

Winding Roads

by kereia

On the day following the Battle of Hogwarts, Katie Bell realized that she no longer had the ability to use magic. After spending the summer as a Quidditch instructor, Katie accepts Professor McGonagall's offer to become Hogwarts' new Quidditch coach. While she reforms the school teams and assist the staff in their plans to lessen the rift between the Houses, she learns that 25 years ago, renowned Auror Alastor Moody had been cut off from his magical abilities as well only to have them restored by Alice Longbottom.

Prologue

Chapter 1 of 2

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Prologue

February 12th, 1974

The night was ablaze with spell-wrought fire. Crimson, green, and orange flames engulfed the small cottage by the shore. The sizzling and crackling sound of burning wood whipped through the heated air accompanied by sporadic explosions of splintering timber. The fragments were caught by the harsh breath of northern winds—tumbling, burning, glowing bright, until they sailed as soot and ash unto the graying snow below.

Amidst the sound of hungry flames, shouts could be heard, angry and commanding. Their hard cadences battled the whaling of the unleashed storm. Lights of red and blue flashed briefly before the shouts turned to yelps of surprise and pain.

Alastor Moody cursed viciously. "Are you hurt?" he asked, his voice deep and rough from the strain of shouting orders.

Sitting on the frozen snow, a dazed expression on his face, Frank Longbottom gingerly flexed his wrist and fingers. He shook his head.

"We have to get out of here," Alice yelled. She protected her friends with a solid, translucent shield. Next to Frank, the unconscious form of Beatrice Alongee, their fellow Auror trainee was sprawled across the ground, and a little ways behind, the fifth member of their party, Augustus Rockwood, lay incapacitated, blood pooling around his head.

Alastor cursed again, whirled around, and attacked the group of witches and wizards that surrounded them with a flurry of spells. Frank pushed himself to his feet, swayed and stumbled forward, wand raised. With a firm hand, Alice restrained his efforts to rejoin the battle. Her shield flickered alarmingly beneath the onslaught of curses and hexes. "Alastor, we have to Disapparate."

The stocky wizard ignored her. Instead, he left the protective dome of Alice's shield and roared defiance at the gloating group that had attacked them. He dodged and ran, stopped and threw himself to the side, his wand twisting and turning with his unceasing effort to launch counter attacks.

Now, Alice started cursing. "Damn it, Moody." She allowed her shield to crumble, whirled around and sent the red trails of a stunning spell towards the wizard that had snuck up behind them. The man keeled over, his expression frozen into wide-eyed disbelief. "Get back here, you knuckle-headed oaf." She deflected attacks as best as she could, supported by Frank who had regained his wits and balance.

"She is right, Alastor. There are too many of them."

Alastor sent his fist into a disarmed opponent while he deflected a blue-streaked curse with a well-aimed counter-jinx. "I will be damned before I'll be beaten by a bunch of kids." He dodged green lightning and let an array of Stunners fly. His voice was laced with utter fury. "Look at them—snivelling youngsters. Still wet behind the ears."

A strobe of blinding light passed his face, and he flinched away from it. Pain exploded in his skull, feeding his rage. Ignoring the warm wetness on his cheek, he cast offensive spells which fell wide off their intended marks. His vision was drowned by dazzling stars of pure white light, and for a moment, he was not sure if he was standing upright or lying on the ground.

He could hear people shouting. He could feel the cold, bitter gales of parting winter whip around him—their glacial caress as reluctant to concede the battleground to spring as he was to concede it to the human pack of wolfs. "I'll teach you," he ground out between clenched teeth. He stumbled, realized that he was indeed still on both feet, and raised his wand. While he listened to the sounds around him, he wondered why he had not been attacked again.

"Alastor." He started and jerked towards the voice right next to him. "Calm down. It's me, Frank."

He felt the other man's touch on his arm, and reluctantly, he allowed himself to be led back to Alice and his fellow Aurors-in-training, who lay dead or unconscious on the ground. Slowly his vision cleared. The curtain of stars gave way to shapes and movement, then, colours and depth. Another translucent dome of magical protection spanned the entire width of open space from the cherry trees that stood as sentinels by the burning cottage to the edge of the forest that framed the garden. The shield was enormous, too enormous to have been wrought by one witch or wizard alone.

