."

"I'm sure she does," Poppy said with a nod and a smile.

Filius ate his own porridge with little appetite. When Poppy handed him a bowl of raspberries, he stirred some into his porridge. He tasted it, then smiled at Poppy.

"Very nice, thank you," he said brightly.

"I thought it was good." She took a sip of tea. "You know, you should get out more yourself, Filius."

"Oh, I am quite content with my life as it is," Filius said.

"You know, this afternoon, Murdoch and I are going to meet for tea at Madam Puddifoot's and then do a little shopping. He's thinking of bringing his cousin Caroline with him Perrin Egidius's daughter, if you know him. Why don't you come along? If you and Caroline hit it off, that would be fine, if not, nothing ventured, nothing gained, and you can just return to the castle after tea."

"Oh, I don't think so," Filius said with a shake of his head.

"Don't think of it as being fixed up, if that's what you're concerned about. Caroline and Murdoch will just think that you are there because you were coming into the village anyway and so I invited you to join us for tea. You're so out-going, Filius, and fun to be with, we would enjoy your company even if just for the afternoon. Please say you'll come!"

Filius mulled it over. It might get his mind off of Pomona if he got out of the castle, socialised with more people. He hadn't been out with a witch in years. There had been Vespasia about six years after Eudora had died, but that had petered out after several months. Their interests simply hadn't coincided. The physical intimacy had been nice, but after a while, that had been the only thing that was, and by the end, that wasn't even very satisfying. Then about three years after that, he had spent a year in Denmark working with a friend who had apprenticed with the same master he had, and he'd seen a witch named Gudrun, but that had been a peculiar relationship and had ended when he had left Denmark. A few years before he had joined the staff of Hogwarts, he had begun an on-again off-again relationship with Sophia, a witch who lived in Provence, but that had been more of a fling than anything else, and he hadn't seen her since beginning to teach at Hogwarts. Three witches in the twenty-two years since Dora had died hardly made him a Casanova, that was certain. He had always been the gregarious type, though, even if he had not dated very much, and it would be good to go out. Murdoch was a good chap, too.

"All right," Filius said. "It sounds like fun!"

It was fun, too, and Caroline, who was only eight years younger than he, was delightful. She had lost her own husband, Roscoe Mayfield, to sudden illness a few years before. She wasn't Pomona, but she was very pleasant and quite bright but then, it seemed the Egidius family produced bright witches. They made no plans to see one another again, but Filius thought he might not mind, and she had seemed to like him. It would help distract him from thoughts of the witch who wasn't interested in him.

For the next few days, Filius suffered listening to Pomona discuss the various attributes, positive and negative, that Preston had, feeling fortunate that he had been spared any details of the time they had spent in her rooms after their date on Friday. Preston had gone home that night, though, that much Filius had been clear on. But when on Wednesday, he heard Pomona whisper to Poppy that she thought that this Saturday she might bring the relationship to a "new level" and so Poppy should not be surprised if she was not at breakfast until quite late on Sunday, Filius had excused himself from the table, taken himself to his rooms, and composed an invitation.

He could be heartsick or he could be happy with his lot in life. Even if he and Caroline simply had a pleasant platonic friendship, that would be quite nice. He wasn't one to think to seduce a witch on the sixth date nor to be seduced by one, or whatever was going to happen between Pomona and Preston. He supposed it wouldn't really be seduction, in any case, but he didn't want to think about it.

That evening at dinner, a beautiful Snowy Owl flew up to him and landed gracefully on the edge of the table. Filius gave the bird some of his steak and kidney pudding and took his letter from her. A pale pink envelope. Just gently feminine, not at all tawdry or cheap looking. Filius flicked his finger to slit open the envelope neatly. He read the letter and smiled.

Pomona was watching him from the corner of her eye as he read the letter then put it back in its envelope and tucked it in his pocket.

"Letter from an old friend?" she asked.

"No, a new one," Filius said.

"Oh, was that from Caroline?" Poppy asked. "I shouldn't be nosy, of course."

"Well, since you introduced us, that's natural," Filius said cheerfully. "Yes, it was from Caroline."

"That's nice," Poppy said. "I had hoped you two might be friends. Charms was one of her favourite subjects in school, Murdoch told me. She received an Outstanding in her Charms NEWT."

Pomona picked out the bits of carrot from the gravy and ate them.

"She certainly seems like an accomplished witch," Filius said with a nod.

"What does she do?" Pomona asked.

"Her husband Roscoe was a glass-charmer. Did Charmed glass-blowing. His main business was supplying potions bottles. That's how he and Caroline met, because he supplied her father with his potions bottles, did specialty orders and such, and she helped out in the apothecary," Poppy explained. "After Roscoe has passed on, she took over the business. She didn't know a thing about glass-charming when she married him, but she became very accomplished. She mostly handles the business side of things now she has four employees working for her. She's added another glass-charmer and the business has grown by twenty-five percent since Roscoe died. She's very good."

"Hmmp. Glass-charming. Sounds dull," Pomona said.

"Oh, not at all!" Filius said. "Their primary business is potions bottles, but that's just for income; it's what supports the business. They also do Charmed windows for people who want a view that they don't have, Charmed snow globes, specialty drinking glasses she's even started doing some Charmed optics and has a new contract with the Omniocular company. She thinks that she'll be able to improve upon the current design. It's not dull at all!"

Pomona smiled at him. "Well, if you think it's interesting, it probably is. And you do have a way of making anything sound like fun."

Filius blushed.

His date with Caroline on Saturday was very nice. Of course, he did not invite her up to the castle and to his rooms as Pomona had invited Preston, but they barely knew each other. He did invite her to come to the next Quidditch match, Ravenclaw-Hufflepuff, the following weekend, and she didn't hesitate to accept.

At the Quidditch match, Filius stood on his seat and cheered as the Ravenclaw Chasers scored, and Caroline stood beside him and cheered just as loudly. Standing on his seat, he was actually a little taller than Caroline, and when he turned to smile at her, he could look into her eyes. Pomona, on the other side of Poppy, was not as thrilled. Hufflepuff did well, but lost both in terms of Quaffle points and overall, as the Ravenclaw Seeker caught the Snitch. In the excitement, Caroline kissed his cheek, and Filius could feel himself blush all over, but he was happy. It would have been nice if it had been Pomona, but she never would kiss him when Ravenclaw beat Hufflepuff.

Filius invited Caroline to join him for a celebratory drink in Ravenclaw Tower, inviting Poppy, Pomona, Minerva, Horace, and Albus, as well. She accepted with alacrity.

On their way out of the Quidditch stadium, Pomona looked over at Caroline and said, "So, you're a fellow Ravenclaw with Filius, then?"

"Oh, no, I was in Slytherin," Caroline said. "Roscoe was a Ravenclaw, though." She grinned. "Ravenclaw wizards just have something about them, you know?"

Pomona nodded, smiling politely.

"A fellow Slytherin!" Slughorn said. "And I never to have made your acquaintance? How can that be? Such a clearly perspicacious witch, too! And so fair and lovely!"

Caroline laughed, placing her hand on Filius's shoulder. "You can thank Filius for meeting me, then. I haven't been to a Hogwarts Quidditch game since I left school. I've been too busy, I suppose."

On the way up to the castle, Slughorn quizzed her about her business and was clearly impressed, particularly when she told him of her new contract with Omnioculars.

"I don't believe they have ever contracted any but the simplest work out before," Slughorn said admiringly.

"I pursued them, believe me, but by the end, they were pursuing me, convinced that if they didn't have me working for them, that I would set up in competition. I have no interest in that, but it didn't hurt to have them think it," Caroline replied with a chuckle. "Of course, I could have gone to Hengist at Multispectaculars, but that company hasn't done anything innovative since the twenties."

Filius and Caroline began to discuss some of the current drawbacks and limitations to the Omnioculars currently available, and she invited him to come and see some of her prototypes for the new models the next day.

"I'll have to swear you to secrecy, of course," Caroline said, giving him a wink. "No letting this Slytherin here know any of the improvements, or we might see Hengist's Multispectaculars adopting my new designs!"

Filius laughed and reassured her that her optical secrets were safe with him.

The next day at lunch, Filius's seat was conspicuously empty.

"Gone off with that Slytherin glass-charmer for the day," Pomona said grumpily.

"Didn't you like Caroline? I've always liked her. She certainly seems a good match for Filius, if they do hit it off. She's clever, ambitious, and she certainly doesn't need a man to support her, so you know that if she does like a particular wizard, it's for more than just his income."

"Sounds like she married that first husband of hers in order to get ahead. Inherited his company, after all," Pomona said cynically.

"I didn't know her at the time, but I don't think their marriage would have been as good as Murdoch says it was if it had been based only on some kind of economic benefit they could get from it. Besides, she's doing quite well on her own now," Poppy replied.