Alastor stopped. He could see figures moving by the trees beyond the shield, and he could dimly hear their shouts of confusion and anger. His eyes fixed on Alice's face. "How..." he began.

Her breath came in short pants. Her arm was shaking, her whole body trembling. "Don't know... can't hold."

Frank pulled urgently at his arm. "We have to leave. Now!" He ran towards Alice.

Alastor blinked and emerged from his stupor. He watched Alice's knees buckle. His feet were moving of their own accord, pounding on the frozen snow as he hurried towards the collapsing woman.

Frank reached her first, but rushed past her to grab hold of one of the prone bodies on the ground. "Hurry up, damn you." While his words were meant for Moody, his gaze clung desperately to Alice's kneeling form. Her eyes were tightly closed, her free hand braced against the solid snow, but still, she held the shield.

"*Accio*," Frank shouted, and the second body zoomed towards him. It was only now that Alastor realized that, through his own foolishness, he had forced both of his friends to abandon the protection of their fellows.

As Frank grabbed hold of Rockwood's robe, Alastor reached Alice. He fell to the ground next to her and gently touched her arm. With a sharp slashing sound, the shield broke, and Alice sunk into his arms, unconscious. He watched Frank Disapparate next to him, his eyes commanding him to bring Alice back safely. In the seconds he needed to concentrate and gather her more securely into his embrace, a last attack was launched.

Three spells simultaneously hit his back. Heat and cold and screaming agony crashed over him. Then, he felt the world whirl away into a maelstrom of colours as he threw himself into that place between and disappeared.

Chapter One

Chapter 2 of 2

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Chapter I

July 4th, 1999

Dear fellow Quidditch Nut,

How are you? I watched your match against Puddlemere United last month. Smashing performance, I must say. Though you won't begrudge me betting against you, seeing as you faced off against my former team.

I was very concerned to hear of your recent accident, and I am sorry that it leaves you unable to rejoin your team this season. Having been a professional player myself, I can imagine how you must feel. So if you are bored to tears, I have a proposition for you.

As you know, even after quitting my own career in Quidditch last year, I could not resist the siren call of our noble sport (stop laughing) and decided to open a summer camp. To tell you the truth, applications have been quite overwhelming, and I would be grateful for any help you can give me.

I am sure that you'll feel right at home here. Alicia, Penelope Clearwater, Magdalena Kornisheva, and Rufus Talbot have signed on as instructors as well, so you know that you will be among friends. In fact, since Magda and Alicia tell me that you haven't seen each other since last year, I'm sure you'll have a lot to talk about.

Don't worry that we'll put too much strain on you; you are recuperating after all. (Though knowing you, we'll probably have to tie you to a goal post to keep you from over-exerting yourself; and fear not, we are up to the challenge, Katie.)

Courses start on July 5th. I realize that this is very short notice, but I'm sure we'll have a great summer. I am awaiting your response by owl.

Oliver

Katie folded the dog-eared parchment and smoothed the creases between her fingertips. Her head leaned absentmindedly against the train window. The bench next to her was empty save for her travelling bag.

The countryside sped past; trees and fields spotted with small villages and hamlets, a few chimneys crowned by smoke despite the warmth of summer. Cattle were grazing next to the tracks, the train's passage so familiar that it raised neither alarm nor curiosity among the herds. The sky was an azure summer blue, spotted with little puffs of snow-white clouds. It promised to be a beautiful day. Katie hoped that it would be, even if her current mood was not at all befitting the radiance of the July sun.

Her restless hands unfolded the letter again as they had so many times in the last three days. There was a tightness in her stomach as her eyes skimmed over the lines. Her love for Quidditch had been one of the few constants in her life. It was sometimes the only thing that allowed her to forget the memories that plagued her: the hopelessness that was eating away at her beneath the resolute facade she showed to the world.