"Well, he'll get tired of her before she can do anything too Slytherin to him, I'm sure," Pomona said.

"Pomona Sprout! I have never heard you speak like this before." Poppy laughed. "If I didn't know better, I would think you were jealous."

"Jealous? No, not at all. Don't be ridiculous. Filius is a fellow Head of House and a friend. I just don't want to see him made a fool of, that's all," Pomona said.

"That's very insulting to Filius. Caroline is a lovely witch, and Filius would certainly not be made a fool of. He's a very accomplished and charming wizard with a lot to offer a witch," Poppy said, rising to Filius's defence.

"Of course he is! And that's why it would be terrible if that witch was just . . . just using him or teasing him or something," Pomona replied.

"I haven't known Caroline long, but I have never thought she was mean or underhanded. I never would have introduced her to Filius if I didn't like her. She's one of Murdoch's favourite cousins."

"How are they related exactly?" Pomona asked, still sceptical.

"She is his and Minerva's Uncle Perrin's daughter, as I told you before. Perrin is Minerva's mother's older brother. She was in school with Gertrude's late husband and her brother in fact, Gertrude's brother Gareth would have been in the same House with Caroline. Gertrude is probably at least slightly acquainted with her, and when Filius mentioned her the other day, she didn't say anything negative about her."

"Well, Gertrude wouldn't, would she? She never seems to say much of any meaning about other people at least nothing that this particular Hufflepuff can ever decipher. Besides, she's seeing Malcolm. I'd hardly think that Gertrude would say something negative about her beau's cousin."

"She would if she thought he was bad for Filius, believe me," Poppy said, thinking of another witch who had tried to get her clutches on Albus. "She might not be as direct about it as you might like, but she would, and she would certainly say something to Filius."

"Hmmpf. I suppose Filius has a right to his little flings," Pomona said, "although it is hardly seemly at his age."

"And when are you going to stop enjoying your life, Pomona Sprout?" Poppy asked. "Set an age yet? A date after which you won't have fun? Filius is an out-going, fun-loving, intelligent wizard, and I don't think that a quiet, retiring life would suit him. Besides, he's not all that old, really. Older than either of us, obviously, but he's younger than Albus."

"Everyone's younger than Albus. I think everyone has always been younger than Albus," Pomona said. "That wizard was born old, I think."

Poppy laughed. "Still, Filius is not that much older than Gertrude and Slughorn. Maybe ten years older than Slughorn. They're still having fun, and I haven't heard you say it's unseemly when Gertrude goes off on her jaunts with Malcolm or Slughorn waxes poetic about the latest buxom widow he's thinking of courting."

Pomona shrugged. "I just think he could do better, that's all. It won't last."

"I still think it sounds as though you're jealous," Poppy said with a grin.

"No such thing, Poppy. Besides, I have Preston."

Final exams came and went, and another class of seventh-years took their NEWTs and left Hogwarts for their adult lives, and Pomona was seeing Donald McPherson, a purveyor of what he called "curiosities of yesteryear," both Muggle and wizarding. He had opened a new shop in Hogsmeade, since his shop in McTavish Street in Edinburgh was so successful. Poppy called it a junk shop, but Pomona thought it was fascinating, and when Donald had asked her if she'd like to have a cup of coffee with him in his back room and see some of his "rarer finds," she had quickly agreed. It hadn't hurt that the wizard was six foot two, broad-shouldered, with curly black hair, grey eyes, a straight nose, and a roguish smile.

One day in early July when Poppy was visiting Malcolm and Gertrude at their little house in Hogsmeade Malcolm's house, actually, though Gertrude spent her entire summer there Malcolm clucked his tongue and shook his head when Poppy mentioned Donald McPherson.

"I was in school with him, and I've had dealings with him since I occasionally have items to sell which he is interested in buying. He's fairly honest, and I'd trust his word on a handshake, but he is a bit of a scoundrel, personally." Malcolm quirked a grin at Gertrude. "Some folk think I'm a bad boy, but he really is. I suppose that's the attraction to witches. I just hope that Pomona doesn't have any delusions that she's the only one in his life. I'm sure he never has fewer than three witches on the hook, and maybe even a Muggle or two."

"Oh, dear," Poppy said with a sigh. "At least Pomona never seems to get very serious about anyone she dates. I thought she was serious with that Preston fellow, but after a couple months, she broke it off. She probably won't have time to wonder about other witches."

Gertrude took a sip of tea. "You know, if I were to give Pomona advice, which I would not do and which she would not take even if I gave it, I would tell her not to accept the invitation of every good-looking or remotely eligible wizard who asks her out. Apart from the way it makes her look, which I don't care about personally, but which could become embarrassing to her, it is not going to lead her to happiness," Gertrude said. "I think she should wait until someone she really likes asks her out. And failing that, she should extend the invitation herself. She's certainly got the nerve to do it. She'll never get the wizard she really wants by dating others, one after the other, and if he doesn't ask her, she should. Nothing ventured, nothing gained, they say."

"She seems to like most of the wizards she dates," Poppy said. "At least initially. And this Donald seems like he's fun. They went to a Quidditch match last weekend, the Pride of Portree against the Chudley Cannons, and that sounded fun, and they're participating in a broomstick paper chase this weekend. At least she's enjoying herself."

August came, and Filius and Caroline went on holiday to a wizarding spa in Switzerland. Pomona broke up with Donald when she dropped in on him at his shop in McTavish Street and found him entertaining another witch in his backroom.

The new school year approached, and Pomona returned from holiday with a slight sunburn, her nose peeling. Filius returned looking radiant and relaxed.

"Come up to the infirmary after lunch and let me put something on that sunburn," Poppy said as they sat down at the large round table the staff used when there were no students in residence.

Pomona nodded agreeably. "I'm afraid I was so caught up in what I was doing, I forgot about the sun."

"What were you doing? Snorkelling in the Bahamas with your latest conquest?" Poppy asked. "I haven't heard from you since you broke up with "

"Don't mention it," Pomona said. "I'm done with men. Through. Finis. Kaput. Over. It's just me and my botanical buddies from now on. Well, for a while, anyway."

"So where did you get your sunburn? Sunbathing all by your lonesome, or did you bring some of your 'botanical buddies' along?" Poppy asked with a grin.

"No. I spent a couple weeks with my brother and his wife, nursing my wounds, so to speak," Pomona said, "but then I heard from Johannes Birnbaum. You may know that he is completely redesigning the Tyree gardens for Siofre and her sister-in-law, and he wrote me and asked if I'd like to visit and see some of what he's doing. He has brought in some unusual plants unusual for Scotland, anyway and he's creating new Charmed microclimates from scratch. I'd never done that, so I jumped at the chance. I ended up staying for a week. Siofre and her sister-in-law were very gracious. It was wonderful. Just the balm I needed. A perfect way to spend the last week of the summer and a good start to my new wizard-free life."

"And how was your summer, Filius?" Poppy asked.

"Very nice, thank you," Filius replied as he helped himself to some fish and chips. "I had a brief holiday in Switzerland, as you may remember, and then I went to my little cottage down in Berkshire, and that was quite lovely, as well."

"How is Caroline?" Poppy asked.

"She is fine. We went on a picnic on Sunday. Her work on the Charmed optics has been taking a lot of her time, and so she wanted to do something relaxing," Filius said.

Pomona stabbed a chip.

"So are you two getting serious?" Poppy asked.

"Oh, ah, well, ah, I wouldn't say serious. She is a fine witch, though. And we enjoy each other's company." Filius blushed, thinking of how well they enjoyed each other's company. Even on the picnic. Outdoors on a blanket in the sun. She certainly had enjoyed his company that afternoon.

Pomona splashed more vinegar on her chips.

"I'm glad you enjoyed your summer, Filius. And I'm glad that my little introduction led to something," Poppy said.

Filius nodded. "I am glad I accepted your invitation that day."

Pomona waved her wand and removed half the vinegar from her chips, ate one, then pushed away from the table.

"Let's go up to the Hospital Wing, Poppy," Pomona said.

"I haven't finished my lunch yet but I'll meet you there in fifteen minutes if you're done already."

Pomona nodded and left the Great Hall.

Filius looked concerned. "Is Pomona all right, Poppy?"

"I'm sure she'll be fine. She's just preoccupied. New school year, end of the summer, sworn off men, that's all."

"What happened with McPherson?" Filius asked.

Poppy told him the brief version, and Filius shook his head in sympathy.

"She certainly deserves far better than that," Filius said.

"I tease her sometimes about her dating habits, but I think she really is looking for the right wizard. She's just not going about it the right way. There's nothing wrong with casual dating and exploring relationships with different wizards, but I think that every time she breaks up with one, Pomona really does believe that the next wizard she goes out with will be The One, that they will fall in love and she won't ever look at another wizard again. But it doesn't happen, and so even though she says that she doesn't expect much, she really does, and so she is always disappointed. Always something missing, she says."