Quidditch had been her anchor. When all else failed, and she was afraid to suffocate, Katie ran outside, grabbed her broom, and launched herself into the air. It always took several minutes for her breathing to calm down. She would circle higher and higher before flipping over backwards and plunging into a steep dive, which took her breath away, this time not from distress but from elation. Her worries, unable to contest the laws of gravity, fell away from her and shattered on the ground. Mere inches from the ground she would sharply level out again, and her path would meander languidly up and down, here and there, chasing sheep or imitating the erratic flight of butterflies until the last vestiges of gloom had fallen from her mind.

During the latest match of the season, her reckless attempt, and ultimate failure, to out-fly three Tutshill Tornados' Chasers and two well-aimed Bludgers on her own had led to not only near fatal injuries (which had required her treatment at St. Mungo's Hospital) but also prevented her from rejoining her team for the rest of the season. "Or *perhaps forever*," she thought as her free hand fisted around the pocket of her jacket.

Inside, there was another letter, this one far less welcome than Oliver's. It informed her of her current suspension and the hearing that would take place on August 3rd. The letter did not state the explicit reason for this hearing, citing only "general counselling and evaluation," but Katie could make an educated guess. Other players had been injured because of her ill-fated manoeuvre, and while the rules for fouls had always been lax, being a professional Quidditch player mandated an ability to integrate oneself into a team, and even Katie had to admit that her solos had become more and more frequent. She sighed softly and looked at her watch. The train would reach Cornwood in a few minutes.

On one hand she had been excited by Oliver's offer; being a coach would allow her to pursue the one thing that brought her untarnished joy, and it offered her a place of sanctuary from the worries of hearings and future plans as well as the endless fussing and torrents of advice from well-meaning friends, whose attempts to comfort and reassure her were getting on her last nerve. On the other hand, she had kept her condition a secret as best as she could, and the thought of further exposure tightened the constant knot inside her stomach.

* * * * *

The train arrived in Cornwood just an hour past noon, and Katie was pleasantly surprised to find Magdalena waiting for her. Magda had graduated Hogwarts three years earlier than Katie. The willowy Hufflepuff had been a Beater on her house team, and because she had been the only other witch close to her age, who'd lived in Katie's home town, the two of them had spent almost every summer playing Quidditch in the abandoned quarry behind the fields.

Even after Magda's graduation, they had remained friends, though their summer matches had become infrequent. She had accepted a research position in the field of Potion Studies, a subject in which she had excelled to the point of being one of very few students, not belonging to Slytherin House, who had ever managed to survive seven years with Professor Snape without getting any House point deducted in his class. This, as much as her final grade, had been high praise indeed.

Magda gave her a quick smile and a strong hug. "It's good to see you again."

"Same here," Katie replied.

After a brief argument, Magda succeeded in wresting Katie's travel bag away from her. She hooked her arm around Katie's elbow, and just like that, Katie felt twelve years old again: remembering when they had sat side by side against the quarry wall, the hot July sun burning in a cloudless sky, ice cream melting faster than they could eat it up, their hands and clothes a mess while she and Magda talked about everything and nothing. It felt like coming home.

Katie allowed herself to be led to the edge of the small village and off the streets into the forest. A short way into the woods, Magda reached into the underbrush and retrieved a handsomely polished broomstick. Katie whistled softly. "Wicked." She admired the brand new Comet. "Also, pricey."

Magda nodded in agreement. "But worth it. This one can finally keep up with the Firebolt series. Isn't it a beauty? I finished my research project last month and decided I deserved a little extravagance. How about it? Are you up for a little race?"

A predatory glint shone in Katie's eye. "Am I ever not?" She opened her travelling bag, extracted her miniaturised Firebolt and flicked her wand to restore the broomstick to its proper size.

Magda mounted her racing broom, and before Katie could object, she had slung the travelling bag across her torso. "Up and straight north by northwest. You can't miss the Quidditch pitch."

They launched into the air through the narrow gaps in the thick canopy and sped past the leafy crowns of ancient trees. Katie had been certain of the Firebolt's superiority in speed but, to her surprise, Magda had been right. The new Comet matched her broom's velocity, neither giving nor gaining an inch. Impressed with the new model, but unwilling to lose, she pressed herself closer to the handle and stretched her legs.