Filius nodded and sighed. "I do enjoy Caroline's company, and I don't see that we will be going our separate ways any time soon, but I am also not looking very far into the future. I don't believe Caroline is, either. We're just enjoying what we have now. Perhaps Pomona should do the same."

"I think it's probably for the best if she takes a break from dating for a while, though. It will give her a chance to think about what she wants," Poppy said, eating her vanilla ice cream.

"I am glad she has a friend like you, Poppy," Filius said.

Poppy smiled at him. "And you, Filius."

The Halloween Feast was winding down and the students, their stomachs full to the point of bursting, were beginning to straggle out of the Great Hall on their way to their common rooms.

Poppy stood and watched the students, wondering how many of them would need her services in the middle of the night because they had eaten themselves sick.

"So, Filius, are you going to see Caroline this weekend? I haven't heard you mention her recently," Poppy said as the little wizard began to wave his wand and remove some of the Charmed decorations he had created earlier in the evening.

"I don't think so. We haven't any plans. Caroline has been very busy," Filius said. "The Omnioculars contract is taking a lot of her time, and the Ministry has commissioned her personally to replace the Charmed windows on three levels of the Ministry building, so she hasn't had time for anything outside of work. I haven't seen her in about three weeks."

"I'm sorry," Poppy replied. "It must be hard."

Filius shrugged. "I'm busy here. It may sound odd, but as much as I enjoy the time we spend together, I don't find myself missing her. I suppose that Mayfield Charmed Glassworks is her life and Hogwarts is mine. I will be pleased, of course, if we are able to see each other again soon. She does add a great deal of pleasure to my life."

Pomona, who had been listening from a few feet away, said, "I am going to go down and check on my Hufflepuffs, make sure they're all where they are supposed to be. I'll bring any to you who seem green around the gills, Poppy. Good night, Filius."

"Good night, Pomona!" Filius said cheerfully.

Poppy opened the door to Greenhouse Two and fought her way through the humidity and the heavy, dark green branches that obscured the clearest path through the greenhouse. She unwrapped her scarf and took off her cloak. The contrast between the bitter late November weather and the heat in Greenhouse Two was extreme, and the air felt oppressive to Poppy.

"Pomona! Po- mo- na! Where are you?" Poppy called. Pomona had asked her to meet her in Greenhouse Two, and now she couldn't find her.

Pomona's head popped up from behind some peculiar fern-like plants. Her face was glowing and dotted with perspiration, and she had removed her teaching robe and loosened the bodice of her under-robe. She grinned at her friend.

"Poppy! You're early!"

"No, I'm not. I'm actually late," Poppy said, grumbling slightly. "You will have to speak with Ogg and Hagrid. I had to slog through snow drifts on the way here. I finally just melted myself a path."

"Oh, my, I didn't notice, myself. I just thought you might like to see my latest acquisition: a Brazilian Flurrynut Tree." Pomona pointed proudly at something in front of her.

Poppy couldn't see it, so she made her way around until she was standing beside Pomona. "Where? Where's the tree?"

"Here! Isn't it beautiful?" Pomona beamed. "The very first one to be cultivated in Britain."

"The purple stick with the fuzzy stuff on top?" Poppy asked.

Pomona rolled her eyes. "Yes, that's it." She reached out with a gentle finger and touched its skinny stalk.

"It's very nice, Pomona," Poppy said. Hardly a tree, and she didn't see what all the excitement was about, but Pomona was clearly very pleased.

"It's beautiful. In five or six years, it will start producing Flurrynuts. Not very many, of course, but once it attains full maturity, we should have Flurrynuts in abundance." Pomona gazed lovingly at her little purple stick with fuzz on top.

Not wanting to listen to a long dissertation on Flurrynuts, Poppy didn't ask what those unknown things were or what they were good for, and simply said, "That's really wonderful, Pomona! You will have to keep me updated on its progress."

Pomona nodded and stood after giving the little plant one more gentle caress. "Want to go have a cuppa in Greenhouse Three?" she asked. She had a little workroom there where she fixed herself tea in the afternoons. Poppy never accepted because she was never completely certain that odd bits of peculiar plants didn't make their way into the tea.

"I had some before I came down, thanks, but I'll join you and keep you company," Poppy said.

She followed Pomona out of Greenhouse Two and through the drifting snow to Greenhouse Three. Poppy bundled back up, but Pomona didn't seem at all perturbed by the sudden changes in temperature, and the path cleared itself in front of her. No wonder Pomona hadn't noticed the poorly maintained path, Poppy thought.

"How do you do that?" Poppy asked as they reached the door to Greenhouse Three, which was actually between Greenhouses One and Four.

"Do what?" Pomona asked, opening the door to the primary teaching Greenhouse.

"Clear the path?"

"Oh, um, I am not sure any longer it's just automatic now, a habit. I guess I just think warm and loving thoughts at the earth, and it gets rid of the snow for me," Pomona said.

Poppy rolled her eyes, glad that Pomona's back was to her.

Greenhouse Three was not as stifling hot as Two, but it was still warm, and Poppy took off her cloak as she watched her friend fix her tea. She moved aside a set of daffodils so that she could sit on the bench.

"So, any plans for the weekend?" Poppy asked.

"Nothing in particular. The Quidditch game, of course. Hope Ravenclaw wins. Horace will be unbearable if Slytherin wins again," Pomona said.

"No date?"

Pomona shook her head as she heated the water with her wand.

"What about the Christmas holidays? I know you'll be here for most of it, but "

"I'll visit my brother and his wife on Boxing Day," Pomona said, "but no dates. I'm through with dates. I've turned down the last four wizards who have asked me out, you know that."

"Well, have you thought about asking one out yourself?" Poppy asked. "You know, maybe just casually, as friends. See where things may lead?"

"No, I haven't," Pomona said shortly.

"It wouldn't be a bad idea," Poppy said encouragingly. "You would be able to choose the person you spent time with, and if you just made it a casual outing between friends, there wouldn't be all of those great expectations you always have and which are always dashed."

"I don't have great expectations," Pomona said. She shrugged. "None of them were right, that's all. There was always something missing."

"That's why I think you should take the bull by the horns "

"Take the what?"

"Take the initiative," Poppy said, "take the initiative and invite out a wizard you like. Just as friends. A casual drink. If it's someone you like, you're bound to have a good time even if it doesn't amount to anything, and you'll be better friends. And if sparks fly, well, all the better. I'm sure you can fill in the rest with your imagination."

"I don't know, Poppy, but . . . I am getting a little bored, I suppose. But the only wizard I would want to ask out wouldn't want a date with me," Pomona said.

"Why not? And you don't have to say it's a date. If you have a good time, you can make the next one a date," Poppy said. "You're not shy. Just do it. If the wizard's a good bloke, he's not going to laugh in your face, after all, and he'll likely be pleased. Whoever it is."

Pomona shrugged. "I'll think about it."

"You know . . . if you want to start slowly with someone who is sure to accept the invitation and be a gentleman, someone you're bound to have a good time with, even if he is just a friend, I think you might consider asking Filius. You wouldn't be nervous with him, after all. He is a friend."

"Isn't he seeing that Slytherin witch?" Pomona asked.

"Not really. I don't think they've seen each other in weeks. I think they drifted apart. Besides, you're only asking him as a friend. A trial in asking men out as friends."

"I would not use Filius as some kind of an experiment!"

"I didn't mean it that way," Poppy replied, "but I do think you'd both enjoy each other's company. At least until you each find someone else you might rather go out with. It was just an idea, anyway."

The students had left for Christmas holidays, and only four remained in the castle, two in Slytherin and two in Gryffindor. Pomona was more free than usual at that time of year. It would be nice to go out for a mulled wine or a warm Butterbeer, maybe do a little window shopping in Hogsmeade. She could ask Poppy, or . . .

Filius looked up at the knock on his door. He waved his wand to open it. On seeing his visitor, he smiled brightly.

"Good afternoon, Pomona! Enjoying the quiet?"

"Yes, I am. I was thinking of going into Hogsmeade, actually. Doing a little shopping, stopping at the Three Broomsticks. Would you like to join me? We could even have dinner there, if we feel like it."

"Just you and I?" Filius asked, thinking she must have asked Poppy or Minerva to come along as well.

"Yes, just the two of us, if that's all right," Pomona said, masking her nervousness with a smile. He had the most beautiful brown eyes she had ever seen, and she was pleased to see them light up at the prospect of just the two of them going into town.

"I would love to! And dinner sounds lovely," he said. "When did you want to leave?"

"Now?" Pomona asked.

Filius smiled broadly. "Now is perfect."