It was a difficult position to hold at high speeds, and only her continuous training gave her the advantage she needed. Below, she saw the endless mass of trees break away to frame an oval clearing. In the centre loomed a full sized Quidditch pitch adjoined on the left by a smaller practise field and on the right by numerous cottages. Separating the cottages from the pitch was a stream that was bridged by stone on the near end of the clearing and by wood on the far one.

Katie turned into a steep dive which finally gained her the body length that declared her the victor of the race. She touched down on the soft, dark grass next to the stadium but, suddenly, the world swam before her eyes.

"Katie?" The voice seemed to come from far away. "Katie, are you alright? Lie down! OLIVER!"

Katie's vision slowly focussed, and the dull throbbing of a vicious headache began to echo inside her skull. "Blimey," she whispered and pressed her palms against her eyelids.

Then, she blinked and realized that she was sitting on the grass. Magda had crouched down next to her and regarded her with a worried frown. "Why am I sitting on the ground?" Katie asked weakly.

"You fell." Gently, Magda brushed Katie's bangs from her forehead and then lifted her chin to study her pupils. "How are you feeling?"

"Fine." Magda's scowl was fierce enough for Katie to amend her answer. "I have a bit of a headache," she admitted.

Magda sighed. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have challenged you to a race. After that blow you took in your last match it's a miracle that you're still standing."

Katie bit her tongue to keep herself from pointing out that she wasn't actually standing anywhere at the moment. She doubted that jokes would alleviate Magda's concern; her friend had always been a bit of a mother hen. So instead, Katie pushed herself to her feet and took care not to flinch too obviously when the sudden motion encouraged the little elves inside her head to beat out a faster rhythm on their anvils.

She faced Magda, noting that two figures had appeared from one of the cottages and were running towards the stone bridge. "Don't be silly. I haven't had this much fun in weeks. We'll just have to wait another week or so before we do it again." Suddenly she perked up. "Hey, I won, didn't I?"

Magda gave her a wry smile. "You sure did. You'll have to teach me how you keep your balance in that position before the summer is over."

"Deal."

Then they turned towards the approaching wizards.

"Hey." Oliver stepped up beside her and put a hesitant hand on her shoulder. "Are you alright?"

Katie shrugged him off. "I'm fine, really. Please, don't start fussing. I've been trying to get away from that." She smiled to take the sting out of her words and lightly punched his arm. "Good to see you again. Now, how did you get free reign over this place for the summer?" She looked around her with approval and tried to ignore her dizziness.

"I have friends in high places," Oliver replied, only half-joking. He must have caught on to her condition, because he stepped closer and put a steady arm around her shoulder. He gestured towards Rufus Talbot, who stood next to Magda and began to lead her towards the bridge and the cottages beyond.

Before the war, Rufus had been her coach on the Appleby Arrows' reserve team. His compact stature had always reminded Katie of a bobcat ready to pounce, and during his time as Seeker for the Monrose Magpies he had exhibited the predatory accuracy worthy of any feline comparison. His goatee and thin, impossibly long moustache had become iconic among his fans, and though his temples started showing grey strands among the jet black mane, his facial hair remained untouched by time.

As her coach, he had been the exact opposite of her expectations and experiences. His soft-spoken manner during her interview had worried her. He had been the model of quiet reserve; courteous, gentle, impeccably polite. It had been difficult to believe that anyone who seemed as bloodless and unemotional could work up any genuine enthusiasm, let alone authority, to coach a professional Quidditch team.

One her first day of training, Katie had walked onto the practice field not knowing what to expect. Her team mates had blocked all of her inquiries, only winking at each other, patting her on the back, and telling her that she would understand soon enough. To her astonished amusement, Rufus Talbot, who had started the training session wrapped in his usual mild-mannered cloak, had transformed into a dervish by the end of it. With every minute he'd spent in the air, layer after layer of his timidity had fallen away to reveal not only a strategic mastermind and excellent Quidditch player, but also a personality boiling with glee and love for his occupation. However, the second he touched the ground again, he reverted back to his tame, gentle self.

Half a year after Katie had joined the Arrows, Rufus had moved to France, and although she'd gotten along fine with her new coach she had regretted his leaving.

"Ms. Bell, it is a pleasure to see you again." He relieved Magda of her travelling bag and picked up Katie's broom.

"You see, it is my uncle who owned the Falmouth Falcons, and after their unfortunate, though entirely justified, disbandment, the stadium has not been used at all. When Oliver approached me with his idea...." He cut himself off. "Though perhaps explanations can be left for a later time. You look faint, Ms. Bell."

Katie grunted in response, but could no longer deny his observation. Her head felt as if it was about to split open. "Maybe I should lie down for an hour or so."

They crossed the stone bridge and approached the fourth of the five buildings that lined the edge of the clearing. Before she knew it, the group had guided her upstairs and down the wide stone hallway to a spacious bedroom. Rufus and Oliver excused themselves, and Katie sank gratefully onto the bed.

Magda hovered in the doorway. "Is there anything I can get you? A glass of water? A flask of Fluffy-Head?"

Katie shuddered at the mention of the bitter headache remedy. "No, thank you." She reached for her bag, which Magda had deposited on the linens next to her, and pulled out a large blue flask and a small yellow vial. "I got my own potions, with compliments of St. Mungo's staff. And when I say compliments, I mean orders." She frowned critically at the two glass vessels.

Magda gave her a sympathetic smile. "I'll wake you in time for dinner."

By the time Magda knocked at Katie's door, the sun stood low above the treetops. Her headache mercifully gone, Katie hurriedly dressed and followed Magda down the stairs. The two women walked to the first building directly opposite the stone bridge and entered the handsomely furnished mess hall. Walls, floor, and ceiling were lined with dark mahogany. Tables and chairs of the same wood were covered with cloth and cushions of cream and crimson. Slender, green vines clung to the corners of the far wall, arching along the edges of the ceiling and falling as curtains on either side of the window frames.

Dinner was to be served on the centre table, where Oliver and Rufus were waiting to welcome them. Conversation was light and amiable. Polite inquiries revealed that Rufus had moved back to England only a few weeks ago, after his daughter had graduated Beauxbatons. He was hoping to acquire a new coaching position for the following season and viewed the summer camp as an opportunity to see if he still had the skills, patience, and motivation required for the job.

"You make it sound as if you not only moved out of the country, but left your entire life behind." The comment had been made in an off-handed manner, and Katie was surprised by the sudden pain in the man's eyes.

"One has little choice when the safety of one's family is at stake," he replied quietly with a regretful inclination of his head. There was an air of fragile grace about him as he held her gaze.

She had never spared any thought to the reasons for his sudden relocation, and now she realized her foolishness. Despite everything that had happened to her, to her family, and friends, she had always regarded Quidditch as her safe haven. Wilfully ignorant to anything that threatened her sanctuary, the shadow of war had never touched that part of her life. She had not allowed it to. It was a harsh and unwelcome re-acquaintance with reality to be reminded that others had not been able to afford the same luxury of denial. Hastily, she looked away and changed the subject.

"Your letter said the students arrive tomorrow," she addressed Oliver. "I'm still not entirely sure what my job is going to be. Am I going to teach a class? Do the paperwork?" There was a noticeable growl in her last question, indicating that any attempt to put her behind a desk would be met with strong resistance.

Oliver grinned into his glass of wine. "Don't worry." He pushed his plate towards the middle of the table and eyed the scarce remains on her own. "If you're done, I'll show you around and explain everything."

Plopping a last morsel of chicken into her mouth, Katie nodded with obvious excitement. She followed Oliver outside and stepped into the cool evening air. Although the sun had disappeared behind the trees, there was still an hour of daylight left and the two of them set out across the stone bridge and around the oval shape of the stadium to the open practice field.

"So where are Alicia and Penelope?" Katie asked as they strolled along the gravel path which passed just behind the goal posts.

In passing, Oliver's knuckles rapped against the wooden beams with the preoccupied familiarity of habit. "Penelope will be here tomorrow morning. Alicia sometime in the afternoon. She can only coach half-days because of her job." He smiled. "I'm really glad she can help at all; I didn't expect so many applications."

Katie returned his smile. "So your letter said."

"Yes, well, you would like to know what you'll be doing during the next six weeks. There'll be almost a hundred students coming, and we decided to split them up into six groups, five of which will be rotating through all playing positions, plus a class of advanced flying lessons. You will be responsible for group number six." He stopped walking and turned towards her.

"And group number six will be doing...?"

"Flying lessons." The answer came a little too fast.

"Not the advanced kind, I take it?"

"The beginners kind."

"You want me to babysit?"

"I would like to leave the future of Britain's proud Quidditch tradition in your capable hands," he corrected in mock outrage.

"That would be the same proud tradition that puts our last international victory in September of 1986, would it?"

Oliver clasped his hands to his heart and, staggering backwards, looked at her with comically wide eyes. "Oh, you vicious woman."

Katie laughed. "All right then. How many charges am I going to have?" She turned towards the stadium and resumed her walk, waiting for Oliver to fall into step beside her.

"We have eleven kids who are either in their first year or starting Hogwarts this autumn. Alicia will teach the advanced lessons in the mornings, and I thought you could do the same with your class. That way you can have some free time in the afternoon or maybe supervise the students when Alicia isn't here. There is a lake a few miles east of here. It's ideal for swimming, if you feel like it."

Katie buried her hands in the pockets of her trousers, closed her eyes, and let her head fall back. Walking carefully, she took a deep breath and concentrated on the wind that caressed her face and tangled in her hair.

"I think I'd like that," she said quietly.

When she opened her eyes again, she stood inside the stadium, at the edge of the Quidditch field. She could see the fading red of sunset drain away behind the treetops, and the goal hoops to either side of her loomed as darker shadows against a background of grey. Memory and imagination painted the monochrome landscape with daylight colours and supplied the roaring cheers of a spectator's crowd. The sudden longing to take flight rose inside of her, and, for a moment, all Katie wished for was her broom and an endless sky.

Her hand searched for her wand. The Summoning spell was on her lips...and then she remembered. Clenching her teeth, she strode with long and rapid steps towards the far end of the field.

"Katie?"

At first she didn't even hear the voice, and she was almost in the tunnel leading towards the wooden bridge and the cottages beyond, when she remembered that she was not alone. Oliver's touch against her elbow made her slow down. "Sorry," she forestalled any questions, "I just remembered the accident and I... I just...." Avoiding his eyes, she took a deep, shaky breath. "It's difficult."

"I understand." He put a comforting hand on her shoulder. "Hey, I'm sure you will be fine by the time the next season starts. You're only missing two matches as it is. It's not the end of the world."

Katie stared at him for a long time, not sure if she wanted to laugh or cry. In the end, her incredulity outweighed her misery, and she managed a feeble chuckle. "Right. This coming from you...the Hogwarts Quidditch captain famous for making his team practice extra hours in rain and snow storms, so we would be prepared for all conditions."

Oliver gave her a sheepish smile.

"Drenched to the bone, shivering so badly that we could barely fly in a straight line, and you yelling at us to 'think warm thoughts, damn it, because we're not leaving this field until we...'"

"All right, I get your point." He was grinning now.

They crossed the wooden bridge in amicable silence and followed the path towards the cottages.

"You've changed." Katie picked up the conversation again. "When I first heard that you quit playing, I didn't believe it. Out of all the people who played at school, you were always the one I was sure would have to be dragged off his broom at a hundred and fifty."

Oliver shrugged in non-committing fashion and looked off into the nearby forest. "There are some things I needed to sort out." He threw a quick glance at Katie's face. "I know this isn't exactly an explanation, but there are some things I can't talk about, yet, and others I just... don't really want to talk about." He raked a hand through his short hair.

"It's all right." Katie laughed, but there was no humour in the harsh sound. "Isn't it funny how the war's been over for more than a year now, but so many of us are still trapped right in the middle of it?"

Oliver didn't answer. They reached the first cottage and waved to Magda, who was about to retire for the night. Katie turned to Oliver. "Well, I'd better head in as well. We'll have to get an early start tomorrow, I expect."

"Yes, the students will arrive between eight and ten. Breakfast is at seven." He touched her shoulder again. "Have a good night."

"You, too."

He smiled. "I'm glad you came."

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